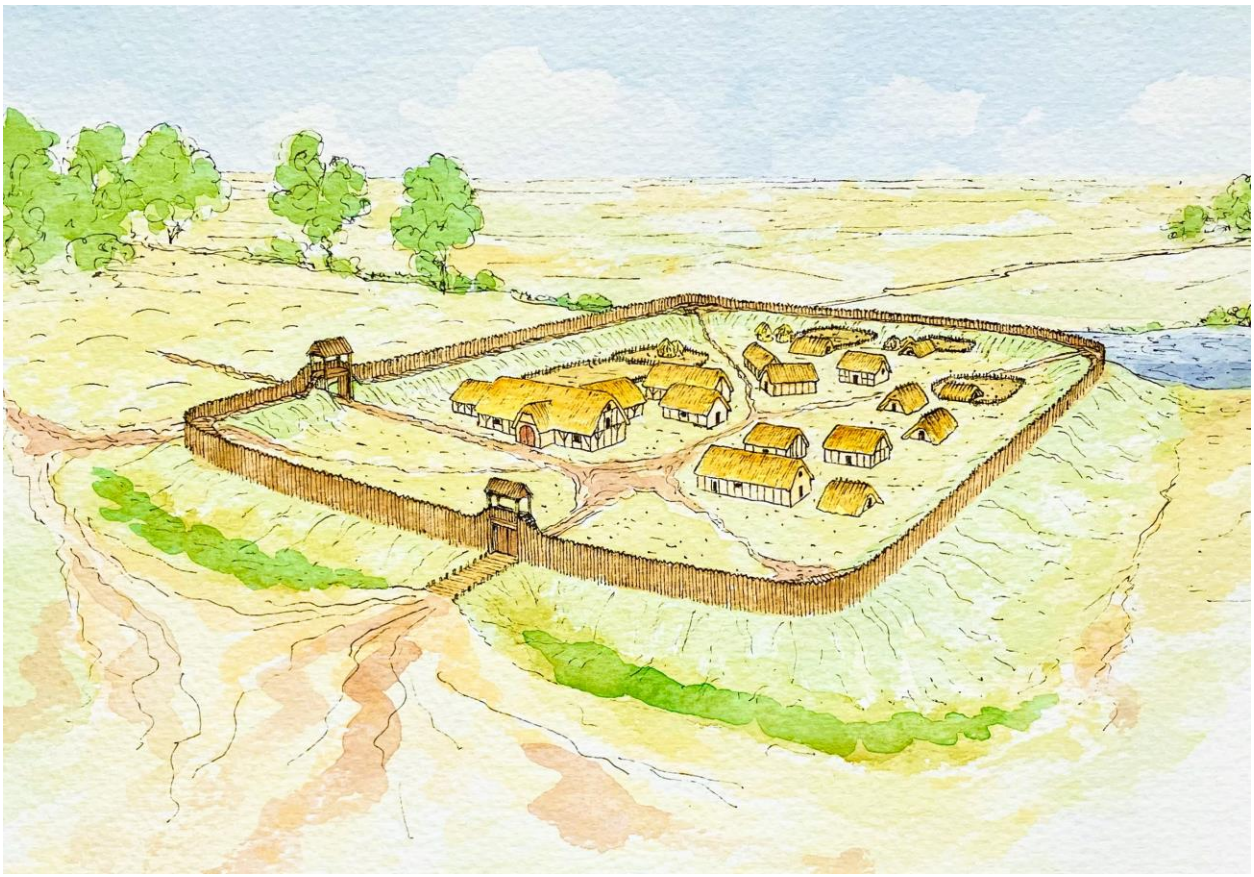
Occaham - The Story of Anglo-Saxon Oakham



