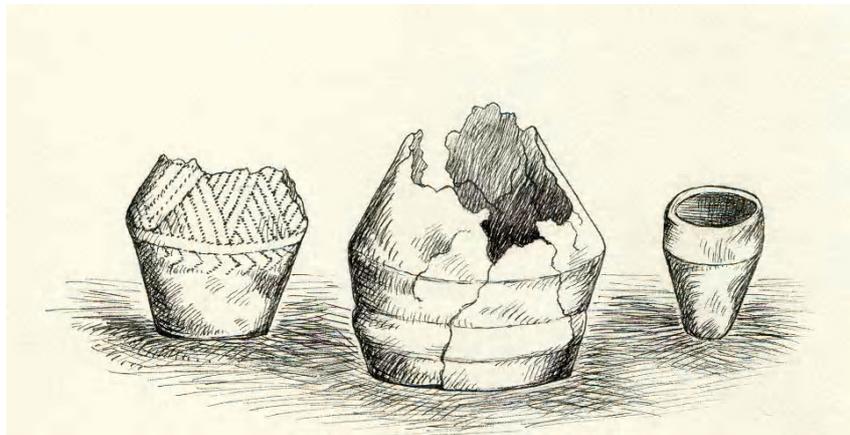


Chapter One: Beginnings – the border land

We do not know who first settled in the parish of Edingale. What is known is that the flat fertile lands either side of the Trent and the Tame were peopled well before the Romans arrived in Britain. The local British tribe was the Coritani – but, in Edingale, we were near the border with the lands of the Cornovii. The Coritani tribal lands had significance even beyond the Viking invasion. Edingale and Croxall, on the bluff above the rivers would have been good sites to settle. Three clay urns, one of which contained bone fragments, were found just to the west of Oakley Farm in 1874 by workmen digging for gravel. The urns are judged to be ancient British in origin, dating them to around 1200 BC. A sketch of the urns prepared by Reverend Richard Ussher is below. There is also an ancient British tumulus – or burial mound - to the south east of the church at Croxall. A former owner of Croxall Hall, Thomas Prinsep, attempted to level the mound around the year 1806 but found so many bone fragments that the project was abandoned.



*British urns found in the year 1874 at Oakley – by Helen Pilgrim
from a sketch by Ussher*

So what of Edingale village itself? With no direct evidence, dating our settlement is conjecture, but the topography of the site between Holy Trinity church and the tree roots outside the Black Horse pub is ideal for settlement. What we now know as Main Road and Lullington Road is almost certainly part of a ‘Salters’ Way’ or pre-Roman trade route. The logic of siting a farming settlement on one of the higher parts of that route yet with easy access to the river Mease, would seem compelling.

And then there are the tree roots themselves! Local oral tradition has it that the mound is a Roman tumulus. There is no evidence available to back up any hypothesis, but the more logical explanation is that if it is a tumulus, it is of the ancient British, pre-Roman era.

Roman activity

The Roman ‘invasion’ of Britain was a much slower process than is popularly imagined. Even before the arrival of the legions, there was trade between Britons and the Roman

Empire. This trade may have had an impact further inland, as the lead miners of Derbyshire seem to have exported to the Roman Empire well before the invasion.



The tree roots in about 1920

By around the middle of the first century, the Romans decided that they needed to invade rather than continue to trade with Britain. This fact of itself is evidence of the fertile and productive nature of pre-Roman Britain: it was worth occupying. The Midlands, however, were not so popular – they were still forested, with clearances only around the most fertile river valleys. This is true of our locality. Outside the immediate river valley, the area would have been densely forested, for the forests of Arden, Needwood and Cank (later Cannock) met in this general area.

Within a decade or so of the invasion, the Romans had constructed two major roads through the district. Watling Street ran from London to North Wales and Rykneld Street ran from the South West to the North East. Their intersection was at what we now know as Wall: to the Romans, Letocetum.

Clearly, for many years, a British/Druidic culture and a Roman culture existed somehow side by side (although there was cruel persecution of the overt practice of Druidism). Gradually, however, the term Romano-British could be applied to most local inhabitants, meaning that most of the British had absorbed aspects of the Roman way of life. The focus for growth seems to have been on the Roman settlements: Stubbs suggests that the British settlement of Caer Llwydcoed or 'place of the grey woods' (present-day Lichfield) withered during Roman times as Letocetum (Wall) thrived. He also suggests that the Rykneld Street (the present A38) was a newly-built road, pointing out that a string of British settlements, Lichfield, Elmhurst, Curborough, Fradley, Alrewas, Wychnor, Barton, Tatenhill, Shobnall and Anslow are all in a line parallel to the Roman road rather than intersecting with it. Similarly, the British route from Alrewas to Edingale lay to the north of the present road,

crossing the Tame close to present-day Mytholme Cottage (which, much later, was an inn) and climbing the hill at Croxall at least 200 yards north of the present road.

