

THE GIFLE

Donald G Hill
Biggleswade
September 1988

INTRODUCTION

The chance survival of a seventh century document grants us a brief glimpse of an otherwise obscure people known as the Gifle. They are commonly considered from place-name evidence to have inhabited the Ivel Valley in Bedfordshire. Unfortunately nothing further is known; the extent of their territory or their origins and their ultimate fate are not recorded.

It is the aim of this study, therefore, to attempt to correct this situation and to set these people in a geographical and historical context. From a study of place-names, archaeology and other evidence it is hoped to provide some possible answers to the many questions.

It should be noted the terms 'British' and 'Celtic' are used throughout to refer to the native Romano-British. Similarly the names 'English' and 'Saxon' refer to the Germanic immigrants who eventually gave their name to the Southern half of our island.

THE TERRITORY

The only historical reference to the Gifle is in a seventh century document known as the Tribal Hidage. This document was a tax assessment prepared for the kings of Mercia. Here, amongst thirty-three other names, we find the Gifle listed as a folk group of 300 hides. (A hide was a unit of tax assessment. Later, by the time of Domesday, it was equivalent to an area of 120 acres. It is not known whether this was so in the seventh century). The fact that the Gifle occur in the list after the Herefinna and the Sweodora of South Huntingdonshire and before the Hicce of the Hitchin area suggests an approximate location in East Bedfordshire. The early forms of the name Ivel, i.e. Givle c1180 and Guile, however, confirm their precise position, in 1232. The name is Celtic meaning 'forked'; it is also the origin of Yeovil in Somerset. In the Bedfordshire case it presumably refers to the prominent fork near Langford where the Flitt and the Ivel join. Perhaps this was a tribal meeting place.

Early forms of the names Northill (Nortgiuele, Nortgible 1086, Nortgiffelle 13th century) and Southill (Sudgiuele, Sudgible 1086, and Sutgivel 1286) show that these, too, contain the same word, and it is sometimes assumed that these two parishes represent the original extent of Gifle territory. The survival of the tribal name in the two parishes should not be over-emphasised, it perhaps reflects a later situation. Indeed, comparison with the areas that have been allotted to other groups in the list suggest that such an area would hardly be appropriate for 300 hides. Furthermore, at this early date the river

valleys tended to unite rather than divide the people through whose territory they flowed and we should, therefore, allow for the probability that in origin the Gifle also controlled land to the East of the Ivel. An area roughly corresponding to that of the 12th century Shefford Rural Deanery would be more appropriate. The use of a land unit of such a late date to indicate ancient boundaries may seem hard to justify but it is an idea that is not without merit.

It is a hypothesis, moreover, that has found favour with other writers ¹. Within this area two sub-units can be discerned. Either side of the Ivel, parish boundaries trace out careful and significant shapes in the landscape (Fig.1). East of the river the outer boundaries of Biggleswade, Eyeworth and Hinxworth enclose an area whose shape displays a clear unity. The precise origin of this unit is not clear, but it is certainly early. It is now commonly accepted that many parish boundaries originated as estate boundaries that can be dated back to at least as early as the Saxon period. Certainly our unit must have existed before the creation of the county boundary in the 10th century when Hinxworth was lost to Hertfordshire. The creation of such a unit crossing the county boundary after that date would otherwise have made little sense. On the west bank the parishes of Southill, Old Warden and Northill (together with Beeston, now in Sandy Parish) suggest a similar unit.

One further place name in Bedfordshire is to be associated with the Gifle. Fifteen miles north-west, close to the County boundary, lies Yielden. Medieval documents show the name derives from 'Giveldene' (the valley or swine-pasture of the Gifle). Clearly the place is too distant to connect with the main block of territory and must be a detached area under the Gifle control. But what was the link?

Its location provides the clue, for it lies on the edge of the formerly extensive forest of Brunswald. (The name is preserved in Newton Bromswold and Leighton Bromswold). Detached areas of woodland are well known elsewhere. In the Weald of Kent, for instance, there were a number of detached areas belonging to settlements often many miles away which were used extensively both as a source of timber and as pasture for foraging pigs. A clear Kentish parallel to Yielden would be Tenterden, 'the swine pasture of the people of Thanet', but in this instance fifty five miles separate the two places.

