

## **Urso d'Abitot - Sheriff of Worcestershire, by Eric Smith**

In the second half of the eleventh century, at the time of the Domesday Survey (1086), the one name most likely to send the chill of fear down the spine of everyone in the County of Worcestershire, young and old, rich and poor, was that of Urso the Sheriff, or simply Urso, or Urse as he was most generally known. (The name of Urso d'Abitot is used only once in the Survey). Forceful, dynamic and resolute he certainly was. It is best, however, to put any discussion of other aspects of his character on one side until we have explored what we are told about his origins and his ancestry.

The "source" of information which most readily comes to mind is **Dr. R. Treadway Nash (1725 - 1811)**. Nash was a Worcestershire man through and through. Born in the parish of Kempsey, he attended King's School, Worcester, and after reading theology at Oxford, he was inducted into the living of Leigh. Here it is said that he preached only on one Sunday a year, - just before the annual tithe audit, which he clearly hoped would be to his advantage. Such dereliction of duty was not uncommon among the clergy at that time, however, and presumably it gave him more time to write his two volume "**Collections for the History of Worcestershire**" (1782), highly acclaimed still today, despite its almost endearing shortcomings on occasions!

Parsimonious in the extreme, Nash nonetheless sought to give the impression of living in grand style by riding around his parish in a carriage and four, "with two servants before and two behind". In 1797 he became Lord of the Manor of Strensham - (by purchase from his brother), and also Rector of the Parish. At that time the Church was dedicated to St. James; it was later dedicated to St. John the Baptist. He is buried at St. Peter's, Droitwich.

On the subject of **Urso d'Abitot**, Nash writes; "Urso de Abtot, (sic), son of Almericus de Abtot, lord of the town and territory of Abtot in Normandy, came in with the Conqueror and was made Sheriff of Worcestershire, he and his heirs, and baron of Elmley. He had issue, Roger, baron of Elmley and sheriff of Worcestershire, who in a furious fit of anger commanded one of the King's officers to be slain; for which Henry I disinherited him of his great possessions. His sister Emeline (sic) being married to Walter Beauchamp (sic), baron of Bedford, the barony of Elmley, and sheriffalty (sic) & came into that family. Arms of that family; party per pale Gules and Or, three roundels counterchanged" - MS, in the Temple Library.

[The "Temple Library" referred to is the Library of the Middle Temple of the Inns of Court. Pepys tells of going there on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1667 to inspect a newly published book on the Loyalists attending the late Charles I]

Nash goes on to add, "From Walter, above mentioned, the sheriffalty descended by inheritance to William his son, who in the reign of Henry II was also sheriff of three other counties; Hereford, Gloucester and Warwick." Vid. Dugdale Baron and Lord Lyttleton's History of Henry II. [Sir William Dugdale (1605 - 1686) was a distinguished Warwickshire antiquarian who rose to be Garter King of Arms. He was the author of the "Baronage of England" (1675). Sir Thomas Lyttleton (1416 - 1481) was born in Bromsgrove, a judge, jurist and biographer, he wrote in late mediaeval 'law French' and was one of the last men to do so before Chaucer established the English language as the force we know it to be today]. As it happens, Nash and both his "sources"

are wrong, Urso and his descendants *held* manors in all the counties mentioned, but they were *Sheriffs* only in Worcestershire. Another ‘problem’ with Nash is his *tacit assumption*, together with many other historians, that at Urso’s death *all the d’Abitot estates* were inherited by Walter de Beauchamp through his wife Emmeline. **However, Sebastian Barfield, in his M.Phil, thesis for the University of Birmingham** (1997) on **“The Beauchamp family to 1369”** (internet edition) tells us that *on the death of Urso, his father-in-law, Walter inherited only half of the ‘d’Abitot estates, including Elmley Castle, ‘the principal centre of Beauchamp power from 1110 to 1268.’* (Barfield, understandably, does not enlarge further - his main interest is with the complicated affairs of the Beauchamps, not the d’Abitots.) *What happened to the other half of the inheritance? A partial explanation to this ‘mystery’ may be afforded by Grazebrook (vide infra), but some ‘clouds of uncertainty’ will remain.*

The second “source” with brief autobiographical notes on Urso is **H. S. Grazebrook’s “The Heraldry of Worcestershire”** (2 Vols) (1873). Clearly Grazebrook is familiar with Nash, as indeed are most county historians, but he supplies a few more details in addition to the quotation above. He begins by sowing a *further* seed of doubt in our minds by saying that Urso is said by some to be the “son of Almericus, Lord of Abtot (sic), and by others of Thurstan le Dispenser”. [As we have seen already, such expressions of doubt, of ‘other possibilities’, of unvarnished inaccuracies on occasions, are the *ever-recurring keynotes* of all accounts of Urso’s ‘private’ life. The early years of ‘the greats of history’, such as the **Duke of Normandy** whom the French so ‘*charmingly*’ (and with no sense of shocked prudery) refer to as *Guillaume le Bâtard* (1027 - 1087) are usually very well documented, (particularly if there is some ‘whiff of scandal’) but with young **Urso** we are dealing with a *relatively obscure* ‘also ran’ of *only modest consequence*, as will be seen later - vide *A.J. Poole “Domesday Book” etc.*, op.cit infra]. Grazebrook’s account of the d’Abitot family also serves to highlight the later link with the Despenser and Spenser families which were established by Robert d’Abitot, Urso’s younger brother (half-brother?). Robert was later known as Robertus Despensator (Robert the Bursar). This was the same Robert who reputedly built Elmley Castle (on land *seized* from ‘Worcester Church’ (vide Phillimore/Morris - App 5 Worcs, G ). Most of Robert’s estates, however, were outside Worcestershire, unlike the estates of his brother. Robert’s estates were *mainly* in Leicestershire, principal seat of the Spensers, but he also held manors in Lincolnshire, Warwickshire and Gloucestershire. He was also Castellan of Tamworth. Grazebrook also repeats the account of Roger’s banishment and quotes as his ‘source’ - “William of Malmesbury (1090 - 1143), monk and chronicler of the “Gesta Pontificum”. It is a pity that Nash did not use this ‘source’ - it was widely known in his day and is almost contemporaneous with the subject. Nash also states, according to Grazebrook, with a hint of some caution, that Urso was said to be the brother of Hugh, Earl of Montgomery, but the other ‘sources’ are silent on the matter. The most prominent ‘Montgomery’ on the ‘public’ scene at this time was Roger de Montgomerie (from south of Lisieux) who, for ‘services rendered’, was created Earl of Shrewsbury and rewarded with extensive lordships extending well into Wales [the *County of Montgomery*, (now part of the ‘region’ of Powys), bears his name] and into Anglesey. It does not seem particularly likely that young Urso was associated with such an exalted family, but one never knows. **Finally, Grazebrook returns to the subject of Urso’s wife Adeliza, with the information that she held certain estates in her own right** (Female land-holders were comparatively rare in Norman times, the most important being Judith, Countess of Huntingdon who held much of East Anglia as well as estates in ten other counties. In this

