The Boundaries of Anglo-Saxon Clapham

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Introduction

Michael Green's recent history of Clapham contains a detailed discussion of the boundary clauses of three Anglo-Saxon charters dating from the tenth-eleventh centuries.[1] Although none of these documents relates to the granting of an estate at Clapham itself, they do relate to its boundaries, other than that with Streatham in the south. Unfortunately, Mr. Green has chosen to make several linguistic errors and unnecessary changes to the generally accepted interpretations of the various boundary points, as well as extending his discussion of their location to large areas of Battersea and Wandsworth. No reference is made to the series of papers which have appeared in this journal over almost four decades,[2] instead relying wholly on the work of J.G. Taylor, published in 1925.[3]

This paper is not concerned with locating the boundary features, nor with the geographical extent of the various estates referred to in the charters as Battersea and the vexed question of what is meant by the term 'hide' (notionally the land needed to support one [extended] family) in terms of area and resources on the ground, either before or after 1066. These are topics which need more research, and will form the basis of another paper. Rather, it looks at Mr. Green's interpretation of the Old English texts and seeks to show that its translation errors confuse rather than clarifying our understanding of what these documents tell us about the late-Anglo-Saxon landscape of this area.

The first boundary clause is attached to a charter dated '693', but which seems likely to be a grant of land at Battersea to Barking Abbey made in the late-680s.[4] It survives as a copy of the late-eleventh century. Detailed boundary clauses were not used as early as the late-seventh century, and it is probable that this one is of 10th-11th century date. The second list is attached to an unrelated charter of 957, and while broadly similar to the first displays several divergences from it. It survives in a twelfth-century copy, but the bounds are probably valid for the tenth century.[5] The third boundary clause relates to part of Lambeth and is in a charter dated 1062 which granted several estates to Waltham Abbey.[6] This survives in a thirteenth-century copy. The local topography is relatively simple, making the list of boundary features short. It relates to the later estates of South Lambeth and Stockwell, covering the area between Vauxhall and the top of Brixton Hill.

To simplify the following discussion, these three boundaries are labelled 'A' - Battersea '957', 'B' - Battersea '693', and 'C' - Lambeth, with each feature numbered sequentially. Mr. Green's interpretation is given first (MG) and this author's second (KB). Except where it is relevant, the linking text between the boundary points is omitted. For ease of reference the actual topographical features have been capitalised, which is not the case in the original documents. Note that there are also many typographical errors in *Historic Clapham,* causing confusion in interpreting the solutions offered.

A. The Battersea Boundaries of 957

This charter provides a boundary for the north and west sides of Clapham parish, from the Thames to Clapham South, before proceeding westwards to the River Wandle.

ðys synd ða landgemære to Batriceseie: These are the boundaries to Battersea

A1 *Arst æt Hegefre*: MG That is from the boundary of the Effra; KB First at the high bank. It seems that the River Effra, which joins the Thames at the north-eastern corner of Battersea near Vauxhall, takes its name by back-formation from the bank or dyke at its mouth, possibly man-made to prevent flooding.

A2 *Gætenesheale*: MG Goat Hall; KB kid's corner/nook. MG has confused OE *halh* with *heall*. The dative of *halh* is *heale*. The first element is clearly the OE diminutive **gæten* 'kid', rather than *gāt* 'goat'.

A3 *Gryndeles syllen*: MG/KB Grendel's bog. Grendel was the monster in the epic poem *Beowulf*, whose lair was in a bog. His name features fairly frequently in place-names. The root of OE *syle* is mud/muddy'.

A4 *Russemere*: MG/KB Rushmere. OE *risc/rysc, mere* 'pool fringed with rushes'.

A5 *Bælgenham*: MG/KB Balham. This is a difficult name, and may contain OE *hām* 'village, farm' or *hamm* 'meadow, land in the bend of a stream'. The first element may be OE **balg* 'rounded, bulging, smooth' (cf. modern 'belly') which would fit the local topography of Balham Hill.[7]

A6 *Bernardesbyrieles*: MG Warriors' graves; KB Beornheard's burials. MG does not adduce any origin for his interpretation, although OE *beorn* means 'hero, warrior'. However, there seems no reason not to opt for the personal name. The choice of plural 'burials' may indicate a pagan Saxon cemetery, with or without barrow[s].