BRITONS OR SAXONS, A QUESTION OF NATIONALITY

That the name Gifle is Celtic may be significant for it suggests that the people to whom it refers were themselves of Celtic (or British) stock, for it is hard to imagine the circumstances under which the Saxons would readily adopt a Celtic name. The concept of sub-Roman Celtic people surviving here into the 6th or 7th century is by no means impossible. The old idea of defenceless Britons deprived of the protection of Rome being slaughtered or driven West into Wales by the invading Saxons is no longer considered tenable by modern historians. A simple consideration of the number of people involved is against it. Latest estimates of the population of Roman Britain at the end of the fourth century are about five million. Yet the first Saxons can have numbered

no more than a few hundred. The transition of Roman Britannia into Saxon England was a long drawn out process and the final outcome was not at first inevitable. It is impossible to put a firm date to the end of Roman Britain; there are several possibilities.

One contender is 410 AD. In this year the Goths took Rome and the Emperor Honorius told the British to organise their own defence. But the British people did not suddenly forsake five centuries of Roman civilisation nor did they easily abandon their homes. They strove to preserve their way of life though the protection of the Legions was gone. Early in the fifth century the British aristocracy brought in Saxon mercenaries to supplement their own forces. Thus arrived the first Saxons, not as invaders but as mercenary troops employed by the British to protect them from further invasion. They were stationed at strategic sites particularly in East Anglia. It was a policy that seemed sound at the time but which was ultimately doomed to failure.

At the end of the fourth century the small Roman town at Sandy was a thriving community, the market centre for the large area of particularly rich agricultural lands that surrounded it. Finds suggest that Roman or sub-Roman occupation persisted into at least the first quarter of the fifth century. Continued occupation thereafter is probable but hard to prove. There has, until recently been little scientific excavation at Sandy and in any case British artefacts of the late fifth century are sparse in Britain and not easily recognised.

The Saxons arrived at Sandy early in the fifth century. The time of their arrival and their location close to the Roman town strongly implies their mercenary status. Other local, presumably mercenary, settlements of this time were located at Kempston, Luton and particularly around the Roman town of Cambridge and further east. Sandy, however, is the only known early Saxon cemetery in the Ivel valley. Yet it is remarkable that, though Saxon settlement at Sandy lasted well into the sixth century, there is little or no evidence for early expansion onto the more fertile lands further south.

Archaeological evidence for expansion into the Ivel valley before the late sixth century is totally absent. Similarly, the only place names of early date anywhere near the Ivel valley are Higham Gobion, Kitchen End (in Pulloxhill parish) and Newnham in Hertfordshire. However, even these may be of late sixth century date. All three lie on the edge of our territory. Blunham, in the heart of the Ivel valley, might possibly be early but its topographical siting suggests later more probable interpretations². Clearly the Saxon settlement at Sandy remained a small, isolated group in largely British countryside. Their nearest compatriots were nine miles away at Kempston.

CUTHWULF'S REVOLT

Against the Year 571 the Anglo Saxon Chronicle records:

'In this year Cuthwulf fought against the Brit-Welsh at Bedcanford and took their villis, Limbury, Aylesbury, Bensington and Eynsham.'

It tells how Cuthwulf, the leader of a group of Saxon mercenaries rebelled against the British authority and captured a large area of the Chilterns. The site of the battle, Bedcanford, is possibly Bedford, though the identification is controversial. Limbury, however, is clearly the place of that name just to the north of Luton. The whole statement has been the cause of much debate amongst historians in the recent decades. But, whatever else may be said, there is a strong implication that the independent British population survived in our area into the late sixth century.

It is an idea that, as we have seen, in no way conflicts with archaeology or place names. Cuthwulf a revolt signalled the beginning of the end for local Celtic dominance. Throughout the next century a number of new settlements sprang up. At Astwick a new seventh century cemetery is known whilst isolated finds of this time have been found at Clifton, Langford, Moggerhanger and Shefford.³ Across the boulder clay hills to the East the place names Edworth, Eyeworth, Hinxworth and probably Biggleswade to the north are possibly also of late seventh century date. Interestingly the boundaries of some of these parishes (i.e. Hinxworth, Edworth and Eyeworth) suggest a careful division of the old Gifle estate into equal shares. (Fig. 2)

We appear to be witnessing a time of transition. The tribal hidage suggests the people were still known by their Celtic name - Gifle, but the old territories were beginning to be divided up and shared out amongst Saxon newcomers. It appears to have been a process of assimilation rather than annihilation, with Britons living side by side with Saxons.

