

PRISTON HISTORY GROUP TALK

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Bronze Age:

During the period around 2200 B.C. immigrants arrived with what is known as the Beaker Culture in Britain, and Wessex is rich in burial sites with Beaker pottery and bronze working. Round barrows were, however, in common use even earlier so it is not known to what era Priston's 2 round barrows, which John Skinner, the rector of Camerton, mentions in his diary in 1821 belonged. They were located above the stream beside the very old track or holloway from Watery [Priston] Lane which runs up to connect with the old pathway [mentioned in 1446] which ran both from Church Farm and the Rectory through the old medieval Southfield to the Rector's enclosure of Lammasfield further upstream. At least one of the 2 barrows was destroyed in 1827 by quarrying for road-stone and for the limekiln placed next door but it is believed that fragments of bone were found in one of them. The quarry was later backfilled and so the exact site is not known ¹.

Iron Age:

The earliest Iron Age [800-600 B.C.] was a time of agricultural intensification throughout much of Britain with the landscape filling up with farmsteads maintained and rebuilt over generations. Another feature of the period was hilltop areas being enclosed by a bank and a ditch. These structures tend to concentrate in the central swathe of Britain from Wessex to the Welsh borderland. The interiors appear to be largely empty of major features and it is now thought they were designed to contain animals at certain times of the year when it was necessary to bring them together for castration, culling, shearing or redistribution [Cunliffe, 2013, p.300.]

The middle Iron Age [600-400] was a time when the British communities continued to develop very distinctive regional cultures. In some areas, notably central southern Britain, extending from the Channel coast, though Wessex and Gloucestershire to the Welsh marches, the growth of heavily defended hill-forts was indicative of unsettled conditions [Cunliffe, 2013, p.304.]

There is a strong belief that the boundaries of Priston were established along a series of ancient trackways associated with neighbouring hilltop forts. The "Jurassic Way" passed Tunley Camp and then Duncorne Hill going towards the early shrine at Bath; Tunley Camp has a single ditch and bank, now mainly ploughed out, which might be an earlier structure. Stantonbury hillfort in Marksbury parish was beside a trackway that crossed the "Salt Way" near Priston's parish border. It is thought that the outer boundaries of Priston, Markesbury, [Stanton Prior], and Corston are based on what was the central core of land belonging to Stantonbury hillfort [Costen 1983, p.31.]

Interestingly, a hoard of late Iron Age gold coins c.5-20 A.D. was found in Farmborough in 1982 and is now in the British Museum. There are 61 staters with a horse and a wheel on one side with the name Corio above [possibly an abbreviated name of the ruler] and a stylized leaf motive on the other side. They form the largest hoard of ancient coins so far found in this area of Western England and they are from the Dobunni tribe. Possibly the hoard related to elite habitation centred at Stantonbury

¹ Skinner also mentions a barrow 30ft round near the farmhouse at Wilmington but it has not been found. 2 more round barrows, similarly placed above the water further upstream at Wallmead appear to have gone. [Priston Farm Survey, 1991].

Hill-fort, which was partly excavated in the 1950s, and there is some suggestion that the Dobunni south of the River Avon may have recognised a different local leader to that of the main tribe who occupied most of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire as well as north Somerset [Clewes, 1996, p.6-7].

Stantonbury's earlier Anglo Saxon name was Marksbury, which uses the older element of *Maerc*, O.E. meaning 'boundary', which also appears in Maes Knoll, another Dobunni hillfort, close to Whitchurch near Bristol, coupled with *burh* 'a stronghold'. It is not known what the Dobunni named it.

The Dobunni fought against the Emperor Claudius' invasion and were defeated by the Legio II Augusta under the future emperor Vespasian but later were one of several tribes who served as middlemen in the complex trading systems during the early Roman period and may also have been middlemen in the late Iron Age before the Romans arrived. The Dobunni, Durotriges [Dorset and southern Somerset], and Corieltavi [west midlands and Lincolnshire] tribal confederacies belonged to the 'periphery' that brought raw materials and slaves from the wilder west and north and passed them to the entrepreneurs who dominated the markets in South-east Britain [Cunliffe p.367.]

The possibility of Priston having had a late Iron Age settlement was corroborated by the discovery of a few shards of 1st century B.C. Iron Age pottery in the Great Croft behind the Hill Farm complex in 1953 when William Wedlake was excavating, and aerial photos of the surrounding area show the imprint of important field systems which are possibly prehistoric ².