essentially male 'macho' society, one feels that they must have been quite 'formidable' ladies!). We do not know the exact extent of her 'holding', but her signature as "*vicecomitesa*" (sic) appears on a document relating to Malvern Priory (VCH Vol.2). Her 'holdings' *could* well account for part of "Barfield's **missing half**", as could a small number of Worcestershire manors which are also believed to have been added to Robert's 'tally' post-Domesday (ibid.). And then, Grazebrook makes the intriguing statement that "***Whether Roger (Urso's son) died without issue does not appear to be "positively" ascertained, but the name of d'Abbetot (sic) did not become extinct in the county until long after.***" The suggestion here is clearly that Roger *may* well have had descendants, and that at least some of these descendants were to be numbered in the multitude of those Geoffreys, Osberts, Williams, Johns and so on who grace the pages of the VCH.

The third account of the origins and ancestry of **Urso d'Abitot** differs from the first two in at least two ways. The author, **J.R. Planché (1794 - 1880)**, was not truly English, even though he was born in London, and his narrative concentrates more on the Norman-French aspects of the family in the years before they left their 'domaines' in France. Virtually all other accounts are strongly influenced by the "**Nash**" line of approach, which is essentially "**Urso in England**". Our third historian deals with "**Urso in France**" and introduces us to a whole set of 'dramatis personae' with whom we are unfamiliar. **James R. Planché** was born of Huguenot émigré middle-class parents. He began his literary career by writing an astonishingly large number of plays in the melodramatic Gothic style then greatly in vogue, - rather like stage versions of Victorian 'penny dreadfuls'. Payment for his efforts was poor, so he then found that he had a talent and an interest in writing a number of scholarly treatises on historical subjects. His style is rather too 'legally diffuse' for modern taste, but apparently his readers found it acceptable. His knowledge of history clearly served him especially well when he was appointed to the post of **Somerset Herald** and at last received a regular source of income with a small stipend from the Civil List. One such historical 'opus' was "**The Conqueror and his Companions**" (1874). Urso d'Abitot features in Volume 2. Chapter 6. According to Planché, the **Grandfather** of Urso (Vicecomes/the Sheriff) and Robertus (Dispensator/the Bursar) was probably one **Gerold** (sic), **Sieur** (lord) **de Tancarville**. The overall lordship (seigneurie principale) of Tancarville embraced a number of smaller estates (manors, 'domaines') of which the lesser 'seigneurie' of St. Jean d'Abbetot (sic) constituted one such holding. Gerold also held the hereditary appointment of **Chamberlain** at the Ducal court; that is, "head of the central revenue 'chamber' or office". ***It was part of William's attempts to reduce corruption in his "Civil Service" that this official was often a man of quite modest social rank.*** [vide Golding "Conquest and Colonisation - the Normans in Britain - 1066 - 1100" (1994)]. This last point is also developed further in the section "**Urso in England.**" (vide infra).

[Here it may be worth interrupting the narrative to say that the modern **Ville de Tancarville** in Normandy has its own official municipal website which has numerous points of interest. For the tourist there is an 18<sup>th</sup> century château and the remains of a mediaeval stronghold. For the historian, the fact that the town and district were raised from a '*seigneurie*' to a '*vicomté*' (viscountancy) in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. For the motorist, the Pont de Tancarville - a suspension bridge 1.4kms long (completed 1959) carries the Le Havre - Paris autoroute across the Seine. The port of **Le Havre**, incidentally, did not exist at the time of Urso d'Abitot. It was developed on the orders of *King François I (1515 - 1547)* because the tides and currents in the Seine estuary were silting up Honfleur (on the opposite bank) and impairing larger 'ocean going' traffic. Today, as a fishing

port, Honfleur still retains its intimate charm in contrast with the commercialisation of Le Havre.]

To resume Planché's 'history'. **Gerold** (above) had two sons, the elder being **Ralph Fitzgerald** (sic) [hardly surprisingly 'fitz'= (fr.), fils= son] and **Aumary d'Abetot** (sic). On the death of Gerold, Ralph inherited the principal lordship of Tancarville (above), while Aumary received the lesser estate - the "land" of St. Jean d'Abbetot (5km west of Tancarville). The topographic suffix after Aumary's name *specified the "land" only*, and this soon proved to be a severe limitation of his interests. **A charter of 1050** records that elder brother Ralph resolved to exert his right to give the "*Church and tithes*" of St. Jean d'Abbetot to the Collège (Monastic Community) de St. Georges de Bosherville, who were starting to build their Abbey at St. Martin de Bosherville (12 kms from Rouen). [The abbey was completed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and may be visited today. (Details on website)]. **Ralph** was clearly a man of foresight and ruthlessly selfish personal ambition. On inheriting the function of Chamberlain he lost no time in ensuring that he was dubiously styled 'Chambrellan de Tanquarville' when he was in fact the more prosaic 'chamberlain of the court', (a treasury official). He certainly became wealthy - we do not enquire too deeply into all his methods. However, having ensured his 'comfort here on earth', we cannot remain entirely unmoved by the 'unfairness' (to say the least) of his method by the 'charter of 1050' (above) of hopefully securing, at the expense of his brother, the ultimate 'well-being of his soul in heaven'. Gifts to the Church (and the majority were doubtless perfectly 'honourable') were commonly regarded as such a quid pro quo, and it must also be emphasised that in the cases, for example, of Robert Fitzhamon and Richard, Earl of Cornwall, founding noblemen respectively of the great Gloucestershire Abbeys of Tewkesbury and Hailes, their wealth was given in a genuine spirit of joyful thanksgiving.