THE CELTIC FACTOR

We have seen that, outside Sandy, there is little evidence for Saxon settlement in the Ivel valley before the late sixth century. This apparent reluctance or inability to expand suggests that the countryside was already fully populated, presumably by descendants of the native Romano British. The alternative explanation, that the fertile lands either side of the Ivel were left empty and unexploited seems most improbable. But what evidence do we have of Celtic survival? Archaeology is silent, but this is not surprising. By the end of the fourth century the Romano British had largely adopted Christianity, the new official religion of the empire and it is likely that Christian worship persisted and flourished among the Dark Age British. As Christians they buried their dead without grave goods. Had the early Saxons been Christian we would know equally little of them; there are no techniques for dating or categorising unaccompanied burials.

To reveal the Celtic presence we must turn to place-names⁴ (Table 1). The number of

surviving Celtic place names in east Bedfordshire and the adjoining parts of Hertfordshire is not large but is to be expected given the many centuries of subsequent English influence. Those that survive tell of a period of overlap between the two cultures during which the new English were able to learn British names for various features in the landscape. Though their numbers were not great, their distribution is interesting (Fig. 3) for there is only one instance east of the north-south line drawn by the Ouse and Ivel. Cambridgeshire is also largely devoid of British names.

OTHER EVIDENCE

St. Macute's Chapel

On the Southern edge of Wilshamstead parish lies St. Macute's Wood. The name is the only surviving evidence on the modern map for the former existence here of a chapel dedicated to St. Machutus. This saint, more commonly called St. Malo, appears to have originated from south-west Wales. He went to Brittany as a missionary and is commemorated there in the place name St. Malo. He appears to have died in Brittany in the early seventh century. But why do we find a chapel with this unusual dedication to an obscure Welsh saint here in Bedfordshire? It is unlikely to have been an English dedication for the early English church owed little to Celtic Christianity. Indeed Bede castigates the British for their failure to convert the early pagan English. In the twelfth century the chapel was given to Beaulieu Priory in Clophill but the origin appears to have been ecclesiastically independent.

Is it possible that this chapel owes its foundation to the survival of a British Christian population into the late 6th, early 7th century?

Ickwell May Day Celebrations

Side by side with Christianity the Celtic people of Britain practised certain traditional customs. One of the most important dates in the Celtic calendar was Beltane celebrated on the first day of May. In Scotland and Wales Beltane traditions survived well into the 19th century. There they celebrated the Summer return with song and dance, with lighting great bonfires and by decorating their houses with greenery.

The present celebrations at Ickwell are a modern revival owing little to earlier traditions. Records preserved in Northill churchwardens accounts dating from the 16th century, however, show that the original ceremony was more authentic in character. References to calves for slaughter, spice and fruit for bake meats, hops to brew beer and to minstrels and dancers show it to have been a time of great feasting and dancing. Of particular interest are references to (cart) "loads of bushes", gunpowder and red lead suggesting huge bonfires and fireworks and. a tradition perhaps more akin to original Celtic rites.

ooooOOOOOOoooo

Much evidence for Celtic survival, as outlined above, comes from west of the Ivel where the name Gifle survived in recognisable form into the 13th century. Here, perhaps, British traditions lingered longest. With this in mind it is interesting to note that it was precisely in this area that Bigmore noted the survival of Celtic settlement patterns⁷.

ooooOOOOOOoooo

CONCLUSIONS

Our knowledge that a people known as the Gifle ever existed is due to the chance survival of a seventh Century document known as the Tribal Hidage. This document was compiled solely for the purposes of tax assessment and as such tells us little beyond their relative size and approximate location.

Examination of other evidence, however, suggests that in origin they were a folk group of Celtic stock who occupied the fertile Ivel valley probably from at least as early as 5th century. The extent of their territory at this time is perhaps suggested by the 12th century Shefford Deanery. With the aid of Saxon mercenary troops based at Sandy they appear to have preserved their independence into the late 6th century.

