

The origins of Haxby

The Roman conquest of Britain began in the year 43 AD, and in about eight years or so they had advanced as far as the south bank of the River Rother near Templeborough. Further to the east, they had also reached the southern bank of the River Torne, close to where Doncaster now stands. For some reason it took them another twenty years to make further progress. The question is, what held them back for such a long time, and the answer is the Brigantes.

The Brigantes were the largest, and probably the most powerful of all the tribes who occupied the island of Britain. By the time of the Roman invasion their territory covered the whole of the north of England, roughly from the border area of Scotland to about Doncaster in the south of Yorkshire. At that time the Brigantes were ruled by Queen Cartimandua, and her consort Venutius, according to the Roman historian Tacitus.

Now, the Roman army had problems in the south, where a number of tribes were threatening to rebel, probably encouraged by the Druids. Whatever the reason, they decided to negotiate with the Brigantes, rather than invade their territory. Cartimandua agreed to a treaty with Rome, and this was to confirm that Brigantia was now a client Kingdom of Rome, and that Queen Cartimandua was recognised as the ruler.

This must have been a mutually agreeable relationship because it lasted for approximately twenty years. Unfortunately, the Queen fell out with Venutius, who had been opposed to the treaty, and he raised an army and attacked the Queen's encampment. This was in about 69 AD according to Tacitus the historian. The Queen was saved, but a few years later, in about 71 AD, Venutius again attacked the Queen, and the Roman army was asked to intervene, and save her a second time. Venutius had not been defeated, and he was hailed as the new King by some of the tribe. A full scale civil war broke out, and the Roman army was forced to invade. Venutius was finally defeated, and probably killed, in about 73/4 AD. Cartimandua also disappears from history, but it is probable she survived and was protected by the Romans, to ensure they continued to enjoy the loyalty of her supporters.

Having disposed of Venutius, the Romans decided to continue their advance, and conquer the rest of the north of England. They established a base for the invasion near to where they had met and negotiated with Cartimandua, and built a fortress, which they called Eburacum. The first fort was of necessity built of wood, which was readily available from the Forest of Galtres. Eventually however, it was replaced by a massive stone fortress, which became the second most important citadel in Britain. Yorkshire was civilised by a network of roads, and the establishment of numerous large, and small, towns and villages.

The Romans remained in Britain for more than 367 years, but the Legions were recalled in about 410 AD, because the Empire was beginning to implode.

Now what has all this to do with Haxby, I imagine most readers will be thinking, so I will try and explain.

An Aerial Survey carried out by English Heritage in 2003/4, has confirmed evidence of at least six Romano/British settlements in the Haxby Moor area, which deserve to be properly investigated. In addition, the possible site of a Neolithic Tomb has also been identified.

This tomb was first excavated in 1770, then in 1811, and again in 1846/7, 1908, and lastly 1922. Unfortunately, all these digs were poorly recorded, according to York Archaeological Trust, who carried out a Desk Based Survey in 2008.

However, this Desk Based Survey of the area of land called Lund Field has identified a number of interesting finds of objects from the Romano/British period. These include, two caches of Roman coins, dated between 330 AD and 355 AD, which is only about 55 years before the Legions were withdrawn. The total number of coins was 838, and some can be seen in the York Museum. In addition to the coins, pieces of Roman pottery have been found in gardens along North Lane, and Station Road. But the most valuable find so far recorded, is of a silver Roman signet ring, found in the Station Road area, and mentioned in the local Press.

Haxby is bordered on the east by the River Foss, which is a tributary of the River Ouse. During the Roman period the Foss was known to be used to transport grain, and possibly other commodities, from Strensall and Haxby to York. There must have been a small landing area near to Haxby, and the name of site called Landing Lane may be related to it.

Another important fact, is that the area of land known as Lund Field, which is situated between the town and Haxby Moor, is water logged. This is not conducive to reliable aerial photography.

Haxby as a whole, is sitting on a bed of thick clay, which I can personally confirm from digging in my garden, only about 80 meters from Lund Field. That is why Lund Field is never dry, and often floods. The whole area of land is criss-crossed with field drains, some as deep as two and three meters. It is also worth noting that this information is recorded on Land Registry Maps of the area.

I have not mentioned yet, the discovery of evidence of a Roman Temple first recorded in 1966, located on a site south of Crossmoor Lane, near Haxby Grange Farm. This was also noted in the Aerial Survey completed by English Heritage.

It is believed that the Brigantes had close relations with the Druids, who considered the Forest areas to be sacred, and worshiped the oak tree. The Forest of Galtres was full of oak trees. The ancient Britons in general considered wells, springs, and ponds as sacred. This area is full of such sites, Lund Field in particular. The Romans were renowned for adopting sites of this nature, to their own beliefs. The Bath springs are a very good example of this. The significance of these facts, can not be overlooked, because that could possibly explain why a Roman Temple is situated in the area.

