

THE MURDER OF ST. WISTAN

by

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I

There is more than one ghost story connected with the quiet hamlet of Wistow, which lies off the London road about seven miles south from Leicester. As a result of the enclosure and depopulation which appear to have taken place in the early seventeenth century,¹ Wistow today is little more than the solitary church and the Elizabethan Hall, with its memories of the flight from Naseby, by their lake among the trees. On a summer's day one feels that, if the spot indeed be haunted, it must be by a gentle and tranquil spirit in spite of the scenes of violence said to have been enacted there. It is in keeping with this that Wistow Hall is now a Centre for International Christian Friendship and Service.

The suffix *-stow* usually indicates a holy place, and Wistow in 1086 was known as *Wistanestov*, and in 1254 as *Wystanstowe*,² the holy place of Wistan. Behind that name lies a story of murder over one thousand years ago. It also gives rise to a problem of identification, and an attempt is made to establish an answer below. Before dealing with the story of Wistan, it is necessary to outline the background.³

The ninth century saw the decline of Mercia and the rise of Wessex. The last king of the Mercian line would appear to have been Ceolwulf I, and he was deposed in 823. The three succeeding kings, Beornwulf, Ludeca,⁴ and Wiglaf, who reigned in rapid succession, had been ealdormen of minor importance until they obtained power, and the Mercian defeat at Ellendun in 825 had left them rulers of a greatly reduced area. The third of these kings, Wiglaf,⁵ is described by Ingulf as Duke of the Wiccii until he ascended the throne in 827.⁶ As the title of "dux" or "ealdorman" may have some relevance to the argument to be advanced later, it will be as well to see what the position implied. In the previous century the expanding Mercian kingdom had supplanted many lesser dynasties, and the heirs of these had become ealdormen, ruling still over their hereditary lands, but subject to their Mercian overlord. Later it became the practice for ealdormen to have no family claims to succession, but to be appointed directly by the king as his representative.

¹ Nichols, *History of Leics.* (1795-1815), ii. 869, 871.

² E. Ekwall, *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (1936), 502.

³ This is based largely on F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (1943).

⁴ Ludeca may well have been the Lud of King Lud's Entrenchments at Saltby, Leicestershire. See W. G. Hoskins, *The Heritage of Leicestershire* (1946), 8, 9.

⁵ The spelling of Anglo-Saxon names varies greatly. To secure uniformity the spelling adopted in the Chronicle of Evesham, quoted below, has been used, and for other names the practice of Stenton, or the particular source quoted, is followed.

⁶ J. Stevenson (ed.), *Church Historians of England* (1854), ii. 576. The date 827 is given by Sir Frank Stenton in preference to 825 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

Wiglaf, too, had a brief and stormy reign, for in 829 Egbert of Wessex became immediate ruler of Mercia, and overlord in name of Northumbria. Egbert took the title of *Rex Merciorum* and coins bearing his name were struck in the former Mercian port of London. In the last nine years of his reign, 830-839, his power declined. Wiglaf seized an opportunity, and once more became King of Mercia—he calls 831 “the first year of my second reign”⁷—and he rapidly restored Mercian ascendancy over a wide area.

Wiglaf appeared locally in 836, when he held the great assembly on Croft Hill.⁸ The members of the Council prove Wiglaf’s wide authority, as among them were the Archbishop of Canterbury and eleven bishops of the Southern Province.

Little is known of his later years, but his son, Wimund, predeceased him, and Wiglaf himself died in 839. The heir was Wimund’s son and Wiglaf’s grandson, Wistan, who at that date would be a small child, but the succession passed instead to the late King’s brother, Berhtwulf. It was no doubt necessary to have a strong ruler, yet it is rather surprising that there is no contemporary suggestion that Berhtwulf was acting as regent. Thomas de Marleberge, in the account which follows, is misleading in some of his statements. Surviving charters show that Berhtwulf was certainly on the throne in 841, and probably before 840; that he remained King during the events described in the following pages is shown by charters and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 851.

Against this stormy background of fluctuating warfare and declining Mercian power came new and ominous events. Four years before Wiglaf died, the first Danish longships—“those vultures of prey” in Florence of Worcester’s vivid phrase—had raided Sheppey,⁹ and by 841 Mercian territory was attacked, when Lindsey suffered heavy damage. Times were perilous for all, with strife between the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and the heathen raids, but for princes life was especially hazardous. At least three princes and one king were murdered before reaching their late teens,¹⁰ and what follows is the story of one of these.

