

Kingswinford Ridge: An ancient boundary between Kingswinford and Ashwood

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The ridge-top boundary between Ashwood Hay, now in Kinver parish, Staffordshire, and Kingswinford in the West Midlands is an ancient one. Despite a few minor changes in the north during recent decades, the boundary line is remarkably similar to that documented in the late Anglo-Saxon period when Ashwood was an independent estate held by the priests of Wolverhampton monastery.

Some time during the post-Conquest period, Ashwood became an integral part of the manor and parish of Kingswinford. This arrangement persisted until 1935 when Ashwood was transferred from Kingswinford (then part of Staffordshire) into Kinver. This resulted in the Kingswinford-Kinver boundary line — which had, until then, followed the course of the Smestow Brook (latterly River) — being moved eastwards.

The new boundary was sited close to the old Anglo-Saxon dividing line between Ashwood and Kingswinford — i.e. along the ridge of high ground that is today occupied by Ridgehill Wood, Friar's Gorse and Mountpleasant Covert. Both Kingswinford and Kinver (now including Ashwood) remained in Staffordshire until 1974 when Kingswinford became part of Dudley Borough. Ashwood remained within the Staffordshire parish of Kinver. Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between Ashwood's late-Anglo-Saxon extent (named *Eswich* at that time) and more recent county and parish boundary patterns.

Domesday *Haswic*

It is not known precisely when the aforementioned association between Ashwood and Kingswinford began but, at the time of the Domesday survey, Ashwood appears to have been a discrete manor under separate ownership from Kingswinford.

The Domesday book lists a vill named *Haswic*¹ which is believed to have been roughly coincident with Ashwood Hay. The name probably derives from Old English *aesc*, meaning ash tree, and *-wic*, meaning a settlement or trading place with a specialised purpose, such as a dairy farm. There is no obvious evidence of early medieval settlement at Ashwood today, but if *Haswic* was at or near that location it may have been a very ancient settlement, possibly originating as a *vicus* linked to the Roman marching camps at Greensforge, or an even earlier settlement associated with a nearby Iron Age field system which is visible as pit alignments in crop marks.²

It is likely that the *-wic* component of the name *Haswic* eventually came to be replaced by *-wood* because, by the time of the Domesday survey, *Haswic* was recorded as *waste* (i.e. no longer productive land): it had become enclosed by 'the King's Forest' (probably Kinver Forest) and thus reserved for the King's hunt. This situation lasted until at least 1300³. It seems that, over time, all memory of the former *wic* was lost, and the only notable feature left within this land-holding was the ash wood itself.⁴

Anglo-Saxon *Eswich* and the Kingswinford Ridge Dyke

Further evidence for Ashwood Hay consisting of a discrete early land unit appears in a charter (s1380) dated AD 996 — but thought actually to date from AD 994 — which details a grant of several estates 'by the Lady Wulfrun to Hamtun monastery'⁵. *Hamtun* became known as

Wulvrenehamptonia by the late eleventh century and this, of course grew into the present-day town of Wolverhampton. Twelve separate estates were granted in Wulfun's charter, one of which was named *Eswich* (or *Eiswich*), almost certainly an earlier form of the name *Haswic*.

The charter describes a boundary perambulation of *Eswich* which is very similar to the later boundary of Ashwood Hay. The perambulation started near the confluence of Holbeache and Smestow Brooks at Hinksford before following an unspecified route to the northern end of Kingswinford Ridge (i.e. the northern end of Ridgehill Wood). It then seems to have followed a dyke (bank and ditch) southwards along the ridge towards Friar's Gorse and the River Stour⁶. The land enclosed by the perambulation is shown in blue in figure 1; and the dyke is shown in red.

Prior to c.950AD, the land which later became the parishes of Kingswinford and Oldswinford was a single land unit known as Swinford.⁷ In the mid-tenth century, Swinford had almost certainly been in royal ownership for some time. Indeed, it is likely that Kingswinford, and thus the whole of Swinford, was part of an ancient royal landholding — perhaps being one of the ancient lands of the Mercian royal family.⁸

The desire to physically demarcate a territory of such importance may have resulted in the construction of the *Eswich* boundary dyke as well as the co-linear system of dykes on Wollaston ridge to the south.⁹ The latter was recorded as *mæredice* 'boundary dykes' in a