Roman Era:

John Skinner mentioned a stone coffin found at Edgills farm being used as a pig trough in the farmyard in 1826. [In 1818 Mr James Edgell took out a lease on Mill Farm for the period 1818-1832³ so my assumption is that the coffin was located on land belonging to Priston Mill]. In 1917 a second Roman coffin was located in Great Croft field, Hill Farm, now in the church porch, and the skeleton wore bracelets made of 5 strands of bronze wire⁴.

Bill Wedlake [who as a youth came to see the 1917 coffin] was well known for his archaeological work in Bath and at Camerton a small Roman town near a late Iron Age settlement built on either side of the Fosse Way, possibly as an early military camp on the great military supply road. Later it would have served passing trade on the Fosse way [running from Exeter to Lincoln], such as pilgrims and the sick travelling to the religious centre in Aquae Sulis, movement of lead and silver from the Mendips, transport of foodstuffs either to the local market or further. Britain as well as feeding the large number of troops stationed in the province, was a food exporter in the Roman period.

Wedlake's finds in Priston's Great Croft included Roman pottery of the 1st and 2nd centuries, quite a lot of Samian ware, [one shard with the maker *Albinus*' mark ⁵], sections of spindle whorls, parts of a bronze brooch, a lot of other pottery and some industrial slag. His finds and Priston notes are in the Bristol Museum in Park Street

² Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society, 2008, p.9.

³ Copy of lease held by Tim Hughes

⁴ These were shown by Tim Hughes at the talk by BCAS on the geophysical survey results, 2008.

⁵ Albinus worked in central Gaul as a bowl finisher in the late 1st century – early 2nd century A.D. [Museum of London website].

but have not been catalogued.

His excavations exposed wall footings running either side of a cobbled roadway. This is one of several hints of local minor communications patterns, which would have led via known Roman roads in the area towards Aquae Sulis and the important river crossing where the long distance south west-north east Fosse Way and the east-west roads from London and Silchester to the ferry port of Sea Mills north of Bristol met. A fifth road leading towards Poole harbour also commenced from the crossing.

Further work by the Bath & Camerton Archaeological Society was undertaken in Great Croft in 2007 using geophysical survey, which confirmed Wedlake's walls and trackway. Their conclusions were that despite a lot of activity, Great Croft may not have been the main focus of Roman settlement in Priston and they suggested that looking at the field across Mill Lane, still called Town Hill [which once belonged to Mill Farm and might possibly be the site of the first coffin], might reveal further results.

So, no major Roman building has been located in Priston despite its proximity to Bath and its markets but the tenured farms must have supplied grain [wheat and barley], meat [cattle and sheep] hides and wool. Priston's timber resources could have been managed and even possibly coal, mined where it outcrops in the area. Interestingly, coal is mentioned in a 3rd century description by Solinus⁶ of the Temple at Aquae Sulis where "perpetual fire never whitens to ash but as the flame fades turns into rocky balls" [Clewes, 1996, p.8].

Villas came late to this area and one possible explanation for this is if the southern Dobunni tribal area was administered under direct imperial control, as were the lands of the Iceni and the Durotriges. When in the 286 A.D. the usurper Carausius declared himself emperor of Britain and Northern Gaul⁷, this might have resulted in imperial estates being sold off for revenue. After official rule from Rome was re-established in 296 A.D. by Caesar Constantius I Chlorus there was a spate of villa building with over thirty around Aquae Sulis, which created the highest density of villas in Roman Britain. Some of these may not have been conventional farming establishments, but rather country retreats close to the religious spa [Clewes 1996, p.7.]

Post Roman Era:

Of all the towns locally, Bath has the best claim to a late survival of some kind of urban life, possibly administered by the temple authorities [Clewes, 1996 p.8]. And there is speculation that the section of Wansdyke running from South Stoke, westwards across the Foss Way to Englishcombe might represent a boundary between a Dobunnic group to the south and this political unit based on Aquae Sulis, as the construction of the wall shows it faced northwards towards Bath [Costen, 2011,p.21]. For a period at the end of the 5th century, while there is evidence for reusing some of the hillforts in the West country, there is also at the hillfort nr. Congresbury, substantial remains of imported pottery, some coming from the Mediterranean, indicating that merchants were still able to trade at least by sea.

Nevertheless Somerset also has a very high concentration of hoards of Roman coin

⁶ Gaius Julius Solinus, mid 3rd century. Author of *De Mirabilibus Mundi* [the Wonders of the World]

⁷ In Somerset in 2010 a hoard of 52,000 Roman coins was discovered, 800 of which were struck during Carausius' brief reign. Independent Newspaper 30th July 2010.

and there is a distinct rise after c.380 A.D., indicating life was becoming very unsettled as troops were continually withdrawn from the province. From the dating of hoard coins it is clear that the burial of personal assets was a long drawn out process that continued until coins ceased to be available to be buried [Costen, 2011, p.6].

