

Rimpton in Somerset – a late Saxon Estate

M.D. COSTEN

The parish of Rimpton lies in South-East Somerset, on the border with Dorset, about 8 km N.E. of Yeovil (fig.1) The modern parish has an area of 404.29 hectares (999.ac).¹ The name indicates that when the Old English name for the estate was adopted it already lay on the boundary with Dorset. It was *æt Rimtune* 938 AD (BCS 730) and the name means the *tun* on the border, O.E. *rima* ‘a border or edge’².

The purpose of this study is to present a new translation of the bounds of the estate from the two charters which are extant and to provide an elucidation of the boundary together with some discussion of its implications for the early history of the landscape in that corner of Somerset. The last occasion on which something of this type was attempted was in 1933 and with the new work now in progress in landscape and settlement studies in this area it is clearly time that the evidence from the Saxon charters should once more be scrutinised.

The two charters are BCS 730 and BCS 931 of 938 and 953–5 AD respectively.⁴ Both are preserved in copies in the Codex Wintoniensis, BL Add ms. 15350. This is the large manuscript volume produced at Winchester between 1130 AD and 1150 AD⁵. The two charters appear in this manuscript because the owner of Rimpton at the time of the second charter – Brihtric Grim – gave the property to Winchester Old Minister.⁶ Subsequently it was administered by the Bishop of Winchester as a dependency of his manor of Taunton Deane.⁷ It remained in his hands into modern times. From at least the time of the Domesday Survey to the present nothing has occurred to alter the boundary of the estate.

The charters – the transcriptions of the bounds given below are newly made, by the author, from the Codex Wintoniensis, not from Birch.

1. British Library Add ms. 15350 (12th C.) fo. 53–53d (BCS 730).
Dis syndon þes landes ge mære æt Rimtune. Æreste of hig broces
sup andlang dic on þone herpað. west andlang herpaðes on wendan

on hynig broces of beorhtulfes ge mæc dic. Donon suð on ða dic of þa west langan dic. of þære dic on wendan mæres lace. þonon on mor dic. Æft of mor dic norð on wendan beorges herepað. of pam hear paðe on wiðig leas wyrtruman ofer cattes fleot on oaten beares wyrtruman. þonon east oþ oslaces leas east ende norþ be wyrtruman on da east langan dic wale. oðða ealdan dic westewearde. þonon þonon (sic) east on dic oþ heo wend norð on hig broces stream þonon æft up andlang streames on mæcforð neo ðo weardne. þo non norð and lang dic ute þurh wynna wudu on stroð norð wearð. þonon east on ðone mæc hagan. Andlang hagan suþ on feld on wyrtruman of wederan grafes suð ende. þonne west andlang hearpaðes suð on þa ealdan dic æft on mer forð.

These are the land bounds of Rimpton. First to the boundary ford on the honeybrook. From Beorhtulfes boundary ditch. Then south to the ditch. From the west long ditch. From the ditch to Wenda's boundary stream. Thence to moor ditch. From moor ditch north to Wenda's barrow main road. From the main road to the boundary of withy clearing. Over the cat's stream to the boundary of Eata's wood. Thence east as far as the eastern end of Oslac's clearing. North along the boundary to the stream¹⁰ at the eastern long ditch. As far as the west side of the old ditch. Thence east to the ditch as far as it winds northward to the course of highbrook. Thence it continues up along the stream to the northern side of the boundary ford¹¹. Thence north along the ditch out through Wynna's wood to the north side of the marshy area with the bushes. Thence east to the boundary hedge. Along the hedge south to the open ground at the edge of weathergrove at the south end. Then west along the main road (and then)¹² south to the old ditch. Once more to the boundary ford.

The boundaries (BCS 730).

