

Medieval Birmingham

People and Places, 1070-1553

John Hemingway

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Dedicated to my mother, Marguerite Laurie Hemingway,
nee Baker (1921-2016), and my Birmingham ancestors
and their descendants.



Figure 1: Detail of the Gough Road map, circa 1360. Birmingham was important enough to be shown on the Worcester via Droithwich to Lichfield Road.¹ The modern place-names in black were placed there by the writer.

¹ <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3499458>. Public domain. The Gough map is now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Its creator(s) is unknown, but it is the earliest road map of Britain. Some estimate of the date has been worked out by the depiction of a city wall around Coventry, which was first constructed in 1355. The latest possible date is usually given as 1366, the year in which a castle and village marked on the whole map in the Island of Sheppey was renamed Queensborough.

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The typeface used in this work was designed by John Baskerville of Birmingham in 1757. Its clarity led to its use by various organisations, including the University of Cambridge, but it has fallen out of favour in recent years. Perhaps its use here will advance its usage in the future.

Picture Credits

Figure 6: National Archives, Kew, London; Figure 35: University of Nottingham Manuscripts and Special Collections; Figure 99, British Library, London; Figure 59: Mike Hodder/Tempus Publishing; Figures 61, 69, Library of Birmingham; Figure 63, Museum of London; Figure 82, National Library of Wales; Figure 94, Martyn Cole; Figure 122, University of Leicester Archaeology Services.

Preface

My earliest recollection of central Birmingham was in the 1950s when my grandfather took my brothers and myself to the Market Hall to see the rabbits, puppies and kittens for sale on the various stalls. The hall had been bombed during the Second World War (1939-45) and its roof was missing, and I remember looking up at one of the windows and seeing the broken glass still in place and wondering how my mother and grandparents had endured the bombing that Birmingham had suffered. The hall was demolished shortly afterwards, but the building still lives in my memory as an example of my old 'Brum'. Another story from my past is that when I went to work on the archaeological excavation of Dudley Castle in the 1980s, I would often climb to the top of the keep, and gaze at the land around. From there I could see the Post Office Tower in the middle of Birmingham and I speculated on how many people had looked in that direction before me. These are just two examples of looking at the present prospectus and thinking about the past. It is this story of life that this book is about - 'knowledge about the past'. I was once asked, as a school teacher, why we study history and my answer was manifold. History is everywhere, from the physical features, like buildings, that lie around us to the cultural norms of our society, like our language – all had their origins in former times. At a more concrete level we find the past entertaining, demonstrated by our reading books, watching films and programmes at the cinema or on television in which the personalities, characters, dress and dwellings of past people are shown. Probably, however, a more important reason is that we can learn from history what to do or what not to do in the future, it tells us about ourselves and our role in the world, that is if we are willing to listen.

This work attempts to tell the story of the most important phase in Birmingham's history – the beginning of it! Up until recently the medieval period has been woefully written out of the history of Birmingham, but it is now time to reinstate it. Discovering the lives and times of the Birmingham people in the medieval age has highlighted an important point about them, their ability to survive and prosper. A survival and prosperity that eventually would allow the little town to grow to such importance that one day it would be the second city of the country. An important point, however, is that England then, to a lesser degree today, was particularly class-ridden and people from the different sections of society would generally keep to their own social group, except for when war or trade forced them to associate. It is for this reason that this work has been divided into three different parts – the lords, the church and the people. It also must be realised that no one in a later age will fully understand an earlier period and all histories are interpretations. All we can do is surmise based on the evidence that they have left us as to what life was like. No doubt many books will follow

this one and other historians will look at Medieval Bermingham, and so they should, as it is only by examining and re-examining the source material that we may strive to see what life was really like in the past.

John Hemingway, 2020.

Introduction

Over the last four hundred years the people of Birmingham have congratulated themselves on being independent of any external control, but this was not always the case. For the preceding five hundred years they had lords of the manor. The lords, who controlled their lives, took their surname from the place in which they lived - Bermingham. For most of the medieval period this variation of the Domesday Book spelling was used by the family and the place, and for this book this spelling will be adhered to when noting the contemporary names and the settlement.¹ Although few people now realise it, it was due to that family that the present city exists. Occupation of the place, if not the name, is earlier than the lords, however, as it has existed for at least two thousand years. Evidence of a farmstead in the Roman period has been found² and an Anglo-Saxon settlement grew into a small community within the manorial bounds. Neither documentary, nor archaeological evidence, is able to provide much detail until the Norman Conquest. By 1086, however, Domesday Book recorded that Bermingham had at least nine families living there.³

