

A history of Rameslie before 1066 – a Norman key to the kingdom of England?



In our other papers we have commented on the strategic significance of Rameslie, a primary estate which stretched from Rye to the Priory valley of present day Hastings and northwards to the River Brede. It should be noted that there are various spellings of Rameslie in old documents (and recent ones for that matter, with even more neologistic variations). These include Rameslie, Rameslege, Ram(m)es(s)leagh, Hrammeslege, Ramsley, etc. , and these spellings will also be used interchangeably in this document, as in original texts.

This paper will look particularly at the early history of the estate, before 1017. But firstly, to set the scene here is a resume of Rameslie post-1017 after Cnut's Queen, Emma of Normandy persuaded him to grant it to the Norman Abbey of Fécamp, and thus present Normandy with a possible future key to England and a route that led to the field of Hastings at Battle.

At some point, possibly as part of the marriage agreement in 1002, but more likely at a later date, maybe as late as 1014 when Æthelred II (the Unræd) had fled to Normandy and is known to have visited Fécamp, he had promised to his second wife Emma of Normandy (great-aunt of William the Conqueror) that he would give Rameslegh to Fécamp Abbey. Fécamp Abbey was a favourite abbey of the Norman court, but it is possible that Emma – who was clearly a schemer, had political motivation in securing this strategic area for Normandy. Two 'minor' difficulties about this was that the manor already belonged to the Oxfordshire Abbey of Eynsham, and Eynsham's patron was an Ealdorman of Wessex, probably closely related to Æthelred II, who would demand very significant compensation.

Æthelred II, perhaps unsurprisingly, failed to make the transfer before his death in 1016. Emma was not to forget this and dealt with the matter soon after Æthelred II's death, when she married King Cnut in 1017. Emma played an active role in the signing of royal grants and charters and she took steps to make sure that Ramesleagh was signed over to Fécamp.

Emma signed the grants that Cnut made in 1017 by which Fécamp was given the estate at Ramesleagh with its landing place, '*as promised by Æthelred*'. Some of Hastings was included in the original grant of the manor which comprised virtually all of the Hundred of Guestling and extended westwards into the Hundred of Baldslow as far as the present day Priory valley of Hastings (see map at end of paper). In or just after 1028 a further charter or charters confirmed by Harthacnut after his later accession and also signed by Emma added another estate at Brede (*Bredta*) and the revenue from two thirds of the tithes of Old Winchelsea to Fécamp's holding. Overall, although this second charter appears to be one document it contains two documents which additionally refer to a third. Haskins says that the cartulary of Fécamp '*is not free from forgeries*' but there is no doubt that the present St George's Church in Brede was founded by Fécamp in 1180 and if they had not legitimately held the land this would not have been the case.

This link with Normandy was to last four centuries, with the odd break during hostilities with France, when ownership temporarily resumed to the English crown. The link may also explain why the Normans were happy to choose Hastings as their 1066 base, after their probable first choice of the Isle of Wight or Solent area (see Foord and Cameron).

The abbey of Fécamp probably founded the original churches of All Saints and St Clement on its land at Hastings and a major development of a new borough also probably took place between 1066 and 1086 on the then semi-island of Rye (as concluded by the Romney Marsh Research Trust's Rye Project) – this was almost certainly the 'new' borough described within the rather confusing entry for Rameslie in the Domesday book of 1086. At about the same time Fécamp exchanged about 300 acres (120 Ha) of land west of what is now Hastings old town which included the 'West Hill' on which Robert d'Eu would build a stone castle as a centre for the Castlery or Rape of Hastings. They were compensated by William I for this loss by receiving land at Bury in western Sussex.

But how was it that a quite large manor, with 100 saltpans, 20 hides* of arable land, plus meadows and other assets including a 'landing place' was in the hands of Eynsham Abbey in 1017? Not only that but it was probable that even before Eynsham held it that it had been held by Abbess Wulfwyn and the Saxon nunnery at Wareham in Dorset from way before 982. This mystery needs some historical detective work to find possible explanations and theories.