2

One day, early in the thirteenth century, the monks of Evesham Abbey came to Prior Thomas de Marleberge¹¹ and begged him to describe the life of St. Wistan. Here, with comments, is his story, with all its mediæval faith and wonder.¹²

⁷ J. M. Kemble (ed.), *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici*, vol. 1 (1839), Charter 227.

⁸ *Trans. Leics. Arch. Soc.*, xxvi. 85-86.

⁹ The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle gives the date as 832, but it is three years behind in its chronology. Stenton, *op. cit.*, 241.

¹⁰ Alkmund (murdered in 800), Kenelm (812-819), Wistan (murdered in 849), and Edward, King of the West Saxons (c. 963-978).

¹¹ Thomas de Marleberge became a monk c. 1199-1200, and was made Prior of Evesham in 1218. This account appears to have been written while he was Prior. In 1229 he became Abbot, and he died in 1236. (*D.N.B.*)

¹² Printed as an Appendix to the *Chronicon Abbatiae de Evesham*, by Thomas de Marleberge, edited by W. D. Macray, Rolls Series, 1863. Quotations are from the translation of Mr. Balmforth, which appeared in the *Transactions of the Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club*, vol. viii, no. 1, 1927. I am indebted to the Editor for permission to use this.

When King Wiglaf died "the prelates of the churches, the great men of the realm, the clergy, and people of the whole region . . . came with one accord to the blessed Wistan as to their natural lord and the lawful heir". As Wistan was still youthful and more interested in religion than in affairs of state, he decided to allow Queen Elfreda, his mother, and the chief men of the realm to govern in his stead, although he did not renounce his hereditary rights.

This last fact was a keen disappointment to Brifardus the Consul,¹³ who was nephew of the late King Wiglaf, and second cousin of Wistan. It was a complicated situation, for, as has been seen, the new Mercian king was in fact Wiglaf's brother, Berhtwulf, the father of Brifardus. The younger line had supplanted the elder, and Brifardus hoped to assure his succession against the rightful heir, the boy Wistan.¹⁴

His first plan was to marry the widowed Queen, Elfreda, and so he sent certain men to her, well known for their loyalty to Wistan, with this message: "Let the Queen accept my counsel and be at accord with a man of high nobility, and I will make her my wife, so that, my power being united with her rank, she may with more security watch over the rights of the kingdom". Queen Elfreda was favourably impressed, but delayed her answer until she had consulted her son. Now Brifardus was the Prince's godfather, and Wistan's reply to his mother was blunt: "The traditions of the New Testament and the sanctions of the Sacred Canons do not allow that you, who had my father according to the flesh as a husband, should be joined in wedlock with my spiritual father and a kinsman of your former husband".

Brifardus, to his fury, had been thwarted, and he decided on more drastic measures. "He invited his lord, with words of peace but thoughts of guile, to a conference, that he might slay him by treachery, and so it was that, when the time was come for their conference, they met at the place which from that day to this is called *Wistanstowe*. Wistan attended with a great company, the usual retinue of a prince, but all unarmed. Brifardus came with a great company armed, but secretly. Inviting Wistan apart to give and receive a kiss in holy peace, in the act of saluting him [he] drew his hidden sword, and smiting the head of his lord with the hilt, inflicted a fatal wound at the top of the skull. A follower of Brifardus then pierced the body with his sword." Three of Wistan's retinue were also slain.

"The holy martyr suffered on the first of June [849, and] his martyrdom was followed by heavenly miracles. For from the place where, guiltless, he was killed, there rose up to heaven a column of light, visible to all dwellers in that place, and for thirty days it stood there plain to behold."

¹³ Brifardus was the *Ego Berhttric, filius regis* of Kemble, op. cit., ii, Charters 242, 258.