**Aumary d'Abbetot** in turn also had two sons, **Urso** and **Robert**. We do not know for certain when Aumary died, though it is thought to have been later than 1066. At his death, **Urso** predictably inherited the 'seigneurie' of **St. Jean d'Abbetot**. If, *as seems likely, this 'domaine' was still being deprived of its income from 'Church and tithes'*, a man of Urso's character is unlikely to have been long satisfied with *his impoverished lot*, which had been decided, in effect, a couple of decades earlier by his uncle, *the profligate 'Chamberllan de Tancarville'*. Younger brother Robert seems to have drawn a still shorter straw, with nothing left to 'inherit', and it seems virtually certain that in these straightened circumstances both brothers would have jumped on the *Conqueror's 'Invasion Band-wagon'* at the earliest opportunity. Whether either of them was actually present at the Battle of Hastings is uncertain. Planché freely admits that he cannot tell, and Nash's comment "Came over with the Conqueror" is ambiguously vague, as is that of his numerous acolytes. The many Battle Rolls of the conflict, listing the "Dukes, Counts, Barons and Seigneurs" who took part in the fateful events of Saturday, 14<sup>th</sup> October 1066 (Julian Calendar) are impressive but unreliable, being essentially 'copies of copies' made decades after the event. [vide Golding op. cit. supra)]. Robert Wace (1115 - 1183) a generally well-regarded chronicler writing in the 1150s, makes no mention of a d'Abitot'; another lists an 'Ours d'Abitot; yet another an 'Ambry d'Abitot. (Father, son or neither - who knows?). Planché says that Urso had arrived in England certainly by 1073, and he and others confirm that Urso was one of those most active in crushing the rebellion against William I by Richard, Earl of Hereford in 1075, for which he was duly rewarded by the granting of manors. **He had indeed "arrived"!** Meanwhile, Robert was also making headway. Urso's land-tenancies lay mostly in Worcestershire, while apart from a few

manors in this county, which he held as under-tenant, Robert's principal estates were mostly in Lincolnshire, Leicestershire and Warwickshire, and he was Castellan of Tamworth. Robert also assiduously sought to forge links with the already powerful Despenser and Spenser families. Robert is credited with starting the building of Elmley Castle, later the barony of the Elmley branch of the Beauchamp family. Elmley is not mentioned in Domesday, though there is a reference to 'Elmlaege' in connection with land held by Bishop Leofing and Worcester Church (Abbey). [vide op. cit. Morris/ Phillimore - App. 5 .Worcs G]. It seems that Robert was not 'given' the land for the Castle by William, as some commentators coyly maintain, he 'seized' it from the Church, - both brothers were all too often guilty of this practice! The blatant rapacity of the two men is stressed particularly by **Barfield** in his 'University of Birmingham' thesis mentioned earlier. Barfield re-echoes Prof. E.A. **Freeman** ("Norman Conquest - Vol iv " - vide infra) that in Worcestershire the *accumulated wealth* of the Beauchamps was *derived significantly from land seized* by these two men. Moreover, it can only be described (with no pun intended) as being Urso's and Robert's good fortune that, as *Barfield* observes, "Worcestershire was a county *unusually dominated* by ecclesiastical landlords."

Before we metaphorically bid farewell to France and Aumary, it must be observed that he is really the link between the two countries and also between the two "sources" - Nash and Planché. They are both "singing from the same hymn sheet" as regards names. "*Almericus*" is clearly an earlier latinised equivalent of Planché's "*Aumary*", both behaving according to well-defined philological rules. The 'l' of 'Almericus' vocalises to 'u', - a common process in French today (cf. pluralisation of : journal > journaux, cheval > chevaux.). The 'icus' is a latinised form, probably borrowed by Nash from Lyttleton (vide supra). This ending weakens in French to the half-vowel 'y', - and there you have it - "Aumary"!

Once having arrived in England, there are no reports of the brothers ever having returned to their native soil, (if indeed France was their 'native soil'. - vide Appendix 1). Under the new régime of opportunity which they found as enthusiastic followers of the Conqueror (other *less bland epithets* would not be out of place!), they both set about carving out for themselves 'careers' in the broadly '*financial and administrative sector*' - Urso as Sheriff ('vicecomes' in Domesday): Robert as Bursar ('dispensator'). In this world of "money" were they perhaps (*subconsciously?*) making some statement about themselves following their relatively impoverished beginnings occasioned by the '*infamous charter of 1050*'? We know nothing about their education, but it seems probable that they would have achieved *a basic level* of literacy and numeracy. Urso in particular, 'out and about' in the County, would have needed to be *sharp-witted* enough to personally counter the wiles of both manorial reeves and church officials who would be striving to pay over the least amount possible in dues and taxes; - he could not have waited for 'the people back in the office' to advise him. A man of Urso's character clearly would have relished this 'hands on' approach.

One final point to be raised is the question of the possible date of **Urso's birth**. There is no definite answer to this. We can only surmise in general terms. As regards the date of his death, Nash and others say he was still alive in 1112. **An interesting Internet website with 'computer generated genealogical tables'** (vide Appendix 1.) gives the date for his birth as possibly 1050, (and in Lincolnshire, moreover!), *but this in itself is highly suspect*. If this date is correct, then 'our hero' would have been a sixteen year old teen-ager at the Battle of Hastings. If

his entry on one of the Battle Rolls (above) as one of the “seigneurs” is true, that would imply that his father had died and Urso had inherited. Both are ‘possibles’, - just about! Present day history tells us that in revolutions in third world countries, for example, sixteen year olds can indeed be vicious fighters, determined and ruthless well beyond their years, though whether they can successfully command older men, as “*seigneurie*” suggests, is rather more open to doubt. A much more serious question concerns the *virtually certain fact* that Urso was appointed Sheriff shortly after 1066. (This is confirmed in detail by Nash - vide infra). The selection process of the Sheriff, the personal commitments required and the duties of the post once appointed, (vide infra) make it hard to believe that the Conqueror, who was certainly no fool, would have appointed a teenager, no matter how keen and dynamic he appeared. If we were to give Urso another ‘ten years of experiencing life’, perhaps, and if we were to suppose that he was born about 1040, then the whole new hypothetical scenario begins to make more sense – “viz: (possibly?) a ‘junior officer’ leading a ‘platoon’ of men at Hastings, and then Sheriff aged 26, Domesday Survey aged 47 (at the height of his career), still alive age 72?” (but *such manoeuvring* with figures is hardly ‘history’!)

