



A Norman in Wantage

by Lis Garnish

The first part of the road to Newbury, the B4494, is known as Chainhill Road. It climbs steeply out of the town and over Chain Hill, runs south for a mile or so and then ascends the final rise to the crest of the Downs. For many years I assumed that it took its name from the iron foundry at the foot of the hill. I imagined that at some time the foundry, established about 1826, had made chains. Then, in some deeds of a private house in Wantage, I found a reference to *"Two acres and three yards of arable land ... on the Topp of Chayne Hill"* (1). The document was dated 1694. At that time there was no foundry and Chain Hill was open farm land, so where had the name come from? Various suggestions were made by friends to account for the name - that carters used chains on the cart wheels to get up the steep track, or that the steepest part of the hill was a chain in length (twenty-two yards). None of the explanations seemed very satisfactory.

Then, a few years ago, a holiday in Guernsey provided a possible explanation. A mile or so along the road from our hotel was a 'Chêne Hill' and at the top stood 'The Chêne Hotel' with a picture of an oak tree on the inn-sign in the yard. Local enquiries revealed that the name is pronounced 'chain' in the local patois, rather than 'shain' as in modern French. So could our local name be a survival of the Norman-French name for the hill?

When the Governors of the Town Lands of Wantage had a map made of their lands at Grove in 1753 the surveyor noted only 2 oak trees, while there were 608 elm trees (2). In fact, oak trees have probably been scarce in the Wantage area since the time of Domesday (3). If there were oak trees growing on Chain Hill, or even a particularly large one by the road, it might have been unusual enough for Norman French administrators to use the word to distinguish the area.

After the Battle of Hastings Wantage became a possession of William of Normandy, and although he continued to use the Anglo-Saxon administrators of his predecessor they were gradually replaced by Frenchmen. French continued to be the language of the Court and was the language of Richard I, who gave his Manor of Wantage to the Earl of Albemarle about 1197. It is likely that French continued to be the language of administration for some time after this.

There used to be other field names in Wantage Parish which were of French origin. Further south from Chain Hill, where the Newbury Road climbs to the top of the Downs, were Mountain Acres and Mountain Piece (4, 5, 6, 7, 8). The names also come from French and simply mean 'hilly', not the more extreme heights suggested by the modern use of the word.

Most local place names in Wantage are based on Anglo-Saxon words, as in the rest of Berkshire. Margaret Gelling identifies only ten Berkshire place-names which come from French (9). Is it perhaps possible that there are more minor French place names which haven't yet been recognised? Local studies can focus on an area in more detail than can a county-wide survey, and it may be possible for local historians to identify more non-Anglo-Saxon place and field names. Wantage is an area which has not yet been studied in great detail, but which has potential for future research.

REFERENCES

1. Deeds of 'Allin's Croft', Wantage, (in private hands).
2. 'Map of the Lands at Grove of the Governors of the Town Lands of Wantage, 1753' Berkshire Record Office, D/Q W.
- 3.' N Stebbing, The Vale of White Horse - Land and People, Oxfordshire County Council Department of Museum Services, Oxford (1978), p19
4. 'Instruments for a new lease of the Manor of Wantage, 1598', Archives of the Dean and Canons of Windsor, XV.31.118
5. 'Sale ... to William Masemore ... of arrable land, 1658', Archives of the Dean and Canons of Windsor, XV.40.3
6. 'Lease to . William Masemore ... of Mountaine piece, 1662', Archives of the Dean and Canons of Windsor, XV.40.2
7. 'Lease to Petley Garnam ... of Mountagnes acres, 1666', Archives, of the Dean and Canons of Windsor, XV.31.123
8. 'Map of the Lands of the Governors of the Town Lands of Wantage,1753', Berkshire Record Office, D/Q W
9. M Gelling, The Place-Names of Berkshire - Part 3, English Place-Name Society (1976), p945

This article was reproduced from "The Blowing Stone" Spring 1989 (revised October 2000).

The Vale and Downland Museum is a registered charity (No. 270466) which aims to preserve and provide information and objects relating to the Vale and Downland area, Wantage, Oxfordshire.

The Museum encourages access to historical records for non-profit making purposes. This article may be used for such purposes, however the information must not be edited or reproduced for commercial purposes without prior written permission.

Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL
Telephone: 01235 771447 e-mail: museum@wantage.com