

THE ELMBRIDGE STORY

by E. Royston Pike

"Elmbridge" comes into history in the pages of Domesday Book. That was in 1086, just twenty years after the Battle of Hastings that placed the Duke of Normandy on the throne of the Anglo-Saxon kings. But it was in existence long before that, for it was one of the "hundreds" into which the Saxons divided their occupied territory, and that takes us back to the seventh century and perhaps the sixth.

The hundred was the basic unit of local administration adopted by the Saxons when they were able to settle down and consolidate their conquests. But the term is not capable of exact definition. The hundreds were of very varying size and shape, reflecting the rough and rude circumstances in which they originated. According to one theory a hundred consisted of a hundred hides; but as far as we do not know for sure just how much land a hide covered this does not take us very far. A second theory is that the hundred was the territory from which a hundred fighting-men might be recruited for the fyrd or militia in time of war. A third theory (and what perhaps would appear to be the most reasonable) is that it was the extent of country originally settled by a group of a hundred families and their dependants.

When Domesday Book was compiled Surrey had long been divided into 14 hundreds. They may be conveniently pictured as lying in three rows across the shire or county from west to east. The top row consisted of four hundreds fronting the Thames, of which Elmbridge (to use its later and generally accepted name) was No. 2, with Godley (in which Chertsey was the principal vill or place) on its left, and on the right Kingston hundred with Brixton still farther eastward up to and including Southwark, just across the river from the City. South of these and forming the middle row were Woking, Effingham, and Copthorne hundreds (with all of which Elmbridge had some physical connection) and Wallington. Then in the bottom row were six hundreds - Farnham, Godalming, Blackheath, Wotton, Reigate and Tandridge - which reached up to and in some places over the North Downs, where the Surrey-Sussex border meandered uncertainly in the Weald.

Elmbridge was middling in extent. From Weybridge it ran along the Thames to the north of the little river Mole, at East Molesey, and it extended southwards some seven or eight miles to Stoke d'Abernon and beyond across the Mole almost to the Bookhams, which were in Effingham hundred. On the west its border followed pretty closely the river Wey, but in the east it was highly irregular, and the northern part of Thames Ditton with Long Ditton and Claygate were in Kingston hundred. With these exceptions, the area of the present Borough of Elmbridge practically coincides with that of the ancient hundred of Elmbridge.

Running more or less down the middle of Elmbridge was the valley of the river Mole, and it seems probable that this was the area of original settlement by the Saxon invaders when at length they were able to exchange the sword for ploughshare and cattle-pen.

In the beginning, Amelebridge

In Domesday Book Elmbridge is called Amelebridge, in which Amele is the original name of the river Mole and brige is the Old English word for a bridge. In the course of time Amele became modified into Emlyn or Emley, and for hundreds of years up to at least the beginning of this century Emley Bridge was the generally employed name of the Hundred. "Elmbridge" is a further modification or corruption of the ancient name.

From this it should be clear that "Elmbridge" has nothing whatever to do with elm trees. The inclusion in the new Borough's armorial bearings of a lusty elm tree growing out of a two-arched bridge is just a piece of heraldic nonsense.

But where was Amelebridge? Was there ever a vill, a village or township, a hamlet even, bearing this name? Historical evidence there would appear to be none, but the consensus of opinion is that the name of the Hundred derives from the bridge by which the road from London to Chertsey crosses the Mole (Emlyn, Emley) on its way to the west. At the foot of Lammas Lane, then, on the lower slopes of Esher, we should be most likely to find some trace (if any trace at all exists) of the Amele bridge.

Beyond any doubt, there has been a bridge hereabouts, on and off if not continuously, for a very long time. The first Amele bridge, we may suppose, was a rough structure of tree trunks and brushwood, and doubtless the design and make of its successors improved with time. The name Albany Bridge dates from the latter part of the last century, when the Albany branch of the Royal Family had their home at Claremont House and, as lords of the manor, were responsible for the bridge's upkeep. In those days the bridge was a modest affair of stone and timber, but a few years ago the present fine structure of steel and concrete took its place, and to it the old name was transferred.

Another reason for holding that Albany Bridge occupies the site of Amelebridge is that it is almost exactly in the middle of the Hundred, which would make it very convenient for access from all parts.

But we cannot be sure. When we have weighted most carefully the possibilities and probabilities, it must be confessed that it is only in imagination that we catch a glimpse of the founding fathers of Elmbridge Hundred assembling in their moot-hall beside their bridge, or perhaps in the open air beneath some spreading oak tree, ready and eager to discuss and decide the public business of the community. If our ear of fancy is specially sensitive we may listen in to the proceedings of those first "council meetings" ever to be held in Elmbridge. But to repeat, we cannot be sure, and the "sullen Mole", as Milton calls it, keeps its secrets.

