

The Managers of the Manor, Welton le Wold, 1086-1218

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In the Domesday Survey of 1086 the manor of Welton or Welletune was held by Count Alan of Brittany [LDLS 12.37, p.64 – *for references see below*]. Landric was 'the Count's man'. In other words, he was the trusted agent of middle social rank responsible for the control and management of this manor. Landric also held estates in Lincolnshire from Alan his overlord in Killingholme [ibid 12.7, p.62] and Holbeach [ibid 12.84, p.71]. This collection gave him an opportunity to farm on the Wolds, out on the Marsh and deep in the Fens, granting him the full variety of land types available in this county. As lord of Hornby, Landric also held lands from Count Alan in Yorkshire, who had been granted the Honour of Richmond by William the Conqueror [EYC, p.272]. Landric had three sons. Alan was the eldest, probably named after the family's overlord, followed by Ralph, with Wigan as the youngest [EYC, p.285].

The Lindsey Survey, dated 1115-18, recorded that the Duke of Brittany held the manor in Welton le Wold. This was an error, for in reality at this time Stephen of Brittany, Alan's youngest brother and Count of Tréguier, was in possession of it [LDLS, 18.1, p.258]. The entry then finishes, "*and in Welletune 1 carucate, which Alan son of Landri held.*" This is a curious addition, because normally the Lindsey Survey was only interested in the tenants-in-chief, not the sub-tenants. It is perhaps significant that the reference to 'Alan son of Landri' is given in the past tense, i.e. 'held', in contrast to similar entries in the Survey which used the present tense. This might indicate that Alan had died just before the Lindsey Survey was carried out but that his brother, Ralph, was yet to be authorised as his successor. The compiler felt that this transition was worthy of recording.

At Michaelmas in 1130, a list of the principal Yorkshire tenants of Count Stephen was made. Wigan son of Landric was one of the thirteen listed [EYC, Table I, p.10]. An undated return of those owing service of castle-guard at Richmond Castle lists Wigan as being obliged to supply 5 knights for the months of April and May [EYC, Table II, p.11-12]. This list appears to have been a composite one of various unspecified dates covering the second quarter of the 12th Century [EYC, p.2].

Later, Conan son of Ellis (Elias) owed 2½ knights fees for lands in Yorkshire [EYC, Table III, p.13] and another 2½ knights fees for lands in Lincolnshire. He was expected to provide 5 knights to Richmond Castle during April and May just like Wigan had done [EYC, Table IV, p.16]. Although there is no surviving direct proof, it seems most likely that Wigan was Conan's grandfather and thus the father of Ellis. Unfortunately, little is known about Ellis, other than that he died sometime before Michaelmas 1165. His son, probably named after the family's lord, Conan Earl of Richmond [1146-71], had been born c.1153. Young Conan's mother had a brother, Alan, who was constable of Richmond Castle. This uncle held the boy's lands in custody until he was old enough to become a knight. This milestone in a youth's life seems to have marked the point when he could control land. Conan reached this threshold in his life shortly before Michaelmas 1174 [EYC, p.273]. By this time, the Honour of Richmond was being held by King Henry II as guardian of Constance, Duchess of Brittany and Countess of Richmond, the young daughter of the late Earl Conan [above].

The obligations for lands in Lincolnshire held by Conan son of Ellis consisted of one knight's fee for Holbeach and Whaplode, another one for Killingholme and a ½ fee for Welton le Wold [EYC, p.272]. In 1181, Henry II had issued the Assize of Arms, which ordained that every holder of a knight's fee must possess a coat of chain-mail with a helmet, lance and shield. As the years went on, military equipment became more elaborate with the introduction of a padded waistcoat to wear under the mail, iron gauntlets and

some basic protection for the horse. This added to the rising costs of military services [Stenton, p.90]. Bearing in mind that Conan was obliged to provide five knights' fees, his income and wealth must have been quite substantial, especially as some time before 1212 his family had received an extra ½ carucate in Welton le Wold, giving him control over 1½ carucates there [EYC, p.272, footnote 5]. He settled to the peaceful life of an English knight with land-holding responsibilities, moving between Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. Then, the royal maelstrom caused by the untimely death of Richard I in 1199 brought far reaching repercussions.

Constance had finally come into her Richmondshire inheritance when she married Geoffrey, son of Henry II in 1181. Conan then had her as his new feudal overlord. Although Geoffrey had been killed in a tournament in 1186, Constance still believed that she was entitled to claim the former lands of her late husband of Anjou, Maine and Poitou, for their son, Arthur, as well as bequeathing him Brittany. King Philip II of France, was willing to recognise these proposals in exchange for Arthur swearing an oath of fealty, making him a direct vassal of France. However, Constance's former brother-in-law and Arthur's uncle, King John would have none of this.

These claims led to aggression and later to military conflict. After the death of Constance in 1201, John took over the lands of the Honour of Richmondshire and collected the revenues. Arthur fled to France, but was captured in August 1202 at the siege of Mirebeau and imprisoned by King John and later disappeared, presumed murdered in 1203 at the hands of the king [Hill, p.315].

John later decided to divide the Honour and in 1205 granted the Yorkshire estates to Ranulph de Blundeville, Earl of Chester, second husband of the late Constance and thus stepfather to Arthur [EYC, p.319]. In contrast, the Lincolnshire major tenants, including Conan, remained answerable directly to the king for nearly 12 years.

