

CHAPTER VI.

HEORTLEA IN EARLY SAXON TIMES.

Let us picture the gradual evolution of the Anglo-Saxon village which sprang up in this place. These Teutonic forebears of ours when first they reached this country were a wild uncultured people. But the sterling qualities of the Caucasian race to which they belonged in due course asserted themselves, and in the favourable environment of their new inheritance in this island a steady ethical and social evolution took place.

Nominally the land belonged to the new king, but for the most part it was held in fief by those to whom it was granted.

We may assume that it was so here. We must picture then a small community established on the site of the old village, and ruled over by a head man, possibly in the first instance chosen from among themselves, by themselves, and not imposed upon them by the king or some other over-lord.

These people, in the early days at any rate, lived in a rude and primitive way. They tilled the land after a fashion and kept flocks and herds, but in their habitation was seen nothing of the art and culture of their predecessors.

We may picture at this time a cluster of log huts

along the road between Stocks Farm and Hartley Hill. In a more commodious and perhaps better built one lived the Head Man. An enclosed space served as the common farm yard of the village. Here the stock was reared and fed. Beyond this was the common pasture and the arable land, where they grew as much corn as the community required. Outside this area was waste and woodland.

It was probably at this time that the village received the name by which it has, with many variations of spelling, ever since been known.

The forest abounded with deer. The derelict farm lands round this spot had no doubt afforded attractive grazing ground for these creatures. In the Saxon language the pasture of the deer would be Heortlea, and thus the place seems to have been named by the new comers.

For nearly 600 years Heortlea was a Saxon village but how little do we know of the happenings here during those long ages, a period equal to that which has elapsed since the reign of Edward II to the present time.

We do know something of what went on throughout the country generally and in the kingdom of Kent, but there are no historic records which reveal anything of the history of this village during that period. It is only in the 11th and 12th centuries

that we begin to get a glimpse of the little community in the light of history, but the picture then presented to us tells us something of what must have been going on here during those long ages of which we have no actual details.

In early Saxon times the western portion of Kent was divided into two lathes or lands, taking their names from Elesford and Sudton. And these again were sub-divided into hundreds. Heortlea came into the lathe of Sudtone and the hundred of Axton.*

Each hundred had its own parliament and was responsible for self defence, but the local affairs of each village or ton were settled by the folk moot or meeting which also sent representatives to the hundred court, and each hundred sent representatives to the King's Court which was the ultimate tribunal of appeal.

We do not know at what time the villagers of Heortlea were converted to Christianity. In the early days of Saxon rule we may be sure that there was an altar here to Thor or Wodin. But later on there is little doubt that monks from the missionary settlement of St. Andrew at Rochester, now and again found their way to the village and talked to

* I have not been able to ascertain the origin of this name. In Domesday it is written Achestan. This may have stood for Ash-ton, but Axton is not necessarily the name of a place. Elsewhere it is spelt Acstane and Clacatane.

our rough Jutish ancestors under the oaks in Foxborough Wood, or upon the village green, and told them the story of the gospel.

When the day of Pentecost was come in the year 597 A.D., and the King himself had confessed the new faith and been baptised at Canterbury with great ceremony, thousands throughout the Kentish kingdom followed him to the font, and we may be sure that in due time a little congregation of Christians would have been found, probably without let or hindrance, holding their service here, if not on the site of the heathen altar at some other place of meeting in the village.

Augustine was now Archbishop of Canterbury and Justus the first bishop of Rochester, and I think we may assume that by the close of the 7th century the Thane of Heortlea had sanctioned the substitution of a Christian altar in the village for that of the Gods of his forefathers.

