

Asgar the Staller

The following narrative project has been compiled using available historical documents, the veracity of which has not been assessed by the writer, together with logical extrapolations of the same.

Asgar the Staller appears in documents under a number of subtly differing spellings of his name. The same applies to his title. In early works he is the 'Stalre'. In later works he is the 'Constable'. However, all three versions of his title have the same meaning. Throughout this work, the name Asgar will be used. He is nonetheless variously to be found as Esgar/Esger/Ansgar/Asgarus/Ansgardus.

The title of 'Staller' shows that Asgar was a Master of the King's stable. He is also noted as being a Thegn (Minister), a Regis Dapifer (Royal Steward) and a Procurator of the Royal Hall. As will be seen, clearly Asgar was a person of some importance in late Anglo Saxon society.

Asgar was born c1025. The Waltham Chronicle names his father as Aethelstan (Staller) and his grandfather as Tovi the Proud (Staller) a lesser Danish nobleman. These were very eminent people and extremely wealthy. It was Tovi who founded Waltham Holy Cross church by an endowment and the presentation of a 'Holy Cross'. The same Chronicle further states that there was an unbroken line of succession from Tovi to Asgar regarding the inheritance of estates. As far as Sawbridgeworth is concerned, this is most interesting. Asgar is usually named as the first known 'Lord of the Manor' (of Sawbridgeworth/Sayesbury). However, if the Waltham Chronicle is correct, then Tovi, who was active at least as early as 1020 during Cnut's reign, would qualify as the earliest known, followed by his son Aethelstan. (At this point it should be noted that the title 'Lord of the Manor' did not exist as such in Anglo Saxon England. A more correct term would be the holder of the Hundred of Sawbridgeworth, which would also at that time have included Gilston).

Asgar entered the service of king Edward the Confessor c1051. During Edward's reign Asgar seems to have prospered greatly and added to the already large estates which he had inherited and owned. So much so, that by the time of the Confessor's death in January 1066, Asgar is noted as being the wealthiest Thegn in England. Domesday gives the value of the Hundred of Sawbridgeworth in 1066 as £52.65 which made it one of the richest. Near to Sawbridgeworth, Asgar also owned hundreds at Thorley, Stanstead and Wickham as well as substantial holdings in Essex, Lincolnshire and Middlesex. Indeed, Domesday shows Asgar with estates totalling over 300 Hides in 9 different Shires. Their combined value was approximately £400 in East Anglia alone, although Asgar is by now regarded as only the second wealthiest Thegn.

Asgar's loyalty to king Edward seems beyond doubt. This however cannot be said regarding Edward's successor king Harold II. Following the Confessor's death on 5th January 1066 and Harold's coronation the next day, Asgar's loyalty to the new king is muted. Although it is possible that the swift coronation of Harold was simply due to the required nobles being already present at Westminster for the feast of Epiphany; the speed and undue haste of the coronation, without a due period of mourning, indicates that Harold really usurped the crown. This indeed is the judgement of most commentators. Asgar seems privately not to have agreed with Harold's coronation, but was of course powerless to do otherwise. However, later, Asgar's actions indicate his new loyalty was in fact with Edgar the Aetheling, the Confessor's sole surviving male heir.

Possibly of interest, a near contemporary representation of Asgar may exist. The Bayeux Tapestry panel showing Harold's coronation has 7 unnamed people present. The 2 people to Harold's right are dressed as Earls and must be his brothers Gyrth and Leofwine. However, the 5 people to Harold's left are dressed as Thegns. Logically because of his seniority, one of these must be Asgar.

Asgar did not seemingly go north with Harold to fight against the invaders Harald Hardrada and Tostig at the battle of Stamford Bridge near York. Furthermore, he is definitely not present at the Battle of Hastings against William of Normandy. If Asgar was truly Harold's man, these absences would both be very striking and surprising omissions on his part. Indeed, one of Asgar's duties as 'Staller' would have been to carry the King's standard in battle. Asgar's non presence at either battle is clearly therefore indicative of his feelings towards Harold. He may have excused himself from both battles by citing his duties in London, where, according to the 'Carmen' Asgar was the Governor and 'Portreeve'. However, it must be remembered though that Edgar was also in London. One must wonder, what if Harold had won at Hastings, then who knows what may have become of Asgar's numerous holdings and estates. Even though Asgar was obviously an astute person, things may have gone very badly for him. Harold could be ruthless.

Harold II was defeated by William of Normandy on the 14th October. The next day, news of the defeat reached London and a hurried meeting of nobles ensued. The nobles led by the Archbishops Stigand and Ealdred, (Canterbury and York), and the Earls Edwin and Morcar, (Mercia and Northumbria) thus proceeded to proclaim on 15th October, Edgar Aetheling as king. Given his position it is extremely likely that Asgar would also have been present at this meeting. This was a logical decision. In theory, Edwin and Morcar could raise a substantial army with which to defeat William. It should also be remembered that William's army was in hostile lands with the weather beginning to turn. Furthermore, Orderic Vitalis in his 'History' gives the Norman casualties at Hastings as 25% (1 in 4). Without the chance of major reinforcements, William's position was precarious.

William seriously believed that following Harold's defeat, a delegation would be despatched to him post haste from London, offering submission and the English Crown. Once William realised that this was not going to happen, he knew that he would have to act quickly and decisively. He marched on London.

Although William was a fighter of renown, he was also intelligent enough to know when not to fight. On his way north, William received the submissions of Dover and Canterbury through threat alone. William could not afford another major battle at this time. However, on his arrival at Southwark, William found a small force ranged against him. Whilst this was quickly overcome, William could not force the bridge and enter London. As he was 'Portreeve', this covering force together with the closure of London Bridge gate must all have been acting upon the orders of Asgar.