In my opinion, the evidence indicates that this area was settled by the Brigantes, and the Romans, by farming communities. Obviously we are unlikely to know what they called the place, if in fact they called it anything in particular. However, I do believe it should be properly investigated before any rash decision is made to cover the evidence with another concrete jungle,

Many towns and villages in England can trace their name back to Anglo-Saxon origins. That is a fact, and no modern linguist would disagree. I believe that fact can be tested in a number of ways. For instance, I hope that most people would agree that Haxby, was undoubtedly settled deep into the Forest of Galtres, and therefore many, if not most, of the residents would in all probability make their living from the forest in some way. Fortunately, the Forest of Galtres was one of the forests that enjoyed Royal patronage. This was because the Anglo-Saxon settlers recognised the woodlands as a national resource, and the protection of this resource was very important.

The King delegated the responsibility for managing the forests to a number of senior Government officials. At the top was the Master of the Forest of Galtres, and he would appoint a number of minor officers to ensure the day to day husbandry of the forest. They, because of their day to day work load, had to live within the forest boundary. There were a number of these minor officers, and they had a variety of titles, one of which was the Steward, and another was Master of the Game. Another important person, was the Bowbearer. This was considered an important appointment, because only this person had the rite to carry a bow, which was a very dangerous weapon in wrong hands.

Having established that place names are likely to have Anglo-Saxon origins, and will probably have local connotations, does it apply in this case? This example may be of interest. Easingwold is named after Esingas, or people of Esa. This suggests that Angles settled in the area sometime after the 5th. Century, because Esa has strong Angle origins.

Another example is Sutton on Forest. Sut may prove tricky, but ton as a suffix is definitely Anglo-Saxon for town or village. Forest needs no further explanation, in my opinion.

Let us try Hagsby, does it fit the mould. Hags was used by the Anglo-Saxons to describe a coppice in the forest, which was a clearing in the forest. The suffix by, when added, would mean a settlement. In other words, the settlement in or by the forest.

That is all very well, but it is not Haxby, That is true, but please remember that some names changed because of variations in spelling, and many people were only semi literate at best. Take a look at the spelling of Shakespear for instance. He was undoubtedly one of the greatest playwrights of all time, but his name was spelt wrongly more times than not

Finally, let us consider other factors which are used to suggest that Haxby was founded by the Vikings. Presumably, they are the only serious contenders.

They certainly invaded the area, and it is quite possible that they had a hand in naming the settlement. After all, the settlement might have been small, and not worth bothering about. In that case how had it survived for so long. No, I don't buy that argument, remember that the village was recorded in Domesday Book, so let us move on.

Is there anything that could indicate a Viking origin. Yes, the Norse name for a wet, or marshy, clearing in a forest is Hag. I am willing to keep an open mind, but it only suggests that they had a hand in naming the settlement they had just come across, not that they had founded it. After all, they captured the city, and stayed for quite a while. They called it Jorvik, which morphed to York over a period of time. but no one would suggest they founded that city, would they.

The last piece of evidence, is the discovery of a cross shaft of a christian cross, buried in a garden near the present church. Unfortunately, it's present location is unknown. Nevertheless, the implication by default, is that the village once had a church. This is important, because it suggests that there were enough inhabitants to justify the provision of an official place of worship. That delivers a fatal blow to the Viking argument, because they were a pagan culture at that time, and probably destroyed the wooden Anglo-Saxon church, and buried the cross. Case closed, in my opinion

A History of Haxby (Revised and expanded in 2003) written by local author Tom Smith, gives a comprehensive coverage of village history from this point on. It is very well written, and reinforces my argument for historical relevance of the village. Our opinions differ on when the area was first inhabited however. Perhaps he can be persuaded to change his mind.

The History of Easingwold, and The Forest of Galtres, is another interesting book to read. The author was Geoffrey C. Gowling of Easingwold M.A., who wrote his book in about 1980. He has also identified the Anglo-Saxon influence in the area, and in the Forest of Galtres in particular. Unfortunately, it is probably out of print, but Haxby Library has a copy, which I have borrowed many times over the past few months. There are a number of references to Haxby, and some of the residents too, from the Domesday Book, right through to the mid. 1960's.

Neither of these two excellent books make much mention of events prior to the Battle of Marston Moor in 1644. In fact, The Forest of Galtres, and Haxby, figured prominently during the lead up to the battle fought on the 2nd. And 3rd. of July. York was besieged by the Parliamentarian Army, and the Marquis of Newcastle who commanded the Royalist forces sent word to Prince Rupert that he was not hopeful of holding out for much longer.

Prince Rupert responded by marching his army from Preston, over the Pennines to Knaresborough. Then instead of taking the direct route to York, he led his men on a long sweeping north east manoeuvre via Thornton Bridge and Boroughbridge, and approached the city through The Forest of Galtres. The Royalist Army bivouacked at Haxby, forcing the forces besieging York to retreat.

Although the siege was lifted for a time, the Battle of Marston Moor was lost by the Royalists, and the rest is history, as they say. Another surprise awaited the residents of Haxby and Wigginton, when they each had to pay £250 in cash for accomodating Royalist troops, and horses. This seems a bit unfair, nowadays they would have charged the Royalists for the privilege.

The disafforestation of Galtres was confirmed in 1630, and Haxby and Wigginton were granted a total of 2,509 acres of common land in lieu of losing their Forest Rights. This was the largest allotment of any other townships in the Forest. Unfortunately, the distribution of land and the Enclosure Act of the mid 17th. Century did not benefit many of the local residents. Hedges and ditches marked the area of field demarcation, and some of these can still be seen in Lund Field.

Origins of Early Haxby

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