Whether any of the parish's present-day roads have any Roman influence is impossible to know. The best candidate would seem to be the Lullington Road, as it leaves Edingale in a long straight line. At least one writer attributes this to the time of Julius Agricola around 80 AD. Others, however, suggest that the Lullington Road is part of the 'Salters' Way' (see above) and pre-dates the Roman era.

The other possible Roman connection in Edingale comes from the clay pits and brick kilns of Pessall (or Pessall Pits to give it its older name). Local tradition has it that the brick-making activity is Roman in origin and a couple of factors add weight to this hypothesis. The first is that Letocetum (Wall) is constructed in a sandy area – some of the nearest deep clay for brick making is to be found over the bluff above the Rivers Tame and Trent. Indeed, the clay land around Pessall is particularly heavy. Secondly, a reasonable number of bullock shoes – like horseshoes but narrower and flatter – have been found on the green lane where Pessall Lane now ends. Two or three of these have been found in a field known today as Little Brickle meadow.

Just outside our parish boundary lies Catholme, adjacent to the River Trent. Stubbs reports that a team of archaeologists found evidence of a Roman villa close to an Anglo-Saxon farm they were excavating. Other than this, there is only a little evidence of Roman activity in our part of the Mease Valley: pottery has been found at Elford and coins at Shuttington. Our local Roman heritage really lies in our position close to the intersection of two major national trunk roads - a factor that makes Edingale a handy commuting village in the twenty-first century.

Considering that they left such a mark on our nation – and also on our national psyche – the Romans were here for a relatively short period. By the middle of the fourth century they were in decline. In this part of the Midlands, the Romano-British were at first under threat from bands of Celtic/Druidic invaders from North Wales (presumably using the long, straight Watling Street as a quick route for travel). Further invaders came south in raiding parties from Scotland and Ireland.

At first, the Romans deployed mobile field armies to counter this threat, then they began to destroy some of what they had constructed. Great earthworks were thrown across the major roads and to encircle settlements: evidence of a thick earth wall has been found at Letocetum. But these were ineffective defences erected by a crumbling empire and by about the year 400 AD, the Roman legions had left this area. The Dark Ages had begun.

The Anglo-Saxons

It is hard to know where the myth comes from that we are an island that has been rarely invaded. In the space of about 400 years, Angles and Saxons from north Germany and Jutes from Denmark invaded England, closely followed by Vikings from what are now Norway and Sweden and Danes from Denmark. There were also marauding invasions by the Celtic peoples of North Wales, as well as Vikings based in Ireland. So as the defences of the Romano-British collapsed, the threats to peace multiplied.

Locally, the first wave of foreign invasion came from the Angles (the Saxons tended to settle farther south). When the invaders had subdued the local people they began to settle and bring some order to a divided and impoverished land.

We tend to think of England as a long-established country. In fact, well beyond the Anglo-Saxon invasion, we lived in a kingdom known as Mercia. At one time, Mercia was the most significant kingdom in what is now England and Scotland. At its height, Mercia included nearly all of the land between the Humber and the Thames and from the Wash to the Welsh border. The parish of Edingale lies pretty much at the heart of Mercia – in an area known as Tomsaetia. This stretched from Repton in the north, over the border in Warwickshire to the south and included both Lichfield and Tamworth. It is possible that these boundaries follow those of the British tribal lands of the Coritani; they may also have enclosed an area controlled by a powerful family. Tomsaetia was the strong heart of Mercia, containing Tamworth and Repton, both, at one time or another, the capital of Mercia, and Lichfield which, by the seventh century, was a key ecclesiastical city.

The Anglian invasion gradually turned from being a threat posed by raiding parties to a full-scale settlement of peoples. There is no contemporary evidence of how the Romano-British and Anglian peoples lived together, but it is noteworthy that in our district there is a mix of Anglian and Roman place names. By the end of the fifth century, the greatest difference between the Romano-British and the Anglian peoples would have been that the former were Christian and the latter were not. Also, on the assumption that the two peoples were able to live side by side, another distinguishing feature would have been that the Romano-British communities would have been farming the fertile river valleys, almost certainly including those of the Mease, Tame and Trent, and the Anglian people would have been occupying sites in the forests outside of the river valleys.