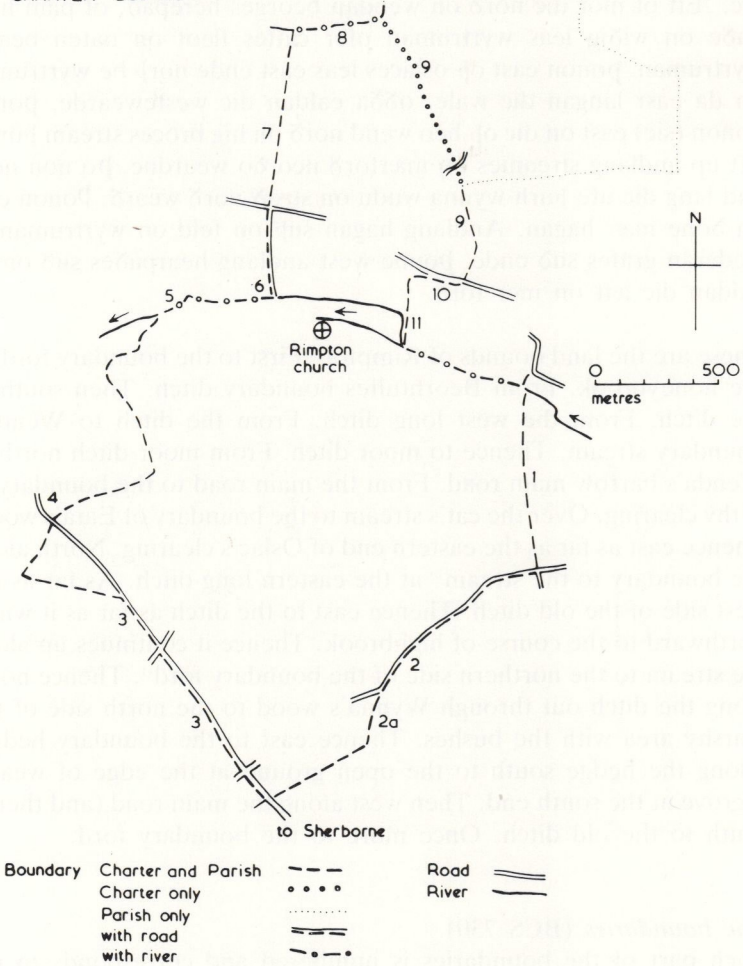
Each part of the boundaries is numbered and corresponds to the numbers on fig. 2

1. First from the high brook south along the ditch to the main road.

The brook is clearly the river which runs from Sandford Orcas, through Rimpton towards Marston Magna. The ditch is still extant as a bank about two metres wide and at least a metre high, with a ditch on the Rimpton side. The current parish boundary follows this bank. The bank ends when it comes to the minor road from Sandford Orcas to the road from Sherborne to Marston Magna.

Rimpton in 938ad.

CHARTER BCS 730



2. West along the major road to Wenda's boundary. To the murder ditch.

The parish boundary still follows this road, on its southern side. A very large hedgebank, some four metres wide and one metre sixty high, densely wooded, runs along this southern side. The bank on the northern side of the lane is much smaller. It seems reasonable to assume that this bank was intended to form a boundary along the lane.

At ST 6105 2015 the modern boundary leaves the lane and follows a deep ditch which is some two to two and a half metres deep, and very steep sided. This ditch leads water down Hanging Covert and is almost certainly a deepened natural streamlet. This may well be the 'murder ditch' which forms Wenda's boundary (see 2a). The present parish boundary then runs west to the road which is probably still Wenda's boundary.

3. Then north along the main road to the boundary of the withy clearing.

The boundary then runs along the main road as the parish boundary does, for about a kilometre. It then turns off to the west. This is probably the 'withy ley'.

4. Then all along the boundary as far as the east side of the oak clearing.

The whole group of fields just here, Tithe award numbers 209, 198, 113, 114 are all called *Oakley*.

The present boundary runs past this area and so clearly did the Old English Charter boundary. The boundary is marked by a ditch and it meanders towards the river as if it were once a stream.

5. Thence to high brook.

The modern boundary runs to the river, following a sinuous course. It looks as if the charter boundary also followed this course.

6. East along the brook to the ditch of the one hide holding.

The modern boundary leaves the river to follow a road and then runs due north with a small bank and ditch. This would seem to be the charter boundary also.

7. North along the ditch to the boggy ground with the bushes.

The northern end of the parish here is marked by a small stream. This must once have provided the dampness to make the ground boggy.

8. East along the boggy ground with bushes.

The boundary now turns due east for about three hundred metres.

9. From the boggy ground with the bushes to the boundary trees at Weathergrove.

In order to reach Weathergrove, which is now part of Sandford Orcas parish and never part of Rimpton, the charter boundary must run south at this point. A continuous hedge runs past the area of Rimpton called Woodhouse. This hedge cuts off this part of the

parish, showing that it is not part of the charter estate. This hedge is formed of large trees and tall dense hedging. It is now, in part, grubbed out and disappointing to look at but the continuous nature of this *wederan graf scagan* shows well on aerial photographs of the area made thirty-five years ago.¹³ This continuous boundary is marked on fig.2 and runs to the Weathergrove to Marston Magna road.

