

## **Blacklow Hundred, Gloucestershire: a proposal for a lost assembly site**

**by Janet Hudson**

The area known to historians as Blacklow Hundred is recorded in Domesday Book as containing 45 hides in the modern Gloucestershire parishes of Frampton on Severn, Fretherne and Saul, Whitminster, Eastington, Stonehouse, Frocester, Leonard Stanley, King's Stanley, and part of Woodchester. By 1220, it had merged with Whitstone, a royal hundred until 1617.<sup>1</sup> In the Anglo-Saxon period, a hundred was a subdivision of a shire for purposes of royal control, taxation, and local law and order. Each hundred had an open-air assembly site, where royal dues were collected, and judgements were made on disputes and crimes.<sup>2</sup> These sites often occupy a high position overlooking the hundred territory, and identifiable from it, but more towards the edge of it than the centre. They tend to be linked to important routes, and to be easily accessible. They are also often associated with older archaeological features or notable natural ones, and may contain a natural amphitheatre or sheltered area for assembly. Blacklow's assembly site is unknown, but studies of the landscape and field names of Stonehouse in the 1990s suggested that the Verney valley on Doverow Hill may have been the site. Then in January 2010, University College London launched the 'Landscapes of Governance' project to study hundred assembly sites in England. Volunteers are encouraged to submit ideas to the project, which involves looking at any historical evidence, and recording the physical and acoustic properties of the site.<sup>3</sup>

Doverow Hill, locally called Doverow, lies near the southern parish boundary (River Frome) of Stonehouse, a parish at the north-eastern corner of the hundred. It is a slipped block from the Cotswold scarp, composed of sand and lias clay, with springs at the sand/clay junction. It formerly had a cap of inferior oolite limestone. The proposed site is the Verney valley, north-west facing on the west side of Doverow, mainly pasture land with scrub and hedgerow oaks, and with a spring. There is a shallow bowl at the head of the valley, with 100m overall radius. The hill summit above has all-round visibility.



View NW from Doverow down the Verney valley, with the river Severn in the distance