Balked at London, William proceeded upstream with his army to cross the Thames at Wallingford. This is interesting, because Wallingford was one of Alfred the Great's fortified Burghs and would supposedly have been capable of surviving a substantial siege. William manages to cross the Thames here though because of his negotiating/threatening/bribery skills. In return for their submission, William promises not to punish the thegns present and to guarantee their holdings. Indeed, Archbishop Stigand who had a lot to be afraid for, was one of those who submitted at Wallingford.

Once across the Thames, there was little to stop William reaching London. The northern Earls Edwin and Morcar had proved slippery and untrustworthy. It must be borne in mind that they failed to support Edgar at the Confessor's death, and were probably pursuing their own agenda now. They made no effort to raise an army to confront William.

Asgar's position as 'Portreeve' of London meant that he was personally now at risk. However, William still did not want a major battle. Accordingly, he makes the same offer to the London nobility as he did to Wallingford. The 'Carmen' specifically names Asgar as one of those who benefitted, being allowed through this deal to keep his holdings. Thus, in November, the Earls and Edgar and most certainly Asgar, met William at Berkhamsted (probably near Tring, but equally probably Little Berkhamsted near Hertford, (historians disagree the exact location) and submitted. William being crowned on Christmas day 1066 at Westminster Abbey, again most certainly with Asgar in attendance.

Within a year of his coronation, William had consolidated his control of England and Asgar seems wisely to have kept a low profile at this time. The next test of his loyalty did not come until 1069. In this year, Edgar revolted against William in collusion with Sweyn, King of Denmark. Most of the action took place in York. However, a small force of Danes occupied Norwich. Accordingly it is reported that an Anglo Norman force, in part led by a Saxon 'Staller', was despatched to remove the Danes. Bearing in mind the year and the locality of East Anglia, this 'Staller' must have been Asgar, now fighting for William.

Unfortunately for Asgar, his land and titular holdings were too great to be ignored. William wanted land to give to his Norman followers, and eventually he cast his eye on to Asgar.

Asgar seems to have come to William's attention through the Hundreds of High Easter and Pleshey. Both quite close to Sawbridgeworth and adjoining Asgar's substantial holding of Great Waltham.

High Easter and Pleshey were held by a dowager lady called Godgifu. There is some debate as to her exact identification. Godgifu (Gift of God) was a common name at that time. She was noted as the widow of a noble (Comes).

At least one commentator opines that she was one of the widows of Tovi the Proud, Asgar's grandfather. It is known that in 1042 Tovi married a lady called Gytha. However, Tovi may also to have been previously married 'in the Danish fashion' to Godgifu. This was not uncommon. Even king Harold II was 'married' in this way. Importantly though, the Church did not recognise this type of 'Danish marriage' and Godgifu would have been regarded by the Church as a mistress, not a widow. Nothing is recorded for Tovi after 1043, and it is likely he died then or soon after. This does seem to be a somewhat early date for what occurred at High Easter/Pleshey.

Alternatively, and more likely, the 'Liber Eliensis' states that this Godgifu makes a will during Abbott Leofric's time (1020-1029) naming Ely as benefactor of both the estates in question upon her death. Furthermore, the 'Liber Eliensis' also mentions at another point, a lady Godgifu who was the wife of Earl Leofric of Mercia as a benefactor. It is therefore almost certain that these are one and the same person. This lady Godgifu is actually much more famous by her alternative Latinised spelling of lady Godiva. Earl Leofric was, after the Godwinson's, one of the most powerful nobles in the land. He dies in August/September 1057. Lady Godgifu (Godiva) dies sometime after 1066. Both these dates are consistent with what happens at High Easter/Pleshey..

Possibly Asgar wanted to increase his power base in Essex. Possibly he felt that the Hundreds of High Easter and Pleshey were his by right of descent. Possibly a combination of the two. Whatever the reason, Asgar simply and illegally seized both Hundreds for himself. Domesday shows that Asgar held both estates in 1066. This is unlikely to be completely correct. They were probably disputed at the time but with Asgar nominally holding them. Asgar's action may have been unlikely to have caused a major problem at Harold's court. William though was looking for an excuse to dispossess his remaining Saxon nobles.

Apart from Godgifu, there were other legitimate heirs to consider. Furthermore, Abbott Wulfric and the monks of Ely wanted to get involved and also claimed ownership rights, complaining that the land was seized from them illegally by Asgar. A legal agreement subsequently being drawn up allowing Asgar's occupation, but specifying that the lands reverted to Ely upon Asgar's death. It was Asgar's upsetting of Wulfric and the Ely monks and their forceful complaints to the royal court which finally drew William's attention. The Abbot and his monks initiated at least two lawsuits against Asgar. The first does not seem to have been too successful and probably dated to Harold's reign. The second however, with William in an avaricious state of mind, resulted in Asgar's removal from office.

The 'Liber Eliensis' states that Asgar and his sons (he seems to have had two) were imprisoned by William. This would have been c1075. All Asgar's lands and estates and titles were duly forfeited and transferred to Geoffrey de Mandeville, including Sawbridgeworth, High Easter and Pleshey. Even including 'Governor and Portreeve of London'. William clearly felt that Asgar had become too powerful.

Asgar finally dies whilst being held captive in Normandy c1085. Possibly at one of William's two power bases of Caen Castle or Rouen Castle. He seems to have died a natural death. Of his sons, there is no further mention. It is extremely unlikely they returned to England.

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