10. Out through the woodland, along the bee's brook.

The brook has gone and the modern boundary follows the road. This is probably where the stream ran.

11. Then south by the boundary to the high brook.

The boundary, like the modern boundary, runs south to the river.

The boundaries (BCS 931) see fig. 3.

1. First to the boundary ford on the honey brook.

This is almost certainly the same point as the previous charter bound. There is now a small sunken lane or holloway running down to the river here, on the northern bank of the river. This may explain why a ford existed here (1a)

2. From Beorhtulfes boundary ditch.

It looks plain that a phrase was missed out of the charter as it was copied. "to Beorhtulfes boundary ditch" is missing. The boundary ditch is the ditch of BCS 730. On this occasion it is clear that we now have the name of the owner of land in Sandford Orcas and marks the existing bank as the original of Beorhtulfes boundary ditch.

3. Then south to the ditch.

This carries us to the point at which the modern parish boundary turns west along the bank beside the road. This time the road is not mentioned.

4. To the west long ditch.

This probably carries the boundary along the southern boundary.

5. From the ditch to Wenda's boundary stream.

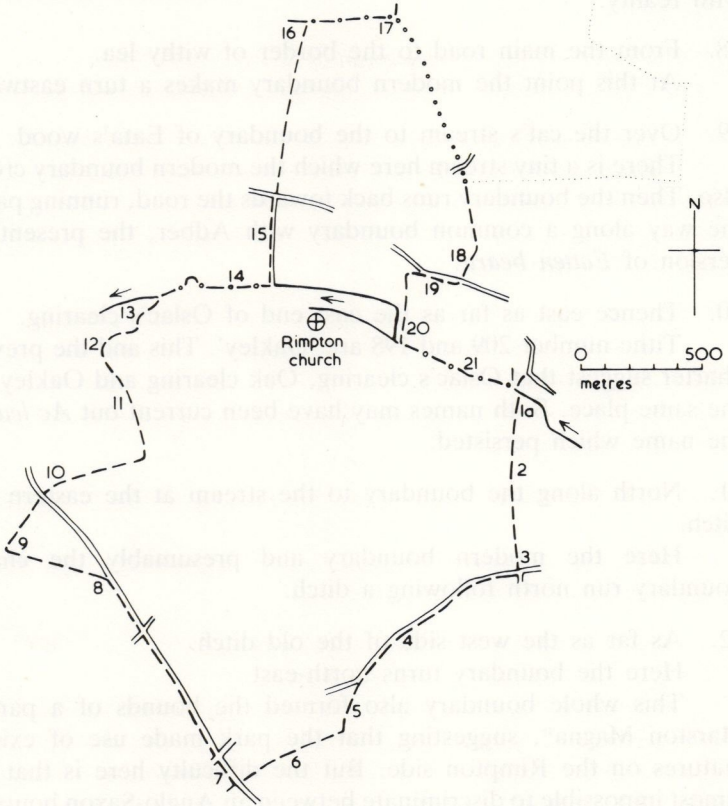
The boundary stream is almost certainly the stream in the deep ditch at the top of Hanging Covert, the murder ditch of the earlier charter.

6. Thence to the moor ditch.

This is the ditch which runs along the present boundary to the

Rimpton in 953–5 ad.

CHARTER BCS 931



Boundary	Charter and Parish	— — — — —	Road	— — — — —
	Charter only	o o o o o	River	— — — — —
	Parish only			
	with road	— o — o —		
	with river	— o — o —		

Sherborne to Marston Magna road. This shows well on aerial photographs.¹⁴

7. From moor ditch to Wenda's barrow main road.

The boundary runs north along the main road. The whole road here is named after Wenda's barrow. Probably the barrow was named after the local landowner. The 1947 aerial photograph may show Wenda's Barrow in a field nearby¹⁵, although there is nothing to

be seen today. If the charter read “nord *andlang*” instead of “nord on” the whole passage would make better sense and would coincide with reality.

8. From the main road to the border of withy lea.

At this point the modern boundary makes a turn eastward.

9. Over the cat's stream to the boundary of Eata's wood.

There is a tiny stream here which the modern boundary crosses also. Then the boundary runs back towards the road, running part of the way along a common boundary with Adber, the present day version of *Eatten bearu*.

10. Thence east as far as the east end of Oslac's clearing.

Tithe number 209 and 198 are 'Oakley'. This and the previous charter suggest that Oslac's clearing, Oak clearing and Oakley, are the same place. Both names may have been current but *Ac lea* was the name which persisted.