**The above-mentioned ‘website’ referring to Urso** is very easy to find, for readers who are interested. (Simply type in **Urso d’Abitot** and follow the links from the ‘home page’, preferably following the sub-site routes of “Genealogy Data Page 222” and “Emmeline d’Abitot born 1110 of Barley” etc). Readers will find here and on the other sub-sites sets of facts and figures many of which may be described as ‘*interestingly bizarre*’, but they have been on the ‘net’ - (without being challenged, as far as is known) for so many years that it is difficult to simply dismiss them out of hand. “Someone out there” fairly obviously believes them to be true, (or at least ‘*anecdotally true*’, as the website says). The writer, however, admits that he finds it difficult to establish an absolutely convincing rationale behind all the “possibilities” as they are presented to us, - especially the dates. The (not entirely infallible) ‘authoritative sources’ already quoted, - Nash, Grazebrook and Planché, together with ‘their earlier sources’, - all imply that Urso and his family ‘lived in Normandy’ before the Conquest. The websites do not contradict this. What comes to us as a *complete surprise* is the suggestion that Urso, his father Aumary (Almericus), Urso’s wife Adeline (Adeliza) and daughter Emmeline were born, the first two actually in Lincolnshire, the last two in Derbyshire. A brief moment of reflection will show that in the overwhelming majority of cases Nash’s statement that “they lived in Normandy etc.” may be safely taken to mean that they were ‘born’ there as well. It is clear, however, that in the most exceptional of cases, that is *not necessarily true*. They could just as easily have all been ‘born’ elsewhere, and then ‘grown up’ in Normandy. “There’s nowt so queer as folk” runs the North Country phrase, - does this apply here to the d’Abitots? The ‘proper’ thing to do is surely to present all the details, then ask readers to decide for themselves. With this thought in mind, the intriguing topic of **“Urso in Lincolnshire (?)”** is further explored in the **first of the Appendices** at the end of this monograph.

## **Urso in England**

Once his troops had recovered their stomachs after the Battle of Hastings, William lost no time in demonstrating to the vanquished what was to be gained by submission, and what would be lost by resistance. A vast swath of fire and plunder [Schama - History of Britain - Vol.1 (1992)] was cut across the countryside of Southern England. One by one the great centres of Anglo-Saxon power crumbled. First Canterbury, then Winchester, where Queen Edith, widow of Edward the Confessor, personally handed over the keys of the city and the necropolis of the great Saxon kings.

London was not taken by a frontal assault. To create greater effect, the city was almost ceremoniously surrounded, and then the Conqueror entered to find Archbishops Stigand and Aeldred, and Edgar the Atheling ready to kneel in submission. The Anglo-Saxon notables were in for a rude awakening if they thought that the Norman occupation would be a repeat performance of earlier Viking invasions, where a Danish figurehead had simply presided over fundamentally the same system of government, aided by the 'in situ' hierarchy of earls and thanes. **The Saxon system of local government**, which dated back to King Alfred in 871, and which of course included the office of Sheriff, to which Urso aspired, was based on the principles of **decentralisation and diversity**. "County notables" elected those who were charged with administering "County affairs".

**The Norman system was entirely different**, being based on a rigid policy of **control from the centre**. With few exceptions, the Saxon dignitaries were dismissed from their posts, to be replaced *briefly* by Normans of approximately equivalent rank. (In **Worcestershire** the only manor to remain in Saxon hands was that of **Chaddesley**, held incidentally, by a woman, Edeva or 'Aldeve'). William soon discovered that though they were his compatriots, these new men were *highly dangerous*. Having helped William with his conquests, they expected greater rewards than he could immediately afford to give them - and *quickly!* Victory may have been achieved at Hastings in 1066, but even as late as 1073 great areas of the Northern Counties had still not been settled enough to be handed over to potential tenants. ***Rebellion after rebellion*** by disgruntled grandees seriously threatened the position of William himself. To add to his difficulties, in 1069 Danish Vikings ("Viking" means "warrior"), though ethnic kinsmen of the Conqueror, spotted the chance to consolidate earlier conquests by invading Yorkshire and Northumbria and burning down the city of York. William's response was typically swift and drastic. *He devastated the Northern Counties* and for good measure invaded the kingdom of Scotland. When at last he could turn his attention to civil administration, he dismissed his newly appointed, but treacherous, aristocratic Norman sheriffs, and found it expedient to **select Sheriffs from the less influential ranks** of society, men of **ignoble stock, and raised so to speak from the dust,** as the Anglo-Norman chronicler, **Ordericus Vitalis**, contemptuously puts it. William sought men of this class who had the *burning ambition* to succeed, untroubled, like himself, by scruples and qualms of conscience and who would not be tempted by loyalties to long established noble families. **Urso d'Abitot was one such man** ***"who had no great pedigree worth speaking of"***. [A.J. Poole "Domesday Book to Magna Carta 1087 - 1216" (Oxford History of England vol. 3 - 1985)] He was therefore well qualified to apply for the post **when the time came to bid for it**. Such was William's system. Ever desperately short of money, the post went ***to the man who could guarantee*** the highest annual sum for the royal treasury, - by whatever means. This led to the grossest of abuses on the grandest scale. The peasantry and others both in the town and countryside who were being fleeced were powerless to complain. ***The way to obtaining royal justice lay via the very man who was perpetrating the extortion*** - the Sheriff himself! It might be supposed that the Church would have shown compassion and sympathy for the plight of the downtrodden, but the ***Church was far too busy*** protecting its own affairs to intervene, moreover, certain members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy were not above **shady deals** of their own. One of the very rare cases of "official recognition" of the swingeing severity of Urso's methods is to be found in the entry for **Old Sodbury** [vide Morris/Phillimore **"Domesday Book - Gloucestershire"** (Sect

**1.48)** where we learn that at the “salt holding” of that manor at **Droitwich** “Urso the Sheriff so oppressed (vastavit) the men that now they cannot pay (the tax for having produced) the salt,” [For a fuller account this example of Urso’s fiendishly complicated way of ‘milking the system’ to his own advantage, see also VCH.Worcs Vol.2 p265]. It goes without saying that Urso would have squeezed other ‘tax-payers’ still more harshly to make up this short-fall.

