

BRIXTON
THE STORY OF A NAME

by

Ken Dixon

Published by The Brixton Society

**Brixton The Story of a Name was written by our late
archivist, Ken Dixon, and originally published by the
Brixton Society in 1991. It was reprinted twice.
Having sold out of the second reprint, we decided to
make it available on our website rather than undertake
another reprint.**

Copyright reserved

BRIXTON - THE STORY OF A NAME

People are often interested to know how a place got its name. The origin of the name "Brixton" is strange. Until about 200 years ago it had never been the name of a village or neighbourhood. It was the name of a "hundred". For most people today a hundred only means 10 x 10, so in looking for the origin of "Brixton" one first has to look at a different kind of hundred.

In the 6th century Britain was violently invaded by the English, who sailed across from various parts of the continental coastlands of the North Sea. They spoke different dialects of what would later have been called "Low German". They arrived as fighters but they remained as hard working farmers who over the next centuries gradually cleared huge forests, ploughed the land and founded nearly all the villages that exist today in southern and midland parts of England.

SAXONS

One of the institutions of the English (or "Saxons") was the "hundred". The hundred was an area of land, thought to have originally consisted of 100 "hides"; a hide was the amount of land that one family or household could till with one plough. By the time Domesday Book was compiled (1086) hundreds were of all sizes, varying from 20 to 150 hides.

Domesday Book, compiled for William I (the "Conqueror") towards the end of his reign, is boring as a book but an invaluable source of information for names and holders of manors and brief details of their holdings. It refers to "Brixistan hundred". It was from the jurors of the different hundreds that all the information for Domesday Book was supplied.

BRIXTON

Brixistan hundred - often shortened to "Brixton" in later years - consisted of about 15 parishes on the south side of the Thames from Mortlake on the west to Hatcham (better known today as New Cross) on the east. The southern boundary included Merton, Tooting, Streatham, and Camberwell. The names of a few of the tiny villages mentioned in Domesday have changed with age - Estreham is now Streatham. Totingas is Tooting, Patricesy has become Battersea, and Belgeham is now Balham. The rest are easily recognisable. The only settlement in the hundred that could be called a town (a "burgh") was Sudgeweorhe, which was to end up as "Southwark"; it was a small neighbourhood on the south side of London Bridge - the name meant "south [defence] work" - to protect the city of London.

Brixton - The Story of a Name

Brixistan hundred was one of the fourteen hundreds of Surrey and was in the north eastern corner of the county. By AD 1000 most of southern England was divided into counties and each county was looked after by the shire reeve or "sheriff". It was to be another 900 years before counties had such things as county councils. But they did have a county court, or "shire moot"; it was presided over by the sheriff and included representatives from the hundreds. Among other things it decided some of the most serious criminal cases.

The hundred court was vitally important for the community. It dealt with crime, settlement of disputes, agricultural rights and duties, taxation and military service. The law it administered was the unwritten custom of that particular part of the country. There were no law books. The men of the hundred carried the law in their heads and declared in the court what they remembered of the old customs. The hundred had an officer, usually called the sergeant, or bailiff, or hundred-reeve. He was the local police force, the district council and everything else rolled into one. Bureaucracy had not been invented.

NO POLICE FORCES

In their heyday the hundred courts met every four weeks. After the Norman conquest in 1066 it became the practice for the county sheriff to preside over each hundred court twice a year to question the representatives about crimes and fines. There were no police forces. Every adult free man had to belong to a group of ten men which was called a "tything". In these mainly farming communities the members of each tything would be near neighbours. Most people were rooted to the land; travelling was very difficult and rare. If a crime was committed somebody, if not several people in the locality, could be fairly sure who did it.

The ten men of the tything where the crime occurred were responsible for producing the culprit to the authorities. If they failed to produce anyone the whole tything might have to pay a collective fine that could be ruinous. So the tything would make sure they got their man.

Methods of proof at the hundred court were bizarre; punishments for the most serious crimes were barbaric and were such as would ensure that the wrongdoer could never repeat the offence. Lesser injuries involved money compensation by the offender to the injured man. In a community where life was a constant struggle to get a living from the soil this system of justice saved the people from an impossible burden of paying for a professional police force and prison service.

PALM TREE JUSTICE

It is not known just how or when hundreds began. There is no mention of hundreds in any surviving documents earlier than the 10th century, but in the earlier English periods very little was written anyhow.

Brixton - The Story of a Name

The hundred moot may possibly have dated back to the first English invasions. But there is reason to think they developed over a long period. The earlier meetings of the freemen of the hundred would certainly have been on an agreed site in the open air. There were no buildings at that time capable of accommodating a meeting of any size. The hundredmen would have dispensed palm tree justice in the fresh air which they preferred, even if the palm tree was an oak.