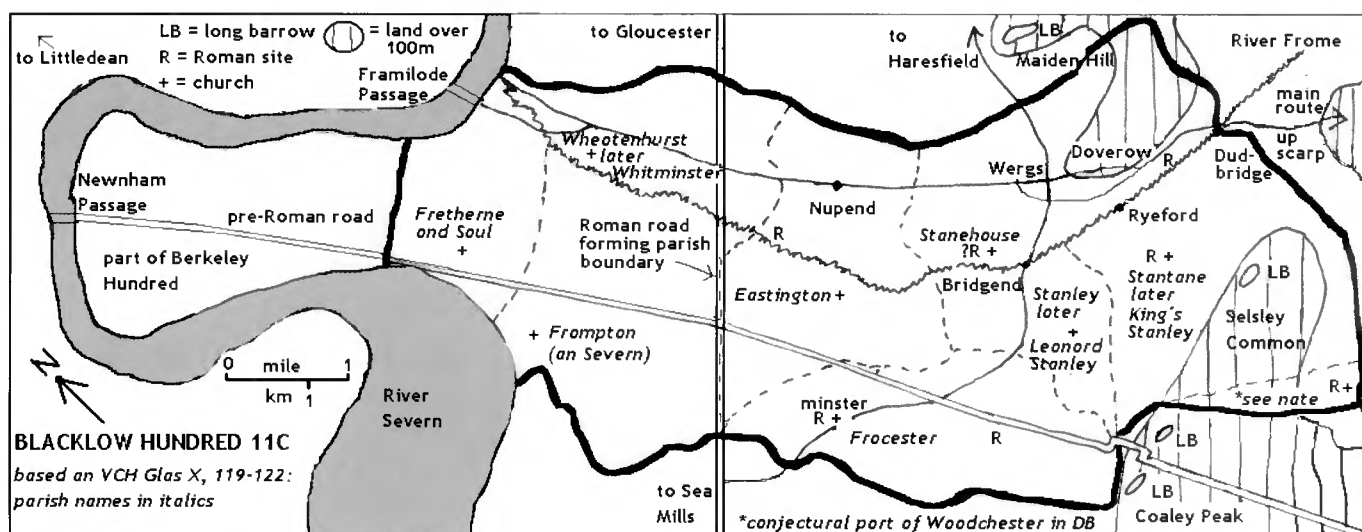
## Doverow in the landscape

As there are no specific documentary references to Blacklow Hundred later than Domesday Book, and little original record survives for Stonehouse before the 15<sup>th</sup> century, evidence about Doverow mainly has to be inferred from landscape interpretation. Domesday studies suggest that Blacklow may have been part of an earlier group of the three hundreds of Whitstone, Blacklow and Berkeley, centred on Berkeley.<sup>4</sup> The meeting place of Whitstone Hundred was perhaps at the junction of the Roman road (A38) with Little Haresfield road, but Berkeley island is a natural feature, like Doverow.<sup>5</sup> Archaeological features forming an arc round and to the east of Doverow include a hillfort on Haresfield Beacon, and long barrows on Maiden Hill, Selsley Common, and Coaley Peak. The river Severn is visible to the west, with Littledean Roman (or earlier) water temple across the river, above the Great Horseshoe Bend, where the Bore wave becomes increasingly dramatic. The Roman road from Sea Mills to Gloucester (A38) crosses the hundred south-north, intersecting a pre-Roman road east-west down the Cotswold scarp through Frocster to the Newnham Passage across the Severn.

High ground is concentrated at the east end of the hundred. Doverow, at 143m O.D., is the only point above 50m apart from the steep Cotswold scarp. Selsley long barrow has been proposed as being the 'Black Mound', with an assembly site linked to the important Roman villa at Woodchester, which may have had estates spreading down into the Frome valley. However, there is no evidence that the Selsley barrow ever bore such a name, and it would have been very exposed, and much less accessible to the rest of the hundred than Doverow.<sup>6</sup> Barrow Hill at Overton near Fretherne, 62m, is in Berkeley Hundred. The summit of Doverow is exposed, and steep-sided on the south and east, but there is a more sheltered valley and a gentler slope on the west side, with a spring, called Verney/Ferny, 'overgrown with ferns'.<sup>7</sup> This has a potential assembly space at its head, with a good soundshed within the valley. There are other possible sites in Eastington, but Barrow Hill near Alkerton may be just a low hill, and Whitstone Barrow (16C) is probably the 'wet' [part of a field called] Stanborough.<sup>8</sup>

Almost the whole of Blacklow Hundred can be overlooked from the top of Doverow. The proposed assembly valley has a more restricted view to the north, south and east, but is more open towards the west, whereas any sheltered place behind Selsley long barrow would have had no such view. The Severn Vale can be seen from south of Berkeley to May Hill and the Malverns. Blacklow Hundred is the part fully in view, defined by the lower Frome valley, which widens out at Doverow. The bend of the Severn can be seen, and there may be pre-Roman connections between Doverow and the Littledean temple. Recent archaeology on the south-east slope of Doverow suggests that tracks over the hill may have origins in the first century AD or earlier.<sup>9</sup>

## Sketch map of Blacklow Hundred at the time of Domesday Book



## Wergs crossroads

Two important early routes intersect at a crossroads at the lower end of the Verney valley. The north-west/south-east road from the Framilode Passage across the Severn (in use from 7<sup>th</sup> century or earlier) was a main route via Dudbridge up the Cotswold scarp to Minchinhampton, Cirencester and London.<sup>10</sup> The south-west/north-east road from the Severn Vale via Frocester led to Haresfield and Gloucester. Two fields adjoining this crossroads are called 'le Wergs' in 1542, and later Great and Little Wergs/Weargs/Worgs.<sup>11</sup> Little Wergs is now included within the Verney valley, while Great Wergs lay to the west of the Haresfield road. The Anglo-Saxon word 'werg' means a felon, criminal or outlaw, and also something malign or accursed. 'Wearg-rod' and 'wearg-treow' could mean a gibbet or gallows. This is possibly the site of a gallows or judgement area, although there is no known archaeology. Such areas could be associated with assembly sites, or could be separated from them, but the lack of other potential sites is perhaps why Doverow could have been a place for both meeting and judgement. The easiest route up to the summit of Doverow from the hundred territory was by the road up from Framilode along a gravel ridge through Wheatenhurst (renamed Whitminster in the 16<sup>th</sup> century) and Nupend to Wergs, joined by side roads from the Frome river crossings. The part of this road which then continued along the south side of the Verney valley over the top of Doverow was carried on a natural ridge called Throat or Throughter Piece, which suggests an early way through.<sup>12</sup> This road may have given rise to a conjecture about fortifications on the hill.<sup>13</sup>