From about the sixth century, the history of Mercia is best related through its royal families. In distinct contrast with our own times, royal succession was often resolved by murder or other violent means. Reigns were short lived and allegiances constantly shifting. The first known king of Mercia was Cearl, who reigned around the end of the sixth century having married into the royal family of Northumbria. After his death, the throne passed to the family of Penda. Penda expanded Mercia by conflict and his family retained control for several generations.

Perhaps the best-known Mercian king was Offa; others include Aethelbald and Ecfriht. For the people of Edingale, the importance of these Mercian royals would have been that they

lived and operated nearby. As we know, Tamworth was the capital of Mercia for some time; before this the capitals were at Repton and Stone. All three of these towns retained their importance and the royal families would have been moving between them frequently. With that closeness went danger. Aethelbald was murdered by his bodyguard in Seckington in 757 and Offa murdered most of his family, apart from his son and heir. Whether, at a distance of five miles or so from Tamworth, Edingale was insulated from these events or directly affected by them is impossible to know.

Another significant piece of local Mercian history came with the relatively short time that Chad spent as Bishop at Lichfield. St Chad and his followers managed to pacify Mercia in about three years. It was probably the influence of people like Chad that turned the warlike invaders into more peaceful and settled pastoral farmers. After his death in 672 AD a shrine soon grew up, and this is the site of Lichfield cathedral. As the Christian influence spread over Mercia, the shrines to saints became ever more important, including the shrine to St Modwen, which became the site of the great abbey at Burton.

Another feature of this period is the increasing domination of the Anglo-Saxon language. While surprisingly few written Mercian records remain, in part because of the ferocity of the subsequent Viking invasion, the legacy of this period is in our place names and our language. Most of our local place names are Anglo-Saxon in origin, named after the man or his people who settled in a particular place. Thus Edingale is “the settlement of the people of Edwin”. In 1085 it was written as Edwingham, the earliest written record of our village name. Croxall is “the settlement of Crocca” (in 735 written as Crockashalle) and Catton “of Catti”. Oakley or “Acle” means “an open space in the oak woods”. Harlaston is the settlement of Heorulf and Wychnor of Hwicce. Alrewas means aldermarsh, written in 771 as Allerwas. The Anglo-Saxons translated some British words – thus the Mease was renamed from the British Meos, meaning ‘moss’. However, the Trent (said by Stubbs to mean “the trespasser or flooder of ways”) and the Tame meaning ‘dark’ retained their British names.

Some four centuries after the first Anglian invasion, our area was relatively settled and presumably prospering. Edingale and the other local villages and manors were administered from Alrewas through a series of moots or meetings of free people. These meetings were used as the venue for the headmen to pass down information about legal and administrative matters as well as being forums for resolving local disputes. The major local moot was at Offlow, near Lichfield, which later translated into the administrative division of Staffordshire known as the Offlow hundred. Stubbs points out that a minor moot was held at Alrewas at the Spellow – spell meaning ‘speech, talk or discussion’ and low, ‘a meeting place’. The Spellow remains the name of fields along the old Croxall Road to Alrewas and it is here that the men of Edingale and Croxall would have met the men of Alrewas to form a local court and ‘council’.

In 1191, Bishop Aethelwald at Lichfield made the first steps towards an ecclesiastical presence at Edingale by instituting prebends at a series of villages including Alrewas. This meant that Alrewas and its satellite villages paid for a prebendary or priest at the cathedral who in turn appointed a vicar to look after the religious needs of the communities. The

vicar would have been based at Alrewas and would have appointed curates at surrounding villages including Fradley and Edingale. We know that this arrangement persisted for at least another 800 years, as the earliest written records of Edingale church still in our possession establish that the priest of Edingale was a curate of the vicar of Alrewas.

Before this arrangement, we must assume that the community's spiritual needs were met by roving priests on the Celtic model of Christian service. This assumption is a reasonable one, as there seems to have been a chapel here that dates from the Anglo-Saxon period. The Reverend Charles Cox has left us a detailed account of the building that pre-dates the present church at Edingale. Although this was mostly a plain Georgian construction, it is clearly built on a much older stone foundation. Cox and others offer the view that this foundation, along with the little window still preserved in the vestry, is of the early Saxon period. He suggests that the Saxon (Anglian) church would have been built of wood and thatch on a stone foundation with some more substantial stonework (including the window) around the chancel.