A7 *To þam blachemore*: MG To Thane Blach's moor; KB to the black moor. This is the first of several wholly incorrect translations by Green. He invents an unknown personal name, whereas the word preceding 'black moor' is in fact the genitive singular of the masculine definite article qualifying the noun *mor* 'moor, boggy place'.

A8 *To þam coppedeðorne*: MG to the Thane's [sic] coppiced thorn; KB to the pollarded thorn.
Here again, MG is mistaking the definite article for a noun, although he here seems to favour OE *ðegn* ''noble, minister, retainer', rather than a personal name. OE *ðorn* is masculine, the article is in the dative case.

A9 *To Bænces Byri*: MG To Bænces cowhouse; KB To the earthwork on a shelf/bench of land. There is no evidence for any OE personal name Bænc-.[8] The second element is not OE *byre* 'byre', but *byrig*, the dative singular of *burh* a multi-purpose word for fortification, ranging from hillforts to what would later be called manorial complexes. The first element is probably OE *benc* used in a topographical sense still familiar today. If, as is possible, this feature is Caesar's Camp on

Wimbledon Common, earlier known as Bensbury, its position close to the edge of steep slope would be an appropriate use of this word.

A10 *Swa ðonon to Bæueriðe ealswa feor swa an man mæi mid anen bille ge worpan and an friman mid fif bere cornen*: MG Thus through to the pasture hythe just as far out as it pleases a person to stretch out his sword, and one advances amid five barley corn [fields]; KB So then to Beaver Stream as far as a man may throw a bill, and a freeman five barleycorns. This is one of the most intriguing, and problematic, boundary features to be found in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon charters, although that hardly justifies the totally divergent solutions offered above. Later, MG offers the solution of Beffra's Stream for *Bæueriðe* (see B13), but here prefers 'pasture landing-place', whatever that may be! OE *bær* does denote pasture, but more typically in woodland foraged by swine. There seems no reason to reject Beaver Stream.

The more usual phrases marking the passage of a boundary to midstream are here abandoned for two almost poetical phrases. OE *bille*, like the modern word bill has a variety of meanings, ranging from sword and spear to billhook (for pruning, hedging etc.). Quite why anybody should wish to throw potentially valuable possessions into the water is difficult to imagine. A billhook measures around 12-14 inches with its handle,[9] a sword or spear much more. The distance reached would surely depend on the thrower; hardly a precise demarcation. Green's interpretation makes no sense, and does not translate the original, the same his true of his version of the next clause. If the translation is clear, its meaning is opaque. Why a freeman? Why five barleycorns? The OED dates the latter word no earlier than the 14th century, although it is in fact a perfectly acceptable OE compound. From around 1600, the OED notes the use of the term in measurement, with one barleycorn equal to one-third or one-quarter of an inch. Given their weight, five barleycorns are hardly likely to have gone far into the stream! Perhaps five heads of barley is meant, which would equate more closely with the length of a bill. For now, this enigma must remain unsolved, but imagine the Anglo-Saxon worthies gathered on the bank of the Beaver Stream deciding to vary the prosaic language of the boundary perambulation and setting a conundrum for posterity.

A11 *Swa eft ongen to Fugelriðe*: MG Then east again to Fugelrithe; KB So afterwards towards bird stream. MG has again confused the manuscript *eft* for *est*, which would in fact be *east*, as today. He also offers no translation of *Fugelriðe*. (See also B14)

A12 *Þanon forð into Tæmese bemiddan streame*: MG the north into the Thames to the middle of the stream; KB then forth into the Thames to midstream. A misreading of the manuscript by MG.

A13 *Be healfan stræme eft into Hegefre*: MG Following the stream halfway across to Hegefre; KB in midstream afterwards to High Efre.

Appended to the boundaries of the main estate is another fascinating clause.
A14 *Herto gebyreð se wude þe hatte Pænge, seofen milen and seofen furlang and seofen fet embeganges*: MG Formerly this brought you to the wood called 'Penge', seven miles seven furlongs and seven feet in circumference; KB Hereto belongs the wood called Penge, then as MG. Penge remained a detached portion of Battersea

parish until 1888. Part of a belt of woodland along the Surrey/Kent border, it provided vital resources which were in short supply closer to the Thames.