## Doverow as Blacklow?

In the absence of direct evidence for the name 'Blacklow' on Doverow, the name itself has to be examined for clues. Blacklow Hundred is recorded six times, and with six possible variant spellings (none of which is 'Blacklow') in Domesday Book.<sup>14</sup> The second element is 'hlaw', a hill or burial mound, and hundred names containing this element have been presumed to include the name of the person buried. The Domesday spellings have been interpreted as meaning 'Bla[ec]ca's mound', but either any evidence that Doverow carried a barrow or burial mound has been lost, or any mound was destroyed without record.<sup>15</sup> The word 'blaec', however, could in an early form mean 'pale, bleached or bleak', or more commonly 'dark, black or obscured'.<sup>16</sup> An alternative meaning for 'Blacklow' might be a mound resembling a barrow and named after natural features, as seems to be the case at Blacklow Hill in Warwickshire.<sup>17</sup> Blaec-hlaw might mean the dark (black) wooded hill, or the pale (bleached) or bleak (tracless) hill [like a] burial mound.<sup>18</sup> Doverow was later noted for the 'lord's wood' on its top, said by Atkyns in 1712 to be 'seen at a great distance', but Domesday Book, so particular about detailing valuable resources, lists no woodland in Stonehouse. King's Stanley, for example, is said to have woodland 'one league long and a half broad', a reasonable description of the present woods on the scarp slope in that parish.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Doverow's cap of limestone could have provided an exposed pale topping. It has been removed by a top quarry, thought to be in operation by 1601 for the rebuilding of the manor house, and still being worked in 1746.<sup>20</sup> It may have been used in the Roman period to build an older 'Stanhus', remarkable enough to give its name to the manor, or even for the stone-built corn dryer recently excavated on the south-east slope of Doverow.<sup>21</sup> A recently worked quarry might have shown pale stone, free of much tree cover, when early hundreds were becoming established. Five of the six occurrences of the name in Domesday potentially show a medial 'h', which could develop with both meanings of 'blaec' when joined to another word. However, given the lack of later references, the etymology of the modern rendering as 'Blacklow' could be open to debate. If this is an early name, it is possible that these spellings could derive from an early 'bleach/bleak' meaning of the first element.

The hill may therefore have been a natural feature, but regarded, by virtue of its form, and its association with surrounding ancient monuments, as a symbolic ancestral mound and appropriate assembly site. William de Ow had acquired Stonehouse manor by 1086, with a manor house 1.5km to the south-west, possibly on a Roman site. However, the previous holder was Tovi, who had widespread estates before 1066. Tovi had also held land in King's Stanley, and retained a small estate there in 1086. King's Stanley,

1.5km to the south of Doverow, was believed in about 1700-10 to have been the home of Mercian Kings.<sup>22</sup> 'Stantone' was only renamed as King's Stanley in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but it does lie directly across the river from Doverow via Ryeford. It may have been a royal vill with dues paid in grain at the hundred court, and brought over the river at the ford.<sup>23</sup> This suggests a link to the hill, which predates the formation of parishes, and may be reflected in Tovi's estates. Blacklow Hundred was also probably the territory of Frocester minster, which served it spiritually before parishes were laid out, Stonehouse church being a 12<sup>th</sup> century foundation. The minster church is on the road south-west from the Wergs crossroads, perhaps implying a sharing of power over the territory between the ecclesiastical and royal authorities.<sup>24</sup> The derivation of the modern name 'Doverow' is uncertain, but it may be a revival of a pre-existing local name, or may be connected to William Devereux, a 13<sup>th</sup> century cousin of the Giffards of Stonehouse and a claimant to King's Stanley manor.<sup>25</sup> These could all be small pointers to an early connection between Doverow and King's Stanley, interrupted by the imposition of parishes, which attached the hill to Stonehouse. That manor had a Court Leet, one of several in the hundred including King's Stanley, but perhaps earlier than most, which again may reflect residual royal importance. A lower through route to Framilode round the base of Doverow, avoiding the climb over the hill, provided the High Street of Stonehouse village, probably gathered together from scattered hamlets by the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The speculation, therefore, is that Doverow could have been named 'Blacklow' for its resemblance to a large burial mound, either with a pale stone cairn on top, or carrying a wood, which was an early landmark. As such, it may have served for a time as a focal point for the inhabitants of the territory within its overview, and a symbol of royal authority. It is important in both the physical and historical landscapes of the lower Frome valley, and has many of the attributes of known hundred assembly sites.

This proposal will be presented as part of a volunteer exhibit at a conference on 'Power and Place' at UCL Institute of Archaeology in November 2011. It will also be included in the Landscapes of Governance project database, which will be made public in 2013, as a resource for further study and debate.