The emphasis on raising money when considering the appointment of the Sheriff indicates the priority given by William to that function. For a **determined pecuniarist such as Urso**, the *spectacularly diverse duties* of his office offered endless opportunities for **corruption** which he was not slow to exploit. His duty to provide soldiery for William’s many military needs was sometimes tempered by his willingness, on receipt of an appropriate sum, to ‘grant exemptions from National Service’ as we would have said in a later age. As principal law officer for the County, he was responsible for the arrest of criminals and their punishment. William had suspended capital punishment but the remaining ‘menu’ of punishments was still horrendous, - physical mutilation, - cutting off hands and ears, castration, putting out eyes and punishments by endurance etc, were still daunting enough. [Capital punishment was restored shortly after William’s death (op. cit. A.J. Poole) and the range of capital offences grew over the centuries until by 1820 no less than 126 crimes (‘sheep-stealing’ is a much quoted example) attracted this penalty]. *Justice in ‘civil law’ cases allowed Urso’s personal preferences and antipathies to have full rein*, - both in the matter of verdicts and the amount of fines involved, so that any monies paid over always took account of the Sheriff’s own *substantial ‘cut’*. It was clearly impossible for him to attend every manorial court, but he did appear in person whenever possible and in any case had to ‘rubber stamp’ all the verdicts. This abuse of power was not unique (though Urso was one of the worst offenders), with the result that in the end William was forced (vide Poole) to send out judges ‘from the centre’ in London to take over some cases and ensure more impartial standards. Thus we have the beginnings of the system of ‘circuit judges’ which has persisted until modern times.

**The “métier par excellence” of this grotesquely rapacious mediaeval Pooh Bah**, however, lay in “**land deals**”, - all too commonly “**land seizures**”. As the VCH (Worcs) Vol 2 says, “**Worcestershire alone** was the scene of his remarkable proceedings. In Worcestershire, at the time of the Domesday Survey, he held of the Crown a fief at least as large as any other lay tenant; however, **his real power** lay in the vast amount of land he held as **an under-tenant**. This was at the “sharp end of the action” when it came to enforcing tax and revenue collection (and extortion!). Here was where the most easily divertable and concealable profits were to be made. Tenants further up the chain were by comparison mere ‘middle men’. The King was predictably the largest landowner, followed by the Church, in particular the great Churches (abbeys) of Worcester, Gloucester, Hereford, Westminster, Pershore and Evesham, The French abbeys of St. Denis in Paris, Bayeux and Corneilles in Normandy. ‘Coventry Church’ plus the monks of St. Guthlac (Hereford) and the canons of St. Peter (Wolverhampton) all held manors and were entitled to receive manorial dues. Urso was under-tenant of many of these manors, and cutting through the fog of complexity which surrounds Domesday land tenure it may be said that of the land ‘available’ to laymen in the county, **Urso ‘had his finger in the pie’ of at least 60% of it**, in one capacity or another. It was with **the Church** that Urso ‘got those same fingers burned’ when those Worcestershire abbots whose ‘mother churches’ lay outside the county, - and particularly the great French cathedrals, (vide Poole), **diverted to those “mother churches”**

large dues which Urso counted as his, leaving him with a considerable short-fall which he had to wrench from other unwilling victims. To 'get his own back' he resorted to blatant confiscation of church land. The Church, in fact, was Urso's principal protagonist, and we are made aware of this more vividly today by the fact that the Church was, in an age of limited literacy, the institution most able to record its case convincingly for posterity. We cannot leave the present theme without quoting the well-known passage in the VCH. Worcs Vol 2 p. 262. The gist of the incident is referred to by Nash, Grazebrook, Planché and almost every other local historian:

**"The dominant personality** revealed to us, in Worcestershire, by Domesday is that of **Urso the Sheriff**. In Mr. Freeman's words (E.A.Freeman "Norman Conquest" vol 1V (1871):- **"The terrible Sheriff, Urse d'Abitot** was the chief of a whole band of Norman spoilers, who seem to have fallen with special eagerness on the lands of the Church in this particular shire. But the Sheriff was the greatest and most daring of them all. He built his castle in the very jaws of the monks at Worcester so that the fosse of the fortress encroached on the monastic burying ground." (Freeman) then tells the "famous tale" of Ealdred, archbishop of York and 'protector' of the see of Worcester, examining the site and denouncing Urse in the following grim terms: - **"Highest thou Urse, hast thou God's curse."** ('Highten' = to be called - Anglo-Saxon, cf mod. German 'heißen') . [There was certainly no need for this act of sacrilege, there was plenty of room to remove the building of the "motte" of the castle a few yards further away. It was sheer spite on the part of Urse ]. **Planché** adds that Ealdred then continued: "and mine and that of all holy men, unless thou removest thy castle from hence, and know that thine offspring shall not long hold the land". This prophecy, says Planché, (if not a subsequent invention), refers to the fact that Urso's son, Roger, was unable to inherit, being subsequently banished for having slain an officer of Henry I, (1100 - 1135). For good measure he also died without producing an heir, [though Graze brook (op.cit p.1) **casts some doubt on this, as we have seen, and possibly with far-reaching consequences!**]. Urso's lands were given on the marriage of Urso's daughter Emmeline into the hands of her husband Walter de Beauchamp, where they were subsumed into the estates of that family and lost their identity. This story of Worcester Castle, involving also as it does Roger's possible 'double whammy', appears in William of Malmesbury (op. cit, supra) and must refer to an event which took place ante Sept. 1069, when Ealdred died.