Cox is the only source to offer the suggestion that in this period there were actually two chapels in Edingale, one serving the Edingale part and one the Croxall section of the village. Although no trace of such a 'Croxcall' chapel exists, nor is it mentioned elsewhere, the idea of two chapels, one looking to Alrewas, the other to Repton, would solve some other confusions in the ecclesiastical history of the village.

The Vikings

By the middle of the ninth century, we have a picture of a reasonably settled Anglian community where Christianity and the rule of law (albeit a harsh law) persisted. It was, of course, too good to last.

Bands of Danish and Viking raiders began to pose a significant threat to inland Mercia, rather than just having an impact on the coastal regions. A significant blow was struck locally in 873 when an enormous Danish army wintered at the great abbey at Repton. We know very little of what they did at Repton for the simple, but stark, reason that the army plundered the abbey of all its treasures and manuscripts. Those treasures seem to have included a large amount of the written history of Mercia. This would have been a very difficult period for local people as the Danes had a large army to feed in the middle of winter and would have sent out foraging parties to secure supplies. The rivers would have been suitable arteries for foraging and Stubbs suggests that Alrewas and other local villages would have been destroyed, the wooden huts and churches being easy to burn.

Further south, King Alfred (of the cakes) was rallying the remaining armies of Mercia and Wessex and succeeded in defeating the Vikings in 878. The treaty, which followed the defeat, gave the Danes the right to settle a large area of the north and east of England known as the Danelaw. Locally, this treaty must have been very dislocating because the Rivers Tame and Trent formed the boundaries between King Alfred's lands and the Danelaw. This must have meant that Edingale and Croxall were separated from their 'mother' settlement at Alrewas. Presumably, the curate at Edingale – if there still was one

after the earlier Danish raids – was operating without supervision from the vicar at Alrewas. Tamworth was within the Danelaw area, but Lichfield was not. As Stubbs puts it, “*for many years to come this area was a troubled frontier region.*”

As in any territorial dispute, the border would have been defended. Borough Hill at Walton (next to the river between Catton and Walton) owes its name to ‘burgh’ meaning ‘fortress’. Evidence of the defensive ramparts can still be seen there and several skeletons, dated to about 1000 AD, seem to provide evidence of some sort of skirmish in or around the defences.

The boundaries of the Danelaw were not settled for long. Another well-known local name, Ethelflaeda, was King Alfred’s sister and she led an army to capture Leicester and other parts of Mercia in 918. She died in Tamworth in the same year. This action is likely to have reconnected Edingale and Croxall with Alrewas as the Danes retreated. But this happy state did not last for long and, in 939, Olaf Guthfrithson, King of Dublin, stormed Tamworth and looted the surrounding countryside. In 943, the Danes re-captured Tamworth in a bloody battle involving significant slaughter. Again, it is impossible to conceive that Edingale would have been immune from these events.

In an effort to strengthen the defences of the Mercian lands, King Edmund gave Alrewas to Maur Wolsye in a deed entitled *Holy Charter of King Edmund of Alrewas, Bromley and Barton, year of Our Lord 942*. The deed included Alrewas and its lands, Clifton and Haunton and was signed by, amongst others, the Archbishop of York and the Bishop of Lichfield. Grand as this arrangement sounds, we do not know Wolsye’s fate because eventually the manor of Alrewas became the property of the Earls of Mercia. Even then, no long-term peace was found and a vicious rout of Danish settlers is said to have begun at Tutbury. The Danish revenge for this action was significant and resulted in the throne of a consolidated England passing into the hands of the Danish King Canute.

It seems that the storybook picture of Canute being a wise ruler is based on at least some evidence. He managed to consolidate his hold on the thrones of both England and Denmark, while choosing to spend most of his time in England. Canute gave Mercia as a single earldom to Leofric, who resided at Coventry but had his summer palace at Kings Bromley. Another local connection with a famous name was that Leofric’s wife was none other than Lady Godiva. So, in their movements between Coventry and Kings Bromley, it is most likely that Lady Godiva would have come through or near our parish lands. Godiva’s granddaughter married Harold, of Hastings fame, who retained Bromley and much of the surrounding land for himself. However, Alrewas, including Edingale, but not Croxall, was held by Algar, or Aelfgar, Earl of Mercia, and the last Anglo-Saxon to retain influence in this area before the Norman invasion and its disastrous local consequences.