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Herbert, N (ed) *Victoria History of the County of Gloucester* (hereafter *VCH Glos*), vol 10 (1972), p119; Thorn, F.R. 'Hundreds and Wapentakes', in *The Gloucestershire Domesday*, (London, 1989), p42. A hide in Domesday is about 120 acres, glossary at [www.domesdaybook.co.uk](http://www.domesdaybook.co.uk).
- <sup>2</sup> Heighway, C *Anglo-Saxon Gloucestershire* (Gloucester, 1987), pp59-60.
- <sup>3</sup> Information on the 'Landscapes of Governance' project and on the characteristics of hundred assembly sites will be found at: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/assembly>.
- <sup>4</sup> Thorn, 'Hundreds', in *Glos Domesday*, p47.
- <sup>5</sup> *VCH Glos*, vol 10, pp119-22.
- <sup>6</sup> Cox C 'The Mystery of the Black Mound', *Gloucestershire History* (1988), pp12-13.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Place-names of Gloucestershire*, part 2, English Place-Name Society (hereafter EPNS) vol 39 (Cambridge, 1964), p204.
- <sup>8</sup> *Place-names Glos 2*, p195; *English Place-name Elements*, EPNS vol 25 (Cambridge, 1956), part 1, p20.
- <sup>9</sup> Press release by Cotswold Archaeology at [http://www.cotswoldarch.org.uk/press\\_release.htm](http://www.cotswoldarch.org.uk/press_release.htm), accessed on 9 March 2011.
- <sup>10</sup> *VCH Glos*, vol 10, p157.
- <sup>11</sup> 1542 Stonehouse manor court roll, Gloucester Archives (hereafter GA) D340a/M23; 1608 'wirggs', GA D445/M7; 1629 'worgges', GA D445/M3; 1709 'wergs' in Keene and Apperley estates, GA P316/IN3/1; 1763-1847 'weargs', 'wergs', 'worgs' in Skipp estate, GA D5869/4 and D678/1 T2/4/241-253; Little Weargs had been 'thrown into the Ferney' before 1803, GA D678/1 T2/4/284-295.
- <sup>12</sup> *English Place-name Elements*, part 2, p217. Throat Piece, now largely lost to the former Stonehouse brickworks quarry, had been 'thrown into the Ferney' before 1803, GA D678/1 T2/4/284-295.
- <sup>13</sup> Witts, G *Archaeological Handbook of the County of Gloucester* (Cheltenham, 1883), no 85 Randwick Camp, envisages an outpost on Doverow, 'where the natural slope of the hill has been scarped in two parallel lines.'
- <sup>14</sup> Blacelawes/Blachelawes (doubtful 'h'), Blachelew, Blacelew, Blacheleu (twice), Blachelaue: *Glos Domesday*, ff165v, 166v, 168, 168v, 169, 170. 'Blacklow' is the rendering given by EPNS in 1964: *Place-names Glos 2*, p195.

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<sup>15</sup> Anderson, O.S. *The English Hundred-Names: the South-Western Counties* (Lund, 1939), p14: available in electronic form at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/assembly>.

<sup>16</sup> EPNS allows the alternative meanings ‘black mound’ or ‘Blaca’s mound’: *Place-names Glos* 2, p195. Other examples by the Institute for Place Name Studies may be found by searching their Key to Place-names under the elements ‘blaec’ and ‘blac’, at <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~aezins/kepnp.php> . Meanings can also be explored through the Germanic Lexicon Project at <http://lexicon.ff.cuni.cz> , which includes the Bosworth/Toller and Hall Anglo-Saxon Dictionaries, and Bright’s Anglo-Saxon Reader.

<sup>17</sup> *The Place-names of Warwickshire*, EPNS vol 13 (Cambridge, 1970), p191: understood as blaec-hlaw, ‘black hill or barrow’.

<sup>18</sup> *English Place-name Elements*, part 1, p37: the different meanings are often hard to distinguish.

<sup>19</sup> Atkyns, Sir Robert *Ancient History of Gloucestershire*, 1712 (Wakefield, reprinted 1974), p694; *Glos Domesday*, ff166v, 169 and translations: a league in Domesday is about one and a half miles, glossary at [www.domesdaybook.co.uk](http://www.domesdaybook.co.uk) .

<sup>20</sup> *VCH Glos*, vol 10, p283.

<sup>21</sup> Press release by Cotswold Archaeology, see endnote 9.

<sup>22</sup> *VCH Glos*, vol 10, p242 refers to Bodleian MS Rawl.B323, f208; Atkyns, *Ancient History*, p680.

<sup>23</sup> *VCH Glos*, vol 10, p242; Heighway, *Anglo-Saxon Glos*, p59; Ryeford is ‘the ford over which the rye harvest was carried’, *Place-names Glos* 2, pp202-4.

<sup>24</sup> Heighway, *Anglo-Saxon Glos*, p100.

<sup>25</sup> *VCH Glos*, vol 10, p245; Burke’s *Landed Gentry* (London, 1952), p975.