"Brixistan" means Brix's stone. The one mention we have of this stone is in a charter of the Saxon king Edward the Confessor in 1062¹ by which among other things he granted to Waltham Abbey (in Essex) some land in Lambeth. The boundaries of the land are set out in Old English (Anglo-Saxon) and in Latin at the end of the charter. They can be rendered in modern English as follows:

"First at Brixges stane ("stone of Brixius" in the Latin version) and then forward through the grove to the boundary ditch and so to the gnarled tree to Hysa and from Hysa to Aelsyge's enclosure and so back to the highway and then along the highway back to Brixenstan."

The reference to "Hysa" in the Latin ("hyse" in Old English) seems to make no sense. "Hyse" in Old English means "young man" or "warrior". It might possibly be a copyist's mistake for "hythe", meaning "landing place"; "th" in Old English was represented by a single letter.

The one thing of interest we learn from this little excursion into rural Lambeth is that Brix's stone was on a highway. The word used in the charter is "strate" in Old English and "via" in Latin; both these imply a principal road, which in 11th century England might mean one of the old Roman roads.

Who was Brix? His real English name was Beorhtsige which we may be allowed to pronounce Bert-sig. "Beorht" in Old English meant "bright, splendid"; "sige" meant "victory". The "rht" was a guttural sound which most modern English speakers find hard. So did the Normans. Hence versions like "Brix". But Beorht is definitely the same word as the modern "bright".

MANORS

Beorhtsige's parents may have foreseen a splendid and successful future for him when they named him. He certainly became a man of importance. Domesday Book shows him as having held in the reign of king Edward the Confessor five manors in West Kent and four manors in Surrey. His Kent manors were at Seal (near Sevenoaks), Lullingstone and Horton Kirkby (both on the river Darent), Plumstead, and one of two manors at Greenwich which at that time were in the Greenwich hundred of Kent. His Surrey lands were at Hatcham (on the border of Kent), Stoke D'Abernon, Compton (in Godalming hundred) and West Horsley (in Kingston hundred).

Brixton - The Story of a Name

Domesday describes him in one of the Surrey references as "Bricsi Cild". The word "cild" - pronounced "killed" - is the same word as our "child" but was used after a person's name as a title meaning something like the modern "Lord". Three of the five Kent references have "Brixi cilt" - the same word in Kentish dialect. The probability is that his family originated in Kent rather than Surrey because the movement of peoples tended to be from Kent westwards.

By 1082 when Domesday was written all Brixi's manors were in other - mostly Norman - hands. He may of course have died by then. But it is almost certain that in any case he would have lost his holdings as a consequence of a serious English revolt against William the Conqueror in 1069.

Many, but by no means all, Saxon tenants-in-chief of land were implicated in this rising. It was the tenants-in-chief (or "barons") who supplied armed men when the king needed a military force. After the revolt had been put down William decided for safety to replace nearly all Saxon barons by Normans, so that Brixi may have suffered in this way, perhaps for the sins of others. But he may well have continued to enjoy "sub-lets" and other lesser interests in land.

There is little one can say about Brixi's stone itself. The Saxons were not in the habit of littering the land with unnecessary monuments; more than likely it was set up for a practical purpose like marking a boundary. Its mention in the charter would be more meaningful if Brixi's name had been engraved on the stone but there can be no certainty that it was. It may get dug up one day!

Possible reasons why it was Brixi who erected this stone are:

- (1) he may have held some nearby land previous to the holders in king Edward's reign named in Domesday, and so had an interest in establishing what might have been a disputed boundary;
- (2) in view of his land holdings in Kent he may have been in a position to have stone shipped up the Thames from Kent quarries to Lambeth.

How did the local hundred get its name of Brixi's stone? Here is a little problem. If the stone was put up by the Brixi mentioned in Domesday, the hundred name must have been given in the 11th century. This would mean that it was either a new name given to an existing hundred, or that the hundreds of Surrey were during Brixi's lifetime created for the first time, or rearranged. The existence of a complete system of parish churches and manors in Surrey by the 11th century, and its nearness to London, make it impossible for there to have been no hundred courts or officers at that period.

Brixton - The Story of a Name

NEW SITE

A rearrangement of hundreds might be a possibility. But the likeliest thing would be that in Brix's day Brixistan became the new name of an existing hundred. This might have been because Brix's stone became the new site for meetings of the hundred moot.

A regular place and time of meeting was a necessity in those days of poor communications and little writing. Brix's stone, evidently near the junction of the main road to Kent and roads south and south-west into Surrey, and near the Thames, would seem a convenient venue for the hundreders as well as the Surrey notables.