Before leaving the '*story of Worcester Castle , one must record an interesting sequel*. In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, some 150 years after "Hastings", the centre of power moved from Worcester Castle to Elmley Castle, where the Elmley branch of the Beauchamp dynasty had by now established their 'residence'. At the time of the death of **King John** in 1216, Worcester Castle was of little significance and had so decayed that only part of it was suitable for use as the 'King's prison'. (VCH Vol,3). John's affection for the Abbot and citizens of Worcester led to his request to be buried 'between the tombs of St. Oswald and St. Wulstan' in the great Abbey (now the Cathedral) [Frazer - "Companion into Worcestershire"(1939)]. Before he died he commanded that his son, as Henry III, **should restore the 'confiscated' land to the monks**. This was done, probably on the occasion when Henry attended the re-dedication of the Abbey in 1218, following the rebuilding of the tower which had collapsed in 1175. Was this perhaps a gesture of royal contrition for the initial misdeed of his ancestor's Sheriff Urso as well as for some of his own shortcomings which have earned for John 'Lackland' the opprobrium of history?

To return from the above digression to the theme of Urso himself, we can see from the dates mentioned earlier, (arrival 1066 - seizing Church land as Sheriff 1069?) that **he wasted no time** in ingratiating himself and obtaining not only the post of Sheriff, but also that of Castellan of Worcester; and in order to castellate he would have needed to be at least of the rank of “**vicecomes**”. In Worcestershire, William had acted **especially swiftly after 'Hastings'** to set up his ‘new order’. Nash (op. cit. vol 1) tells us “Kindwardus was Sheriff at the Conquest, and Deputy soon after to Urso de Abetot (sic) ‘qui hereditatus vicecomes a Rege constitutus erat’. (who was confirmed as hereditary Sheriff by the King). The rank of “**vicecomes**” (viscount), known in Normandy but new to the Anglo-Norman hierarchical system, was given by William to **all these Sheriffs’ of more modest birth** to give them some sort of authority and social standing with other nobles of higher rank. (vide Golding op. cit. supra). When Urso arrived in England he was presumably still only the “sieur” (lowest rank) of the dependant manor of St. Jean d’Abbetot (vide Planché supra). He needed this new rank (one step higher) when in due course, among other things, his ‘talents’ conveyed him (part-time?) to central government in London. (Details of this development in his career are virtually unknown, and in any case are beyond the scope of a ‘local history’). Urso was now able to ‘hobnob’ comfortably with the ‘mandarins of William’s Civil Service’, though whether he ever had any real friends there we do not know.

### **Urso chez lui (Urso at home)**

We have no information either as to whether Urso was a good husband or an indulgent father. His “public persona” doesn’t raise our hopes too much! His likely “place of residence” provides more scope for examination, however. In this respect, two manors (estates) are in possible contention - in alphabetical order - **Hindlip** and **Salwarpe**, today, two small villages about four miles apart between Worcester and Droitwich. At this point I hope the reader will forgive a departure from the standard ‘impersonal third person’ style generally associated with “academic research (?) papers”, and allow a little ‘personal narrative’. - (Nash does this sort of thing, anyway!). Regarding **Hindlip**, I have long been intrigued, over a period of some years, that on more than one occasion, when I have expressed some doubt as to whether Urso ‘lived at Hindlip’, my ‘companion in conversation’ whoever he may have been, would assure me that I was wrong, and that he, ‘A’, knew ‘B’ who knew ‘C’, and ‘C’ knew that the old scoundrel did live there. Despite my interest in the mystery, I was never told who ‘C’ was and certainly not ‘what exactly he knew’! Accordingly, one lovely sunny day in June (2004), I decided to ‘have a day out in the glorious Worcestershire countryside’ and try and sort the matter out for myself. I drove to Hindlip and paused at the drive entrance which was guarded by the sign “Private Road - West Mercia Constabulary Headquarters and Hindlip Church”. I was not particularly interested in the Constabulary, but I ‘wanted’ the Church. So, driving along the immaculately tended drive I turned right to find myself confronted by the splendid Georgian mansion which is the Police Headquarters (on a hill, lovely views etc.,). But no Church. A passing pedestrian, from his bearing obviously a police officer, told me that the Church was ‘just round the next corner’, and that I could park in the official car park and get the key from reception - but ‘No, he knew nothing about Urso’. Cordially received in reception, I was given the key (my ‘phone number being logged in the visitors’ book!), and in the course of a brief conversation with the two receptionists (one a ‘local’ lady), plus another unknown ‘officer’ who was passing through the reception area, it transpired that no-one knew anything about my quarry! They were, however, aware of the Elizabethan, John Habington, and the role which the house later played in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. (An interesting topic in itself!)

I 'proceeded to the church', not really expecting to find any 'evidence',. bought a copy of "Hindlip - a brief history of the Estate and tour of the church of St. James", and noted, predictably, that a church had existed on the site possibly since Saxon times, but that no trace now remained.. The oldest part of the present building is 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is indeed, a lovely little village church, sympathetically cared for by the Constabulary, in whose extensive, well-manicured grounds it is situated. Next door is a black and white cottage, reputedly an old manor house - possibly Elizabethan, currently being restored as the Constabulary museum. But no sign of Urso!

