

Account of Purley on Thames

Section R200432

The Spread of Settlements

Introduction

The essentials of the structure of present day Local Government areas can be traced to the earliest days of the Saxon migrations. There had been a very vital and competent form of government in the cities and regions of Britain under the Romans but it did not survive the movements of people during the Dark Ages.

Under the Saxons, government grew up from two extremes: the direct and personal rule of the king and the enshrined right of every man to have a say in matters that directly affected him. The effective community unit developed as the parish. This started out as a small isolated settlement at a convenient point of geography, a river crossing, a sheltered valley, a clearing in a wood, or as in Purley's case, a piece of dry land in a marsh and was finally defined in the reign of King Edgar.

The Settlement

The extent of a community's territory was limited either by a natural boundary, such as the River Thames, or by the distance covered by a single strip that could be conveniently cultivated by one person. This latter limit was effectively about half to three quarters of a mile and gave rise to a spacing between villages of around one and a quarter miles which is so typical of the English countryside.

Once the settlement was well established and tenure passed from father to eldest son there was no land left for the younger sons. They had to move on. The most common place for them to settle was at the next convenient point where they were separated by this key distance. It is interesting to see how this worked out in the Purley area.

Inter-settlement Spacings

Taking Purley Magna as centred on the church, its neighbouring ancient points of settlement are at

