

William Harrison
The description of Britain
London
1577

1577.

THE
Firste volume of the
Chronicles of England, Scot=
lande, and Irelande.

...

Faithfully gathered and set forth, by
Raphaell Holinshed.

AT LONDON,
Imprinted for Iohn Harrison.

God saue the Queene.

...

AN HISTORICALL DE=
scription of the Islande of Britayne, with a briefe re=
hearsall of the nature and qualities of the people
of Englande, and of all such com=
modities as are to be
founde in the
same.

<book 2, chapter 4>

73vb

..... as olde recorde doth wnesse.
Into how many shyres the sayde Alfrede did
first make this particion of the Islande, it is
not yet founde out, howbeit if my coniecture
be any thing at all, I suppose that he left not
vnder eyght and thirtie, sith we finde by no
good author that aboute fiftene haue bene ad=
ded by any of his successours, sith the time of
his decease. This prince therefore hauing
made the generall partition of his kingdome
into shyres, or shares, he deuided againe the
same into lathes, as lathes into hundreds, and
hundredes into tithinges, or denaries, as di=
uers haue written, and M. Lambert follo=
wing their authorities, hath also giuen out,
saying almost after this manner is his de=
scription of Kent. *The Danes* (saith he) *both*
before, and in the time of king Alfrede, *had*
*flocked by *the sea coastes of this Islande in*
great numbers, sometimes wasting and spoi=
ling with sworde and fire, wheresoeuer they
might arriue, and sometime taking great bo=
ties with them to their ships, without dooing
any farder hurt, or damage to the countrey.
Thys inconuenience *continuing for manye*
yeares together, caused our husbandmen to
abandon their tillage, and gaue occasion and
**hardnesse to euill disposed persons, to fall to*
the lyke pillage, as practising to followe the
Danes in these theyr theftes and robberies.
And *the better to cloake their mischiefe with*

<1576:20>

*<sea to the>

*<hardnesse>

all, they feigned themselves to be Danish Pyrates, and would sometime come alande in one *port, and sometime in another, driuing dayly great spoyles as the Danes had done vnto their ships before them. The good king Alfrede therefore (who had marueylously traueyled in repulsing the barbarous Danes) espying this out rage, and thinking it no lesse the part of a politicke prince to roote out the noysome subiect, then to holde out the forren aduersarie: by the aduice of his nobilitie, and the example of Moses (who followed the counsell of lethro his father in law to the like effect) deuided the whole realme into certaine partes or sections, which (of the Saxon worde, 'Schyran,' signifying to cut) he termed shires or as we yet speake, shares, or portions, and appointed ouer euery such one shire an Erle or Alderman or both, to whome he committed the gouernement of the same. These shyres also he brake into lesser partes, whereof some were called lathes, of the worde 'Gethian,' which is to assemble together, other hundredes for that they *coined iurisdiction ouer an hundred pledges, and other tithinges, bycause there were in eache of them to the

*<part>

<1576:21>

*<conteyned>

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number of tenne persons, whereof euery one from time to time was suretie for others good abearing. He prouided also that euery man shoulde procure himselfe to be receyued into some tithing, to the ende, that if any were founde of so small and basse a credite that no man woulde become pledge or suretie for him, he shoulde forthwith be committed to pryson, lest otherwise he might happen to do more harme abroad. Hitherto M. Lambert, by whose wordes we may gather very much of the state of this Islande in the time of Alfride, whose institution continued after a sort vntill the comming of the Normans, who chaunged the gouernement of the realme in such wise (by bringing in of new officers and offices, after the maner of their *countries) that very little of the olde regiment remayned more then the *bares names of some officers (except peradventure in Kent) so that in these dayes it is hard to set downe any great certainty of things as they stooode in Alfrids time, more then is remembered, and touched at this present. Some as it were roming or roving at the name Lath, affirme that they were certen circuites in euery county or shyre, contayning an appoynted number of townes, whose inhabitauntes alwayes assembled to know and vnderstande of matters touching their portions, in to some one appoynted place or other within their limites, especiallye whylest the causes were such as required not the ayde or assistaunce of the whole county. Of these Lathes also (as they saye) some shyres had more some lesse, as they

*<r. 'country'>

*<r. 'bare'>

were of greatnesse. And M. Lambert seemeth to be of the opinion that the lets of our tyme (wherein [these pledges be yet](#) called 'Franci plegii' of the worde Free burghe) doe yeelde [some shadow](#) of that [politike institution](#) of Alfrede: but sith my skill is so small in these cases that I dare not iudge any thing at all as of myne owne knowledge, I will not sette downe any thing more then I read, and reading no more of lathes, my next talke shal be of hundredes. The hundrede, and the wapentake is all one, and by this diuision not a name appertynent to a sette number of townes (for then all *hundrede shoulde be of equall quantitie) but a limited iurisdiction, within the compasse whereof were an hundred persons called pledges, or ten denaries, or tithings of men, of which eache one was bounde for other good abering, and laudable behaiour in the common welth of the realme. The chiefe man lykewyse of euerie Denarie or Tithing was in those dayes called a tithing man in latine 'Decurio,' but now in most places [a borsholder](#) as in Kent, where euery

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*<r. 'hundredes'>

<1576:22>

[tithing is](#) more ouer named [a Burrow](#), although that [in the West countrie](#) he be still called [a Tithing man](#), and his circuit [a Tithing](#) as *haue hearde at large. I reade further more and it is partly afore noted, that the sayde Alfride caused eache man of free condicion (for the better maintenaunce 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 swere or saye vpon their certen knowledge for his honest behaiour and ciuile conuersation if it should happen at any time, that his credite should come in question. In like sort, I gather out of Leland and other, that if any smal matter did fall out worthie to be discussed, the Tithing man or borsholder (now officers, at the commandement of the Constable) should decide the same in their Letes, whereas the *greatest causes were referred to the Hundredes, the greater to the Lathes, and the greatest of all to the shire daies, where the Earles or Aldermen dyd set themselues, and make finall endes of the same, according vnto lustice. For this purpose likewise in euery Hundred were 12. men chosen of good age and wisdome, and those sworne to gyue their sentences without respect of person,

*<r. 'I haue'>

*<r. 'greate'>

<This is an excerpt from the 'Description of Britain' written by Harrison in 1576–7 as an introduction to Holinshed's 'Chronicles' (1577). Passages quoted from Lambard's newly-published book are printed blue. – C.F. October 2010.>