

1086: Axminster at the Time of the Domesday Book

Introduction and Sources

The Domesday Book was drawn up in 1086 following a national survey of land based on local hearings and inquiries. Its purpose was to enable William the Conqueror and his Norman successors to understand more clearly the value of their land holdings, and therefore how much money they could hope to raise via taxation.

In the case of Devon we have both the entries in the main Domesday Book, and the more detailed returns contained in the 'Exon Domesday'. This latter document originally covered five counties in the South West, but only survives in full for Devon and Cornwall. The original manuscript is now held in Exeter Cathedral.

Following the Conquest of 1066 virtually all land passed into the ownership of the Norman victors, and whilst by 1086 large tracts had been granted to William's supporters, those lands were still subject to taxation.

Although understanding the significance of the entries in the Domesday Book is not simple, they tell us the relative size and importance of each settlement or estate, by allocating to each a value expressed in units known as Hides and Virgates (a Virgate being worth a quarter of a Hide).

There are many opinions regarding the precise meanings of these terms, and how many acres are equivalent to one Hide. However, although there is general agreement that the terms were not consistently applied across the country, within each individual county it is safe to assume that one Hide was as valuable as any other, so local comparisons can be made with a reasonable degree of confidence.

For those who want to delve deeper into the background to the Domesday Book, two websites in particular are recommended: domesdaybook.net and opendomesday.org. The first provides clear explanations of the underlying principles; the second provides a simple way to access returns by location, without needing to know which place names were in use in 1086.

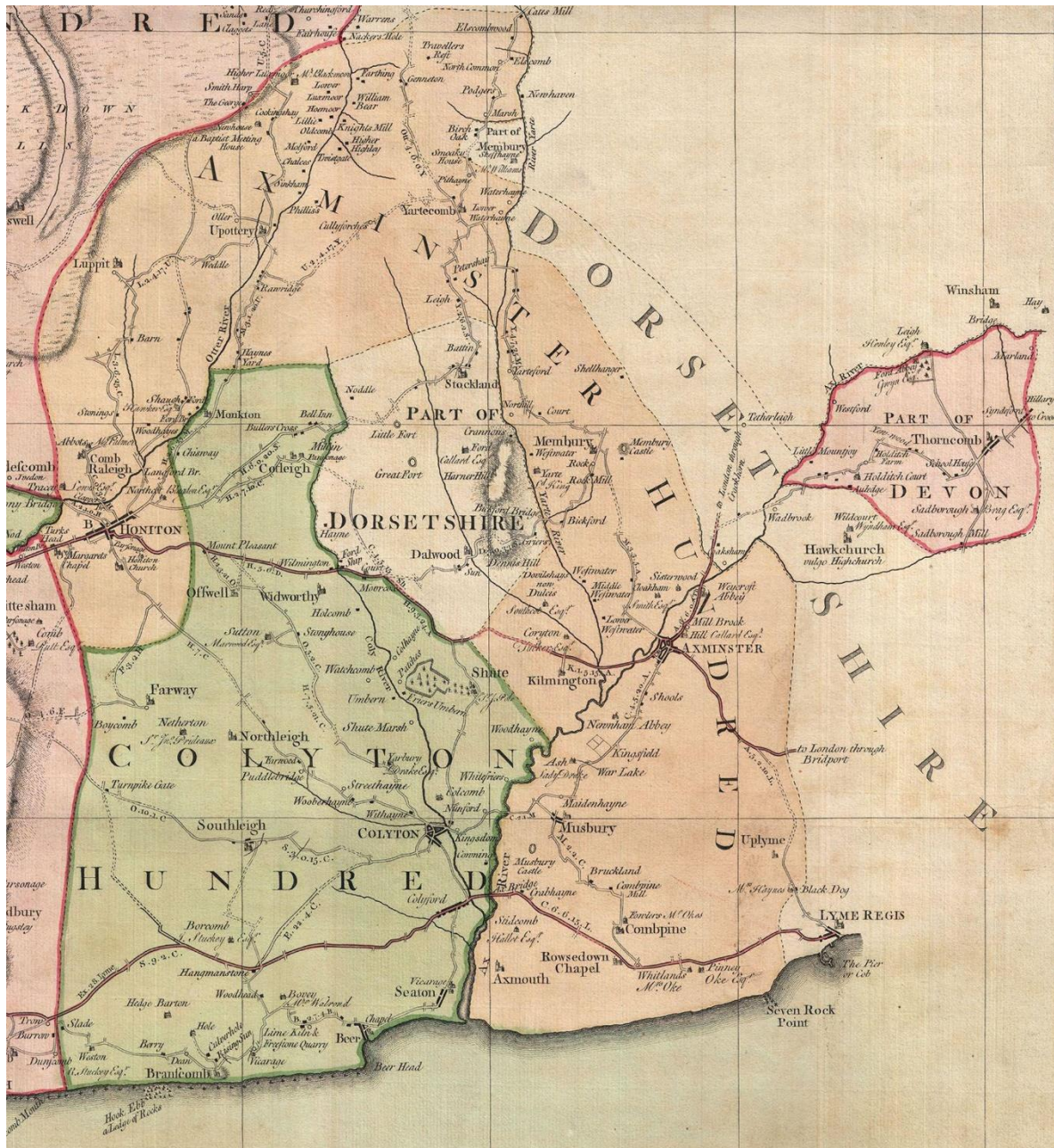
In the specific context of Axminster, 'The Hundred of Axminster in Early Times' by Rev. Oswald Reichel¹ (edited after his death in 1923 by Lt Col F B Prideaux and published by the Devonshire Association alongside an equivalent analysis of Axmouth) is particularly helpful, and by some way the main source document used in compiling this short document. Rev. Reichel wrote about all of the Hundreds in Devon, which makes his commentary particularly valuable. A copy of his short book is held in Axminster library.

