

Survey of the Manor of Elton, Huntingdonshire

Compiled somewhere between 1154 and 1189

Introductory note

Elton is a village in East Anglia, and is still a thriving village today. The manor of Elton belonged to the Abbot of Ramsey Abbey, about 12 miles away. He owned 23 other manors. The manor had belonged to the Abbey since the time of Canute, when the story is that the Theng had drunk a drop too much, and told the Abbot that if he came back in the morning with 50 marks in gold he could have it – which the Abbot did. The money and produce from the manor were given directly to the Abbey. Part of the land was held in demesne, part given out to tenants.

The text

At Elton there were in the time of King Henry [1] and still are 10 ½ hides containing 35 virgates. And in those days it rendered full payment in all things and £10 to the treasury of the abbot. It had this equipment: 5 ploughs each of 8 oxen and each worth 40 pence, 10 cows, and 1 bull of the same price, 160 sheep, 2 horses for harrowing and 100 pigs.

[Note a few things; the constant reference to medieval documents to previous custom and practice – ‘it’s always been this way, so that’s the way it should stay’. Plus also, years were not yet counted by our AD system – usually it was by referring to the year of the reign of the current monarch.]

A virgate is a unit of land of about 30 acres. If you had a virgate, you’d be reasonably well off, less than that and you were struggling.

Finally, look at the proportion of livestock. Oxen, though slow, are still needed for ploughing, but horses used for lighter work.]

Of the free fees Reiner son of Aednoth in the time of King Henry had 3 free virgates for which he attended the courts of shire and hundred. Thuri the priest had 2 virgates and he attended the courts of the shire and hundred. And he also had 10 acres and a toft worth 8 pence adjacent to the church.

[A toft or Croft is a unit of land in the village, maybe ¼ to 1 acre, surrounded by a ditch or bank, and containing the house and vegetable plot. Toft is generally Danelaw, Croft elsewhere]

Edmund, father of Jordan, had 1 ½ virgates and he attended the courts of the shire and hundred. And he ploughed ½ an acre every Friday. And he harrowed. He also gave 2 shillings a year for rent and 13 pence and house payment. This land Jordan, his son, now holds for the same service except he pays 12 pence more.

Blundel, grandfather of Gilbert, had 1 ½ virgates by the same service. And Gilbert his grandson, now holds the land in the same way. The aforesaid Blundel also then had another 1 ½ virgates for which he paid 7 shillings and this his son Richard now holds in the same way. Gilbert the reeve then held and now holds 1 virgate in the same way by payment of 6 shillings and by ploughing 6 acres. He holds also another virgate for 7 shillings.

Thorold the priest held 1 virgate for 6 shillings and was free from all work and service. And Rainald, brother of Robert the clerk, now holds this land in the same manner and is free. Gisla, the widow had then, and still has 1 virgate for 6 shillings and by ploughing 6 acres.

[All these 7 people (Rainer, Thuri, Jordan, Gilbert, Richard, Rainald and Gisla are free tenants, the better off people with some small payment in kind by ploughing. The priest is part of the peasant community. Interesting to note that Blundel had managed to subdivide his holdings between his grandson Gilbert and his son Richard. Anglo Danish names have by the time of Henry 2nd disappeared, though still the odd one in the time of Henry 1st. It's also interesting to note that the Abbot is trying with some success to raise the rents on his estate – as evidenced by Jordan, who pays more than his father did.]

The mill with 1 virgate and 6 ½ acres used to render 40 shillings. And he who farmed the village had his provision from it. Alan Rufus has 2 crofts for 4 shillings by the grant of abbot Walter *[of Ramsey]* and 1 virgate which was held by a certain man called Dac for 4 shillings.

[The mill was a major money earner for lords, and villagers were required to use the lord's mill and pay for the privilege. The queue for the mill could be a rowdy place – one priest complains that whores were working their way up and down the line . . .]

In the days of King Henry there were in this village 35 virgates held by work and on the demesne were the holdings of 8 oxherds, 1 swine herd and 1 shepherd. Now there only 28 ½ virgates held by work.

