

William Harrison  
The description of England  
London  
1587

THE  
First and second  
volumes of Chronicles,

...

First collected and published by Raphaell  
Holinshed, William Harrison,  
and others:

Now newlie augmented and continued  
(with manifold matters of singular  
note and worthie memorie)  
to the yeare 1586.

...

<colophon>

Finished in Ianuarie 1587, and the 29 of the Queenes  
Maiesties reigne, with the full continuation of the  
former yeares, at the expenses of Iohn Hari=son,  
George Bishop, Rafe Newberie,  
Henrie Denham, and Tho=mas Woodcocke.

AT LONDON

Printed in Aldersgate street at the signe  
of the Starre.

Cum priuilegio.

...

An Historicall description of the  
Iland of Britaine, with a briefe rehersall of the  
nature and qualities of the people of England,  
and such commodities as are to be found in the  
same. Comprehended in three bookees,  
and written by W. H.

<book 2, chapter 4>

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..... as old records doo witnesse.

Into how manie shires the said Alfred did first  
make this partition of the Iland, it is not yett found  
out; howbeit if my conjecture be anie thing at all, I  
suppose that he left not vnder eight and thirtie, sith  
we find by no good author, that aboue fifteene haue  
beene added by anie of his successors, since the time  
of his decease. This prince therefore hauing made  
the generall partition of his kingdome into shires,  
or shares, he diuided againe the same into lathes, as  
lathes into hundreds, and hundreds into tithings, or  
denaries, as diuers haue written; and maister Lam=bert  
following their authorities, hath also giuen out,  
saieng almost after this maner is his description of  
Kent; The Danes (saith he) both before, and in the time  
of king Alfred, had flocked by the sea coasts of this  
Iland in great numbers, sometimes wasting and  
spoiling with sword and fire, wheresoeuer they might

arriue, and somtime taking great booties with them to their ships, without dooing anie further hurt or damage to the countrie. This inconuenience continuing for manie yeeres togither, caused our husbandmen to abandon their tillage, and gaue occasion and hardinesse to euill disposed persons, to fall to the like pillage, as practising to follow the Danes in these their thefts and robberies. And the better to cloake their mischeefe withall, they feigned themselues to be Danish pirats, and would sometime come a land in one port, and sometime in another, driuing dailie great spoiles (as the Danes had doone) vnto their ships before them. The good king Alfred therefore (who had maruellouslie trauelled in repelling the barbarous Danes) espieng this outrage, and thinking it no lesse the part of a politike prince, to root out the noisome subiect, than to hold out the forren aduersarie: by the aduise of his nobilitie, and the example of Moses (who followed the counsell of lethro his father in law to the like effect) diuided the whole realme into certeine parts or sections, which (of the Saxon word Schyran, signifieng to cut) he termed shires, or as we yet speake, shares, or portions, of which some one hath fortie miles in length (as Essex) and almost so manie broad, Hereford foure and twentie in length, and twentie in breadth, and Warwike six and thirtie in length, etc: and some of them also conteine ten, twelve, thirteene, sixteene, twentie, or thirtie hundreds, more or lesse, as some hundreds doo sixteene, twentie, thirtie, fortie, fiftie or sixtie townes, out of which the king was alwaies to receiue an hundred able men to serue him in the warres, or a hundred men able to be pledges, and ouer each of the portions he appointed either an earle or alderman, or both, to whome he committed the gouernement of the same. These shires also he brake into lesser parts, whereof some were called lathes, of the word Gelathian, which is to assemble togither; other hundreds, for that they enioied iurisdiction ouer an hundred pledges; and other tithings, because there were in each of them to the number of ten persons, whereof euerie one from time to time was suertie for others good abearing. He prouided also that euerie man should procure himselfe to be received into some titheing, to the end, that if anie were found of so small and base a credit, that no man would become pledge or suertie for him, he should forthwith be committed to prison, least otherwise he might happen to doo more harme abroad. Hitherto master Lambert. By whose words we may gather verie much of the state of this Iland in the time of Alfred, whose institution continued after a sort vntill the comming of the Normans, who chan ged the gouernement of the realme in such wise (by bringing in of new officers and offices, after the manner of their countries) that verie little of the old regimenter remained more than the bare names of some officers (except peraduenture in Kent) so that in these daies it is hard to set downe anie great certeintie of things as they stood in Alfrede's time, more than is remembred and touched at this present.

Some as it were roming or rouing at the name

<Smith 1583>

Lath, doo saie that it is deriued of a **barne**, which is called in old English a lath, as they conjecture.

From which speech in like sort some deriue the word Laistow, as if it should be trulie written Lathstow, a place wherein to laie vp or laie on things, of whatsoeuer condition. But hereof as yet I cannot absolutelie be satisfied, although peraduenture some likelihood in their iudgements may seeme to be therein. Other vpon some further consideration affirme that they were certeine circuits in euerie countie or shire conteining an appointed number of townes, whose inhabitants alwaies assembled to know and vnderstand of matters touching their portions, in to some

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one appointed place or other within their limits, especially whilst the causes were such as required not the aid or assistance of the whole countie. Of these lathes also (as they saie) some shires had more, some lesse, as they were of greatnessse. And M. Lambert seemeth to be of the opinion, that the leets of our time (wherein these pledges be yet called Franci plegii of the word Free burgh) doo yeeld some shadow of that politike institution of Alfred. But sith my skill is so small in these cases that I dare not iudge anie thing at all as of mine owne knowledge, I will not set downe anie thing more than I read, least I should roue at random in our obscure antiquities, and reading no more of lathes my next talke shall be of hundreds.

The hundred and the wapentake is all one, **as I read in some**, and by this diuision not a name appertinent to a set number of townes (for then all hundreds should be of equall quantitie) but a limited iurisdiction, within the compasse whereof were an hundred persons called pledges (**as I said**) or ten denaries, or tithings of men, of which ech one was bound for others good abering, and laudable behauour in the common-wealthe of the realme. The chiefe man likewise of euerie denarie or titheing was in those daies called a titheing man, in Latine Decurio, but now in most places a borsholder or burghholder, as in Kent; where euerie titheing is moreouer named a burgh or burrow, although that in the West countrie he be still called a titheing man, and his circuit a titheing, as I haue heard at large. I read furthermore (and it is partie afore noted) that the said Alfred caused ech man of free condition (for the better maintenance of his peace) to be ascribed into some hundred by placing himselfe in one denarie or other, where he might alwaies haue such as should sweare or saie vpon their certeine knowledge for his honest behauior and ciuill conuersation if it should happen at anie time, that his credit should come in question. In like sort I gather out of Leland and other, that if anie small matter did fall out worthie to be discussed, the titheing man or borsholder (now officers, at the commandement of the high constable **of which euerie hundred hath one at the least**) should decide the same in their leetes, whereas the great causes were referred to the hundreds, the greater to the lathes, and the greatest of all to the shire daies, where the earles or aldermen did set themselues, and make finall ends of the same, according vnto iustice. For this purpose

likewise in euerie hundred were twelue men chosen  
of good age and wisedome, and those sworne to giue  
their sentences without respect of person, .....

<This is the passage from Harrison's 'Description of Britain' (1577) as it was revised for the second edition of Holinshed's 'Chronicles' (1587). It starts with the same title as before, but in the running head it is now called 'The description of England'. A modern edition (with modernized spelling) is W. Harrison, The description of England, ed. G. Edelen (Ithaca, 1968). Alterations and additions are printed black – unless they are derived from Sir Thomas Smith's 'De republica Anglorum' (1583), in which case they are printed green. – C.F. October 2010.>