¹⁴ KING WIGLAF = CYNE- (827-839)	THRYTH	KING BERHTWULF = SAETHRYTH (Wiglaf's brother) (839—c. 852)
WIMUND = ELFLEDA (died before 839)		BRIFARDUS
WISTAN		

Wistan's body was taken to the important Mercian monastery at Repton, and was buried in the tomb of his grandfather, King Wiglaf, and his father, Wimund.¹⁵

The sequel was not at all as Brifardus had planned: "for so monstrous a crime he was smitten by the judgment of God and immediately became mad; and so he was not permitted by the Lord either to marry the Queen or to be lifted to the royal dignity". It has been suggested that Brifardus, though too powerful to be brought to justice, probably lost his reason because of his failure through the people's indignation, the jealousy of the other nobles, and his rejection by the Queen.¹⁶

It may be of interest to see what befell King Berhtwulf after the murder of his brother's grandson, and the death of his own son through madness. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 851 is brief and to the point: "And in the same year came 350 ships [about 12,000 Danes] to the mouth of the Thames, and the crews landed and took Canterbury and London by storm, and put to flight Berhtwulf, King of the Mercians, with his army". The situation was retrieved by King Aethelwulf of Wessex, who defeated the Danes at Aclea, but Berhtwulf disappears from history.

Some one hundred and seventy years later, Aylfward, Abbot of Evesham and Bishop of London, earnestly entreated Canute to present the valuable relics of St. Wistan to the important Abbey of Evesham, and this he did.¹⁷

Prior Thomas de Marleberge, having described the murder, continued with the miracles associated with the Martyr.

"When at the request of my brethren, I described the life of the glorious martyr Wistan . . . and read the same to our reverend father, the Archbishop of Canterbury,¹⁸ that he might correct it—although he approved it, yet he rebuked me for not having included in that treatise an account of the annual growth of hair on the day of his passion on the spot where he fell, to wit, *Wistanstowe* . . . I write for the benefit of those to whom it doth not happen to be at *Wistanstowe* on the birthday of the said martyr, nor to see or feel so great a miracle, for the increase of worship of this martyr and the confirmation of faith, that it may be truly said of them, 'Blessed are they which have not seen and yet have believed'.

"When, therefore, the blessed Wistan . . . fell . . . by the sword of the most villainous Brifardus, at his martyrdom as the venerable priest Bede says¹⁹ 'Divine miracles were not lacking'. For in the place in which he was innocently slaughtered a column of light rose up to heaven, and stood visible to all the inhabitants of that place for thirty days. But wonder followed wonder. For though the light has faded, holy miracles are not lacking in that place to this day. For every year, for the space of an hour on the day on which he fell by the villains' hands, on the same

¹⁵ Ingulf, who died c. 1109, states that Wimund was buried at Croyland, but much of his history is known to be a forgery. J. Stevenson (ed.), *Church Historians of England* (1854), ii. 598.

¹⁶ E. A. B. Barnard, *Notes and Queries concerning Evesham and the Four Shires* (Evesham, 1911), i. 10, 11.

¹⁷ E. A. Rudge, *History and antiquities of Evesham* (1820), 13.

¹⁸ Stephen Langton (1207-1228).

¹⁹ Here the Prior forgot to check his authorities. As Macray points out in his edition of the *Chronicon*, it should be Florence of Worcester. Bede died a century before the murder.

place where the column of light appeared, hairs spring up, such as are seen on the head of a man; the hairs torn from the head of that youth, scattered and dispersed in that place, which could not be then gathered together by the faithful who were present, remain there in the same place to this day, and grow there annually, that the true words of our Saviour may be fulfilled, as it is written, 'But there shall not a hair of your head perish'.

"And this I say that when our venerable father Baldwin, Archbishop of Canterbury,²⁰ of good memory, wished to be assured of these things, at a certain time, shortly before the day of the birth of this same martyr, he sent hither religious men and worthy of faith, namely the lord Paul, Abbot of Leicester,²¹ and the lord Baldwin, Prior of Kirkby,²² a kinsman of the said Archbishop, to watch the place diligently with fasting and prayer for three days, and to await the time and the hour when they might be found worthy to see the Divine miracle. And these men, most devoutly carrying out the charge laid upon them, with a great crowd of men standing round them, for the space of one hour, on the day of his passion on that place, near the chapel situated there, were found worthy to see, amid the green grass, hair as it were of a man, which they touched with their hands and kissed with their lips, and again after a short time saw nothing in that place save grass alone. They, weeping for joy, lifting their voices to the stars, praised the glory of God in his martyr." On their return to Canterbury, a report was made to the Archbishop amidst great praise and rejoicing.