Purley Parva 1800 yds

La Hyde 2200

Kentwood 1600

average 1900

For Purley Parva, centered on Westbury Farm, the distances are:-

Purley Magna 1800

La Hyde 1500

Pangbourne 2200

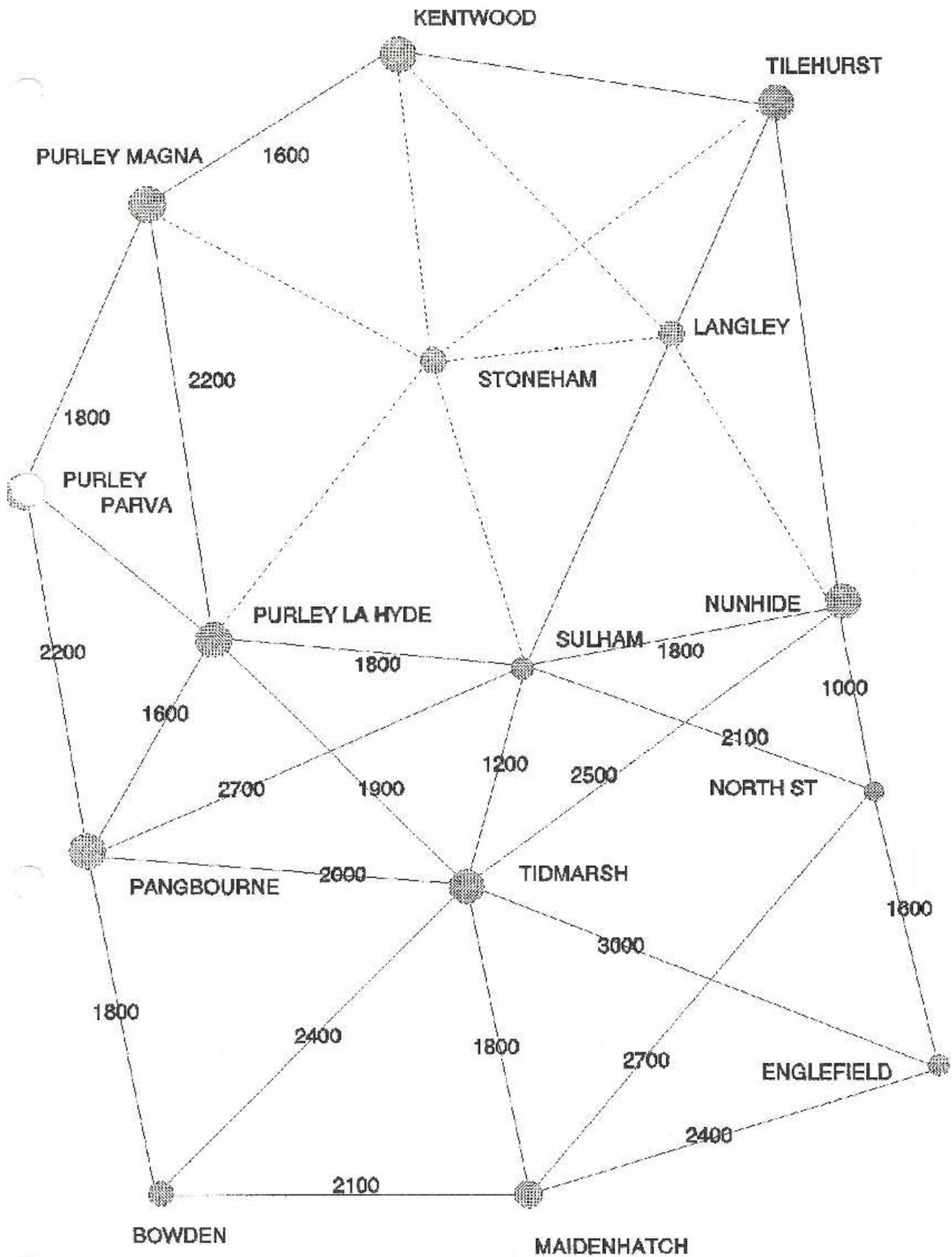
average 1800

For La Hyde, centered on Purley Hall they are:-

Purley Parva 1500

Purley Magna 2200

Sulham 1800



Settlement Points - Distances in Yards

Tidmarsh 1900
Pangbourne 1600

Average 1800

For Tidmarsh, centered on the church:-

Sulham 1200
Nunhide 2500
North St 2300
Chalkpit Fm 1500
Maidenhatch 1800
Bowden 2400
Pangbourne 2000

Average 1950

For Sulham, centered on the church:-

La Hyde 1800
Tidmarsh 1200
Pangbourne 2700
North St 2100
Nunhide 1800
Chalkpit Fm 2300

Average 2000

The average for these five settlements is thus 1900 yards ie just slightly over the mile. This figure is slightly below the English typical spacing and may well reflect difficulties in ploughing because of the terrain. The distances are not always easy to measure as the centre points can be defined only to within a hundred yards or so.

A diagram showing this network has some very apparent gaps in Tilehurst and one should also postulate therefore some ancient settlement points around the Long Lane/Dark Lane area (Stoneham) and in the water tower area (Langley).

Successions of Settlements

It is interesting therefore to see how this concept of settlement spread works in the triangle of land bounded by the Thames and Kennet rivers and extending to the downlands of Basildon and Bradfield.

There is evidence to indicate that the earliest settlement was sited in Reading around St Mary le Butts. A one kilometre radius circle around this point approximates fairly closely to the ancient town area with St Giles parish on the south side of the Kennet, St Laurence Parish occupying the east end and St Mary's Parish the west end.

Moving out the second wave would have given settlements based upon Coley and Battle, plus a further settlement to the east. The Coley Parish would have some very extensive meadows on the banks of the Kennet and likewise the Battle Parish meadows on the banks of the Thames. To take up the land effectively it would appear that the Battle Parish was centered about half a kilometre north east of Battle hospital around the Cow Lane area.

This leaves a nice gap for the third wave of Northcote and Southcote.

The fourth wave gives Tilehurst, Kentwood and Calcot. At this juncture the gap between the rivers is widening and it would seem Tilehurst and Kentwood were established first, the former occupying the high ground and the latter the low ground around the Thames. This left only a small area for Calcot which seems to have been further squeezed by virtue of Burghfield extending its influence across the Kennet to establish a mill on the Holy Brook which being an artificial creation, is more suited for driving a mill than the Kennet meandering across the marshes. Calcot appears to have compensated for this by extending much further along the Kennet than would have been normal, to the Wessex boundary.

The fifth wave gives Purley Magna, Stoneham and Langley. The latter two are sharply limited by the escarpment to the south and west and by the extension of Calcot to the south.

Purley Magna could well have been a much earlier settlement based upon a gravel mound among the Thames marshes and a convenient place to bring chalk and flints down to the river for shipment back to the main settlement at Reading.

The sixth wave appears to have been confined to the west by the boundary between Anglia and Wessex which was agreed between Aella and Cedric around 511. This gives four very small parishes occupying the land down to the mid point of the Sul/Pang valley, (ie Purley Parva, Purley La Hyde, Sulham and Nunhide.

