

# 899 to 901: The Will of King Alfred, and the Witan of 901

## Introduction

Evidence of Axminster's status and development in Anglo Saxon times is scarce<sup>1</sup>, but there are various pieces of documented evidence which suggest that by the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Axminster was of some consequence.

By means of his will, which was written in 899, shortly before his death<sup>2</sup>, King Alfred the Great divided most of his lands between his sons, daughters, nephews and a cousin. His is one of the very few royal wills from Anglo Saxon times to have survived, and in 1788 Rev. Owen Manning, a scholar of Anglo Saxon, published a translation into English under the title 'The Will of King Alfred', which can be found in full on the [hathitrust.org](http://hathitrust.org) website. This was re-published in 1829 under the title 'The Will of King Alfred, reprinted from the Oxford edition of 1788, with a preface and additional notes' by W Pickering of Chancery Lane. The 1829 version can also be found in full on-line, via the [archive.org](http://archive.org) website.

The lands that Alfred bequeathed to his younger son, Ethelward (c.880 to 922), a scholar who did not marry or have descendants of his own, were described as recorded in the quote below. Owen Manning's conclusions regarding the place names are then reproduced after the quote from the will.

## What the will says

The will states that Ethelward was to receive "... *the land at Eaderingtune and that at Dene, and at Meone, and at Ambresbyry, and at Deone, and at Sturemynster, and at Gifle, and at Cruaern, and at Whitchurch, and at Axanmouth, and at Brauncescumbe, and at Columtune, and at Twyford, and at Mylenburn, and at Exanmynster, and at Sutheswyth, and at Liwtune, and the lands that thereto belong; which are all that I in Weal district have, except Tricornshire*".

## What the will means

The final phrase confirms that all of the estates granted to Ethelward lay in the south west (Weal district), but not in Cornwall (Tricornshire).

In the same order as they are listed above, Owen Manning's translation provides footnotes with his best interpretation of where the various place names referred to were. Bearing in mind that spellings and county boundaries have changed since 1788, tentative 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalents of his suggestions are also given, with some further comments.

Eaderingtune = Adrington, Somerset according to Manning. In the absence of anywhere now called Adrington, this may be a reference to Edington, half-way between Bridgwater and Glastonbury, in the heart of the Somerset Levels, which had been King Alfred's stronghold at one time.

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<sup>1</sup> The most important primary source for this era is the 'Anglo Saxon Chronicle'. Axminster is not mentioned after 789, when Cynehard the Atheling was buried in the minster.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Anglo Saxon Chronicle' actually gives the date of Alfred's death as 901, but most scholars now find the evidence for 899 to be rather stronger.

Dene = Dene in either Hampshire or Wiltshire according to Manning. There is a village called Dean between Winchester and Portsmouth; and West and East Dean can both be found to the east of Salisbury.

Meone = Meon, Hampshire according to Manning. East and West Meon are both between Winchester and Petersfield.

Ambresbyry = Ambresbury, Wiltshire according to Manning. This may well be an old spelling of Amesbury, near Stonehenge.

Deone = Down in either Dorset or Devon according to Manning. There are many candidate places with Down in their names. Given the order in which the estates are listed, Dorset seems more likely than Devon.

Sturemynster = Sturminster, Dorset according to Manning, which is between Yeovil and Blandford Forum.

Gifle = Gidley, Devon according to Manning. Gidley is just outside Chagford. Others have suggested that Gifle became Yeovil, or possibly even Ilminster, both in Somerset.

Cruaern = Crewkerne, Dorset according to Manning. It is now in Somerset.

Whitchurch = Whitchurch, Hampshire according to Manning. The Hampshire Whitchurch is between Andover and Basingstoke (and near another village called Deane), but there are many other places called Whitchurch to which Alfred could have been referring, including Whitchurch Canonorum, near Charmouth in Dorset.

Manning places the next three places in Devon. According to him Axanmouth = Axmouth, Brauncescumbe = Branscombe, and Columtune = Cullompton.

Twyford = Twyford, Hampshire according to Manning. Twyford is just south of Winchester.

Mylenburn = Milbourne in Dorset or Somerset according to Manning. This is very probably a reference to a cluster of villages with Milborne in their names on the Dorset / Somerset border, near Sherborne.

Exanmynster = Axminster, Devon according to Manning. Other scholars prefer Exminster (also Devon): see below.