The possibly later extension of Wansdyke westwards to Stantonbury and on to Maes Knoll may have followed when the Bath/Cirencester region passed into English hands after the 577 A.D. battle.

The West Saxons were supposed to have been successful in the late 6th century at a battle near Bath in A.D. 577 at Deorham, assumed to be Dyrham, with the Iron Age hillfort on Hinton Hill as the possible site. The Anglo Saxon Chronicle [compiled 300 years later] claimed this victory gave them Glevum [Gloucester], Corinium [Cirencester] and Aquae Sulis [Bath].

So, from 350 A.D. when the first Roman troops were removed from Britain to 650 A.D. was a period of dramatic change culminating in the total collapse of order and government. Change of this magnitude must have been psychologically devastating and few people would have remained unaffected [Cunliffe, 2013, p.444.]

Of this turbulent early Anglo Saxon settlement here we know nothing, not when the estate of Priston was formed, nor who its owners were, but the existence of Roman roads within the parish left their mark on the actual shape of the future Anglo Saxon estate. One road ran from Saltford southwards to Camerton, via the eastern flank of Stantonbury Hill and Wilmington [it is still the boundary between Stanton Prior and Priston] and on towards Camerton on the western side of Priston [Priston's 10th century A.D. charter called this section "baere ealden dic" indicating that it had by then become disused but it was the boundary]. Likewise, there was what Priston's Anglo-Saxon charter called "the street" but Stanton Prior's charter called "the main road to Bath" also a boundary, which historians believe shows that our and Stanton Prior's Saxon estates must have developed after the road was in existence [Costen 1983 p.32].

So it is also not known when Priston got its combination of Old Welsh/Old English place name: *prisc* a 'copse or thicket' and *tun* a settlement or estate',⁸ nor whether it continued with unbroken habitation by Britons, though the Old Welsh name element rather suggests they may have stayed, their only choices being either to leave or to face alien incomers settling.

Anglo-Saxons:

The local area is rather rich in later Anglo-Saxon charters: Priston in 931; Marksbury in 936; Corston in 941 and 956; Dunkerton in 961; Stanton Prior in 963 and 965. Quite a few are grants to the upper class – thegns - or to religious houses. Priston's was for 10 hides, granted by King Aethelstan, [924-939 A.D.] the grandson of King Alfred, to Bath Abbey and is coupled with a charter for 5 hides in Cold Ashton [then known as *Aesctun*.] Bath Abbey was originally a nunnery, or possibly a dual house under the authority of the abbess, founded in A.D. 676 by the Hwicci King Osric, who was a sub-ruler in the larger and more aggressive state of Mercia. It is believed that King Offa of Mercia rebuilt the monastery in the 780s when he gained control of Bath as it sat on the much disputed frontier between Mercia and Wessex.

Because the charter is unique in having a story attached, it has long been regarded by historians as a forgery – particularly because some of the witnessing clerics listed

⁸ Dr Costen of Bristol University says this use of *prisc* in a place-name is unique and translates it as "a settlement which lies amongst the bushes", [Costen, 1983, p.31].

did not hold those posts until some years later.

The latest scholar to look at all the charters of Bath and Malmesbury Abbeys, feels however that there is some contemporary truth enmeshed within the extraordinary tale which states that King Aethelstan granted the estates which belonged to a discredited thegn, named Alfred, who was involved in an attempt to blind Athelstan in Winchester early in his reign before he was crowned [i.e.924-5]. The plot was foiled and possibly Alfred fled or was sent to St Peter's in Rome to clear himself by taking an oath of innocence to the Pope. He apparently died in Rome and was therefore judged to have perjured himself, so proving his guilt.

Clearly Alfred the thegn owned quite a lot of land, though it is not known where he actually resided, because another 15 hides in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire went to St Peter's in Malmesbury in the same year with the same tale attached to the charter. Dr Kelly speculates that both abbeys later faced a legal challenge from the dispossessed heirs and if this was so, they got together to protect their holdings [Kelly,2007, p.78].