A nunnery and a possible monastery may have been founded at Wareham, in about 672. A '*monasterium of holy virgins*' is recorded in Asser's account of the Danish raids on the town of Wareham in 876, when the nunnery was presumably dispersed – although the physical survival of the minster church there is generally accepted. Tradition has it that the nunnery was re-founded in 915 by Æthelflæd of Wessex, a daughter of King Alfred (also known as 'Lady of the Mercians'), and was apparently still in existence in 982 when the death of its Abbess Wulfwyn is incidentally recorded in the foundation charter of Eynsham (1005), as she had left Rameslie in her will to her kinsman Æthelmær to help him found a monastery. We also have a record that Wareham was the first brief burial place of King Edward the Martyr, murdered at Corfe Castle in 978, before his body was moved to Shaftesbury early in the next year. Knowles and Hadcock give a tentative date for the Wareham nunnery's dissolution as about 997-8, if so it would appear that Rameslie was actually in the personal gift of Wulfwyn, whose death pre-dated this.

In those days heads of nunneries were nearly always drawn from noble families and thus we can presume with reasonable confidence that Wulfwyn was of such a family. But there were restrictions on how women could hold land. Women could inherit land, but often estates granted to them were 'entailed', that is the women might enjoy their profits from the estates for life, but on death the estates reverted to their kin and re-joined the family stocks. Such restrictions seem to have applied not only to women in secular life, but also to those who entered convents (Yorke). It is highly likely that it is via this route that Abbess Wulfwyn of Wareham bequeathed Rameslie to her kinsman Ealdorman Æthelmær 'the Fat' (son of Ealdorman Æthelweard 'the Historian' of the Western Provinces [the western half of Wessex – Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall]) who was the founder of Eynsham Abbey.

Æthelweard 'the Historian' claimed descent from King Æthelred I of Wessex, brother of Alfred the Great (i.e. he would have been the great-great-great nephew of Alfred) so it is entirely possible that if they were both of noble descent that Wulfwyn and Æthelmær were related and that he was her closest male relative. Æthelweard wrote a Chronicle, dedicated to his cousin Mathilda who was the great-great grand-daughter of King Alfred. Also his sister may have been the Ælfgifu briefly married to King Eadwig and then divorced on the grounds of consanguinity. In this context Wulfwyn may also have been a descendant of Æthelwulf, father of both Æthelred I and Alfred. That Wulfwyn was a kinswoman of Æthelmær is clearly stated in Æthelred II's foundation charter of Eynsham Abbey

(S911) dated 1005 (although as ever there is no absolute proof that Abbess Wulfwyn was the same Wulfwyn, although the abbess is the only Wulfwyn of note of 982 and before that according to Searle's Onomasticon.

The foundation charter, which is also a confirmatory list of the abbey's supporting manors and estates, reads: *1005. King Æthelred to Eynsham Abbey; confirmation of the foundation by Æthelmær, the endowment including (a) 30 hides* (mansiuñculae) at Eynsham [acquired from his father Æthelweard in exchange for 3 hides* at Upottery, Devon; 10 at Little Compton, Warwicks.; 10 at Lawling in Latchingdon, Essex; and 13 at Scildforda]; (b) 5 hides* at Shipton-on-Cherwell and the vill at Shifford, Oxon [granted by King Edgar to Brihtnoth, dux, and bequeathed by Leofwine to Æthelmær]; (c) Mickleton, Gloucs. [granted by charter by King Edgar to Brihtnoth, and bequeathed by Brihtnoth to Æthelmær]; (d) 5 hides* at Burton [given to Æthelmær by Æthelweard]; (e) 1.5 hides* at Marlcliff in Bidford-on-Avon and 2 at Bentley in Holt, Worcs. [among lands forfeited by Leoftæt, for which Æthelmær gave 30 pounds to King Edgar]; (f) 10* hides at Yarnton, Oxon. [acquired from Godwine, in exchange for 5 hides* at Studley, Warwicks. or Oxon., and 10 at Chesterton, Warwicks. or Oxon.]; (g) 20 hides* at Esher, Surrey [granted by Brihthelm, bishop, to Æthelweard, and bequeathed by Æthelweard to his son, Æthelmær]; (h) land at Thames Ditton, Surrey (cf. S 847); and (i) **Rameslege with its harbour or landing place bequeathed to Eynsham by Wulfin (Wulfwyn), Æthelmær's kinswoman.***

It is clear from numbers of studies that Æthelmær had been working for some considerable time pre-1005 to obtain the land (mainly by exchanges) plus sufficient income from other manors to support building a new abbey at Eynsham. For example as early as 983 King Æthelred II himself granted land at Thames Ditton in Surrey to Æthelmær. In addition he and his father Æthelweard were high in court circles, were each in turn Ealdorman of the Western Provinces (the son probably succeeding his father in about 1002), and signed numerous charters.

