



The Soke and Wapentake of Wirksworth

The Soke and Wapentake of Wirksworth survives to this day as the jurisdiction of the Great Barmote Court, which sits annually at the Moot Hall in Wirksworth to consider matters of lead mining justice (not that there are many matters of lead mining justice in our modern age, but the court has ancient powers and these still apply).

A Soke is a kind of county, that is to say, an administrative area. In the old days there were many Sokes besides that of Wirksworth, for example the Soke of Winchester, the Soke of Oswaldbeck or the Soke of Peterborough. Almost all the Sokes were effectively abolished by 1965, the last one being the Soke of Peterborough which became part of Cambridgeshire. The Soke of Wirksworth survives because of the special status of the Great Barmote Court.

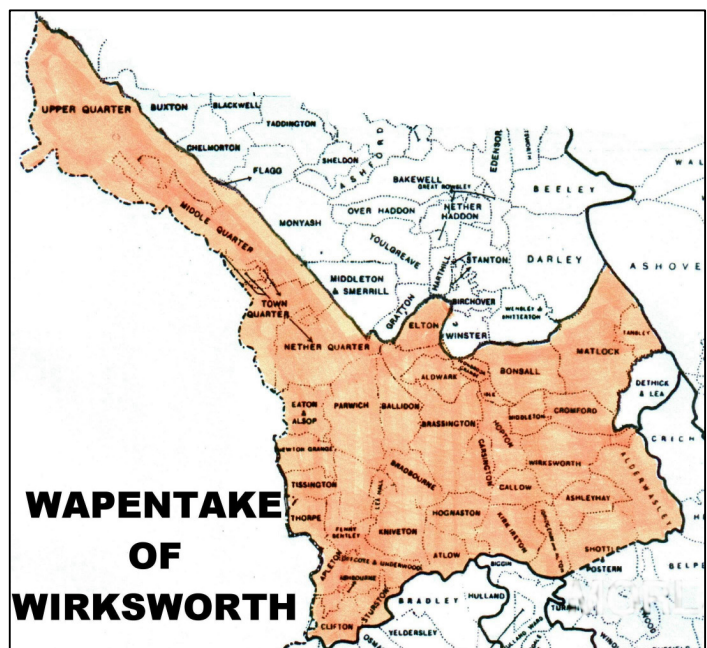


In Mercian ("Saxon") times a Soke was an area of jurisdiction dependant on a secular or ecclesiastical governor, and this part of the structure does not appear to have survived, there is no Governor of Wirksworth, though there is a Barmaster. It might be thought that the geographical area of the Soke of Wirksworth would match that of the Wapentake of Wirksworth, but this is not the case for reasons which are not clear to us at the moment. The yellow area on the map shows the Soke of Wirksworth as it now is, composed of a number of "liberties", which are similar to parishes.

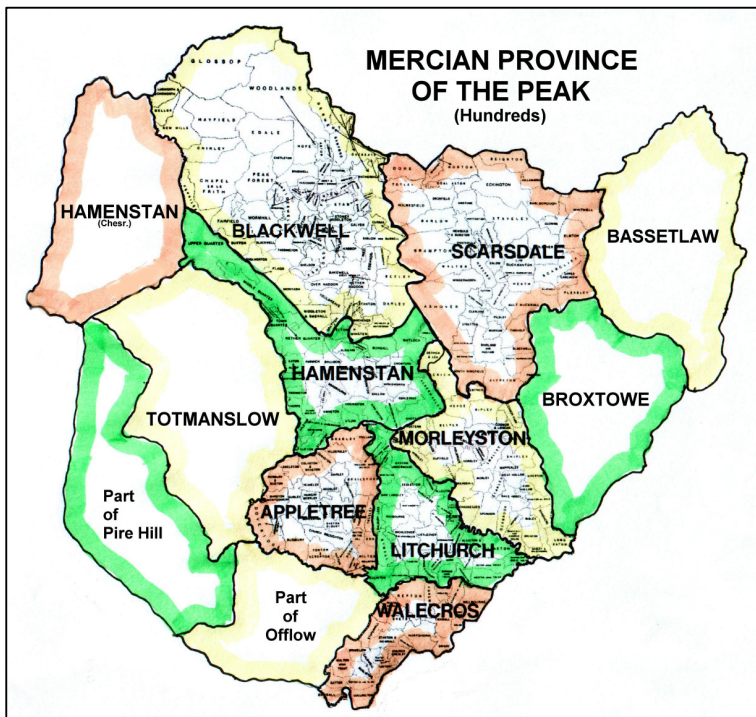
A Wapentake is also an administrative area of a county or province, normally a sub-division. In Mercian times all the subdivisions of this area were originally called Hundreds, but when the Vikings invaded the Kingdom of Mercia and then settled, creating the "Danelaw", they are thought to have taken over the previously existing administrative system (easier than

bringing in a new one) and changed the name to Wapentakes. Because the Mercians (in the person of Queen Aethelflaed) eventually overcame and integrated the Vikings, the terminology the Vikings had used didn't entirely survive, so that in much of the Mercian Province of The Peak the administrative subdivisions reverted to their hundred names e.g. The Hundred of Scarsdale, Hundred of Litchurch etc.