This apparent boundary could actually be very much more ancient than the supposed agreement between Aella and Cedric. It could well be the boundary between the Roman Provinces of Britannia Prima (Cirencester) and Maxima Caesariensis (London) In recent years the Parish of Purley has ceded territory to Pangbourne and retreated to the Sul Brook whereas previously it extended well into what is now the settlement of Pangbourne. It also raises the intriguing possibility that there was a Roman Estate in Maxima Caesariensis spanning both La Hyde and Purley Parva with a villa yet to be discovered.

The pattern beyond this ancient boundary is rather different in that the spread does not appear to have been from the Reading direction outwards. Rather a number of more isolated settlements seem to have established themselves, possibly based upon Roman estates. Certainly this applied to the Maidenhatch area where the remains of a Roman villa were found during roadworks for the M4.

Englefield was the base camp of Aella in 518 and it is likely that a very ancient settlement was used as the basis for a new Anglian and later Saxon village. It is likely that Pangbourne and Theale began life as settlements around the river crossings on the road from Silchester to Wallingford. Tidmarsh occupied the centre of the valley and spread out in a nice circle although confined by the boundary to the east. This left a small area centred on North Street which might have been an extension of Nunhide across the agreed boundary to make it viable as a settlement.

Further settlements followed, of Bowden, Lower Basildon, Upper Basildon, Bradfield and so on into west Berkshire. By the time formal parish boundaries had to be agreed in King Edgar's time so that tithes could be assessed accurately, it would seem that several of the ancient settlements had merged to form the parishes we know today. What likely happened was that neighbouring settlements came into common ownership and it was only in the major settlement that the church was established. The minor settlements therefore would have been obliged to pay their third of the tithe to their parish church and the remaining two thirds to their local monastery.

Thus Bowden, Maidenhatch and Pangbourne were merged into the new parish of Pangbourne; Kentwood, Langley, Calcot, Stoneham and Theale into Tilehurst; Purley Magna, Purley Parva and Purley La Hyde into Purley; and Nunhide and Sulham merged.

This pattern of parishes exists in the area today, although a number of changes have occurred. The Borough of Reading gradually extended its boundaries subsuming Battle, Coley, Southcote and

Northcote. Tilehurst was split into two in 1822 when Theale broke away taking Calcot with it. The residual Tilehurst was further split when, in 1911, the Borough of Reading further extended its boundaries, this has left Tilehurst a very ragged parish with indistinct boundaries.

Effect on Civil Defence

We can use this theory to test some of the practices of Saxon and early mediaeval taxation. It would seem that a full suite of parishes had been established in Wessex by around 850 and the governance of the kingdom was reasonably well organised. This was also the time when Danish invasions were prevalent and the kingdom was busy organising to defend its people from Danish deprivations.

One of the methods chosen was the construction of Burghs to form a refuge for people and their animals which could be defended. In Purley's case their Burgh was Wallingford, about 15 miles upstream.

The size of the Burgh was dictated by the number of people it had to protect and hence the number of men needed to man the defences. In Wallingford's case this was estimated at 2400 defenders and the town walls were laid out with this figure in mind. The settlements which looked to Wallingford then become known as 'The Honour of Wallingford' which extended into both Berkshire and Oxfordshire. These parishes and settlements are then grouped into 'Hundreds' and each hundred became responsible for providing a nominal one hundred men. It would seem that the total was made up in units of five, a Knight plus four retainers.

Allocation of Assessments

The essential question was how this provision could be allocated and the simple yet effective means was that for a start each settlement would be allocated a quota of a five man unit with 20 settlements grouped into a Hundred. In practise the definition of a hundred seems to follow the Roman pattern where the premier unit was assessed as a double and the remaining units used a figure of 80 to mean a century.

If we look at Reading Hundred as given in the Berkshire Domesday we find the following assessments:-

<i>Parish</i>	<i>hides</i>
<i>Hartridge</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Pangbourne</i>	<i>8.25</i>
<i>Purley</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Langley</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Sulham</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Reading</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Bradfield</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Englefield</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Southcote</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Whitley</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Ufton Robert</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Sheffield</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Burghfield</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Hartley</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Woolhampton</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Padworth</i>	<i>10</i>

<i>Ufton Nervet</i>	5
<i>Aldermaston</i>	16.5
<i>Stratfield Mortimer</i>	11
<i>Wokefield</i>	18
<i>Burley</i>	3
Total	174

Reading thus appears to have been the double-Hundred and was in fact soon after split into two (Reading and Theale) seemingly when the Abbey of Reading was founded with the Abbey taking over Reading Hundred from Wallingford. This split was not based on a simple line but seemingly reflecting whether or not the Abbot had jurisdiction. Thus Purley became part of Theale and Pangbourne part of Reading.