11. North along the boundary to the stream at the eastern long ditch.

Here the modern boundary and presumably the charter boundary run north following a ditch.

12. As far as the west side of the old ditch.

Here the boundary turns north-east

This whole boundary also formed the bounds of a park in Marston Magna¹⁶, suggesting that the park made use of existing features on the Rimpton side. But the difficulty here is that it is almost impossible to discriminate between an Anglo-Saxon boundary and a medieval boundary.

13. Thence east along the ditch as it winds north to the high brook.

This is exactly what the present boundary does, winding gradually northwards to the river. Probably this ditch represents an ancient stream bed.

14. Thence continue up stream as far as the northern side of the boundary ford.

Clearly this cannot be the ford which forms the beginning of the charter. It is represented by the bridge over the river at this point and which is known as Mere Bridge – from *gemære*, ‘a boundary’.

15. Thence north along the ditch out through Wynna's wood.

The modern boundary runs north for about one kilometre, across open farm land. There is no sign now of Wynna's wood.

16. To the north side of the marshy area with the brushwood.
This is where the modern boundary turns east along a stream.
17. Thence east to the boundary hedge.
This is the line of hedge with large trees, which runs south.
18. Along the hedge to the open ground at the southern edge of Weathergrove.

Weathergrove still exists as a modern farm and was already in existence as an estate in 1086 when it was an estate of two hides for geld, although only one ploughland. It then supported a population of one villen, five borders and two cottars as well as two slaves on the desmense.¹⁷

19. Then west along the main road.

Here the modern parish boundary which has joined the charter boundary just south of Woodhouse, turns west along the Marston-Magna – Sandford Orcas road.

20. South to the old ditch.

The modern boundary runs south to the river. It looks as if the *beas broc* of BCS 730 and the ditch are one and the same thing.

21. Once more to the boundary ford.

This takes the boundary back up the river to our starting point.

Discussion

The area of Rimpton which lies to the south of the river looks as if it makes a viable small estate. The description of the boundary at (6) in BCS 730, suggests the possibility that the small area of the Saxon estate which lies north of the river forms the single one hide unit of the charter. The description of the boundary on the eastern side of the northern part of the estate, together with the known information on Weathergrove from the Domesday Book (see above), suggests that this area was made up of several one hide units. This view is re-inforced by the Will of Brihtric Grim (see note 6). In his will he left the estate of Rimpton and its charter to the Old Minster. Included with the grant was an extra hide of land which had been acquired separately by the testator and which he stated in his will he had added to Rimpton. This can only be the block of land which lies to the north-east of the Saxon estate and which is the part of the ecclesiastical parish which lies outside the charter grant. This is called Woodhouse.

The small family units of one hide in extent were clearly accumulated together to make the estate larger and presumably merged

together to form a single agricultural unit by the Bishop of Winchester. This process had certainly been completed by 1086, though it is noticeable that the five hide assessment of the manor in the charter is still maintained in the Domesday Survey.

I have translated the word *hiwisc* in BCS 730 as "a one hide holding" but I am conscious that this is a dangerous thing to do. There is no firm evidence to show that in tenth century Somerset, such a holding was 'one hide'. In Somerset the use of the term *hid* in place names is very rare and *hiwisc* is the normal expression. It may be that such name forms were in use at an early period in the Old English settlement of the area and had already become formalised by the tenth century. In any case we must keep clear the distinction between the hide as a tax unit or a measure of tax paying ability and the *hiwisc* as a land unit with social or tenurial implications.

If these family units were still functioning in the tenth century, then clearly we would expect to see some settlement on these areas rather than the concentration in Rimpton village which is only now being disrupted by the erection of new farm houses and buildings north of the river.

The circumstances of the grant make it possible to measure accurately the area of the one hide unit, assuming that its outer boundaries have not changed. The total area shown for the Woodhouse block of land is two hundred acres, one rod, 23 perches in statute acres (80.9 hectares), in the tithe award survey. The field names of this area include *Highwoods*, *Corten wood* and *Crabs wood*, suggesting that, like Weathergrove, this was an area once well wooded. The *hiwisc* can also be measured and is revealed as having about 192 acres of land (77.5ha).

Inside Rimpton itself and close by, there is considerable evidence to show that an area which had only about 30 acres of woodland in 1086¹⁸, was much more heavily wooded earlier. Not only do we have the references in the charters to Wynna's wood and the woodland near Bee's brook inside Rimpton, but there was also woodland or former woodland in "Eata's wood" in Adber and in Weathergrove on the east. Inside Rimpton itself the reference to withy lea and to Oak lea and Oslac's lea also point to woodland, or former woodland, on the eastern side of the estate (see fig. 3).