The first of the Norman Abbots of Evesham had been Walter of Cerisy, Lanfranc's chaplain, and on his appointment in 1067 he was astounded at the number of relics of various saints. "He wondered in himself how a people sprung from the stock of so many saintly men could have been conquered by these Franks [Normans] and become subject to them Being ignorant that the children had not walked in the paths of the Lord as their fathers had done, and that therefore evil had come upon them in the latter days, he began to doubt as to the genuineness of the aforesaid relics and forgetting that it is a wicked and perverse generation which seeketh a sign", he decided to test their sanctity by fire. It would seem that in this he was acting on the advice of Archbishop Lanfranc.

There was an earnest preparation with three days of fasting and prayer. Then "with the chanting of the seven penitential psalms and litanies, he committed to a large fire the relics of the blessed martyr Wistan, whose genuineness he doubted. But Almighty God, mindful of the merits of His holy martyr, and of the prayers of the brethren that He would preserve their patron unharmed, looked out from heaven, as He had done in old time upon the three children in the Chaldean furnace, and not only kept His martyr from being consumed in the fire, but willed that the flames

²⁰ Baldwin was Archbishop 1185-1190.

²¹ Paul was abbot of Leicester 1186-1204 or 1205: A. Hamilton Thompson, *The Abbey of St. Mary of the Meadows, Leicester* (1949), 14.

²² Prior Baldwin cannot be identified with certainty. Kirby Bellars Priory, Leicestershire, was not founded until much later and probably the reference is to Monks Kirby, Warwickshire, of which no complete list of priors exists. Charters show that there was a monk named Baldwin, c. 1160, and it is probably the same person. I am indebted to Mrs. D. Styles of Birmingham University for this information.

should divide and that he should remain unhurt and untouched in the heart of the burning fire (as they who were by are witnesses), so that not even the colour of the bones was changed.

"When the said Abbot, alarmed by the strangeness of so great a miracle, was carrying with trembling hands the skull of the glorious martyr from the fire to its former place, it chanced to fall suddenly from his hands to the ground, and gave forth such a stream of sweat as any man might give forth by whatever mischance. At the sight of which miracle all lift their hands and bow the knee, raising their voices to the stars, praising the glory of God, and then bore the holy head and the other portions of the body to the reliquary prepared for it, with chants and canticles."

In 1207 the tower of Evesham Abbey church collapsed, smashing the reliquary of St. Wistan. Thomas de Marleberge was a monk at the time, and he recalls the incident. "This we also saw with our own eyes . . . and we transferred the relics to another reliquary. And in this fall we saw the skull of this martyr broken, which had been laid, wrapped in a napkin, apart from the other bones, as it still is."

When the canons of Repton heard of this, they earnestly begged "some part of the glorious martyr, our patron and theirs". Because of their devotion, and because Wistan had been buried originally at Repton, the then Abbot of Evesham, Randulf, allowed them to have part of the broken skull, and part of one of the arm bones. "Which relics, more to be desired than pearls, were met by prior and canons, with the greatest possible concourse of their townsmen, in solemn procession nearly a mile from their church, and received with joy and weeping and much kissing, and laid, not in the mausoleum of his ancestor as before, but in a place which they could more worthily and more honourably care for."

3

It is unfortunate that the prior of Evesham was not more precise over his location. According to tradition, the place where Wistan was murdered received the name of Wistanstowe, and it was in Mercia: so much is known, but no further details are given. Several other medieval chroniclers, such as Ingulf, Florence of Worcester, Matthew Paris, and Capgrave, give shorter versions of the story, but they are no more helpful over the site. Unfortunately there are a number of places which appear to contain the name of Wistan, and which at one time or another were in Mercian territory. Wistan, or Wigstan, was not an uncommon name in Anglo-Saxon times, and most of these places do not seem to have any connexion with St. Wistan.²³ Three villages, however, contain the suffix *-stow*, which is usually used of land dedicated to some saint,²⁴ and which may help in identifying the site of the murder. Wistow in Huntingdonshire proves on examination to have another derivation,²⁵ and inquiry has failed to reveal any local legend. On the other hand, both Leicestershire and Shropshire claim that the murder took place within their county borders (the counties did not exist in 849, of course), and it may be of interest to examine their respective claims.