I was not surprised. After all, Domesday (Phillimore/Morris op.cit.supra) tell us "Terra aecclesiae de Wirecestre - (from) the Land of the Church of Worcester, Urso holds five hides (1 hide = 120 acres approx.) at Hindlip and Offerton and Godfrey (holds this land) from him. The value was (before the Conquest) thirty shillings, it is now worth (only) twenty shillings" -(a drastic drop in value!). From the Survey we see that Urso 'rented out' the entire manor to the unknown 'Godfrey'. (The VCH and the author of the 'brief guide' (above) confirm this point. Both 'sources', incidentally, gloss over the way in which Urso acquired these two manors in the first place - did he 'seize' them from the Church, as in the case of so many other properties?). At all events he may well have rented out the 'whole package' simply because he saw Hindlip as an unattractive investment to manage personally, thanks to the 'damage' caused in so many ways to the countryside by the Norman invasion. Would Urso really have wanted to live at such a place, when he had the choice of so many other "plums"? A few miscellaneous internet web-sites on Hindlip, some 'historical' in nature, also make no reference to him. Finally, on several occasions when I have been at Worcestershire County Record Office, pursuing my own 'family research', I have 'side-tracked' to explore this point again, alone and also with help from the very efficient staff. Always the same result. There is no evidence that "He" lived at Hindlip with **Salwarpe**, however, **the matter is entirely different**. Here, too, we find no stone foundations etc., but other strong evidence is available. Domesday (op.cit. supra) tells us this time (5.1.) "Terra aecclesiae de Coventrev - the Land of the Church of Coventry, - St. Mary's Church of Coventry holds 1 hide at Salwarpe in Droitwich. Urso holds it from the Abbot. This land is his (Urso's) park. He has 4 burgesses and 6 salt-houses (salinae) in Droitwich. (A further entry, 14.2, reads "Terra Rogerii Comititis - Land of Earl Roger (Roger de Montgomerie, (south of Lisieux), Earl of Shrewsbury (mentioned earlier and one of the 'really big hitters' in William's team of thugs!) "The Earl holds Salwarpe, and Urso from him. 5 hides, a mill at 10 shillings, 5 salt-houses. Also a park there. Value before 1066 - £5, now £6." - (a nice little earner, by the standards of the time, and showing a '**profit**', as opposed to the 'loss' at Hindlip. A total on both estates of 6 hides and no less than 2 parks! The 'park' of course meant an enclosure (to keep out predators such as wolves) for the raising of deer etc., for the hunt, and in the smaller park, the raising of game, both of them for pleasure and for food. For the Norman nobleman, his 'park' was the equivalent of the private golf course today, no-one worth his 'salt' would be without one - and near his home, so that all could see it! As the VCH vol 2 p 265 observes "his 'park', close by at Salwarpe, points to his personal residence." More detailed attention to Urso's 'holding' of his 'estate' at Salwarpe is given in the VCH vol 3 p.207. The larger park (Morris/Phillimore), covering an area in excess of 125 acres, (VCH ibid,) was used as such until the sixteenth century, and the name survived until much later. On an older edition O.S. 1" map Sheet 130 (Kidderminster) - full revision 1915, may be seen, almost immediately north of Salwarpe, the small 'High Park', and adjacently further north the larger 'Deer Park', containing the 'Great Pool', - could this have been the manorial stew,

supplying fresh fish for the table? (The VCH records that Thomas Solley, lord of the manor in the reign of Elizabeth I, was 'seized of' (owned) a fishery at Salwarpe.) On the latest O.S. Landranger 150 sheet only the High Park and the Great Pool appear, (somewhat apologetically, one feels, in rather light type). The attractive early 16<sup>th</sup> century reddish brick timber-framed Salwarpe Court (with small pond - no suggestion of any link with Urso) and the nearby 14<sup>th</sup> century Parish Church (no guide book, this time, - only a board to carry round as you 'view') stands today in leafy seclusion out of earshot of the A38. One feels that in Urso's day it was also probably a very agreeable spot, - and only two or three miles from Droitwich, where he had major "interests" in the **salt industry of that town.**

**Salt** of course, was **an essential 'ingredient' in the domestic economy** of all countries before the invention of refrigeration for foodstuffs. Salt was produced by the evaporation of brine from the sea or river estuaries or from inland saline springs, - namely at **Droitwich** and in Cheshire. We have seen already that Urso held six 'salinae' as the under-tenant of the Earl of Shrewsbury. He had still more (VCH.3 p265) "extensive rights at Droitwich; of the sixteen estates he held in chief, no fewer than ten entitled him to a share in the proceeds of its salt, - a total of twenty-one (and a half!) salt-pans (houses) being his, - clearly some estates had more than one salt-house....(Moreover), as Sheriff, he acted as the King's agent and "farmed out" the royal rights over the land and saline springs of the town, which were important and extensive enough to give him, with the 'agent's premium', (still more) opportunity for oppression." *Droitwich was a veritable hive of activity* at this period; since the Cheshire salt industry had fallen on hard times, due in great part to the post-Conquest economic depression and political instability which still prevailed in the Northern Counties. [vide inter alii "Hinde - The Domesday Book, England's heritage, then and now (1997)"]. Urso's own holding, impressive as it was, was less than 10% of the reputed total number of two hundred and sixty-three (and a half!) salt-houses in the town, the 'tenants' of which were to be found listed in Domesday 'returns' all over the country. (The 'coastal' salt industry was puny in comparison.) The great leaden evaporating pans were produced within the county, and the never-ending demand for timber both for construction and for fuelling the evaporation process called for vast supplies of timber not only from Worcestershire sources such as Malvern Chase (where a thriving charcoal industry existed) and the Forests of Wyre and Feckenham but from as far away as the Forest of Dean. And all this activity was attended by a complex taxation regime, which (almost needless to say!) afforded Urso with scope for further extortion. A glance at the map will show, interestingly, that "Urso's residence at Salwarpe" lay to the windward of this Dante-esque scene, allowing him to enjoy his "profits" in pollution-free tranquillity. Had he apparently been a man of even moderate culture and sensitivity, he might well have said with Duncan (a near contemporary), "This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air nimbly and sweetly commends itself unto our gentle senses". - (Shakespeare - "Macbeth" - Act 1. Sc 6). Sadly, the 'literature' provides us with no hint that such 'refinements' formed part of Urso's character.

To end the main part of this monograph on a personal note, the writer, as a resident in Redmarley d'Abitot for nearly a quarter of a century, cannot help wishing that it was possible to see Urso less in the light of being "this terrible Sheriff". True, out of all the sixty-odd manors in which Urso had a 'finger in the pie', the village enjoys with Croome d'Abitot the distinction of being the only two locations which still retain their 'positively exotic' familial suffix of 'Norman' origin, - and that, as has been shown in the earlier monograph "Redmarley d'Abitot - development of a name", is, *in*

both cases, not thanks to the Sheriff himself, but to distant relatives some three centuries after his death! On the 'plus side' too, descendants of Urso in later centuries resided at the Down House, but *how satisfying it would be is we could point out some feature and say "Urso himself was really here!"* This 'pleasure' seems denied to us. As it is, the village stood on the very 'edge' of the county as far as Urso's 'interests' and jurisdiction were concerned, and there is no record of his ever having been here - (though there are virtually no records of his 'travels' anyway). In general terms, at Domesday, 'Ridmerlege' was an average-sized manor of seven hides (1 hide = 120 acres approx.). A more detailed examination of the Domesday entry is in Appendix 4). There was nothing particularly remarkable about the manor, but then, 'normality' in Gloucestershire (or south Worcestershire) can in itself be very attractive! The constant problem is with Urso himself. One has to reluctantly admit that with him it was a case of grotesquely misdirected energy and 'talent'. At best he can only be described as an anti-hero. Fairly extensive research over a number of years has not shown up a single example of friendship or of a 'good deed' on his part. One might almost feel sorry for such a man and only hope that at least Adeliza and Emmeline loved him! Anachronistically perhaps, we are constrained in conclusion to borrow T.S.Eliot's phrase from "Macavity," and describe Urso succinctly as "a monster of depravity".