But the Wirksworth sub-division has retained this title: The Soke and Wapentake of Wirksworth, so much so that it remained the only Wapentake in Derbyshire, and was often just called "The Wapentake". Complicated isn't it? Here is the Wapentake of Wirksworth, shown in orange on the map.



These administrative areas possibly date from the beginning of the Mercian period, whereas the shire county of Derbyshire is from the very end, and for a long time both systems co-existed, only gradually did "Derbyshire" become more important than the parts of the former Province of The Peak which existed before it. The Wapentake of Wirksworth was originally called the Hundred of Hamenstan. It's in the very middle of the Mercian province. Hamenstan probably means "carved stone". The carved stone was probably a marker for the assembly ground at Hamston Hill.



This map shows the Mercian Province of The Pecsæte (The Peak District) in terms of its possible constituent hundreds, before the creation of the shire counties. In the middle, almost at the very centre, is Wirksworth, in the Soke and Wapentake of Wirksworth, which was also known as the Hundred of Hamenstan (the green one). There is also a Hundred of Hamenstan around Prestbury and Macclesfield in what is now Cheshire (the pink one), it was also part of the Province. Then in what is now Staffordshire is the Hundred of Totmanslow around Leek, and those parts of the Staffordshire Hundreds of Pire Hill and Offlow which lie north of the River Trent. All the hundreds of what is now Derbyshire were in the Province, and two hundreds in what is now Nottinghamshire, the Hundred of Broxtowe and the Hundred of Bassetlaw as far as the River Idle were as well. One of the reasons why the understanding of this is so poor is because the Province now spans

four different counties and this has made the study of the Province very difficult because many histories tend to be based on county areas. The Wapentakes had an assembly which met once a year or so, usually at the same place, but sometimes elsewhere. The assembly of the Wirksworth Wapentake probably met at a site near Topshill Farm at Wapentake Lane in Wirksworth, but before that the Hundred Assembly of Hamenstan (it's the same thing remember) may have met at Hamston Hill near Thorpe Cloud, where there is a saucer shaped arena at the top of the hill. Now, you may say, who are the people in this province of Mercia? Are they all Mercians? Well, it's complicated:

Communities and Immigration

To begin with there's the Celts, you might call them the Britons or the Welsh, they are thought to be native. Then there's the Romans; then the Saxons (in our case the Mercians); later there are the Vikings/Danes and then the Normans, and many others since. Er, isn't it a bit more complicated than this? Yes it is. Celtic Britain was taken over by the Romans. The Romans stayed a bit, but then some of them went home and a lot of Saxons arrived. Actually they weren't all Saxons, that's just shorthand for Saxons, Angles, Frisians and Jutes, or you might call them all Anglo-Saxons, most people do. Anyway, the Frisians are probably our Mercians (How do we know that? Well, there was a University of London study in 2003 about Ashbourne and Southwell and a big lot of the DNA in Ashbourne and Southwell is from Frisia, that's Holland to you and me). A bit later several boatloads of Danish and Norwegian Vikings arrived and made a bit of a nuisance of themselves with a lot of raping and pillaging and general terrorist behaviour, but eventually Queen Aethelflaed (whom the West Saxons called "Lady of The Mercians") sorted them out. After a bit of a gap during which Mercia, Wessex and Northumbria became England, with several noble kings, they were followed by some Normans led by William the Bastard (known in history books as William the Conqueror).

Of course, it's even more complicated than that and this is only a small thumbnail sketch of it, but its been going on for over 2,000 years, so we'll all just have to get along for the sake of everyone's happiness, as we should do.

Have a wonderful day.

This interpretation guide was written for the Wirksworth Wapentake, it should not be regarded as a definitive history: a thorough history of the Mercian Province of The Peak has yet to be written. The dragon in the left picture below is the Wyvern, which signifies perseverance and retribution; it is the heraldic beast of Mercia.