It is then, in 571, we hear the Saxon leader Cuthwulf fought with the Brit-Welsh at Bedcanford (possibly Bedford) and took four villas including Limbury near Luton. Cuthwulf's victory destroyed local British resistance. He died in the year of his triumph but his followers have stayed to consolidate their victory in the area. There was no sudden rush of new Saxon settlers but a gradual drifting of newcomers into the area that probably took place over many decades. In places we seem to detect controlled settlement with careful division and sharing out of the old territories.

It is perhaps ironic that we hear of the Gifle towards the end of their independent existence; at a time when we begin to see the breaking up of their former territories. To the west of the Ivel, however, the Celtic way of life appears to have lingered longest; here alone their presence can still be faintly traced in the modern landscape.

How long they remained recognisably Celtic we cannot tell; in the end all became English, though perhaps we should think more in terms of a fusion of two societies than the total eclipse of one by the other.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The reasoning behind this idea may be summarised:

At the time of the creation of Bedfordshire rural deaneries the Medieval hundred was an important administrative unit. It is thought they may have been reorganised in the late 10th century and owes little to earlier arrangements. Though the hundred boundaries would have formed an obvious basis for the creation of larger units such as the rural deaneries, they show little relationship. Shefford rural deanery, for example, cuts through the middle of both Wixamtree and Clifton hundreds. Presumably the creators of the Rural Deaneries had some justification for ignoring existing boundaries and we may suspect that the new structure represents a reversion to earlier tribal units.

The idea that rural deaneries appear to preserve ancient territories is noted by a number of authors including:

- a) D. Hooke - *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape - The Kingdom of the Hwicce*. Manchester University Press 1985 p87.
 - b) J.Haslam - *The Ecclesiastical Topography of Medieval Bedford*. *Bedfordshire Archeologica Journal* Vol 17,1988, pp41-50.
 - c) I.Friel - *The Hicce - Hertfordshire's Past*. Vol.13,1982, pp14.
2. K.Rutherford-Davis - *Britons and Saxons — The Chiltern Region*. Phillimore, 1982. Many of the ideas on place names are based on theories in this book.
 3. K.Rutherford-Davis (as above), a useful summary of the archaeological evidence is given in Appendix II.
 4. K.Rutherford-Davis (as above) pp97-104 and Appendix V.
 5. J.Wood - *Bedfordshire Parish Surveys, Historic Landscape and Archaeology*. No.3, Cardington and Eastcotts. Bedfordshire Planning Department.
 6. E.Farmiloe and R.Nixseaman - *Elizabethan Churchwardens Accounts*. BHRXXXIII, 1953.
 7. P.Bigmore. *The Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire Landscape*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1979, pp57-8.

TABLE 1 - BRITISH PLACE NAMES

Note: The numbers below refer to Figure 3.

River Names

Hiz	?sych = 'dry', a common Welsh stream name.
Humber (north-west of Bedford)	? 'good river'.
Ivel	Gifle = forked.
Ouse	'water'.
Saferon (Bedford)	Identical to Severn, certainly British, meaning obscure.

Containing British River Names

(10) Campton	Farm (tun) on a crooked stream.
(6+8) Northill/Southill	As Ivel above.
(2) Tempsford	This name shows the Ouse in this area once bore the name Thames. This is certainly British, perhaps meaning 'dark river'.

Containing British Personal Names

(1) Cadbury (Eaton Socon)	'the fort of Cada'
(12) Cadwell (Hitchin)	'Cada's spring'
(5) Cardington	'Caerda's farm'
(9) Cainhoe (Clophill)	'Caega's spur of land'

Names Referring to Britons

(14) Walsworth (Hitchin)	From 'Weath' the English word for the British, survives most notably in the name Wales.
(7) Wilshamstead	From 'Wilisc', as for wealth above.
(17) Walden	'valley of the Britons'

Other Names

- | | | |
|------|-------------------------|--|
| (3) | Brickhill (Bedford) | British 'brico' = hill with English hill added tautologically. |
| (15) | Carkelowe (Weston) | Probably contains a British word related to Welsh 'carrec' = rock with hlaw = hillock added rather tautologically. |
| (16) | Crouchmoor (Offley) | British 'cruo' = hillock coupled with English 'mere' = pool thus barrow by the pool. |
| (11) | Hanscombe (shillington) | 'Han's cultivated land between settlements. |
| (13) | Karkelowe (Sandon) | As for Carkelowe above. |
| (4) | Kempston | Contains British 'cambo' = crooked, presumably referring to a bend in the River Ouse. |

