

THE CHARTER OF 956 AD

Extract from FS 218 by Sir Frank Stenton, 1956

Eadwig, King of the English, granted Southwell to Oskytel, Archbishop of York, in 956 AD. The legal object of the Southwell Charter was intended to set the Archbishop of York in the exact position which the King himself had previously held in relation to Southwell, and tells nothing of a religious foundation.

The Charter gives to the archbishop not only Southwell but also Halloughton, Gibsmere, Upton, Morton, Goverton, Bleasby and Kirklington. It gives him every third acre in the fields of Normanton, every sixth acre and the holdings of three peasants in Halam, two thirds of Fiskerton and the holdings of four peasants, and the holdings of two peasants in Farnsfield.

A property, which included so many villages and parts of villages, was hard to administer and it can never have been easy to hold it together as a single estate. The estate centred on Southwell, which passed to the archbishop in 956, was neither a geographical nor an economic unity. What preserved it was a court of justice held for the whole property by the Archbishop.- The charter explicitly states that the land was held with rights of jurisdiction.

Some of the villages are defined in the charter by a succession of boundary points. Some are hard to trace now, but they include Hazelwood, Hockerwood and Micklebarrow beside the road to Newark.

For a century before 956 the region had been raided by invaders from Scandinavia and had been settled and ruled over by heathen rulers, and the organisation of the church had collapsed. (Archbishop Wulfstan had allied himself with a contemporary Norwegian King against the Saxon King of England and his lands were lost or impoverished).

In 954 King Erik was overthrown, and Archbishop Wulfstan died in 955. The way was open for the leaders of the Church and state in the south to attempt a restoration of order in the north. In 956 Oskytel was translated to York and the grant of lands at Southwell marks the beginning of an attempt to re-establish the northern Archbishopric in a suitable manner.

The Southwell Charter begins the restoration of ecclesiastical law and order in a part of England that from a time beyond living memory had been subject to alien domination and sometimes to direct heathen rule. (Based on the lecture by Sir Frank Stenton, 22/9/1956)

See also Philip Lyth's book on the Southwell Charter.