Paul Wiggin

Map showing the homeland of the Angles on the Jutland Peninsula

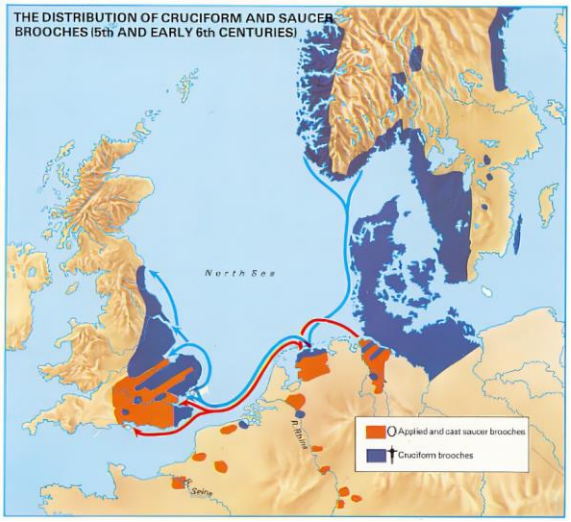
The Angles were one of the Germanic tribes who migrated westwards in the first century AD from an area in present day Poland. By the fourth century, they had reached the southern part of modern-day Denmark and had taken over the territory which had previously been home to the Teutones and Cimbri tribes. This land became known as the Kingdom of Angeln in what is today, Schleswig-Holstein. Tradition has it that Woden, a powerful King of Angeln, was the founding father of the Angles and whose descendants continued the expansion and migration of the tribe by finding new lands to settle in. Scyld is thought to be the founding father of the Danish people and a King of Angeln. This common ancestry may help to explain the unique interactions between the two peoples, particularly during Danelaw in the late C9th.

Germanic Angle warriors

Towards the end of the Roman era, foreigners (laeti), were brought in from outside of the Empire and granted land to settle within imperial territory in exchange for providing recruits for the Roman Army. The Angles were one of the tribes that participated in this venture, and they were granted land to settle in Dewyr, a region stretching northwards from the River Humber to Hadrian's Wall in present day Northumbria. When the last of the Roman armies left Britain in 410 AD, Angles were already established in the north east of the country and this may well have contributed to the way that the country was divided up by the incoming tribes (Angles, Frisians, Jutes and Saxons) over the coming centuries.

A diagram of a Nydam boat used by the Angles

The most likely form of transport used by the Angles to cross the sea was by rowing boat, similar to the Nydam Boat which has been dated to 320 AD. With a crew of 30 oarsmen and carrying up to a further 15 people, these clinker-built boats could travel up to 8 knots. It is possible that some boats tried to cross directly from Angeln across the southern North Sea to Britain, but without a keel, these vessels would have been at high risk of overturning in any storm. It seems more likely that the rowing boats travelled around the shallower coastal waters and used established trading settlements in Frisia for supplies (brooch distribution map).



Map to show the distribution of C5th and C6th brooches

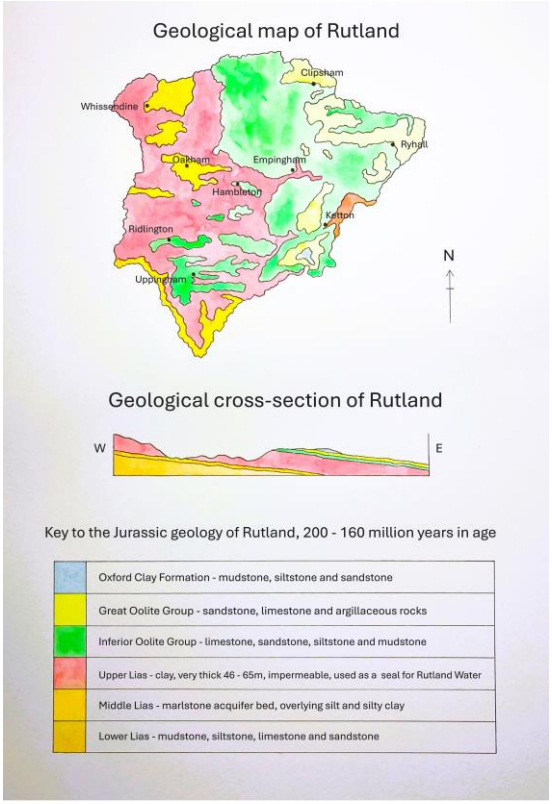
Angles would receive uninterrupted passage provided their boats travelled up along the east coast of Britain, northwards, to find new homeland. Meanwhile, other tribal groups would take the more direct route to settle along the southern coast of Britain and then proceed inland. This possible accord seems to have prevented inter-tribal warfare and allowed relatively continuous settlement by all Germanic tribes across Britain in the C5th.