There have been many histories of Birmingham. One of the earliest was included in Sir William Dugdale's, *The antiquities of Warwickshire illustrated: from records, leiger-books, manuscripts, charters, evidences, tombes, and armes: beautified with maps, prospects, and portraictures* (London, Printed by Thomas Warren, in the year of our Lord God, 1656). Later came William Hutton's *The History of Birmingham*, (Birmingham, Printed and sold by Thomas Pearson, 1783), Conrad Gill's *History of Birmingham Vol. I, 'Manor and Borough to 1865* (London and New York, 1952), W. B., Stephens, (ed.) *A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7, the City of Birmingham* (London, 1964), Richard Holt's, *The Early History of the Town of Birmingham* (Dugdale Society, 1985), J. R. H. Pinkess, *The Lords of Birmingham and their Manor 1066-1554*, (Digbeth and Deritend Local History Project, 1988), Chris Upton, *A History of Birmingham* (Chichester, 1993), Steven Bassett's 'Anglo-Saxon Birmingham' *Midland History* Vol. 25, (2000) and 'Birmingham before the Bull Ring' *Midland History* Vol.

¹ The Domesday spelling was Bermingha(m), but due to the fact that there was no correct way to spell the name other versions were used including, Byrmenham, Byrmyngham, Byrmyngahme, Byrmyngeham, Byrmingham, Byrmyincham, Byrmincham, Burmintham, Burmeigham, Burmyngeham, Burmyngham, Burmingeham, Burmucham, Burmycham, Burmyincham, Burmingham, Brimyncham, Briminchem, Brymyngham, Brimigham, Brumingeham, Brunungeham, Brunychamham, Brymyncham, Brymycham, Brmyngahme, Bremycham, Bremingham, Bernyngham, Bermygh, Burmigham, Bermynheham, Bermyncham, Bermincham, Bermyngham, Bermynegham, Bermengham, Bermingham, Birmungham, Birmynegham, Birmyngham, Birmyngham, Birmingeham, Birmyncham and Birmingham. As a surname, Bermingham often remains in its medieval form to the present day.

² Hodder, M. 2004. *Birmingham: The Hidden History*. Stroud: Tempus, see Chapter Three.

³ Plaister, J. 1976. *Domesday Book: Warwickshire: 27: 5*. Chichester: Phillimore.

26, (2001), Michael Hodder, *Birmingham: The Hidden History* (Stroud, Tempus, 2004), George Demidowicz, *Medieval Birmingham: the Borough Rentals of 1296 and 1344-5* (Dugdale Society, 2008), and the latest, Carl Chinn and Malcolm Dick, (ed.), *Birmingham: The Workshop of the World* (Liverpool University Press, 2016). These are fine histories, though strangely a number have noted there is little evidential documentary material about the medieval town, which is not strictly true. Most modern histories of Birmingham have incorporated the surrounding manors, which this book does not unless relevant to the manor of Bermingham itself. What this book does tell is the story of its lords, people and the institutions that arose there. An important element of this, normally passed over, is that Bermingham was a holding of the barony of Dudley. It was due to the barons that the lords of Bermingham were granted the manor in the eleventh century and it was a lord of Dudley who has been accused of taking it off them in the sixteenth century.

Bermingham⁴, as an urban area rather than a village, began due to the promotion of Peter de Bermingham as the baronial chief steward. His desire to have a town, like the Baron of Dudley, resulted in the planned nature of early Bermingham and the result of this was its subsequent growth. Many places scattered across England started out as planned towns, but few became cities as large as Birmingham has. It was there, on the river crossing of the Rea, that people began to collect to buy and sell goods, as traders and drovers crossed the river from east to west and back again, and as the trade increased, so the town grew until by the end of the medieval period it was ready to leap into the industrial period that resulted in its position today.

A complete story of a place cannot always be found in the documentary material however; archaeology is also an important element, particularly with Birmingham, as the city has been rebuilt several times. Most of the earlier structures cannot be found on the surface of the city, but here and there, by looking beneath the ground, surviving remnants of features may be discovered. It is only by searching for these that we can determine much of the earlier townscape. In the period 1978 to 2000 archaeological excavations at Birmingham revealed numerous features and finds that supported the documentary evidence.⁵ They have added to knowledge of life in and about the town and have revealed more about the activities of some of the people

⁴ Bermingham is the manorial, or parish name, and would have been originally used for the whole of the estate. Many estate names came to be used as settlement names after the Norman Conquest.