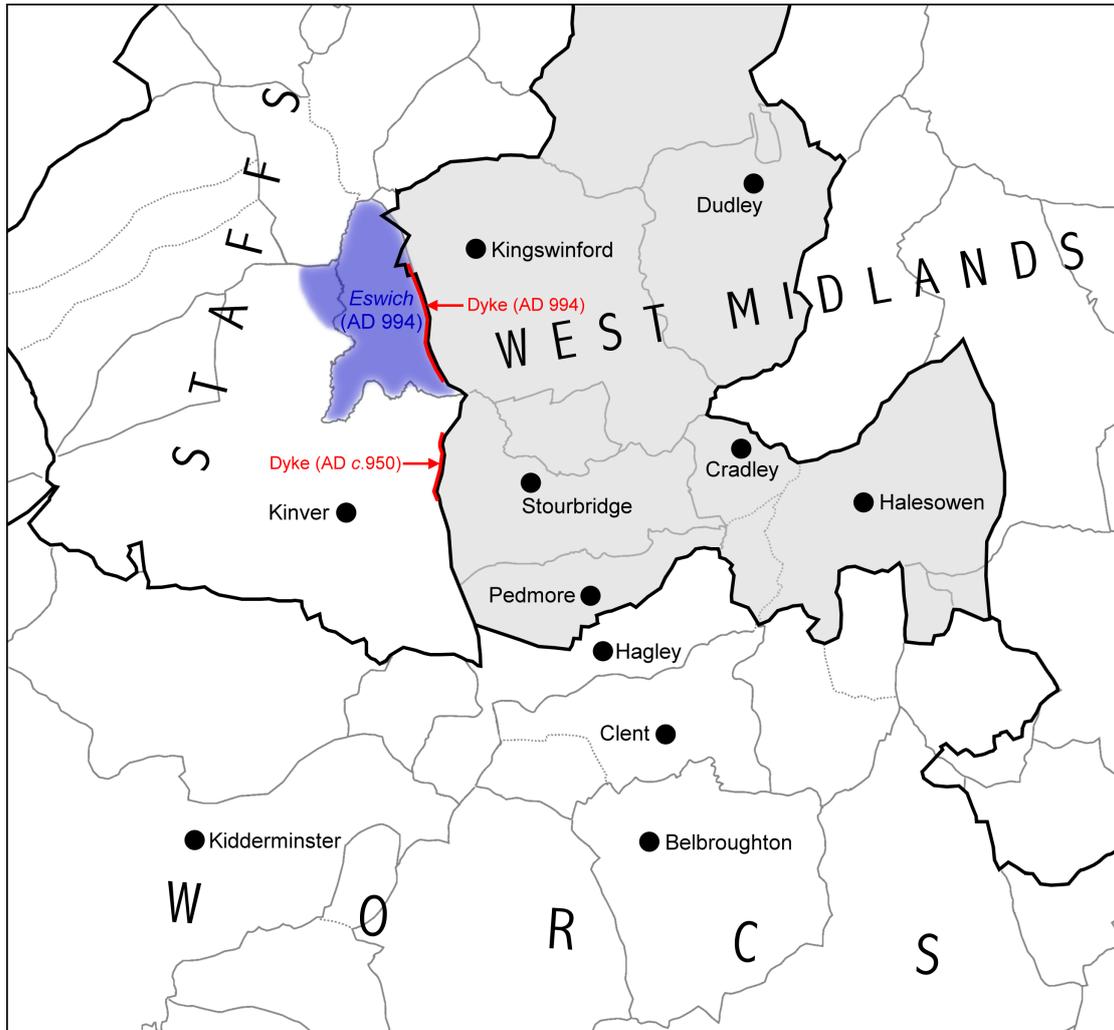


Figure 1. The Anglo-Saxon estate of *Eswich* (Domesday *Haswic*) in blue and associated boundary dykes in red, superimposed upon modern county boundaries and the pattern of ancient (post-Domesday) parishes in the vicinity. The grey-shaded area represents Dudley Metropolitan Borough.

separate tenth-century charter.¹⁰ The Wollaston and Kingswinford dykes may well have been constructed at the same date to bound different parts of a single territory. The fact that a considerable amount of effort and resources would have gone into their construction further indicates that they were associated with a land unit of some importance. That land unit may have been the late-ninth or early-tenth century Clent hundred or even a more ancient territory from which the Clent hundred evolved.¹¹

The date of the dykes' construction is, at present, unknown. While it is notoriously difficult to obtain a construction date by excavation, a *terminus post-quem* for the dyke often being all that is obtainable, any dating evidence which can be retrieved from either of these dykes would provide a very important clue to the origin and evolution of royal landholdings, and perhaps earlier territories, in the locality.

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