B. The Battersea Charter of '693'

This document also provides a boundary for the north and west sides of Clapham parish, from the Thames to Clapham South.

Hec sunt termina huius telluris: MG Here are the boundary points of the land/estate; KB Here are the boundaries of this land/estate.
Þis syndon þa landgemære to badrices ege and to wendlesuurðe: MG/KB These are the boundaries to Battersea and to Wandsworth.

B1 *Þæt is ærest Heah Yfre*: MG That is originally from High Effra; KB That is first [the] high bank. See comments at A1.

B2 *Ceokan Ege*: MG/KB Ceacca's Island, here referring to a slightly raised feature in the low-lying marshland. Note that a derivation from OE **ceacce* 'lump' relating to some raised feature is also possible, although tautologous.

B3 *Grydeles Elrene*: MG/KB Grendel's Alders. Strictly, the word is OE *elren* 'overgrown with/near to alder trees. See comments at A3.

B4 *Into ðara smalan ac*: MG Thara's small oak; KB to the small oak. This is another wholly incorrect translation by MG. He invents an unknown personal name, whereas the word preceding 'small' is in fact the dative singular of the feminine definite article qualifying OE *āc* 'oak tree'.

B5 *Rysmere*: MG/KB Rushmere; see A4.

B6 *Leoddebeorge*: MG Leodde's mount (sic) or monument; KB Leoda's or the people's mound. The OE element *beorg* can be a hill or a mound, and lies at the root of modern barrow. Leoda may be a shortened version of a personal name, but perhaps more likely in this case is OE *leode* 'people', possibly denoting a meeting place.

B7 *Uckebyrge*: MG/KB Ucca's mound. Personal names with this element are unusual in OE.[10]

B8 *Bernnærdes Byriels*: MG Warrior's burials; KB Beornheard's burials. See A6.

B9 *Inne þane blacan mor*: MG Into Thane Blacs' [sic] moor; KB Into the black moor. See A7.

B10 *Oð middan Hlidaburnan*: MG Up to the middle of the Hiddaburna (Hydeburn) stream; KB To the middle of Hlidaburna. Green evidently considers this to be the Falcon Brook, whose earlier name was Hide Bourne, whereas it is clearly the Wandle, whose present name is a back-formation from Wandsworth. The OE name means 'loud stream' and survived into the medieval period as Lodebourne.[11]

B11 *In Gibbe Felde*: MG Gibbe Feld; KB Gibbe[‘s] open country. Although this name reappears as *Giufeld* in the grant of the Battersea estate to Westminster Abbey in the 1060s,[12] it remains impossible from these forms to interpret the first element. It seems unlikely to be a personal name, as Germanic names in Geb- are continental rather than English. It may derive from OE *giefu*, ‘gift, giving’, but this is not on record as a place-name forming element.[13]

B12 *In þa blaca dic*: MG Into the Black Dyke; KB Into the black ditch, OE *dic* may be either masc. or fem in gender, in this case the latter, probably signifying ditch.

B13 *Into Beferiþi*: MG Into Beffra’s Stream; KB Into the beaver stream. MG has again selected an otherwise unknown personal name. Irrespective of which local stream is meant there seems no reason to reject the accepted version. The name survives in Beverley Brook, a tautologous compound, the meaning of OE *riðig* ‘small stream’ having been forgotten. (See A10)

B14 *Of Beferiðe andlang Stræte into Fugel riþie*: MG From Beffa’s [sic] Stream along the Street to Fugel Hythe; KB From beaver stream along the Street to bird stream. OE *stræt* usually signifies some kind of paved roadway, possibly of Roman origin. Green offers no explanation of the OE *fugel* ‘bird’, and abandons the clear ‘stream’ in the text in favour of OE *hyð* ‘landing place’, an element which occurs locally in the names Putney and Chelsea.

B15 *Into þære Tæmese oþ midne stream*: MG Into the Thames there, up to the middle of the stream; KB Into the Thames as far as midstream. Yet again, the definite article has been mistake for another word. The Anglo-Saxons assigned feminine gender to the river, *þære* being the dative case.

B16 *Andlang streames eft into Heah Yfre*: MG Along the stream east to High Effra; KB Along the stream again to High Effra. *Eft* as usual has been misread as *east*. Note that in OE *andlang* ‘along’, takes the genitive case, a usage surviving in some modern dialects as ‘along of…’.

