

“ALDEBY”:

A Suggested Identification in the Leicestershire Domesday, with a Note on the Site and Church

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There are in the Domesday Survey of Leicestershire three entries describing localities all designated “Oldebi”, and all assigned by Professor F. M. Stenton, editing the record for the *Victoria County History of Leicester*, as Oadby. A number of considerations suggest, however, that one of these three cannot possibly relate to Oadby, though the other two undoubtedly do refer to that place, but to a site known traditionally as Aldeby Saint John’s, situated on the western bank of the river Soar and close to the main Leicester-Narborough Road.¹

Of the three estates described separately in Domesday under the title of “Oldebi”, the following refer to Oadby:—

1. A large estate of over nine carucates, held by the Countess Judith, placed under Guthlaxton wapentake.²
2. A small estate held under Judith by Robert de Buci in “Oldebi and Wichingestone” (= Wigston Magna), placed under Gartree wapentake.³

The third entry, whose identification with Oadby I am questioning, relates to land placed under Goscote wapentake and held by a tenant of Hugh de Grentmesnil:—

“Roger holds of Hugh in Oldebi 1½ carucates of land. There is land for 1 plough. It was and is worth 5 shillings.”⁴

It will be noticed that the holdings given the name of Oldebi are distributed over three out of the four wapentake divisions of the county; incidentally, Wigston itself figures not only in Gartree, but also, in another entry, in Guthlaxton.⁵

¹Ordnance Survey, sheet xxxvii Leics., square 9.

²*D.B.*, in *V.C.H. Leics.*, i, 332, col. 2.

³*Ibid.*, 334, col. i.

⁴*Ibid.*, 316, col. i.

⁵*Ibid.*, 314, col. i.

Now, an analysis of the Domesday wapentake-distribution of the other estates in the neighbourhood of Oadby shows that no part whatever of Goscote wapentake fell near that area; for instance, Stoughton, Evington, South Wigston, and other adjacent villages, were all in Gartree, while Whetstone, Blaby, Cosby, and part of Croft and Sapcote, were in Guthlaxton. On the other hand, the estates in the neighbourhood of the present Aldeby site—Enderby, Thurlaston, and the rest of Croft and Sapcote—all fall in Goscote, as does the questionable Oldebi of Hugh de Grentmesnil's lands.

Moreover, the site of Aldeby S. John's falls to this day just inside the borders of Enderby parish, the boundary going down the centre of the river at the eastern end of the site; and since throughout the little that is known of its brief independent history Aldeby was connected ecclesiastically with Enderby, we may legitimately consider it as having fallen in Goscote at the time of Domesday, and therefore as being identical with the Oldebi land of Hugh de Grentmesnil.

A further consideration is that the patronage of the church at Aldeby, as also the patronages of Enderby and Croft,⁶ passed to the abbey of Leicester, founded in 1143 by Robert le Bossu, who acquired the Grentmesnil lands, while on the other hand the patronage of Oadby, owned in 1086 by Judith, had by 1220 passed to the abbey of Launde.⁷

Apart from this suggested Domesday identification, there is no documentary evidence (as there is at the deserted Hamilton Town on the eastern side of the county) for the existence of a village known as Aldeby in the middle ages. There is only the presumptive evidence, that one does not build a church a mile and a half away from the nearest village without some settlement being there to warrant its existence. Presumptive evidence there is too for prehistoric and Roman occupation of the site in the fact that Mr. Thomas Edwards, the present owner of the land running from the main road to the churchyard of S. John's, has unearthed a number of well-worked Neolithic flint cores and scrapers, a stone muller, and a quantity of smelted iron-slag and

⁶*Rot. Welles.*, i, 243, 244.

⁷*Ibid.*, i, 238 (Lincoln Rec. Soc.)

coarse Roman domestic ware, at the south end of the enclosure bearing the Ordnance parcel-number 194, which forms his garden.

All that remains of the church of S. John at Aldeby to-day is an oblong mound, 72 ft. by 30 ft., standing in field No. 195, close to the river bank; there is a modern wooden cross on the east end of the mound, and a service is held there annually by the vicars of Enderby, on the Sunday nearest to S. John's day. It was duly held in 1929 on the afternoon of 23 June.

Our sole information on the history of this vanished church, which was apparently the mother church of Enderby, is derived from the *Repertorium Cartarum*⁸ of Leicester abbey, a corpus of the monastery's charters and possessions, compiled about 1497 by William Charite, then precentor of the house. The extracts from it relating to Aldeby are given at length in Nichols,⁹ and thus need not be enumerated here. Charite tells us that Aldeby was the mother church of Enderby until some time between 1270 and 1280, during which decade negotiations were apparently going on, and that in the latter year a faculty to transfer the parochial rights to Enderby on account of certain “ dangers attending the parishioners ” was granted by bishop Oliver Sutton, as a sequel to a tentative grant which had been made by his predecessor bishop Richard Gravesend.

There is however no mention of Aldeby in the authoritative *Matriculus* of bishop Hugh de Welles, circa 1226, in which Enderby figures as a full parish church, with Whetstone as its chapelry. Had Aldeby then been the mother church, Welles would have said so, and we must conclude that the documents given by Charite—who after all is writing two centuries after the events he narrates—were merely confirmations of an arrangement which had been in practical force for long before 1270; especially as Professor A. Hamilton Thompson, to whom I referred the matter, tells me that he cannot find the originals of either the 1270 or the 1280 mandates, and that there is no note of these transfer arrangements either in the register of Gravesend or the rolls of Sutton. Students of documents, indeed, are all too familiar with the fact that frequently in secular history the original to which an *Inspeximus* relates cannot be found!

⁸MS. Cotton., Vitell. F. xvii (British Museum).

⁹*Hist. Leic.*, iv, 159 sqq.

There can be little doubt that the dangers of which Charite speaks were the floods of the Soar, for this western bank of the river has "grown" visibly even within the lifetime of old residents in the district; numerous alterations have taken place in the course of the river-bed even since 1914, which will necessitate revision in the next edition of the Ordnance Survey; and to-day, despite scientific flood schemes and drainage, the low-lying meadows of the area are very liable to waterlogging.

Nichols, visiting the Aldeby site in 1803, saw in the churchyard enclosure four gravestones, ranging in date from 1713 to 1770, and a medieval coffin-lid with floriated design, of which he gives a poor sketch, but the only traces now remaining above ground are two broken stumps of Swithland slate, near the south-east angle of the mound.

It should be placed on record that the path down which for long the vicars of Enderby have had their right of way to the church mound, on the south side of field 194, has now been exchanged with Mr. Edwards for a strip of land parallel to it on the northern side of the field.