Æthelmær had chosen Aelfric, with whom he had worked at Cerne Abbey, in Dorset (which he had re-established in 987), to be abbot of Eynsham. Æthelmær also planned to live his last years at this abbey. Monks had been recruited, buildings erected, boundaries clarified, endowments settled etc. The 1005 charter was the final seal of royal approval. So, referring back to Queen Emma's wish to obtain Rameslie for Fécamp Abbey, it was unlikely that Æthelred II would upset his trusted courtier's plans. In fact Æthelmær lived on until about 1013, at which time England was in turmoil and under sustained attack from the Danes led by King Sweyn of Denmark. Sweyn would seize control of all England in 1014 and his son King Cnut would do so more securely in 1016 after Æthelred II and Edmund Ironside's deaths. Æthelweard the son of Æthelmær also became Ealdorman of the Western Provinces in turn, but fell afoul of Cnut, who had him executed in 1017. The vacancy created was filled soon afterwards by Godwin Wulfnothson, father of Harold Godwinson, but that is another story. The other son of Æthelmær, Æthelnoth, fared somewhat better becoming Archbishop of Canterbury in 1020.

Cnut made an astute political move to secure the south coast of England from possible attacks from other Danes based in Normandy by setting aside his first wife and marrying the widowed Emma, a princess of Normandy, moving the Dukes of Normandy 'onside'. After her marriage to Cnut in 1017 Emma moved quickly and the first part of Rameslie at last belonged to Fécamp, increasing the Norman gratification.

There is one final conundrum. How and when did Wulfwyn inherit or obtain the grant of Rameslie in the first place? The grant of such a large estate, not heavily populated but with the income from its 100 salterns (it was one of the largest salt making areas on the south coast) and other resources would suggest a noble donor. Looking at the pre-Conquest ownership of nearby manors we can note that many, perhaps more than usual, were held by an ealdorman of Wessex, the king or a near relative of the king (see map).