So the estate of Alfred's at Priston was given to St Peter's in Bath. A very rough guess is that each Priston hide was about 150 acres but by this time a hide was a unit of taxation rather than a particular size as it had been in the past. We do not know if there was a thegn's hall here but if there was a church, it is likely that there was a hall, as the thegn would have been the church builder. Landowners tended to move around their various estates both to oversee their working, collect rents and live off the production of foodstuffs.

We have no record of what was grown but both wheat and barley were common in the Roman period and with Priston's known woodlands, pigs are assumed to be very likely and possibly sheep. The Priston estate was recorded 150 years later in Domesday as under the direct control of the Abbot and this may well have been the case from the beginning. While we don't have any details of how the estate was run, there are several documents from the period that supply background information. Tenurial obligations obviously varied with different manors and but we have a document from Hampshire at Hurstbourne Priors which is dated from the reign of Aethelston's father, Edward the Elder [though some historians argue that it might be later].

Here is the list of payments and obligations [though not whose]:

For every hide of land	40 pence at the Autumnal equinox
[an individual must give]:	6 church mittan of ale [1 mittan = 9 pints]
	3 sesters of wheat [15 punds = 1 sester]
	Plough 3 acres and sow with seed in their own time.
	Harvest the same and bring to the barn [the lord's barn].
	Pay 3 punds of barley as rent [1pund = 5050-5760 individual grains of barley]
	Mow half an acre of meadow and make it into a rick in their own time.
	Supply 4 fothers of wood split and stacked in own time [1 fother = 1 cartload].
	Supply 16 poles [1 pole=5.5yards] for fencing.
	Supply 2 ewes with lambs at Easter.
	Wash and shear sheep in their own time.

And work as they are bidden every week
[possibly 2 or 3 days] except for:
1 week @ midwinter
1 week @ Easter
1 week @ Rogation [May].
[Robertson, 1956, p.207]

Tidenham:

There is also an undated pre-conquest survey of an estate gifted to Bath Abbey in 956 A.D. by King Edwig [or Edwy], the son of Aethelstan's half-brother, that gives details of what labour the workers there owed the abbey. This estate was much larger than Priston [30 hides] made up of several manors, and was located by the River Severn at Tidenham in Gloucestershire. One of the most important duties, was to build weirs on the river and supply a large amount of fish:

“At every weir within those 30 hides every alternate fish belongs to the lord of the manor [the Abbey], and every rare fish which is of value – sturgeon or porpoise, herring or sea fish – and no one has the right of selling fish for money when the lord is on the estate without informing him about it.

The Geneat must labour either on the estate or off the estate which ever he is bidden, and ride and furnish carrying service and supply transport and drive herds and do many other things. [They were comparatively free and would be classed as small holders who also worked their own land and paid rent, probably equated with the Domesday *bordarii*].

The Gebur must do what is due from him – he must plough half an acre a week – work and himself fetch the seed from the lord's barn, and a whole acre for church dues [church scot] from his own barn. Undertake weir building, supply 15 poles of field fencing or dig 5, fence and dig 1 pole of the mansion-house hedge, reap 1.5 acres and mow half an acre, and work other kinds of work. He shall give 6 pence after Easter and half a sester of honey, at Lammas 6 sesters of malt, at Martinmas [11th November] a ball of good net yarn. On the same estate it is the rule that he who has 7 swine shall give 3[initially] and thereafter always the tenth, and in spite of this, pay for the right of having mast when there is mast [i.e. grazing the pigs on oak or beech mast]”. [These people probably would be equated with the Domesday villeinage]. [Robertson 1956, p.205-7.]

Probably the most important document is known as the *Rectitudines Singularum Personarum*, it is the only systematic record of rights and obligations of workers and tenants on an Anglo Saxon estate before the Norman conquest that has come down to us. Some historians believe that it started as a 10th century record for administering an actual estate, very possibly either at Glastonbury Abbey or Bath Abbey⁹, but it was subsequently incorporated as the core of a larger 11th century treatise belonging to Worcester, on the ordering of society in a rural community.

It covers the social groups of Geneats; Cotsetlers; Geburs in some detail:

The Geneat-right:

“s various, according to the custom of the land [or individual estate]. In some places he must pay the land-due [landgafol], and a grass-swine yearly; ride and carry; lead

⁹ This assumption is based on the use of peculiarly Somerset forms for some words in the West Saxon text.

work; work and feed his lord; reap and mow; hew hedging and hold saete [help to make park palings] build and enclose the burh [or mansion]; make new roads; pay church-shot and alms-fee; go on errand far or near, withersoever he is directed”.