²³ e.g. Wistanswick (Shropshire), Wistaston (Cheshire), Wisteston (Herefordshire).

²⁴ A. Mawer (ed.), *The Chief Elements used in English Place-Names* (1924), 57.

²⁵ Ekwall, *op. cit.*, 502.

Leicestershire can advance several cogent arguments in favour of Wistow, and these are set out below with various objections.

1. The local tradition.

2. The place-name, as mentioned earlier, was formerly *Wistanestow* or *Wystanestow*, and here, as in Shropshire, the name is one of the chief arguments brought forward to support the local tradition. Mawer cites Wistow as an example of *-stow* meaning land dedicated to some saint or used for some religious purpose, while Ekwall says that, although the exact meaning of *-stow* is not very clear for these two villages, they may well be named from St. Wigstan (Wistan).²⁶ As against this, one must be wary of too easily identifying an historical figure with a personal name in a place-name, and both names could be much older than the ninth century. In other words, the tradition may be based on no more than a false deduction from the form of the place-name.

3. The church is dedicated to St. Wistan, which suggests that it may be older than the village unless an existing village was renamed after the new patron saint. A later church would not be dedicated to a saint just because the village name appeared to be eponymous, unless the saint had some intimate connexion with the site. It is certainly an ancient site, as is shown by the fact that it is the mother church of the neighbouring villages of Fleckney, Kilby and Newton Harcourt.²⁷

4. The district is rich in Mercian associations. There is a charter of 849 dated from Great Glen (*aet glenne*), little over a mile away,²⁸ and Glen Church possesses two carved stones of Anglian origin, one of which may be of the eighth century²⁹ and so could have been seen by Wistan himself over eleven hundred years ago. Dr. W. G. Hoskins is of the opinion that, for these and other reasons, the district of Great Glen was a summer residence of the kings of Mercia in the early ninth century. He goes further, and is inclined to identify Wistow as the scene of the Council of 849 as "the [River] Sence was then called the Glen, and any place on its banks could have been called *glenne*. There are, however, other and weightier reasons for believing Wistow to be the scene of the assembly of 849."³⁰ The charter itself gives no direct clues, but it has been suggested that King Berhtwulf, knowing of the intended murder, took care not to be present. One cannot say definitely that the charter of 849 was issued at the assembly which saw the murder, but Berhtwulf was certainly not there, and he confirmed the charter later at Tamworth.

That the district, centrally situated in the kingdom of Mercia as it was at that time, and adjoining an important route to the south,³¹ was ideal for such assemblies, is shown by the number held in addition to that at Great Glen in 849. At Gumley, about five miles to the south-east, both Aethelbald in 749 and Offa in 772 and in 779³² held councils, while an ecclesiastical synod met in Leicester in 803, and Wiglaf held his great

²⁶ Ekwall, *op. cit.*, 427.

²⁷ W. Burton, *Description of Leicestershire* (1622), 313.

²⁸ Kemble, *op. cit.*, Charter 262.

²⁹ W. G. Hoskins, *Heritage of Leicestershire*, 34, 35.

³⁰ *Trans. Leics. Arch. Soc.*, xxv. 58.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² F. M. Stenton, *Godmundeslaech*, in *English Historical Review*, xx (1905), 697-699.

assembly on Croft Hill, about nine miles from Wistow, in 836. These facts make it quite possible that the meeting of Brifardus and Wistan took place at Wistow.

5. All accounts agree that Wistan's body was taken to Repton for burial. It is a moving experience to stand today in the ancient crypt, and to see the recesses in the walls made eleven centuries ago to accommodate the tombs of the Mercian kings, so that a space in the centre might be clear for the shrine of St. Wistan.

About three miles north of Wistow is the large village of Wigston,³³ the smaller of whose two churches is dedicated to St. Wolstan. Of this Dr. Hoskins says it "has been wrongly called St. Wolstan's for the past three hundred years, a different saint altogether, but there is no doubt about the original dedication [to St. Wistan] from the thirteenth century onwards".³⁴ He believes that this church was built on the spot where the coffin rested at the end of the first stage in the journey from Wistow to Repton. It is significant that two churches with the same dedication should be so close together. It is also interesting to discover that the only other churches dedicated to St. Wistan are at Repton and Bretby, the latter village, once a chapelry, being about three miles on this side of Repton. In the case of Bretby, the Danish termination of the name is misleading as a village already existed there, and it was renamed by the Danes "the *by* of the Britons".³⁵ The dedication therefore could date from 849, if the chapel was founded then, but it was given more probably at the return of the relics to Repton from Evesham in the thirteenth century.