Conan must have been deeply troubled by this turn of events and very wary of his new lord. Nevertheless, he accepted promotion from King John and as Conan 'de Holebech' he was recorded as being active as a knight on the grand assizes in Lincolnshire between 1203 and 1212 [EYC, p.274]. The last date may be significant, for this was the year when John allocated the lands of Lincolnshire to William Mandeville, the youngest son of the Earl of Essex [EYC, p.277]. Conan was then either relieved of his duties or he took this first opportunity to resign. His opinions of the king appear to have been deteriorating.

Conan now had two new feudal overlords, one in Yorkshire, the other in Lincolnshire. Ranulph de Blundeville was the kind of man who would be loyal only as long as the rewards were high; Constance had been well pleased when their arranged marriage had been annulled after ten turbulent years. William Mandeville's feelings are more of a shadow, but his brother, Geoffrey, who became the Earl of Essex in 1213, was a strong opponent of John. He was one of the Council of Twenty-five Barons, who were appointed from the rebels to oversee John's commitment to the details of the Magna Carta and one of the nine senior rebel barons who were excommunicated in September 1215 as a consequence of their armed opposition to their seigneurial lord. King John may well have been trying to buy William's support. It appears to have worked, because when Geoffrey was killed in a tournament in February 1216, William, as the new Earl of Essex, remained loyal to the Crown.

The next documentary references to Conan son of Ellis are curious ones. On 7 March and again on 18 April 1216, Conan was granted letters of safe conduct [EYC, p.275, footnote 1]. A person only needed a letter of protection if they were moving into a place where they had no status or had been outlawed and thus were at risk of attack. The same day as the

second letter, Conan and William de Holebech paid fines of 60 and 30 marks respectively to regain the king's goodwill – earlier they had been deprived of their lands so they must have done something seriously wrong. Now they could only recover them with new oaths of faithful service, plus the payment of these fines and the giving of William's son, also called William, as a hostage. No one surrendered their son to King John without a great deal of fear, as John had a terrible reputation of dealing cruelly with hostages. So what had these men done and when?

Looking back, Conan had been able to mount a legal challenge on behalf of his wife in November 1213, so he must have still had his knightly status then. William and Conan must have been disseised i.e. deprived of their lands, in either 1214 or 1215. There is no indication in the contemporary Lincolnshire sources as to what happened. However, the answer may lie in North Yorkshire.

When the First Barons War broke out in the autumn of 1215, after the failure of the Magna Carta settlement, one of the castles to be garrisoned against King John was Richmond. The Constable there was Roald son of Alan. He and his soldiers managed to hold out for four months but were then forced to make peace. On 9 January 1216, orders were made to “*set free all the men of Roald son of Alan and of his knights, and others imprisoned in the castle*” [EYC, p.93]. As a knight of Richmondshire, Conan had been obliged to provide annual garrison duty at Richmond Castle during the months of April and May [EYC, p.16]. Furthermore, he was considered valuable enough as a soldier that he had his own station, on the east side, outside the wall of the barbican defending the main gateway next to the keep [Page, pp160-2]. His unprotected troops would have taken the full brunt of any direct attack on the entrance.

This major responsibility, coupled with the fact that Roald was his close cousin, makes it most certain that Conan would have been involved in this stand against John and consequently one of the knights incarcerated after the surrender. This is most likely why he had his lands taken away from him. Clearly, they were not returned to him immediately. It took him some months more after his release to regain the royal trust before the sheriff of Lincoln, who had been controlling these confiscated manors [including Welton] directly, was instructed to hand them back.

Conan died without legitimate issue, but did have an illegitimate son and daughter, both of whom he appeared to 'recognise' and provide for. In 1194 he purchased the advowson of Holbeach to install his son, William, as rector [EYC, p.274]. His daughter later married William de Holbeach, the young man who had been handed over as a hostage for his father's good behaviour in 1216. He must have been fortunate and survived King John's treatment.

With the death of Conan in early 1218, the occupation of Welton manor by the direct descendants of Landric through a period of over 160 years came to an end. It had finished with a massive fight against the late King. However, Conan had not been alone among the knights of Lincolnshire in his resistance. Holbeach appears to have been a centre for discontent. William of Holbeach had been punished for his defiance along with Conan and another major rebel had been the local baron, Sir Thomas de Moulton. He had been the sheriff of Lincolnshire between 1205 and 1208 and had previously fought in various campaigns on behalf of King John. However, his name appears as another of the rebel leaders who were excommunicated for opposing John with the Magna Carta. Captured at the siege of Rochester, he had also lost his lands and did not regain them until 1217 after he had made peace with Henry III.

These Holbeach dissidents not only knew each other but had strong mutual ties. Conan's

daughter married young William de Holbeach [the former hostage] and his widow, Avice, later married Alan de Moulton, the eldest son of Sir Thomas [EYC, p.275]. Why there should be such resistance from these like-minded people living around Holbeach is a conundrum. Welton le Wold is not the kind of place that one would expect to appear on any stage beyond that of the immediate locality. For it to become involved in national politics and then even civil war is quite remarkable.

Sources:

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