[Later in the 12th century, with rising prices for produce, Landholders were eager to bring more land back under their direct control – otherwise it was the tenants who profited, not them. Maybe that's the reason why less land is now put out to tenants in return for service]

And this is the work and service of the holder or one virgate. From Michelmas *[29th September]* to the beginning of August he works for 2 days in each week and ploughs for a third except at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost *[Whitsun – 7 weeks after Easter]*. And from the beginning of August to the Nativity of St Mary *[8th September]* he works for 3 days each week. And from the Nativity of St Mary until Michelmas he works every day except Saturday. In winter he ploughs half an acre and sows it with his own seed. He harrows and reaps this as well as another half an acre in August. And he performs carrying services at his own expense. And he makes malt from the lord's corn and payments for rights on the common. He pays 13 pence for house payment 4 pence at Michelmas, and one halfpenny for wool. And he shall go on errands but if he goes outside the county he shall be quit of his week's work except for ploughing. In August he gives 1 carrying service of timber and 1 work at fencing. And he performs 2 carrying services of corn in August. And each 5 virgates give 4 pence for fish and each 2 virgates give 1 cart of thatch and they make the thatch. When the winnower comes, all shall go to the court and thresh corn daily until the farm is made up. And if the frost is too hard for ploughing he shall work on Fridays instead of ploughing. And when the farmer asks for boon works in August he shall come with his whole household and he shall then be fed by the farmer.

[I guess it's a bit obvious that service would be heaviest during harvesting time – but the dues are very heavy, and make it difficult for the tenant to make the most of his own land. Obviously, he

would use labourers to carry out the service, but at these time competition for labour would be fierce, and the lord came first. ‘Boon works’ were a particular bugbear for the peasant – unsurprisingly the work was called in at harvest time, and as you can see the family themselves were expected to attend.]

After the death of King Henry Ralph of Asekirche received from Abbot Walter at a rent of 6 shillings 1 virgate which previously had been held by work. Richard son of Rainald has 2 virgates which Thuri the priest held. Franceis holds 1 virgate for 6 shillings and by ploughing 6 acres. Geoffrey of Walsoken holds 1 virgate for 6 shillings and by ploughing 6 acres. Gilbert of Dewton holds 1 virgate for 6 shillings and by ploughing 6 acres. Gilret of Loituna holds 1 virgate and 1 toft for 6 shillings and he ploughs every Friday. And he harrows. He holds one rood for 4 pence. Godwine the White holds 1 virgate for 5 shillings and by ploughing 3 acres.

This is the equipment in the courtyard of the manor of Elton: 4 ploughs with 24 oxen and 8 horses and 10 cows; each ox and horse is worth 4 shillings each cow is worth 40 pence; 160 sheep, 26 pigs or more than a year old, 24 piglets, 16 cocks included in the account below. With this equipment it now renders the full farm and £10 in money, with the mill which gives 100 shillings.

[Things haven’t changed a lot. The manor seems to be yielding slightly less at £15 (including the mill, but then more land is now held in demesne.)]

A certain William had half an acre for 2 pence. Master Ralph has an acre of the demesne. The men of Elton gave 17 pence for a croft. And this is the sum of the payment of Elton: £6 besides the 18 ½ virgates which are held by work. Robert brother of Thirkill holds 1 acre of land for 16 pence. Of 13 acrelands the six better pay 18 shillings and the others which give 20 pence. There are 2 tofts which Ketelburn and the widows hold for 18 pence. Walter pays 15 pence for a toft. A certain widow 6 pence. Thomas, Hestilda Ralph, Hurri, Hured, Ailsueda, Robert, Geoffrey the Cobbler, Siwald and the other Thomas pay 12 pence each for the tofts, Roger pays 16 pence for his. Edward holds 12 acres of assart for 9 ½ pence. Geoffrey holds 12 acres of assart for 9 ½ pence, and 12 acres of demesne for 2 pence and his sheep for 8 pence.

[The appearance of assarts after the death of Henry I is interesting because it reflects the growth in population. An assart is a piece of land reclaimed from wasteland or woodland. The deal is that the peasant does the work to reclaim the land, then pays a money rent to the lord. Assarts become common because the population is growing, but productivity isn’t really – so the population growth can only be absorbed by expanding the area under cultivation.]