This memory of the old connexion with Wistan is preserved locally at Wigston. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Hoskins for the information, so far unpublished, that in pre-Reformation times the church was largely, if not wholly, maintained by an annual pilgrimage to a jewelled image of St. Wistan. This was revealed by an Elizabethan Commission of Inquiry into "concealed lands", dated June 1572.³⁶ One villager, George Amery, deposed that "there was an image called St. Wistan's to which men used to come on pilgrimage". The offerings of the pilgrims were delivered to the churchwardens. In Domesday Book, Wigston had a priest and a clerk, and this could suggest that besides the parish church there already existed a chapel dedicated to St. Wistan, although the first documentary reference to it is in the late thirteenth century. Near the chapel was a holy well.

6. It must be remembered that the medieval chroniclers, who are our source for the story of St. Wistan, were writing centuries after the events, and must be used with caution. Thomas de Marleberge mentioned the inquiry into the alleged miracles about 1185, and it will be recollected that the ecclesiastics chosen as witnesses were Paul, Abbot of Leicester, and Baldwin, Prior most probably of Monks Kirby. This seems significant, as it would be unlikely that they would be sent to Shropshire, but quite probable that they would be chosen if the site were only a few miles away.

³³ As Wistan is sometimes spelt *Wigstan*, it should be pointed out that the place-name of Wigston has no connexion with him. It is *Wichingestone*, "Viking's Tun" (Ekwall, *op. cit.*, 494).

³⁴ W. G. Hoskins, *Heritage of Leicestershire*, 35.

³⁵ Ekwall, *op. cit.*, 60.

³⁶ P.R.O. Exchequer Special Commissions, E.178, no. 1230.

This certainly points to Wistow, but it proves no more than that a local tradition existed about 1185. The local chronicler, Henry of Knighton, who died about 1366, does not mention the inquiry.

They may have been trying to establish a local claim, and the fact that Prior Baldwin was the Archbishop's cousin could suggest such a manoeuvre, based perhaps on the place-name as it then was, and a reading of some of the chroniclers.³⁷ If this were so, it would support the objection that the name may not have any connexion with the historical Wistan.

A further point may be mentioned here. Thomas de Marleberge says that "these men . . . on that place near the chapel [*capella*] situated there, were found worthy to see, amid the green grass, hair as it were of a man". Now no medieval ecclesiastic could confuse *capella* and *ecclesia*, and Wistow was undoubtedly *ecclesia*. It may have been a slip, just as the Prior wrote Bede instead of Florence of Worcester, but it seems unlikely, as he was writing within forty years of the event. Could the Commission have gone to the capella of St. Wistan at Wigston, and did the pilgrimage date from that time? It is impossible to say, but Marleberge says quite plainly that they went to the place called *Wistanstowe*.

7. The Rev. W. Conlin of Kilby has pointed out that the site of the church at Wistow is low-lying, and it would seem unsuitable for a church unless there were some special reason for placing it there, as for example to mark the site of the murder. The River Sence (or Glen, as once it was) runs close by, and the church was flooded to a depth of about three feet in 1588, 1609, and again in 1618.³⁸ The nearby lake was not made until the late eighteenth century.

It will be seen, then, that Wistow in Leicestershire can put forward some good arguments, but there are also some weighty objections to them.

4

The Shropshire village of Wistanstow lies about six miles south of Church Stretton and two miles from Craven Arms, at a spot where the valleys open out, and the hills of the Long Mynd and Caradoc recede from the Shrewsbury—Ludlow road.

The following arguments can be advanced to identify the Shropshire village with the site of the murder.

1. The place-name, which unlike Wistow has kept its original form. Here again one must be cautious about too hasty an identification with St. Wistan.