Recreation of the early Anglian settlement at West Stow

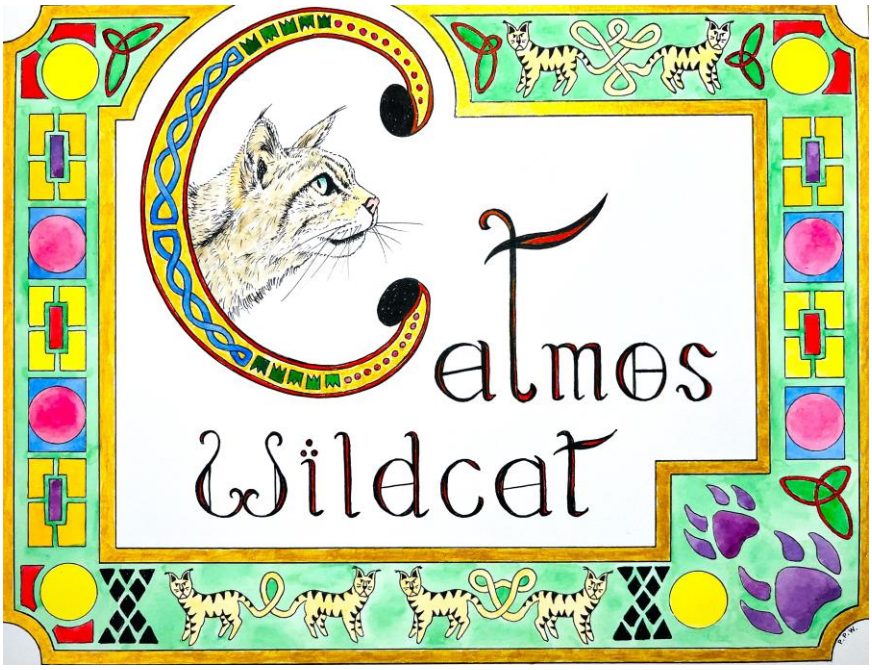
Angles had already established themselves as a tribe that had expansion ambitions, and it seems reasonable that boats were travelling to Britain very early in the C5th. This started the Period of Migration. We know that settlers arrived in West Stow in 420 AD (West Stow Anglo-Saxon village, part of the East Angles, South Folk) and no doubt, as boats returned to Angeln, details of existing settlements, hostile forces and quality of land would be passed on to the next set of venturers. With the prospect of unlimited land for settlement in a country already known for its rich fertile soil and more productive farmland than the low-lying, salt-ridden soils of Angeln, pioneer boats would have travelled further and further northwards along the coastline, seeking suitable sites for settlement until they reached the present-day Wash.

The Fenland, in and around the Wash, was far more extensive than it is today and would have been extremely difficult to navigate with larger boats. Thick reed beds and marshland were hazards to most forms of transport. However, the sleek, clinker-built, keel-less, shallow draft Angle boats were ideal for exploring the creeks and following water channels until they found the four main rivers that ran into the Wash. One of these rivers was the Welland. By rowing upstream, the pioneer crews would have encountered the wooden Roman bridge that provided the crossing for Ermine Street near present day Stamford. The nearby Roman Fort at Casterton had been deserted as the legions marched south to protect Rome from attacks from other Germanic tribes, and palatial Roman villas with fine mosaic floors would probably have been found abandoned and looted.

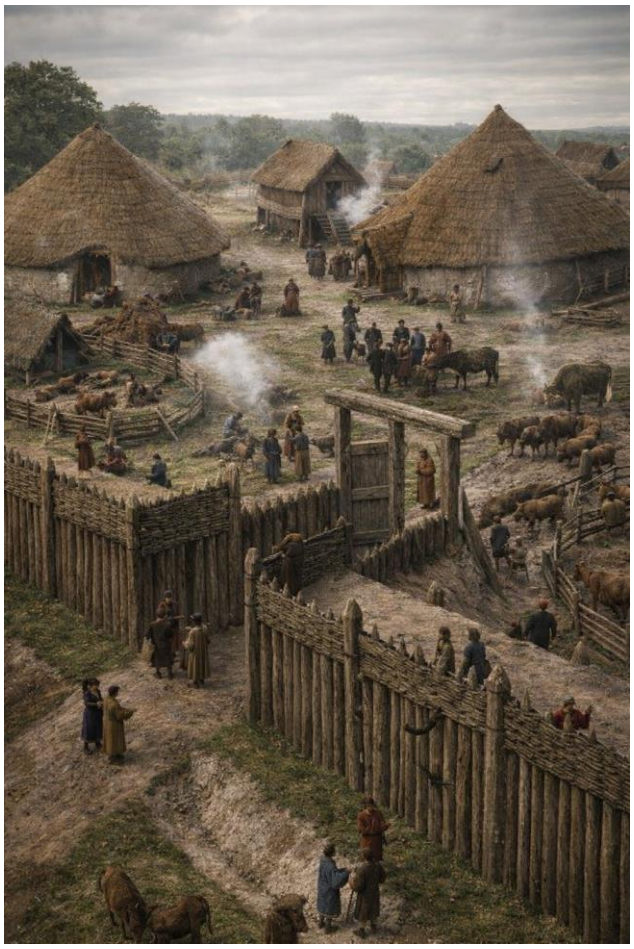
The land the Angles had discovered was of considerable interest to them: deep rich soil, villa-farm fields of harvest, abundance of water from numerous streams and rivers flowing eastwards from the hills to the west and north with plentiful woodland. These early Angles had found present day Rutland.