⁵ Bickley, W. B. and Hill, J. 1891. *Survey of the Borough and Manor or Demesne of Birmingham made in the first year of the reign of Queen Mary, 1553*: 63. Birmingham: C. Cooper. They had also registered that Edgbaston Street had a very mixed occupation ranging from the best class of burgesses interspersed with the barns and cottages of the poorer elements of Bermingham society.

who lived in its streets.⁶ Michael Hodder in his role as Planning Archaeologist for the city, and through his book *Birmingham: The Hidden History* has explored this material.⁷

This work is divided into three parts and eight chapters.

Part One: The place and the lords looks at the ground underneath the city, the history of the medieval lords that inhabited it, the estates that they held in other parts of the country and the wars they fought in throughout the period.

Chapter One identifies what the geology, geography and drainage tell us about the ground that lies beneath Birmingham. The base geology is boulder clay and although this material can be very fertile it needs to be drained and broken up to make it so. It is unlikely that much of this went on in Birmingham. The clay was difficult to plough in the damp lands by the brooks and river, so people in the past tended to leave much of it to pasture to feed their stock in the spring to autumn, and as meadow to use the cut grass as hay to feed their animals in the winter. Some of it after the Norman Conquest was turned into parks. The cultivated land, or open fields, generally lay on the sandstone outcrops where ploughing was easier, but the Birmingham soils were not conducive to arable farming and in the Norman period, with the arrival of the town which allowed the importation of grain, most of the fields were gradually turned over to pasture. Communication was a prime factor in Birmingham's success and although ancient routes transversed the manor it was the crossing of the River Rea that was the main reason for the town's subsequent growth.

In Chapter Two the lives and times of the lords of Birmingham, who ruled the manor and surrounding area for nearly five hundred years, are discovered. Their family tree is traced from their arrival in England after the Norman Conquest until the last member lost his estates in the sixteenth century. This is one of the first times that their genealogical story has been completed in such detail and a short history of the various lords follows. Maps of their lands within the barony are shown, as well as the lands they held in the Home Counties. Their role as important individuals, both locally and nationally, is defined and remnants of their existence can still be found today in St Martin's Church in the Bull Ring where effigies of three of them lie. The Berminghams also settled in Ireland; their estates and the lives of the individuals concerned are briefly sketched out.

⁶ Patrick, C. and Rátkai, S. Land to the South of the Edgbaston Street: Investigations 1997-1999, in Patrick, C. and Rátkai, S. 2009. *Bull Ring Uncovered: Excavations at Edgbaston Street, Moor Street, Park Street and the Row, 1997-2001*: 15-37. Oxford: Oxbow.

⁷ Hodder, M. *op. cit.*, 2004.

Chapter Three examines other medieval estates of the Bermingham family. When Peter de Bermingham was made chief steward of the barony, he was given a number of estates for his 'expenses'. These included the manors of, Edgbaston, Handsworth, Perry Barr, Little Barr, Rushall, Bushbury, Upper Penn, Wombourne, Enville and Amblecote. The men who held the lands on these estates paid him rent and owed him their allegiance in times of war. We learn a little about the activities of these men and, as some of the estates were in the Forests of Cannock and Kinver, we learn in brief detail about forest conditions in the period.

In Chapter Four we look at the fighting men of Bermingham and the wars they fought in. Each lord that received property in medieval England did so in return for military service. They had to go to fight when called to do so by the baron or the king. As well as civil wars this included conflict in the Middle East, France, Wales and Scotland. From the crusades, to the major confrontations with the French at Crecy, Poitiers and Agincourt, the Bermingham family and their retinue served their country.

Part Two: The manor and church of Bermingham looks at the evidence that can be found concerning the manor as a whole and its religious life.

Chapter Five looks at the way in which Bermingham's Norman manor came into being, as recorded in Domesday Book. We will explore ancient place-names and discover what they tell us about the landscape, together with medieval field names to explain how the land was used. Individual elements are observed: parks, communication (roads and routes), watermills and the manor house.