2. The local tradition, which is strong. In the church, in the north wall of the nave, is a very beautiful lancet window given by the Dolbey family about thirty years ago which expresses this. The artist has closely followed the story as given in the Evesham Chronicle. With lovely colouring the upper panel of the window shows Wistan handing the crown back to his mother, Queen Elfreda, while below lies the corpse with blood-stained cloak, and the two murderers, Brifardus and his henchman, lurk in the background. From the body springs the column of light which ascends through the upper window to what appear to be the spires and towers of the Heavenly City, but which the anonymous writer of the guide to Repton church (1950) prefers to see as "a group of buildings beside a river, which

³⁷ I owe this suggestion to Mrs. H. Hayward of the Shropshire Archæological Society.

³⁸ Nichols, *op. cit.*, ii. 871.

may be taken to indicate his home at Repton". It may be appropriate at this point to record that there are several representations of the Saint elsewhere, in various forms. At Repton there is a delightful statue over the south porch, given in 1911, and in the south transept there is a figure representing Wistan in a four-light window, but it portrays, rather inappropriately, an elderly saint. Unexpectedly there is a painting of Wistan in the Venerable English College at Rome.³⁹

Unlike the church at Wistow, this church is dedicated, not to the Saint, but to the Holy Trinity. There appears to be a rather vague idea locally that there was a different dedication in pre-Reformation times, but there is no evidence for this in the registers of the Bishops of Hereford, as published by the Cantilupe Society, while F. Arnold-Forster in *Studies in Church Dedications* and D. H. S. Cranage in *Churches of Shropshire* both mention Holy Trinity as being the pre-Reformation dedication.

It will be remembered that there was a query over Marleberge's use of the word *capella*. Wistow in Leicestershire was definitely *ecclesia* and the same problem arises here. In 972 Wistanstow had been one of the twelve prebends attached to the College of St. Alkmund, Shrewsbury, and it may have been a *capella* at that time, but Marleberge is writing 1218-1229, and describing an event of about 1185. There is a Fine of 1188 which refers to *Ecclesia de Wistanestowe*.⁴⁰

3. The third reason supporting the Wistanstow theory is the location and lay-out of the village. Wistanstow appears to be a village comparatively late in origin, as of course it would be if the local tradition for the murder is true. It is of the linear type, situated along a Roman road—the "Watling Street"⁴¹—which forms the main street. The Watling Street is also a Hundred boundary, so that the houses on one side are in Purslow, and on the other in Winslow, Hundred. From Wistanstow the Roman road branches to Ludlow, Leintwardine (*Bravonium*), and to Knighton in Radnorshire.⁴² Here, too, many valleys open out, making it an ideal place to choose for a conference such as that of 849.

There is one disadvantage in situation in that the village is low-lying in relation to the surrounding district, and one is informed that parts of the area are marshy and liable to flooding, for example the significantly named Marshbrook, three miles away. The Romans took their road on to higher ground at the first opportunity. For a conference in June, as that of 849, conditions might be reasonably dry, and the tragic events which followed might explain the choice of a somewhat unsuitable site for the village which, on this argument, sprang up round the shrine erected where the murder took place.

³⁹ R. Stanton, *A Menology of England and Wales* (1892 ed.), 651.

⁴⁰ Dugdale, *Monasticon* (Bohn's edition, 1846), vi. 750, number xvi, and R. W. Eyton, *Antiquities of Shropshire* (1860), xi. 359.

⁴¹ V.C.H. *Shropshire*, i. 271: "Now commonly called Watling Street on our maps. But the appellation cannot be traced back beyond about 1700, and was probably introduced by antiquaries who considered the road a continuation of the main Watling Street leading from London to Wroxeter. In the Middle Ages its name seems to have been *Botte* or *Bot Street*, which Eyton mentions as used in early times for the Shropshire part of its course". It runs from Wroxeter to South Wales, and in particular to the fortress of Caerleon.

⁴² W. G. D. Fletcher, *Shropshire Parish Registers*, xvii (1920), p. iii. The V.C.H., published twelve years earlier, does not support the theory of branches to Ludlow and Knighton, but there seems no doubt that these are old roads.

4. Thomas de Marleberge uses what may be a very significant word when he says that, on the death of Wiglaf, "the prelates of the Churches, the great men of the realm, the clergy, and the people of the whole region [*provinciae*] asked Wistan to accept the crown". The use of *provinciae* suggests that it was not an assembly of the Mercian Council, who do not appear to have met in the area now covered by Shropshire, but rather of one of the *provinciae* or *regiones* based on former tribal areas into which Mercia was divided.