Three major roads are mentioned in the survey and all three are still to be found as tarmacadamed roads today. The most important of these is the B3148 Sherborne to Marston Magna road which joins the A359 running towards Bruton. The others are the road from Sandford Orcas to Mudford and the road from Corton Denham to Marston Magna.

In addition the two fords on the river suggest that north/south communication through the estate was important. The ford at point (1) would connect Cadbury with the Sherborne area, while the ford at point (14) in BCS 931 gives access to the estate on the southern side of the river and is more local in its use.

Little can be said about the banks which mark the borders, Beorhtulfes bank and the bank along the Sandford Orcas road (Fig. 2 no.1 and Fig.3 no.3). It is not possible to tell whether or not they are contemporary with the charter. On balance it would be unsafe to assume that they are. The bank or ditch at Fig. 3 no. 12, is described as the 'old ditch'. Clearly the thick hedge beside Weathergrove was already an established feature. Probably most of these features and the bounds of Rimpton were well established when the first charter was drawn up.

The picture is of a mature landscape in which established roads and banks form the majority of the boundaries. The estate itself was built up from the unit south of the river, to which were added first one and then another single hide unit. Next door, in Sandford Orcas, a single hide unit maintained its separate identity until well after 1086. The area was one which had been well wooded but the woodland was probably already sharply reduced and perhaps was to fall further before the Domesday Survey.

The history of the estate in the tenth century would appear to be in sharp contrast to other estates in Somerset at this time. Estates around Bath which have charter boundaries of this date, such as Bathford (BCS 1001) of 957, Bathampton (BCS 973) of 956, Lincombe (BCS 1257) of 970 and several others, such as Marksbury (BCS 70) of 936, Priston (BCS 670) of 934–9 and estates elsewhere in Somerset, almost all suggest that little was done to add to or divide up such estates in the tenth century. In Somerset, where charter material survives, it is normally because the property was in ecclesiastical hands and hence unlikely to be sold or alienated, or to suffer much change. Rimpton, by contrast was a secular private estate until the death of Brihtric Grim, at which point the estate stabilised. Lack of charter material makes it impossible to do more than infer that secular estates were more likely to experience division and accretion than ecclesiastical estates in this period.

Notes

¹ Tithe Map – in the Somerset Record Office.

² Ekwall, E. – Oxford Dictionary of English Place Names 1960, 4th Ed. Oxon.

³ Grundy, G.R., *The Saxon Charters & Field Names of Somerset* (Taunton 1935).

⁴ Finberg, H.P.R. *The Early Charters of Wessex* (Leicester 1964) – see p. 137 where Finberg suggests the amendment of the date of BCS 731 from the date given – 956; BCS – Birch's Cartularium Saxonicum, ed. W.de G. Birch, 3 vols (1885–93).

⁵ Hart C. – 'The Codex Wintoniensis and the Kingdom's Haligdom', in *Land, Church and People, essays presented to Prof. H.P.R. Finberg*, Ed. J. Thirsk as Vol.18 (1970), supplement of the *Agricultural History Review*.

⁶ 'The Will of Brihtric Grim' in *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. D. Whitelock, (Cambridge 1930).

⁷ Rimpton appears as part of the Bishop's holdings in the Domesday Survey of 1086. *The Domesday Book – Somerset*, ed. C & F Thorne (Chichester 1980). See The Court Rolls and *Compoti* of the Manor of Taunton Deane in the Somerset Record Office ref. DD/SP.

⁸ This may be a mistake and should simply read 'moors'. However, see further comments.

⁹ *strōd* as found in Strode (Do), Strood (K), Stroud (GL) – see A.H. Smith, *English Place Name Elements* – (Cambridge 1970).

¹⁰ This could be either a 'stream' or 'spring' or 'well'.

¹¹ The text here is quite corrupt. It could read *neoder weardne*, "the far side", and still make good sense.

¹² With the addition of these two words the meaning becomes much clearer in modern English.

¹³ Aerial Photographs. CPE/UK/1944–4367, in Somerset Local History Library, Taunton.

¹⁴ CPE/UK/1944–2364.

¹⁵ CPE/UK/1944–3367.

¹⁶ Personal communication from M.A. Aston.

¹⁷ *Domesday Book*, op. cit 5.69.

¹⁸ Using the formula of acreage multiplied by 0.7 as suggested by O. Rackham in *Ancient Woodland*, (Cambridge 1980).