Manning is unable to offer any suggestion for Sutheswyrth. He suggests that Liwtune is Litten in either Dorset or Somerset. The Dorset candidate location may be a reference to Litton Cheney, roughly half way from Dorchester to Bridport. It is not clear where in Somerset Manning meant. Other possibilities would include two in Devon: Luton, north west of Teignmouth; and Lutton, inland from Ivybridge.

### **Axminster or Exminster?**

Although some histories of Axminster cite Owen Manning's translation of Alfred's will as evidence that it was a Royal manor, rather more go with Exminster as the genuinely royal estate.

Firmly in Axminster's corner is the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of George Pulman's 'The Book of the Axe', which also relies on Alfred's will to claim Colyton (presumably instead of Cullompton) as a royal manor, alongside Axmouth and Axminster. Interestingly, though, the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of 'The Book of the Axe' only refers to Axmouth in this context. George Pulman was very keen to cement the link between Axminster and the battle of Brunanburh, and was prone to latch onto any evidence which supported his preferred narrative.

Although Pulman had Manning's translation and notes (an unambiguous and very reputable source) to support his case for Axminster's royal link, some years before he began his writing career the generally authoritative 'Magna Britannia: Volume 6, Devonshire' by Daniel and Samuel Lysons (London, 1822) had plumped strongly for Exminster. This valuable resource can be viewed on-line via the [british-history.ac.uk](http://british-history.ac.uk) website. Since the text of 'Magna Britannia' does not make any mention of King Alfred's will in connection with either Axmouth or Branscombe (or Axminster), it is possible that they were unaware of Owen Manning's translation of Alfred's will, and got their information on Exminster from another source. If so, this would further strengthen the case for Exminster over Axminster.

'Magna Britannia' (see above) also tells us that the manor of Exminster, like that of Axminster, subsequently belonged to William Brewer (who obtained the market charter for Axminster in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century), adding further scope for later documentary confusion between the two.

Frustratingly, Owen Manning provides no reason for translating Exanmynster as Axminster rather than Exminster, despite the clear presence of Axanmouth, the spelling of which would strongly suggest that Alfred and his scribes would have called Axminster Axanmynster in 899, if that was where they meant.

A final, and less weighty, undermining of the Axminster link is the sequence in which the various places are listed. Although there is not a clear east-to-west sequence in Alfred's will, there is a general tendency to group nearby places together. On this basis it would have been much more logical for him to have listed any lands at Axminster just before or just after those at Axmouth and Branscombe.

On balance, therefore, the evidence within Alfred's will for Axminster's link to the Anglo Saxon crown seems tentative at best.

### **The Witan of 901**

However, there is other evidence which is more positive from the point of view of Axminster and its status.

King Alfred and his elder son (and successor) Edward the Elder, held regular meetings of their senior noblemen and advisors. These meetings, called Witan, often took place at Winchester or other larger settlements, but were also held at different locations around the country, as the King chose.

Two recently-published books both confirm a fact that has been cited for many years in connection with Axminster, namely that in 901 Edward the Elder held a Witan at Axminster. 'Kingship and Consent'<sup>3</sup> lists the Axminster Witan in a table entitled 'Locatable meetings of the Witan: assemblies recorded in charters, 871 to 978', and gives as its source a document identified as 'S 364', which is described as a renewal of a lost charter. 'Kingship, Legislation and Power'<sup>4</sup> goes a bit further, describing Axminster as a Royal estate, and describing the source document as a diploma of King Edward the Elder, dated 901, ref.S 364 (BCS 588), from Wilton.

Other writers have cited a source described as 'Burghal Hidage (914 to 918) of Wessex' as evidence that Axminster was by then a 'burh' (fortified town) under Exeter, forming part of

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<sup>3</sup> See 'Kingship and Consent in Anglo-Saxon England, 871 to 978: Assemblies and the State in the Early Middle Ages' (by Levi Roach, Cambridge University Press, 2013). Much of the text is accessible on-line via google books

<sup>4</sup> See 'Kingship, Legislation and Power in Anglo-Saxon England' (by Gale R Owen-Crocker and Brian W Schneider, Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2013). Much of the text is accessible on-line via google books.

the defensive network of Wessex. Although the original source document has not been seen, this does appear to be a credible statement given the status that would have been a pre-requisite to the holding of a Witan in 901.