It would be a useful clue if one could identify which *provincia* it was. Stevenson, in his translation of Ingulf, referred to above in note 6, describes Wiglaf as Duke of the Wiccii. It does not seem possible to identify these people with certainty, but they are probably the Hwicce of the Severn Valley. Stevenson in his translation of Gaimar⁴³ does not hesitate to equate the people, whom he here calls the Wiccians, with the inhabitants of Worcestershire and neighbouring districts, in other words with the Hwicce. Unfortunately there is a variant reading in the text of Ingulf. In Savile's Latin edition⁴⁴ the text runs *Witlafius dux Mercioru* while Fulman has *Wichtlafus Dux Wicciorum*.⁴⁵ The discrepancy probably arose in the monastic scriptorium, for in dictation *Huicciorum* (the form which occurs in the charters) could easily be written by a scribe as *Wicciorum*, or have been misheard as *Merciorum*. Considerable caution must be used in building an argument from this, especially in view of the known unreliability of Ingulf, but it may explain terms used by Marleberge.

For example, Brifardus the murderer is called *Consul*, and whatever connotation that may have had to Marleberge it suggests that Wiglaf and later Berhtwulf took the natural precaution of keeping their own *provincia* in family hands, while they themselves were kings of the whole of Mercia. Thus they extended Offa's policy by appointing relatives as ealdormen. Mr. E. A. B. Barnard has suggested that Wistan only succeeded to that part of Mercia over which his father Wimund had ruled while Wiglaf was on the throne.⁴⁶ Brifardus, then, was probably ruler of the adjoining *provincia* where the conference of 849 took place, for he seems to have chosen the site. On this argument Wistan had become ealdorman of the Hwicce—a position which he temporarily renounced—and Brifardus of the Magon-sætan, in whose territory the site later known as Wistanstow lay. If this reading of Ingulf be accepted, and the identification of the scene of the murder with the lands of the Hwicce and the Magon-sætan holds good, then it makes a strong case for Wistanstow.

One must not forget the danger of associating a ninth-century prince with a place-name similar to his own, but there does seem to be reason for believing that these two villages may be an exception. The claim must rest between them, but, on balance, Wistow in Leicestershire probably has the most weighty arguments. There is, however, a negative argument which, as far as a decision can be made, indicates that the crime took place at Wistanstow. Some attempt must be made to resolve the apparent discrepancies. If the crime did take place at Wistow, there seems no reason

⁴³ Stevenson, *op. cit.*, 755, Note 7.

⁴⁴ H. Savile, *Rerum Anglicarum Scriptores post Bedam praecipui* (Frankfurt edition, 1601), 855.

⁴⁵ W. Fulman, *Rerum Anglicarum Scriptorum veterum*, i (1684), 7.

⁴⁶ E. A. B. Barnard, *op. cit.*, 13.

for the Wistanstow traditions, but if it happened at Wistanstow it was only natural for the event to be commemorated at Wistow, as the district appears to have strong Mercian associations, and was probably a summer palace.

After the passing of eleven centuries it is impossible to be more definite. It is remarkable indeed that the story survived at all, for within two years of Wistan's death in 849 the Mercian army under Berhtwulf had been defeated, and within six years the Danes had reached the district of the Wrekin. From 865 to 874 the pagan hosts ravaged the Midlands and in the winter of 873 the Danes made Repton their headquarters, destroying the Abbey, of which the empty mausoleum alone survived. In 877 what is now Leicestershire was divided up by the Danish soldiers, the traces of whose settlement can be seen clearly to this day.

Fortunately the monks at Repton, foreseeing the impending disasters, had removed the relics of the martyr to a place of safety, and after a century a new church and shrine to St. Wistan arose at Repton, so saving the sad tale from oblivion. The comment of Bishop Alhhun at Glen in 849 was apt indeed: "The position truly is this: the condition of the present age, critical and uncertain with various upheavals, is as a storm-tossed sea, troubled and disturbed".⁴⁷

⁴⁷ A life of St. Wistan is included in the collection of lives of the English saints that is described by the Rev. Paul Grosjean, S.J., F.B.A., in *Analecta Bollandiana* lviii (1940), 90-103. Père Grosjean is at present editing the text for publication.

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