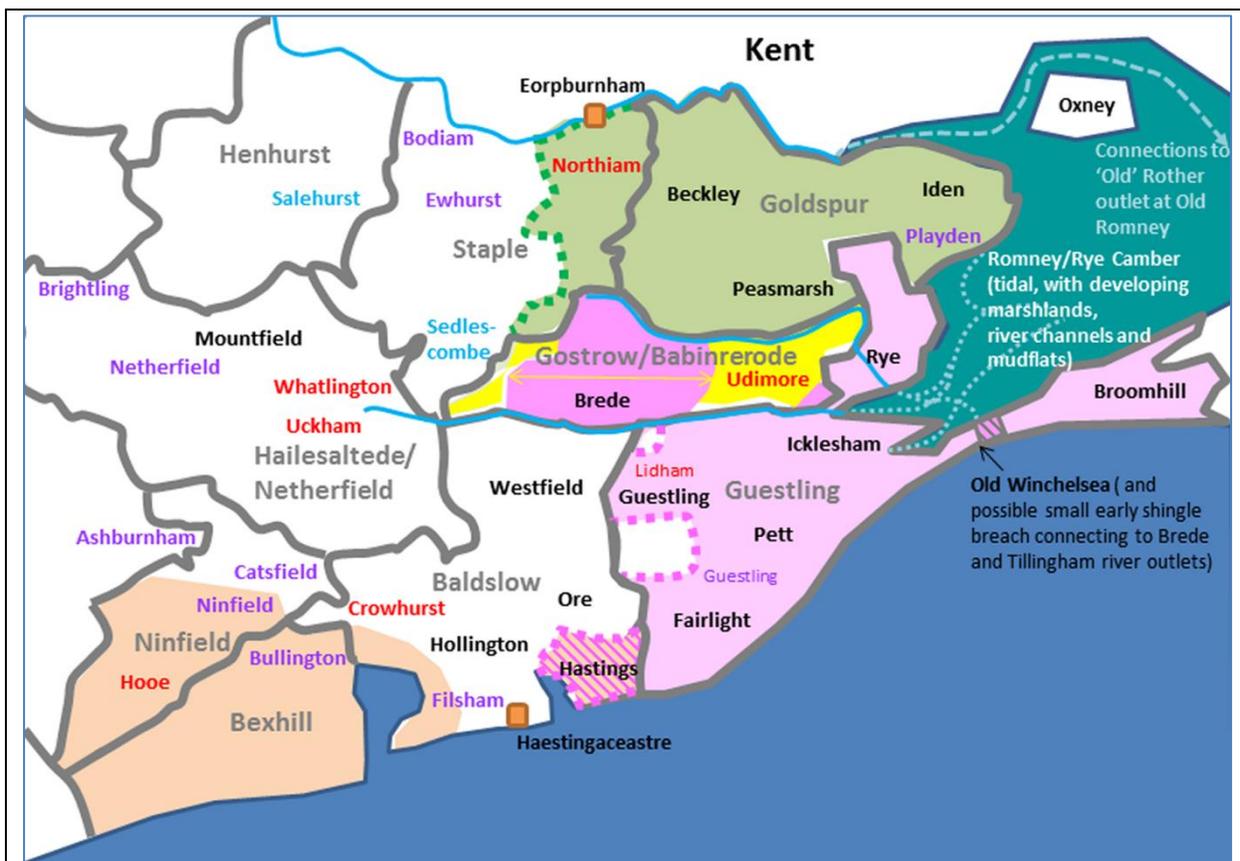
There is also one possible local parallel estate: Playden and adjacent places are considered to have been part of a large Saxon estate north of the River Tillingham centred on an 8th century Saxon minster at Peasmarsh that included Playden, Iden, Beckley and Northiam – But it is noted in Domesday that before 1066 Northiam had '*Earl Godwine*' as its overlord and Playden's overlord was '*King Edward*'. Post 1066 the overlord became the Count of Eu. Neither Beckley nor Peasmarsh are mentioned in Domesday, but in Alfred the Great's will of 901 he granted Beckley to his kinsman. And Eorpeburnham in nearby Newenden was probably an incomplete Alfredian burghal fort. '*The manor of Beccanlea ... and the lands that thereto belong*' was left to his kinsman Osferth, who was possibly Alfred's illegitimate son. Certainly he was closely related to the royal family as twice he is noted as having '*consanguinal kinship*' to Edward the Great and he is prominent in the lists of those signing charters during the lives of three kings – late in the life of Alfred, though Edward the Great to the start of King Athelstan's reign. He signed at least 34 surviving charters; his last recorded signing being in 934. In the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (PASE) he is entered as '*Osfrith 8*' although by far the most frequent spelling if his name is '*Osferð(th)*'. In Alfred's will the addition of the phrase '*and all the lands.....*' raises the possibility that the whole of the minster estate may have been held by Alfred pre-900 – might it also have extended to include Rameslie? Nelson, who examines Osferth's closeness to the throne, goes as far as to query if the bequest to Osferth was in fact the core of a South Saxon sub-kingdom, which to the author of this paper raises the spectre of 'Hastingas', which may have been the sub-kingdom's name. Whatever the situation the pre-1066 Anglo-Saxon beginnings of the above settlements are indicated by Alfred's will, the three Domesday entries and all the place names are clearly of Old English origin.

In the immediate post Conquest period we note that prebends (portions of income allocated to members as a stipend) were attached to the collegiate church of St Mary in the Castle at Hastings. Gardiner has pointed out some seem to have been partly endowed from the churches and endowments of the old Peasmarsh minster. Indeed Canon Theobald's prebend was later known as the prebend of Peasmarsh because the lands of Peasmarsh minster made up the bulk of the endowment – these included the lands belonging to four churches at Iden, Beckley, Northiam, and Playden. This suggests dual administration of the area - ecclesiastical and secular. Similar arrangements may have also once applied to the Bexhill minster *parochiae* which involved churches in Hooe, Ninfield, Bulverhythe and later Hastings

Much as we may postulate about who owned what and who exactly who was the donor of Rameslie to Wulfwyn the actual benefactor turns out to be impossible to determine. The available primary Saxon literature has been researched by many scholars, but the relative rarity of these sources means that sometimes only tenuous family links can be made between even high ranking nobles – sometimes using what may be called by some flexible logic! If we dared suggest possible donors of Ramesleagh if not Osferth, we should perhaps look to Æthelflæd of Wessex and her royal nephews or later to Ealdorman Eadwine of Sussex who died in 982.