¹ For a fascinating and surprising account of Rev. Reichel's life, see the National Trust's website. He was at one time the owner of 'A la Ronde', near Exmouth.

Axminster Hundred

As well as being a Royal estate prior to 1066, Axminster was the main settlement in the Hundred of the same name (Hundreds being important administrative and legal units in mediaeval England). The Hundred of Axminster extended as far as Honiton in the west, but wrapped around the neighbouring Hundred of Colyton and the parish of Stockland (then part of Dorset, despite being an 'island' within Devon), via Membury, Yarcombe, Upottery and Luppitt (see both the map and text below for further details).

Extract from Benjamin Donn's 1765 map of Devon, showing the boundaries of Hundreds at that time



Although the map above dates from the 18th century, by which time the Hundreds of Axminster and Axmouth had been combined, it nevertheless gives a good impression of the

awkward shape of Axminster Hundred. Thorncombe was a 'Devon island' surrounded by Dorset, just as Stockland and Dalwood formed a 'Dorset island' in Devon.

According to Reichel, in 1086 Axminster Hundred contained 17,927 acres of cultivated land, compared to 3,911 in Axmouth and 11,927 in Colyton at that time. Axminster's tax liabilities were assessed based on a 'hideage' of 50 Hides (compared to 9¼ for Axmouth and 25¾ for Colyton). Musbury was divided between the neighbouring Hundreds of Axminster and Axmouth.

Reichel stresses that Axminster Hundred's 'hideage' assessment was unusually large, relative to its cultivated acreage, suggesting (though he does not say this) that the land was considered to be unusually productive at that time. Within Devon, only Exminster Hundred (also assessed on the basis of 50 Hides, but covering 19,797 acres) was comparable. It is probably no coincidence that the Minsters built at Axminster and Exminster were among the oldest religious buildings in this part of Wessex, and had been built in areas able to support a denser-than-average local population.

Because Axminster was at the time of the Conquest a Royal estate, its directly-owned lands were not assessed for tax (after all, the King had no need to pay himself), and the 'hideage' attributable to the lands attached to the main settlement already paid their dues to the Crown, and therefore were not counted twice. The tax-free area was known as the Inland Hundred, with the rest of the land known as the Outland Hundred.

Across the Outland Hundred as a whole, the average acreage per Hide in 1086 was just under 350. On this basis, Uplyme's assessment was particularly high, as was that for Holditch (in Thorncombe, just to the north of Hawkchurch), along with the land in Luppitt and Combe Raleigh.

By the end of the 19th century the cultivated acreage of the parishes covered by Axminster Hundred was roughly double what it had been in 1086, with particularly steep rises evident in Membury and Uplyme.

The basic information carefully gathered and explained by Reichel (see his summary table, on pages 169-171 of the referenced publication) is reproduced on the final page of this document. However, his text also provides a great deal of information about the ownership of the various manors and estates. This reflects the fact that the way that the information for the Domesday Book was collected was largely organised by landowner rather than by parish. This is where Reichel's knowledge of all of the other Hundreds in Devon enabled him to draw well-grounded conclusions which would not have been possible had he only studied one or two Hundreds in isolation.

Axminster clearly remained in Royal ownership, because Reichel also records that in 1176 Henry II made a grant worth 40/- in connection with Axminster to Gerbert de Parci; and that in 1204 King John made the first of a series of grants secured on Axminster to William Briwer (or Brewer), including the right to hold regular markets.

Main settlements	Manors or holdings	Acres	Hides	Virgates
Axminster	Prestaller	160	(0	2)
	Shapwick	120	(0	2)
	Undercleave	80	(0	1)
	Rest of Axminster	3,430	-	-
Subtotal:	Inland Hundred	3,790	(1	1)
Axminster	Smallridge	425	1	0
	Weycroft (incl mill)	368	1	0
	Great Trill	265	0	1
	Uphay / Haccombe fee	168	0	1
	Wyke	97	0	1
Uplyme		1,008	6	0
Musbury	Ash	622	2	0
	Ford	143	0	1
	Little Trill	132	0	1
Kilmington		968	2	0
Membury		566	1	0
Thorncombe	Holditch	770	3	0
	Rest of Thorncombe	1,023	2	0
Yarcombe	Downton	1,100	3	0
	Rest of Yarcombe	1,054	3	0
Upottery	Rawridge	1,040	3	0
	Charlton Luxon	264	0	3
	Rest of Upottery	1,780	4	0
Luppitt	Ottery Fleming / Mohun	1,230	5	0
	Greenway	430	1	0
	Shapcombe	367	1	0
	Rest of Luppitt	515	2	0
Combe Raleigh / Ottercombe		854	4	0
Honiton		2,108	5	0
Subtotal	Outland Hundred	17,297	51	0
Total	Inland and Outland Hundreds	21,087	52	1
<i>Adjustments (see text)</i>		<i>3,790</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>
Geldroll Assessment		17,297	50	0

The adjustment was made by subtracting the 'hideage' attributable to the Inland Hundred (Axminster itself not even being assessed), plus 1 Hide in respect of a piece of land which Reichel concluded would otherwise have been double counted. It should be stressed that the totals of 52 Hides and 1 Virgate and 50 Hides come from the Domesday Book itself, and not from Reichel. He simply worked out how best to reconcile the two figures.