Elmbridge in eclipse

If we are right in saying that the history of Elmbridge begins in the pages of Domesday Book we may say with almost equal truth that it ends there. Even Domesday Book, while making frequent mention of Amelebridge, tells us nothing about the way in which the hundred was organized, what its business was composed of, how that business was conducted, by whom and when and where. We are left with the uncomfortable feeling that even at that early date Amelebridge was nothing much more than a name.

The silence is oppressive, and becomes ever more so as the centuries unfold. "Looking for Elmbridge" becomes a wearisome business as we turn over the pages of a history-book that are almost blank. Only very occasionally does one come across a page on which there is writing, and even then how distressingly meagre what is written turns out to be! One of the most intriguing scraps is the simple record that at the beginning of King John's reign in 1200 the hundred of Elmbridge came into possession of the "men of Kingston", but we are kept quite in the dark as to what the "men of Kingston" obtained, what they gave for it and to whom, and what they did with it when they had got it. But at least we have learnt something, and this gives us a clue to a development which seems to have become ever more marked as the centuries have passed - the development of a very special relationship between the hundreds of Elmbridge and Kingston that became hardly distinguishable from a complete merger.

So the Middle Ages spent their course, and the manorial system had to make way for the thrusting private enterprise of Tudor times. Squires supplanted feudal lords. The old manorial Courts Baron and Leet continued to exist (some few even into the present century), but they were only ghostly relics. Local government passed into other and more vigorous hands. In the counties law and order were enforced by the local magistrates, sitting on the bench in Petty and Quarter Sessions, while in the villages the rector of the parish together with his church-wardens maintained a watchful eye on the moral and material aspects of parish life.

Elmbridge, together with its fellow hundreds, had long since practically faded out of the picture as far as local government was concerned. If there was still some body of persons who called themselves a hundred-court or moot in Elmbridge, its meetings were combined with Kingston hundred.....

Meanwhile the townships which were still regarded as part of the Elmbridge complex went their own individual ways, giving small attention to what was happening to their fellows..... The only water supply was provided by wells and the village pump, and sanitary conveniences comprised shanties at the bottom of the garden or back yard, a midden in front of the house door, and an open channel running along the street. In the more select parts of Esher and Weybridge and Walton there was a sprinkling of houses of a better class, and the turnpiking of the Portsmouth Road in the middle of the 18th century brought Esher and its neighbourhood within the range of coaching services. There was also considerable development along the Thames, and Weybridge and Walton provided desirable residences for moneyed City folk.

At the time of the first census to be taken in England, in 1801, the population of Elmbridge hundred was returned as 6,630; by 1851 it had grown to 11,169, by 1871 to 17,808, and at the turn of the century, in 1901, the figure was 34,600. The principal factor in the rapid growth of population in the second half of the last century was the coming of the railway through Esher and Walton and Weybridge in 1838 and the line to Hampton Court (East Molesey) ten years later. In the present century what the railway had begun the motor-car immensely furthered, with the result that when Elmbridge became a borough in 1974 the population of its area was estimated at 116,480.

What happened in 1974

When this twentieth century opened the local government map of Elmbridge showed urban districts of Esher and the Dittons, Molesey, Walton, and Weybridge, and parish councils in Cobham and Stoke d'Abernon. In 1933 these figures were reduced by the amalgamation of Esher with Molesey, Cobham, and Stoke, and of Walton with Weybridge. After the Second World War further amalgamations were proposed, and in 1960 the two surviving urban districts narrowly escaped being joined to form one of the Greater London boroughs. Their staunch resistance won them only breathing space, however, for in 1972 the Local Government Act enforced the union of Esher with Walton and Weybridge to form one of the new boroughs in Surrey County Council's set-up.

But what should its name be? As was only to be expected, local rivalries were soon given expression, resulting in the exclusion of such names as Albany, Claremont and Walton. Ideas were running out when someone recalled that there was a rural deanery of Emly, and another commented that there was a telephone-exchange at Surbiton that was called Elmbridge. This led to a run on the reference-books, and it was discovered that they had all been living in Elmbridge without knowing it, while the fact that Elmbridge had a past of impenetrable obscurity might be seen as a positive advantage. In a mood of wearied relief the name was decided upon. And so it came about that on April 1, 1974 ELMBRIDGE made a triumphant come-back.

This monograph is based on a Lecture that E. Royston Pike delivered at King George's Hall, Esher on October 7, 1976.