C. The Lambeth Charter of 1062

Before listing the boundary points, it should be noted that Mr. Green has chosen to follow an anti-clockwise perambulation, with the result that there are some very forced identifications of otherwise unambiguous features. Like the two boundary clauses already discussed, the great majority of Anglo-Saxon charter bounds go ‘with the sun’, i.e. clockwise. The following list adopts this practice, *contra* Green.

Þis synd þæt langemære into Lambehyð: These are the boundaries to Lambeth.

C1 *Ærest æt Brixges Stane*: MG That is from Brixge’s Stone; KB First at Beorhtsige’s Stone. This is clearly the modern name Brixton, which originally related to a Hundred, one of the large subdivisions with the county of Surrey from the tenth century to the nineteenth. Hundred moots often met at landmarks such as barrows or stones, possibly a prehistoric survival, or in this case even a Roman milestone, since Brixton Hill follows the Roman road between London and the south coast near

Brighton, which gave its name to Streatham. The precise location of the stone is not known, but clearly lay near the summit of Brixton Hill where Lambeth and Clapham parishes meet.

C2 *Swa forð þurh thane graf*: MG And thus forth by the Thane's [sic] grave; KB So forth through the grove. Yet again, the definite article has been confused with a proper name, and OE *grāfa* 'grove, copse' with *græf* 'digging, grave'. *Þone* is the accusative case, related to the masc. noun *grāfa*, whereas *græf* is neuter. This small patch of woodland would have lain in the vicinity of modern New Park Road.

C3 *To þam Mærdice*: MG To the boundary dyke or watercourse; KB to the boundary ditch.
This feature, at least partly man-made, forms the boundary between Lambeth and Clapham along modern Lyham, Avenue, Bedford and Clapham Roads, and may be indicative of the division of a formerly larger estate, such as the thirty hides ascribed to Clapham in the late-ninth century.[14]

C4 *Swa to Bulce treo*: MG And thus to Bulce's Tree; KB So to Bulce's Tree. Isolated trees were often used as boundary marks, and some took their name from an adjacent landholder. The OE name Bulca is on record in a Wiltshire charter of 778, where the feature is a pit.[15]

C5 *To Hyse*: MG to [the] Hese; KB to Hese. OE *hēse/hæse* means brushwood or land overgrown with brushwood. This was apparently an extensive area in the vicinity of Nine Elms, extending into both Battersea and Lambeth. The name survived well into the medieval period, apparently with a settlement of some kind (cf. Hayes in Middlesex and Kent).[16]

C6 *To Ælsyges hæcce*: MG Aelsyge's 'corner'; KB Ælfsige's gate or fence. OE *hæc[c]* 'hatch, gate' and *hæcce* 'fence' are easily confused, but whichever is intended here, Ælfsige was probably a neighbouring landowner, somewhere in the vicinity of today's Kennington Oval.

C7 *Eft to thare strate*: MG East to the street there; KB afterwards to the Street. Yet another example of confusion over the definite article, *þære* being fem. dative and related to street. This spot is by Kennington Park, where the boundary joins the Roman road.

C8 *Endlang street eft to Brixes stan*: MG And so along the eastern street to Brixestane; KB afterwards along the street to Beorhtsige's Stone. Like the boundary ditch on the western side of the estate, the Roman road is followed for more than two miles, back to the starting point of the perambulation.

Conclusion

Although in general terms Mr. Green's interpretation of these three Anglo-Saxon charter boundary clauses which cover the boundaries of Clapham is in accordance with those of earlier researchers, his consistent failure to appreciate the significance of inflected definite articles and the confusion of 'after' with 'east' mars the end result.

Most of the Old English vocabulary used is straightforward, and there is no need to invent non-existent persons to account for what are commonplace landscape features. Only the mysterious forms of words used at the Beaver Stream in one of the boundaries of Battersea give cause for puzzlement.

The interpretation of the routes taken by the boundaries, is however, much more open to debate, and it is hoped to return to the question of what precisely the "Battersea" estate encompassed in a later paper.

References

Note, unless otherwise indicated, all references in the text to Old English words used in these charters are from A.H. Smith *The English Place-Name Elements* 2 vols. (1956).

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16. Gover et al., p.14, 22.