Beneath the rich top soils lay the geological strata of Jurassic age, gently dipping eastwards, with the younger limestone rocks to the east and older clay layers to the west. By following the streams westwards, the Angles were able to penetrate the dense forests, where they encountered animals, such as bears, lynx and wolves. They discovered the source of the brooks and streams were natural springs, often emerging on the side of hills. This occurred where permeable layers of rock carrying water met a boundary with the underlying impermeable clays and so water would emerge on the surface. Clean, fast flowing, freshwater seemed to be of great importance to the Angles and in present day Rutland they had found a bountiful supply. As the Angles journeyed to the top of the hills following water courses, they found palisade hill settlements occupied by groups of the Corieltavi tribe, a self-governing federation of agricultural people who had been living in Britain before the Romans invaded and who had co-existed with the conquerors for several centuries. It is quite likely that these hill settlements were part of an ancient Corieltavi kingdom, spread across present day Rutland.



Catmos (Old English): Boggy land infested with wild cats (lynx)



Representation of a Corieltavi fortified settlement

Occa was the leader of the pioneer Angle group who followed the marshy River Gwash, upstream to its source. His party would have trekked through boggy clay infested with ‘wild cats’ - lynx, now known as the Vale of Catmose, until they found the confluence in the river. By heading upstream from this point and along the northerly stream, they would have come to the Corieltavi palisade hill fort in present day Oakham. It is likely that the meeting of the two peoples would have been a significant event. Both Angles and Corieltavi were similar in being Iron Age societies that valued land for farming, but a major difference was that the Angles were warrior farmers who had come to acquire land, by force if needed. The sight of the rich, cultivated fields on the extensive plateau of land, must have been very attractive to Occa as he decided that he would make this area his homestead.

Occa's group of about thirty warriors was equivalent to a small Anglian army in C5th and no doubt could have eliminated the Corieltavi if it came to a fight. However, it would have been apparent from the cultivated landscape, that the Corieltavi people had expert knowledge of farming the land and therefore could be of use to the Angles. It seems that a new society order was established with the Corieltavi continuing to farm but with new masters in charge of them.

Illustration of the grubenhaus found in Occaham

We know that an early C5th grubenhaus was discovered about 400m away from the palisade hill settlement, on South Street, opposite Tesco in Oakham today. A grubenhaus was a Germanic design of pit-house with a hearth, made from wood and thatch, so it seems very plausible that the incoming Angles supplanted the Coreiltavi from their hill fort settlement and had pit-houses built for them instead. They were allowed to continue to farm, perhaps in the form of slave labour for their new overlords, who in return may have offered them protection from any new threats.

The hill fort and surrounding settlement became known as Occaham, the estate of Occa. This pattern of territory acquisition from the Corieltavi by the early Angles was replicated across present-day Rutland in places such as Clipsham (the estate of Cylp) and Luffenham (the estate of Luffa). The hill forts bore several common features; settlements on a gentle slope for best lookout views, boggy defensive ditches and mound embankments, wooden palisade walls with elevated walkways inside the fort for lookout, fortified entrances, square in plan view, access to nearby fresh water, and fishponds often created by damming the local streams with impermeable Jurassic clay. Norfolk reeds growing by the streams and fishponds would have been used for thatching the roofs of buildings.