FIGURE 1: THE SUGGESTED TERRITORY OF THE GIFLE

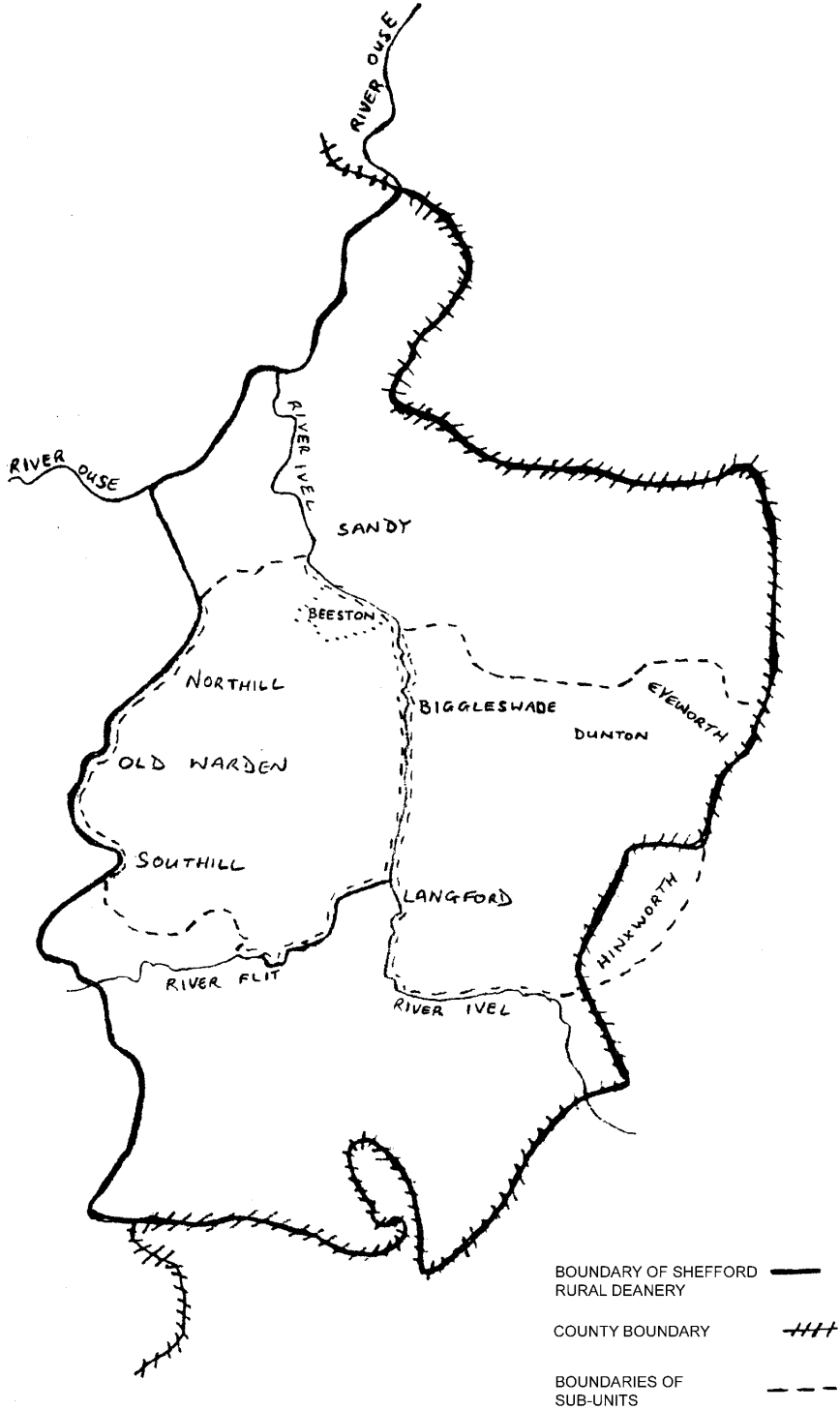


FIGURE 2: THE DIVISION OF THE EASTERN TERRITORIES

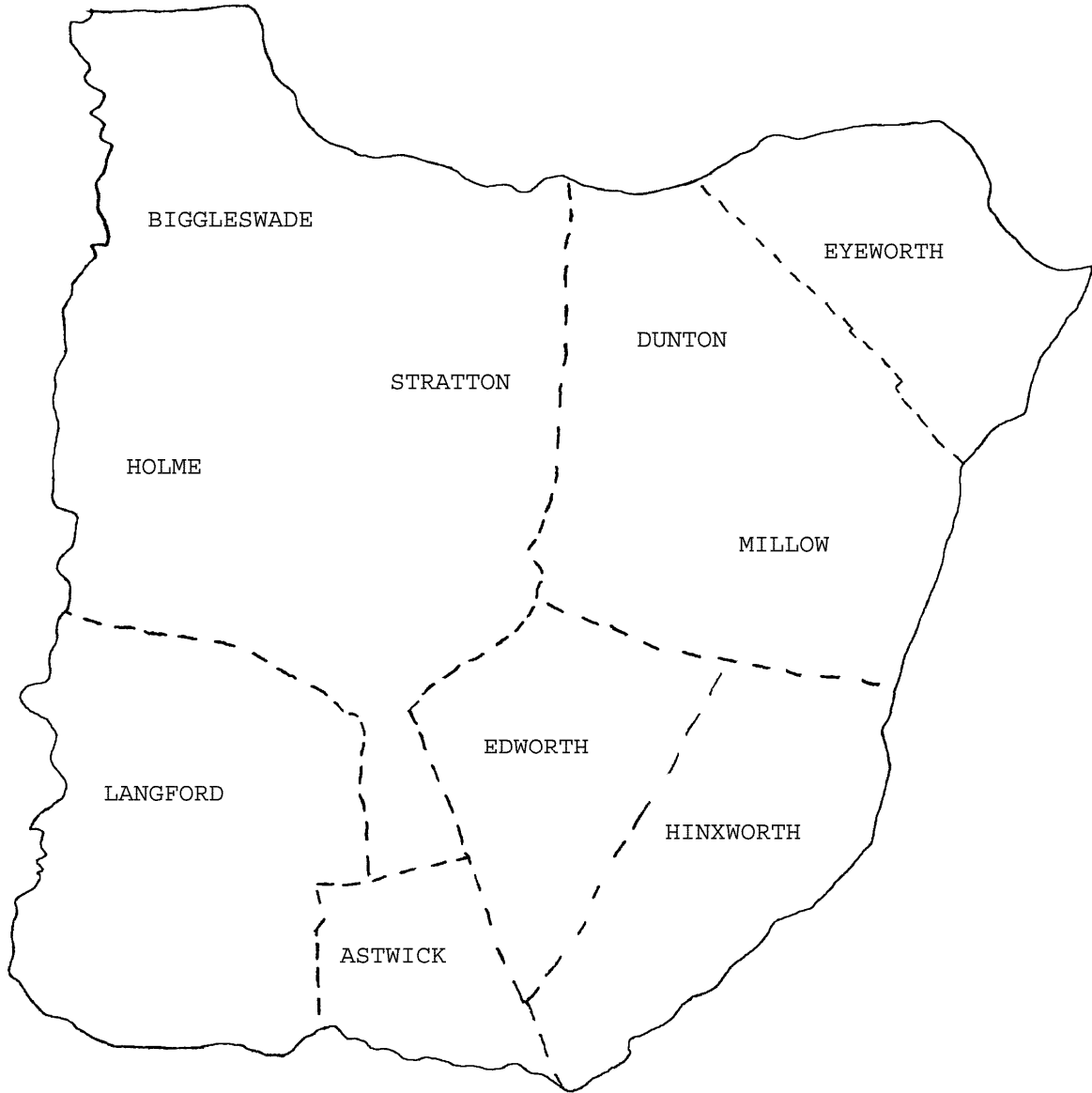


FIGURE 3: BRITISH NAMES

- KEY:
- CONTAINING BRITISH RIVER NAMES □
 - CONTAINING BRITISH PERSONAL NAMES ○
 - NAMES REFERRING TO BRITONS ▽
 - OTHER BRITISH NAMES △

For key to numbers see Table 1