Under the Norman kings the hundreds continued to function as before the Conquest. But the hundred courts began to decline in importance. There were several reasons, and some of these certainly applied to the Brixton hundred. People were starting to take their cases to the new courts held by the king's judges on circuit, who administered the new common law of England instead of the local customary law as did the hundred courts. More and more of the business of the hundred courts was now being dealt with by the courts ("leets") of the lords of the manor. Kings sometimes granted to abbeys and other corporations the privilege of operating the hundreds; running these courts could bring in a good income in fees and a share of the fines.

MAGISTRATES

In the 14th century justices of the peace began to be appointed. These magistrates (the "great unpaid") were to be increasingly used by governments to decide smaller civil and criminal cases in their own districts; this took still more work away from the hundreds. Later two or more justices would sit together in "petty sessions". The petty sessional divisions of counties generally went by the same names as the hundreds.

But though the hundred courts were tending to wither away, the hundred as a district still remained a necessary division of the county. It was the only unit between the county and the parish. Governments looked to the hundreds to supply information or statistics. Local gentry, including magistrates, would meet in their own hundreds to consider public needs. To say what hundred you lived in was a quick way of explaining where your village was to someone from another part of the county. In the absence of any kind of local government other than the manor courts, the hundreds' officers, such as they were, carried out some duties right into the 19th century.

Brixton - The Story of a Name

HIGH CONSTABLES

The Victoria County History says that the Brixton hundred has always been a royal hundred. (This was probably connected with the existence of a palace of the later Saxon kings at Kennington.) It mentions the holding of a three weeks court in 1258. The hundred was farmed out under Edward I for an annual rent. It says that in 1566 a custom had grown up which compelled high constables to retain office for life, an obligation said to have caused some constables to abscond. (The word "high" is used to describe an official appointed by the crown.)

THE SHERIFF OF SURREY

As part of a parliamentary survey during Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth in the 1650s, an investigation of the Brixton hundred found that the old three weeks court had ceased long ago. A court was held by the Sheriff of Surrey who received the hundred court profits, which were small. The Brixton hundred was still functioning on a small scale. It was being policed and people were fined for public nuisances.

It was about then that Brixton hundred was for a time run in conjunction with Wallington hundred, to the south. A court leet for both hundreds was held at Mitcham. This must have been the reason why Brixton hundred was then sometimes called "Allington", something that puzzled the Surrey historians Manning and Bray. But Allington is only Wallington without the weak "W"; in those days the "a" in Wallington would probably have been pronounced like the "a" in alley.

SIR JOHN de BURSTOWE

It is at this period that we meet with a challenger for some of the glory of Brixton in the person of Sir John de Burstowe, knight. His case is presented by his descendant Edward Bysshe, esquire but later knighted, who in 1654 wrote a book consisting of new editions of earlier books on heraldry by three older writers and of long notes of his own on the subject. Two copies of his book are in the British Library. They are printed in Latin but the following translation of extracts from one of his own notes is offered to show his connection with the Burstowe family - and with Brixton². (The name of the John in question is underlined wherever it occurs.)

"The knightly Burstowe family at first had for its family badge three silver falcons on a red field, and took its name from the parish in Surrey where it acquired the manor. The line of their descendants (if I may be allowed to digress) is clearly established from the records...

Stephen de Burstowe who, unless I am deceived, lived at the same time as Richard I, bestowed lands by way of gift upon the convent of Robertsbridge in the county of Sussex...Stephen

Brixton - The Story of a Name

had a son Roger who likewise was generous in giving some land to that same convent;...

His son John de Burstowe engraved in his seal...one falcon with stretched wings. In records written in the reign of Henry III, among a large number of witnesses whose names are set out appear four persons with my surname, of whom two were of the rank of knight...[John] had a son of the same name, a man of equestrian rank, who is mentioned in Manwood's book on forestry laws ...[This second John] took to wife Johanna, the daughter and heir of Robert Burnaville; of this union was born Roger whose sign of gentility ... was his mother's badge, the rose.

By his wife Matilda, who was the daughter and heir of Robert Chastillon, a knight with gilded spurs, Roger had a son called John, the third of that name in this branch. This John shone with distinction in the order of knighthood, and later in military service in France under the Black Prince, and married the daughter and heir of William of St. Amand.

From this union came John and William. On John's death William succeeded to his brother's property. By his wife Joanna, daughter of John Gainsford de Crowhurst, William had one child, his daughter and heir, who married John de la Bysse from whom I am descended - the ninth in succession. This last named John de Burstowe engraved in his seal the lily in addition to the rose as confirmed in the archives and ancient manuscripts...