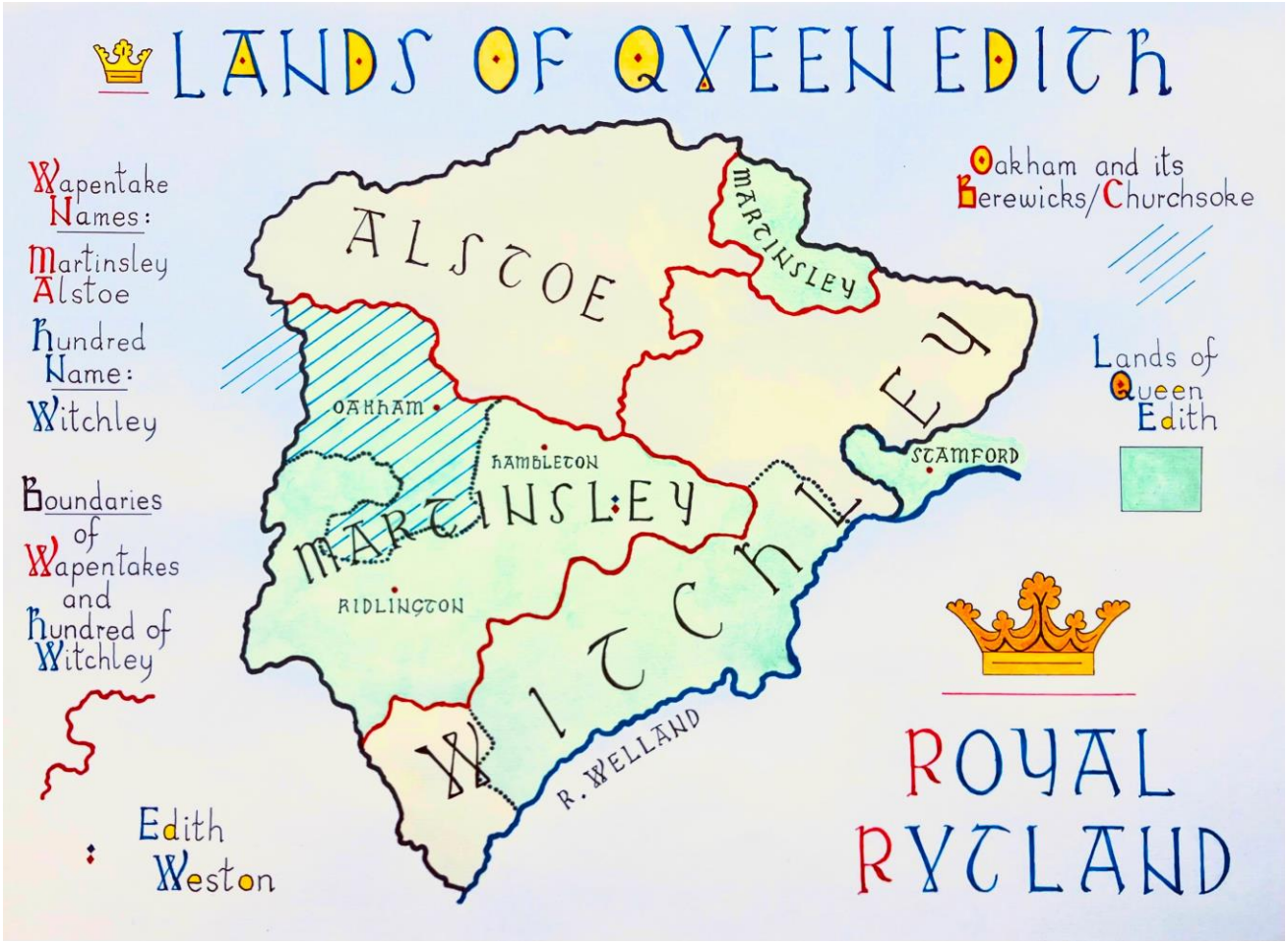
View of Occaham showing the seven trackways meeting in front of the fortified manor

As word spread in Angeln of the rich farming lands to be had in Britain, more Angles decided to risk the journey with families and make the hazardous journey by sea to the new country. Continuous numbers of Angles came to Britain during the Migration Period of the C5th and C6th and they created their own new homesteads, nearly always by fresh running water and often downstream from established Angle hill settlements.

Occaham continued to grow as an estate; more trees were felled from the surrounding woodland for use in buildings and fires, and more land turned into fields for agricultural use.