In Chapter Six we will search for evidence of the Priory or Hospital of St Thomas. This is problematic, for after the sixteenth century dissolution, its structures were demolished due to the eagerness of the townspeople to develop the site, and consequently there is virtually no physical indication of what it looked like. What we do have is information on the training that the establishment offered, and the names of some of those that lived there, as priors, sub-deacons, deacons and priests. We look at the way it may have served as a hospital by looking after the sick, an old people's home for the aged, and a shelter for the stranger who was passing through the town. Nor should we forget that a religious house often offered education to some of the townspeople. The chapter then looks at the parsonage which served as the town house of the priors. Another group of preachers were the itinerant friars. Bermingham as a town attracted them, and their lively sermons, given in English rather than Latin, gave new ideas to the people, new notions of an independent community that may have led to the people of Deritend building their own chapel, an unknown occurrence in England up to that time.

Chapter Seven is a study of the parish church of St Martin. This building still exists, though it has been added to and rebuilt several times. During the nineteenth century rebuild, the architect in charge saw the different building methods behind the plaster walls and described how the church had developed from a simple rectangular building through to a structure, where the priest had a home in an underground vault, to the fourteenth century extensions. A list of priests who served in the church is noted here. The most important institutions that used the church were a chantry and a gild. The Clodeshale Chantry was founded by a wealthy Birmingham family and used the south aisle as the space in which they paid priests to say masses for their and their ancestors' souls. The Holy Cross Gild used St Catherine's Altar in the north aisle and paid priests to officiate. We see the rise of the Deritend guild and its involvement in many of the town's social activities: repairing the bridge across the River Rea (a very important job to keep traffic moving), and funding alms houses for the poor and a midwife for the community's pregnant women.⁸

Part Three: life and times we identify elements of the town and its trade and the good and bad times that the Birmingham people experienced.

In Chapter Eight we observe how the settlement was built up through its street names and their meaning. We see the markets and fairs, the town governance and property within it. An interesting question is where the townspeople come from? Birmingham has been drawing in 'foreigners' for a long time and a study of the places they were named after has demonstrated that although many of them or their ancestors were local, some came from places far away from the West Midlands. The behaviour of Birmingham people was typical of medieval society and a few cases of criminal activity and how it was dealt with are recorded. This includes murder, assaults and robbery.

Chapter Nine: Birmingham, as a market town, provided work for a multitude of people. In the early days agriculture was the main industry, but when the town took-off the inhabitants found employment in many different forms. The most financially rewarding positions were mercers and spicers. Both traders bought finished articles and sold them on, like bolts of woollen cloth, garments and expensive spices. We find chapmen in the town who sold a range of less expensive objects. By the middle of the thirteenth century Birmingham was well known as a cattle town.⁹ Stock was brought in from Wales, sometimes just passing through, but many herds were sold in the Welsh Market for fattening up locally and then sold at home or driven to the major markets of Warwick

⁸ Bickley, W. B. and Hill, J. 1891. *op. cit.*, 59. The site of the alms-houses is The Horse and Jockey Tavern in Deritend which still paid rent for their support in the 19th century; Demidowicz, G. pers. comm. The Old Crown was the guild hall and contained a school room and house for the two priests of the chapel.

⁹ *Ibid*, 85.

and Coventry. Cattle hides were used in the leather trade and a few (of the very many) tanning pits have been discovered in the town. Sheep folds were used to keep sheep, both for milk and for their wool. The latter trade encompassed the manufacture of woollen cloth, garments and linen as well as selling the fleeces both at home and abroad. Associated industries involved canvas and rope making from hemp. Artisan trades included metalworking, pottery and building (masons, carpenters, tilers and glaziers).¹⁰ Service industries comprised apothecaries, bakers, barbers, butchers and millers. It is in the recent archaeological work done in the town centre that physical evidence has been found of many of these industries. A brief survey is made of the people who lived in the town in 1296 with a look at recent archaeological excavations carried out in a few of its streets.

In Chapter Ten we examine the yearly round within the town of Birmingham. Nearly all the entertainment was based on the Christian faith, but often we can see where earlier, pre-Christian elements materialised within it. Health conditions in the town could be poor, with famines and diseases occurring periodically. Some were caused by natural catastrophes like volcanic eruptions and others by climatic changes. As with the rest of Europe, the Black Death devastated the town. In nearby Halesowen it killed nearly 40% of the population and a similar figure would have lost their lives in Birmingham. The results of this epidemic must have had a devastating effect on the Birmingham people and the town, both at the time it arrived and its recurrence in the years afterwards.

¹⁰Dyer, C. 1980. *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society*: 142. Cambridge: University Press. Skilled workers could expect a wage of four pence a day in the late fourteenth century.