

William Harrison
The description of England
London
1587

THE
First and second
volumes of Chronicles,

...

First collected and published by Raphael
Holinshed, William Harrison,
and others:

Now newlie augmented and continued
(with manifold matters of singular
note and worthie memorie)
to the yeare 1586.

...

<colophon>

Finished in Ianuarie 1587, and the 29 of the Queenes
Maiesties reigne, with the full continuation of the
former yeares, at the expenses of Iohn Hari=
son, George Bishop, Rafe Newberie,
Henrie Denham, and Tho=
mas Woodcocke.

AT LONDON

Printed in Aldersgate street at the signe
of the Starre.

Cum priuilegio.

...

An Historicall description of the
lland of Britaine, with a briefe rehersall of the
nature and qualities of the people of England,
and such commodities as are to be found in the
same. Comprehended in three bookes,
and written by W. H.

<book 2, chapter 4>

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..... as old records doo witnesse.

Into how manie shires the said Alfred did first
make this partition of the lland, it is not yet found
out; howbeit if my coniecture be anie thing at all, I
suppose that he left not vnder eight and thirtie, sith
we find by no good author, that aboue fifteene haue
beene added by anie of his successours, since the time
of his decease. This prince therefore hauing made
the generall partition of his kingdome into shires,
or shares, he diuided againe the same into lathes, as
lathes into hundreds, and hundreds into tithings, or
denaries, as diuers haue written; and maister Lam=
bert following their authorities, hath also giuen out,
saiong almost after this maner is his description of
Kent; The Danes (saith he) both before, and in the time
of king Alfred, had flocked by the sea coasts of this
lland in great numbers, sometimes wasting and
spoiling with sword and fire, wheresoeuer they might

arriue, and sometime taking great booties with them to their ships, without dooing anie further hurt or damage to the countrie. This inconuenience continuing for manie yeeres together, caused our husbandmen to abandon their tillage, and gaue occasion and hardinesse to euill disposed persons, to fall to the like pillage, as practising to follow the Danes in these their thefts and robberies. And the better to cloake their mischeefe withall, they feigned themselues to be Danish pirats, and would sometime come a land in one port, and sometime in another, driuing dailie great spoiles (as the Danes had doone) vnto their ships before them. The good king Alfred therefore (who had maruellouslie trauelled in repelling the barbarous Danes) espieng this outrage, and thinking it no lesse the part of a politike prince, to root out the noisome subiect, than to hold out the forren aduersarie: by the aduise of his nobilitie, and the example of Moses (who followed the counsell of Iethro his father in law to the like effect) diuided the whole realme into certeine parts or sections, which (of the Saxon word Schyran, signifieng to cut) he termed shires, or as we yet speake, shares, or portions, **of which some one hath fortie miles in length (as Essex) and almost so manie broad, Hereford foure and twentie in length, and twentie in breadth, and Warwike six and thirtie in length, etc: and some of them also conteine ten, twelue, thirteene, sixteene, twentie, or thirtie hundreds, more or lesse, as some hundreds doo sixteene, twentie, thirtie, fortie, fiftie or sixtie townes, out of which the king was alwaies to receiue an hundred able men to serue him in the warres, or a hundred men able to be pledges, and ouer each of the portions he appointed either an earle or alderman, or both, to whome he committed the gouernement of the same.** These shires also he brake into lesser parts, whereof some were called lathes, of the word Gelathian, which is to assemble together; other hundreds, for that they enioied iurisdiction ouer an hundred pledges; and other tithings, bicause there were in each of them to the number of ten persons, whereof euerie one from time to time was suertie for others good abearing. He provided also that euerie man should procure himselfe to be receiued into some tithing, to the end, that if anie were found of so small and base a credit, that no man would become pledge or suertie for him, he should forthwith be committed to prison, least otherwise he might happen to doo more harme abroad. Hitherto master Lambert. By whose words we may gather verie much of the state of this Iland in the time of Alfred, whose institution continued after a sort vntill the comming of the Normans, who changed the gouernement of the realme in such wise (by bringing in of new officers and offices, after the manner of their countries) that verie little of the old regiment remained more than the bare names of some officers (except peraduenture in Kent) so that in these daies it is hard to set downe anie great certieintie of things as they stood in Alfreds time, more than is remembered and touched at this present.

Some as it were roming or rouing at the name

<Smith 1583>

Lath, doo saie that it is deriued of a **barne, which is called in old English a lath**, as they coniecture. From which speech in like sort some deriue the word Laistow, as if it should be trulie written Lathstow, a place wherein to laie vp or laie on things, of what=soeuer condition. But hereof as yet I cannot abso=lutelie be satisfied, although peraduenture some like=lihood in their iudgements may seeme to be therein. Other vpon some further consideration affirme that they were certeine circuits in euerie countie or shire conteining an appointed number of townes, whose inhabitants alwaies assembled to know and vnder=stand of matters touching their portions, in to some

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one appointed place or other within their limits, espe=ciallie whilest the causes were such as required not the aid or assistance of the whole countie. Of these lathes also (as they saie) some shires had more, some lesse, as they were of greatnesse. And M. Lambert seemeth to be of the opinion, that the leets of our time (wherein these pledges be yet called Franci plegii of the word Free burgh) doo yeeld some shadow of that politike institution of Alfred. But sith my skill is so small in these cases that I dare not iudge anie thing at all as of mine owne knowledge, I will not set downe anie thing more than I read, least I should roue at ran=don in our obscure antiquities, and reading no more of lathes my next talke shall be of hundreds.

The hundred and the wapentake is all one, **as I read in some**, and by this diuision not a name apperti=ment to a set number of townes (for then all hun=dreds should be of equall quantitie) but a limited iu=risdiction, within the compasse whereof were an hun=dred persons called pledges (**as I said**) or ten dena=ries, or tithings of men, of which ech one was bound for others good abering, and laudable behaiour in the common-wealth of the realme. The chiefe man likewise of euerie denarie or tithing was in those daies called a tithing man, in Latine Decurio, but now in most places a borsholder **or burgholder**, as in Kent; where euerie tithing is moreouer named a **burgh or burrow**, although that in the West coun=trie he be still called a tithing man, and his circuit a tithing, as I haue heard at large. I read furthermore (and it is partlie afore noted) that the said Alfred cau=sed ech man of free condition (for the better mainte=nance of his peace) to be ascribed into some hundred by placing himselfe in one denarie or other, where he might alwaies haue such as should sweare or saie vp=pon their certeine knowledge for his honest behavior and ciuill conuersation if it should happen at anie time, that his credit should come in question. In like sort I gather out of Leland and other, that if anie small matter did fall out worthie to be discussed, the tithing man or borsholder (now officers, at the com=mandement of the **high constable of which euerie hundred hath one at the least**) should decide the same in their leetes, whereas the great causes were re=ferred to the hundreds, the greater to the lathes, and the greatest of all to the shire daies, where the earles or aldermen did set themselues, and make finall ends of the same, according vnto iustice. For this purpose

likewise in euerie hundred were twelue men chosen
of good age and wisdom, and those sworne to giue
their sentences without respect of person,

<This is the passage from Harrison's 'Description of Britain' (1577) as it was revised for the second edition of Holinshed's 'Chronicles' (1587). It starts with the same title as before, but in the running head it is now called 'The description of England'. A modern edition (with modernized spelling) is W. Harrison, The description of England, ed. G. Edelen (Ithaca, 1968). Alterations and additions are printed black – unless they are derived from Sir Thomas Smith's 'De republica Anglorum' (1583), in which case they are printed green. – C.F. October 2010.>