The Cotsetler's right:

“Is according to custom. In some places he must work for the lord every Monday throughout the year; or 3 days every week in harvest; he need pay no land due. He ought to have 5 acres; more if it is custom. And if it be less, it is too little, for his service is often called upon. He must pay his hearth-penny on Holy Thursday [Ascension Day] as it behoves every freeman to do; he must perform the duty of coast guard; and attend the king's hunt; his lord's inland and at such things are in his competence; and let him pay his church-shot at Martinmas”.

The Gebur's-right:

“The customs of the Gebur are very various; in some places heavy, but in some moderate. In some places it is usual that he will do 2 days week-work, whatever work may be commanded of him, every week throughout the year; and 3 days week-work in harvest, and 3 from Candlemas to Easter. He must pay at Michaelmas 10 gafol [tax] pence, and at Martinmas [11th November] 23 sesters of barley, and 2 hens; at Easter one young sheep or 2 pence; and from that time when the plough is first put in, till Martinmas, he shall plough one acre every week, and make ready the seed, and two of grass ploughing... For his rent ploughing he shall plough 3 acres and sow them from his own barn; and pay his hearth-penny; and each gebur shall give six loaves to the inswan [swine-herd] when he drives his herd to the oakmast. In the same land where these conditions prevail, the gebur has the right, towards the first stocking of his land, to receive 2 oxen, 1 cow and 6 sheep, and seven acres of his yard of land already sown. After the first year, let him do all the customs which belong to him; and he is to be supplied with tools for his work, and furniture for his house. When he dies, let his lord look after what he leaves [no inheritance passed on].

Then follows occupations such as Bee-keepers; Swine-herds; Woodward and Hayward. It then talks about people who could be slaves: Herdsmen [both men and women who as well as being housed also are given provisions of food and wood]. It also notes that all slaves belonging to the estate ought to have food at Christmas and Easter, a strip of land for ploughing and a “harvest-handfull” besides their dues. Then it concludes by saying: There are many common rights: in some districts are due winter provisions, Easter provisions, a harvest feast for reaping corn, a drinking feast for ploughing, reward for haymaking, food for making the rick and many others”... [Douglas & Greenaway, 1981, p.875-]

At Priston one would expect to find Geneats and Geburs and as the estate contained quite a bit of woodland probably one or more swine-herds as well as a Woodward and a Hayward. Whether there were also Cotsetlers and/or slaves at that time is not known but Domesday records 3 slaves.

It is interesting that whilst we often think of feudalism, due to the Norman reorganisation, as creating crueller tied conditions for workers, but it is clear that somewhat similar indentured conditions existed under the Anglo Saxons too though the scale of estates themselves was much smaller. It is estimated that after the Conquest, the land of 4000-5000 Anglo-Saxon and Danish estate owners were concentrated into the hands of 144 Norman barons [Cunliffe p.487]. Quite a land grab!

Doomsday:

Doomsday records Priston listed immediately after the Abbey itself, with the estate under direct control of the Abbot. The total population was 18 households. There is land for 8 ploughs and of that land 2 hides are in hand of the Abbot [i.e. demesne land cultivated directly for the lord] where there is 1 plough and 3 slaves. There are 7 villeins, and 8 bordars [tenants paying tax and services to the abbey] with 6 ploughs and 4 hides. Meadow of 20 acres, pasture of 80 acres, but no mention of woodland and no mention of animals except for one horse¹⁰. Priston mill, most unusually, belonged to one of the customary tenants, not to the lord, and paid 7s 6p tax. The taxable value was 6 geld units although the whole estate under the Anglo Saxons would have been what was classified as 'inland' which meant it was outside the royal taxation system, as all ecclesiastical lands in Somerset were exempt [Costen 2011 p.132]. Presumably this was no longer the case after the conquest.

Spelling Variants for Priston:

Priscun/Prysgun [Old Welsh/Anglo-Saxon]; Priscun [931 charter: written in Latin]; Priscune [931 charter bounds: written in Anglo-Saxon]; Priscune [Doomsday]; Prystone [Bath Priory 1302]; Prysshton [Bath Priory 1501]; Preston [18th century].

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¹⁰ A scribal error may have left them out as sheep are listed at Wilmington, Stanton [Prior], Markesbury and Corston; pigs are listed at Corston and Markesbury; cattle are listed at Englishcombe; whilst Priston has more meadowland than any of these estates. Markesbury belonged to Glastonbury Abbey, Corston, Stanton and Priston belonged to Bath Abbey. Englishcombe was in secular hands.

It is thought that Priston [Watery/Wood] Lane originated as an early drove way [Priston Farm Survey, 1991].