We may thus assume therefore that Reading Hundred had to find 200 men from an area of roughly 37500 acres or 187 acres per man. This is surprisingly close to the accepted figure of 180 acres to a hide. If we use the Roman definition of the assessment we have 180 men from 37500 acres or 208 acres per hide.

Settlements in the Purley Area

Going back to the settlements we postulated using the wave theory we can begin to get an idea as to how the allocation for this part of Reading Hundred was arrived at. The settlements postulated in the triangle between Thames, Kennet and Pang are:

<i>wave</i>	<i>settlement</i>	<i>Parish</i>
1	<i>Reading (original)</i>	<i>Reading</i>
2	<i>Coley</i>	<i>Reading</i>
2	<i>Battle</i>	<i>Reading</i>
3	<i>Northcote</i>	<i>Reading</i>
3	<i>Southcote</i>	<i>Southcote</i>
4	<i>Tilehurst</i>	<i>Tilehurst</i>
4	<i>Kentwood</i>	<i>Tilehurst</i>
4	<i>Calcot</i>	<i>Tilehurst</i>
5	<i>Purley Magna</i>	<i>Purley</i>
5	<i>Stoneham</i>	<i>Tilehurst</i>
5	<i>Langley</i>	<i>Tilehurst</i>
6	<i>Purley Parva</i>	<i>Purley</i>
6	<i>Purley La Hyde</i>	<i>Purley</i>
6	<i>Sulham</i>	<i>Sulham</i>
6	<i>Nunhide</i>	<i>Sulham</i>

And by counting one unit per settlement we come up with an assessment of

<i>parish</i>	<i>units</i>	<i>domesday hides 1066</i>
<i>Reading</i>	4	51
<i>Southcote</i>	1	2
<i>Tilehurst</i>	5	0
<i>Langley</i>	1	1
<i>Purley</i>	3	5

<i>Sulham</i>	2	4
Total	17	63

Ignoring Reading for the moment and noting that Tilehurst does not figure in Domesday save for its single settlement Langley we find that Southcote, Tilehurst, Langley, Purley and Sulham taken together account for 12 settlements and 12 hides Thus in this area there is a very precise correlation between hideage and wave settlements at the time of the Norman conquest.

If we look further at Reading we find that if we assume it to be made up from the original settlement, plus Battle, Coley and Northcote it covers an area roughly of 2850 acres. Using the figure of 187 acres to the hide this gives 15 hides. In Domesday [1/42] we also note that Reading has 28 'sites' which we may assume to count as an assessment as a hide as well as other dues. Thus adding 28 hides for sites to 15 hides for acreage we get the 43 hides of King Edward's holdings in 1066 [Domesday 1/41]. The remaining eight hides attributed to Reading refer to lands belonging to a church held by the Abbot of Battle [Domesday 15/2] and which we may assume were not actually within the town area as it is listed in Domesday under Compton Hundred.

Relation to Area

The acreage of the area being considered is rated (by counting squares on an OS Map) as follows:-

<i>area</i>	<i>acres</i>
<i>Reading centre</i>	750
<i>Norcot</i>	580
<i>Southcote</i>	700
<i>Tilehurst (Borough)</i>	700
<i>Battle</i>	830
<i>Kentwood</i>	380
<i>Langley</i>	350
<i>Coley</i>	690
<i>Purley</i>	1150
<i>Sulham</i>	725
<i>Tilehurst (W Berks)</i>	1545
Total	8400

If this is equivalent to the 17 settlements postulated by the wave theory then the average size would be 495 acres. ie somewhat below the area we would expect from a circle 1900 yards in diameter, ie 585 acres; but we must remember that we had four parishes constrained by the Pang as the Western boundary and it is not possible to cover territory completely by circular areas without considerable overlapping.

Thus using the wave theory applied to the area of interest, we can deduce both the value of a hide, expressed in acres and the number of units of assessment that we would expect from the triangle of land bordered by the Thames, Kennet and Pang. It would also account for the curious omission of Tilehurst from Domesday.

References

- Domesday Survey for Berkshire (1086)*
- Acreages for 1860 taken from VCH (Berkshire)*
- Domesday Book and Beyond (Maitland 1896)*