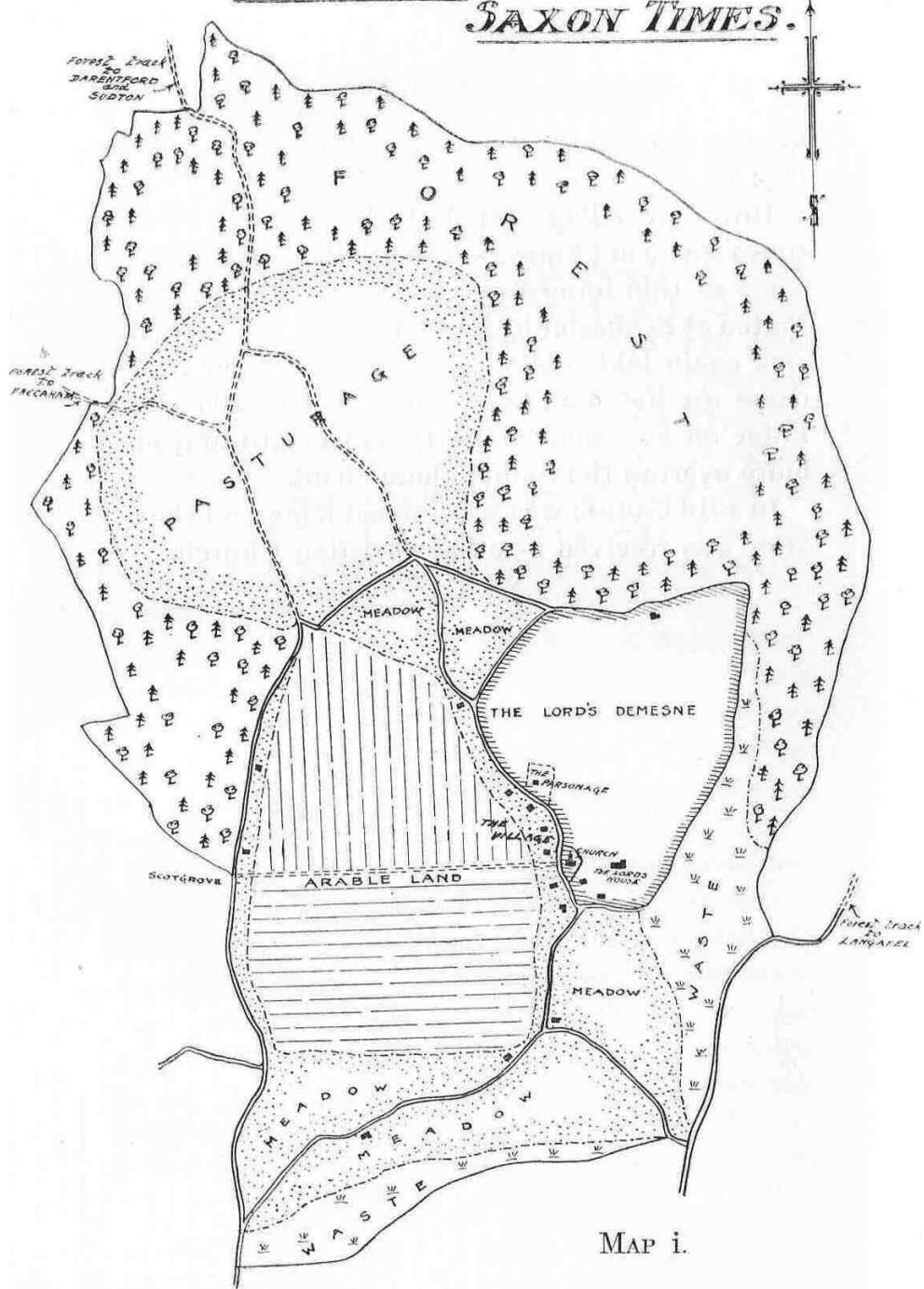
Somewhere about the year 800 A.D. the northmen from Denmark and Sweden landed on our shores and the Church of Christ in this land and probably in our village, had little rest or peace for 200 years. The Church in Kent at any rate throughout this period suffered continual anxiety and desolation. In 838 there was great slaughter at Canterbury. In 850 the men of Kent were defeated by the Pirates in the Isle of Thanet, and a few years later the

greater part of the country was overrun and pillaged.

How our village fared during these troublous times we do not know, but in 885 the Danish armies were in this immediate neighbourhood and were routed at Rochester by King Alfred. In 980 Thanet was again laid waste. A few years later Sweyn came up the Medway with a fleet of 500 ships. Later on he came to the Darent-mouth and once more overran the country here-about.

In 1016 Canute was proclaimed King and shortly after was received into the Christian Church.

*FEORTLEA IN
SAXON TIMES.*



MAP I.