This lily had beyond any doubt been granted to his father on account of outstanding merit and his notable exertions in France. Besides, it has been handed down to us by my ancestors that in the fighting in France Barthomolew, once Baron de Burgersh, was thrown from his horse and lay helpless on the ground. He was rescued by John de Burstowe who was on the spot. In view of this service the baron was quick to say that if they should ever both be given to enjoy the sight of England again he would in thankful memory give John a "small field". And indeed true to his word those lands of his formerly called Crullings are now called (using his own expression) Smallfield. By that name these lands have now come by lawful succession into our possession.

After his return from France John de Burstowe at his own cost paved with stones the public road from the third milestone from the City. This has right up to this day been called the Causeway ["Pavimentum"] or Lithostrotos of Burstowe. But I return from this little diversion back to our road."

Brixton - The Story of a Name

That is what Edward Bysshe wrote in 1654. The small village of Burstow, which has an ancient church, is in the south eastern corner of Surrey and near Gatwick. Smallfield is a small village in Burstow parish. Portions of Bysshe's house survive in the restored private house called "Smallfield Place".

GARTER KING OF ARMS

The stretch of paved road Bysshe refers to is what is now Brixton Hill and probably the southern section of Brixton Road; it is a part of what according to the Ordnance Survey maps was a Roman road from London to the south coast. Bysshe was Garter King of Arms and head of the Heralds' College when he wrote his book. He would know the road very well. What he wrote proves that the "Brixton" section of the road was called Burstow Causeway in his day and for at least some time before. He could not have made a false statement in his published book about something that was public knowledge. But it does not prove anything more.

Sir John de Burstowe was no doubt a very brave man and probably a public spirited one. But it is unlikely that the squire of a remote Surrey village should be the one to pave at his own cost a length of road almost at the gates of London. Bysshe shows himself to be very proud of his family connections and he may have persuaded himself that Burstow Causeway must have been named after his ancestor 300 years earlier. And he may have drawn the wrong conclusions from the coincidence of the two Burstows.

GRAMMAR

The "stow" in the Burstow near Gatwick Airport meant in Old English a "place". We still use the word as a verb when we "stow" something, that is, put it in a place. The Burstow in Burstow Causeway has a totally different history. It is a worn down form of Brixton, descended from Brixistan. The guttural K has disappeared and so has the final N. And the vowel sound I or U has changed places with the R. This switching of position of vowel and consonant was once a common thing; grammarians call it "metathesis".

For example, long ago the word "brid" got changed to "bird". This happened at least twice to Brix's name. He was Beorhtsige. As we have seen, the first part of his name became "bright", the R now being before the vowel sound. When his name was Normanised it became Brix in the same way. Later, Brixton reverted in some users' mouths to Burstow; this might have been an English speaker's version. Possibly French speaking Normans found it easier to say "Bristo". And it is interesting to see that parliamentary papers of 1664/5, only ten years after Bysshe's book was published, refer to "Bristow Cause[wa]y". The names Bristow and Burstow were both in use.

Brixton - The Story of a Name

Brixton hundred ceased to exist as a government unit by about the middle of the 19th century. With the creation of the Metropolitan Police Force and the new style elected vestry of Lambeth, a forerunner of the borough council, the hundred lost what few functions had been left to it. But even after that it still had an official existence as the name of a geographical unit. This lasted until most of the hundred was absorbed into the new County of London in 1888.

The only thing remaining to be said is how the old hundred name came to attach itself to a district in the central part of the parish of Lambeth. This is not difficult. The agent of change was the old Burstow/Bristow Causeway. In the 18th century "Bristow" seemed to be superseding "Burstow" as the name of the thoroughfare. Until legislation of the mid-19th century the name of a road was whatever people chose to call it, and names, not to mention spellings, often changed.

By the second half of the 18th century Bristow was being replaced by "Brixton" as a road name. This last change may have come from outside the district as much as from inside. People passing through would be familiar with Brixton as the hundred name and probably used it quite naturally to describe Bristow Causeway.

Up to that time houses had been few on or near the Causeway. But as more houses were built there grew a need for a name for the new neighbourhood. Lands on the west side of the Causeway had belonged to Stockwell manor, but Stockwell was the name of the neighbourhood around Stockwell Road. So the name "Brixton" filled the vacuum.

By about 1800 Brixton was well established as the (unofficial) local name of a district extending for a quarter to a half a mile in all directions from where is now Lambeth Town Hall. Its use was of course later extended to the north along Brixton Road.

BEST KNOWN

So the Saxon baron Beorhtsige gave his name to a stone, the stone name became the name of a Surrey hundred, and one of the last acts of the dying hundred was to pass on its name to what was to become one of the best known districts in London.

REFERENCES

¹ Dugdale's Monasticon Anglicanum (1817) vol. VI, Part 1, page 62.

² Nicolai Uptoni de Studio Militari (1654) 1.4, pp. 67/8.