We can also note the same place name ending for Beccanlea and Ramesleagh but that is particularly unhelpful as *-leah* is a common place Anglo-Saxon place name ending. The word occurs frequently in traditionally heavily forested counties and well-wooded districts, as both large estates were and remain. In many cases *-leah* is combined with other elements concerning woodland or clearance of woodland rather than elements associated with open country. Also *-leah* appears to be used as a suffixed synonym for extensive woodlands including to the hugely extensive and heavily wooded Weald is referred to in OE as *Andredsleage*.

So we know a bit more about Rammesleagh than many have supposed, but much remains conjecture. What we can postulate, with no certainty whatsoever, is that if it was originally held by Alfred and was passed to Osferth who died sometime after 934, it may have then passed after Osferth's death directly to Wulfwyn. However it probably ended up in the hands of an unknown person or persons (still possibly of royal or noble descent) – the last of which became before 982 the unknown donor to Wulfwyn (who was almost certainly of noble blood). Wulfwyn then gifted to Æthelmær (also of noble blood) in her will of 982, later it was formally transferred to Eynsham Abbey before Queen Emma spotted her opportunity in 1017 to transfer it to another ecclesiastical body, but this time one in Normandy, the possible results of this being why this subject is of such interest to Battle and District.



Pre-1066 major estates, hundreds, parishes and manors of south-eastern Sussex
 The immediate pre-1066 over-lordships by nobles and the royal family of manors in this area (where known) are shown for individual manors in coloured text: **purple** denotes King Edward's over-lordship, **red** Harold Godwinson and **blue** Countess Goda, sister of King Edward. The map is not totally inclusive as smaller manors and landholdings mentioned in Domesday are excluded ©BDHS.

See next page for further explanation

The estates described in the main text are overlain on the map above which also shows the pre-1066 hundreds of the area, plus some manors and parishes. The pre-1066 coastal geographic features include the tidal 'Rye/Romney Camber' through which river channels ran, and the huge shingle barrier across Rye Bay as described by Eddison, with the addition of an early shingle breach suggested by Long *et al.* The main course of the Rother north of Oxney and exiting at Old Romney would not be deviated southwards to form a major inlet at Rye until the 13th century. For a basic explanation of the historical geographic features shown please refer to Foord and Clephane-Cameron.

The lands of Fécamp are shaded pink. The initial Rameslie estate occupied the majority of Guestling Hundred, except for the contained manors at Guestling itself (held by the king pre-1066 and comprising 4 ½ hides [225 Ha]) and Lidham (held by 'Godwin' pre-1066, comprising 1 hide [50Ha]) and which together had a hidage about 25% of the value of Rameslie's. The later but still pre-1066 addition of Brede to Rameslie (in the western part of the Gostrow Hundred with a small outlier in the east) is in deeper pink. Rameslie estate initially also included the land within the Baldslow Hundred (corresponding to the 'Old Town', West Hill' and eastern 'Priory Valley' of present day Hastings in hatched pink. This land was exchanged for Bury (in western Sussex) soon after 1066.

The Peasmarsh Minster estate as discussed in the main text is shaded green. This occupies most of the Goldspur Hundred (less tiny Rye incursions) plus Northiam from the Staple Hundred. Post-Conquest the churches and glebe lands of its five parishes became the Prebend of one of the canons of the College of St Mary in the Castle at Hastings, consistent with some ecclesiastical continuity. The other minster estate in the area, at Bexhill (shaded buff) had similar parishes at Hooe, Ninfield, Bullington, Bulverhythe and Bexhill and these parishes plus the parishes of All Saints, St Clement, St Andrew and Holy Trinity in Hastings all later constituted the Prebend of a second Canon at the College of St Mary.

There is no evidence that Udimore and its detached western parts (both in yellow) was ever part of either estate. Immediately pre-Conquest it was held by Harold Godwinson.

Hundreds are named and outlined in grey. Two show in addition their former OE names and of course Hailesaltede/Netherfield was to be split into two half-hundreds of Netherfield and Battle after 1070 when Battle Abbey was started. The two local Alfredian burghal forts are also shown at Eorpeburnham (Newenden, near Northiam) and Hæstingaceastre (for a discussion of their probable positions see Foord and Clephane-Cameron).

* A hide, which was a measure of land under cultivation (not the whole extent of a manor or estate) and used for taxation purposes. It was variable in size according to how good the land was for farming. It is nominally taken at about 120 acres or 50 Hectares (Ha) per hide. 20 hides would therefore represent about 2500 acres (1000 Ha/10 million square metres) of land

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