View of Occaham showing Occa's stream, watermill, fishpond, reed bed and dam

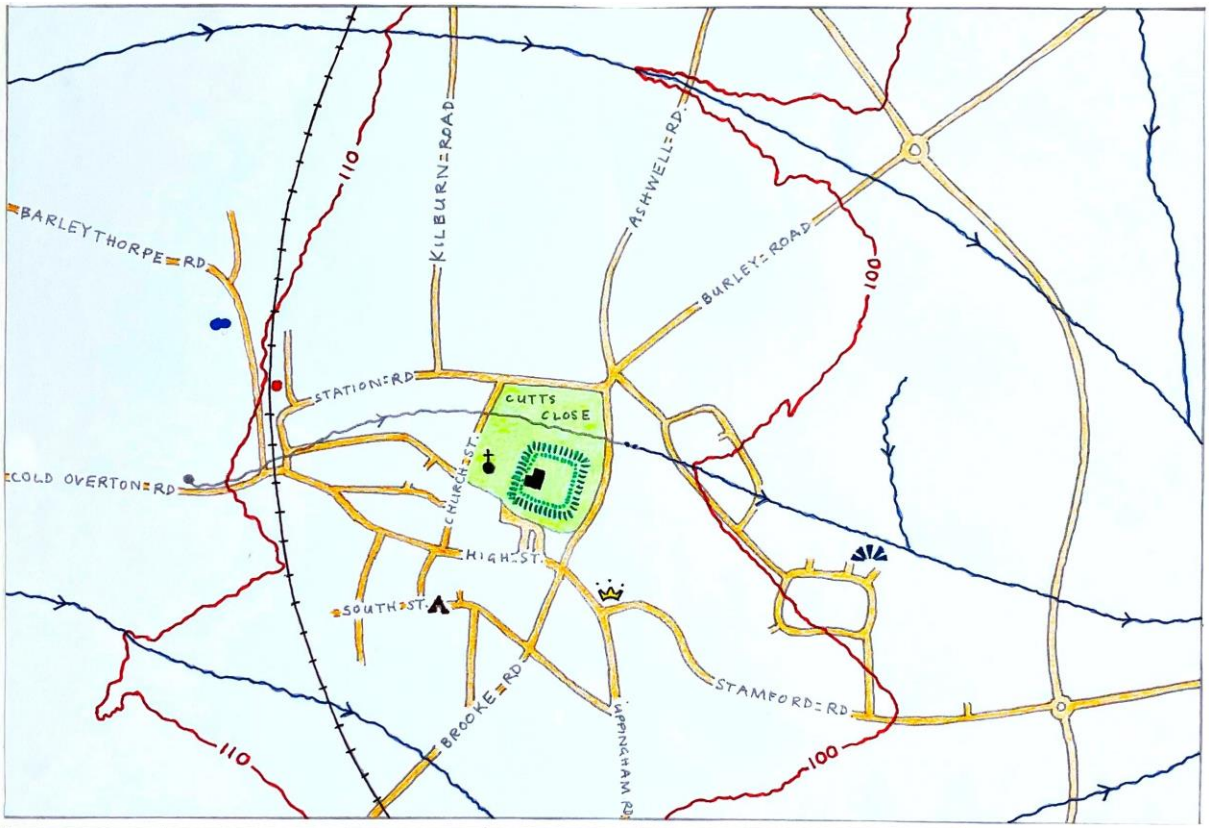
By the middle of the C11th, six hundred years and about twenty-five generations later, Occaham had become one of the three huge royal manors given to Queen Edith as dower by her husband Edward the Confessor in 1045 AD. Its estate land area was vast as recorded in the Domesday Survey of 1086 AD, covering approximately 23 square kilometers in today's measurement. Occaham had five berewicks - Langham, Brooke, Egleton, Gunthorpe and Knossington – attached settlements that paid various dues to the central manor.



Map showing the royal lands in Rotaland held by Queen Edith as dower.

After the defeat of the Anglo-Saxons by the Normans at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 AD, Queen Edith, the last Anglo-Saxon queen and richest woman in England, was permitted to keep her possessions until her death in 1075 AD. At this point, her land holdings, including Occaham, were passed to William the Conqueror and the Anglo-Saxon era had come to an end.

Occaham (Oakham) today.



	Stream		Site of Grubenhaus
	Habitat water hole		All Saints
100	Contour/m		Site of Anglo-Saxon Royal Manor
	Railway station		View point
	QE II statue		Site of Occa's spring

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