## Appendices

### **Appendix 1 - Urso in Lincolnshire ?**

The websites mentioned earlier suggest (surprisingly) that 'Urso and his father Aumary were born in Lincolnshire' and that 'Adeliza and Emmeline' were born at "Barley" (Barlow? 5 miles N.W. of Chesterfield), Derbyshire'. The authors of these websites would have immeasurably increased their credibility if only they had indicated their "sources". Denied this information, we must look briefly at the more general history of Lincolnshire at this time.

Commentators such as Hine (op.cit. supra) and Asa Briggs "A Social History of England" (1994) draw attention to the fact that "**Lincolnshire in 1086 must sometimes have felt like a nation separate from the rest of England**" (Hine). The influence, culture and control of the loosely-organised confederation of Wessex and Mercia diminished rapidly the further the traveller went towards the North Sea, to be replaced by an ever increasing 'Danish-ness' introduced over successive decades by the series of Viking invasions. It was noted in the earlier article on the 'name of Redmarley d'Abitot that the "tot" termination in the Norman French d'Abitot survived as the termination "toft" in 'Danish-English' place-names. Some two dozen settlements ending in "toft" are to be found in the area of the former Danelaw, (roughly east of a line Chester - Kent). Of these two dozen 'tofts' about half are to be found in a fifty mile 'coastal' area from north of Skegness (Huttoft) to south of Spalding (Lound by Toft). Boston is mid-way along this 'corridor' which lies between the sea to the east and the fenland to the west. The inhabitants of the settlements on this 'corridor', especially, felt separated from the rest of Lincolnshire. The fens themselves were not drained until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and in mediaeval times they were a marshy, dangerous, virtually uninhabited area, hindering access to the rest of the County. N.R. Wright "The Site of Boston during the First Millennium" (1997)] highlights the extent of pro-Danish feeling in this area, so far from Mercian control. (Taking a broader view to include the whole of the county, he also tells us that "on the eve of the Conquest almost all the leading landowners in Lincolnshire had Scandinavian names, and as late as 1066 itself one

notable landowner Ulf Fenisc seems to have been a very recent arrival from Denmark). He speaks of this area of "**Scandinavian Lincolnshire**" (sic) as displaying "a sturdy independence of thought and action" at variance with the rest of the Danelaw. On one occasion we are told that Florence of Worcester (a monk despite his name, which was probably the mis-spelling of the 'masculine' form "Florens") recounts how it was impossible to raise a body of armed local men to resist a Danish raid because they were "**all Danes on their fathers' side**". Given that the "immigrant Northmen" of Normandy and these "immigrants" of Lincolnshire both had Danish blood in their veins, it seems not impossible that some degree of social interaction between them took place - they were, after all, the 'ruling classes' who were free to decide where they travelled, unlike the peasants who were 'tied' to their manors. Could it even be that the Danes who established the "tot" settlements in Normandy came from the same 'tribe' as those who founded the "toft"s in Lincolnshire?. As has been observed already, the essentially 'macho' Normans were keen enough on reporting military and legal matters, but they were far less diligent in recording 'family matters' for posterity; - such details seemed beneath their notice. We have, quite simply, **no irrefutable proof** of where Urso was actually born, and it seems that his 'career' path would probably have been much the same **in whichever country the event took place**. As for 'Adeliza and Emmeline', on the one hand it is quite natural that Adeliza should have 'gone back to mother' for the birth of her daughter, but equally one may ask why she wasn't 'at home' with her husband in Worcestershire (Salwarpe?) - was it possibly something to do with Urso's 'less than sympathetic' character? Will some future historian ever discover the links which would really solve this problem.? Who knows!

### **Appendix 2 - A Celtic pedigree for Urso ?**

"It is now generally accepted that there was a (6<sup>th</sup> century) **historical King Arthur**", ["Cambridge Guide to English Literature" - M. Stapleton (1988)], but he must not be confused with the **legendary King Arthur** of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century 'chansons de geste' and 'romans courtois' (courtly romances). The 'Arthur' of history is named twice in one of the ancient chronicles of Wales - the '**Annales Cambriae**' - a Latin text dating from circa 970. One of the references concerns his death in the Battle of Camlann in 537 AD.

Robert Wace (1100 - 1175) has been mentioned earlier. He was a Norman Breton who in about 1150 was the first to take the 'historical' account of Geoffrey of Monmouth and turn the Arthur of fact into the Arthur of legend, (cf. Stapleton supra). Meanwhile, at about the same time in central France the court of Champagne had become the literary focal point of the '**langue d'oïl**' (the northern French language - the language of southern France, the 'langue d'oc, developed quite differently). In Champagne men such as **Chrétien de Troyes** developed a whole new literary genre of 'courtly romances' inspired by the Arthurian legends and a code of knightly chivalry absent in the early 'chansons de geste' of the previous century. (The 'damsel in distress' concept, for example, is completely absent in the world of the earlier 'macho' Norman "Chanson de Roland", where hardly a single female name appears). The influence of Chrétien and his fellow 'Champenois' spread throughout the Celtic lands from Brittany north to Scotland as well as appearing in mediaeval English and German literature.

It was this legendary Arthur who attracted the attention of certain people in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Sir William Dugdale, (already mentioned in page 1 in connection with Nash, - and here taking good

care not identify himself with their views), reports that these people saw, or thought they saw, a “link” based on the words for ‘bear’:- the mediaeval Latin **’Ursus’** (for the purist, “classical” Latin is different) and **’Arthgal’**, a mythical Earl of Warwick at the court of King Arthur, (derived from the Welsh ‘arth’, or ‘artos’, in some sources). This ‘link’, if proven, would have given ‘the dignity of antiquity’ to the provenance of the (‘terrible’) Sheriff of Worcestershire. **Significantly**, however, the Warwickshire County Record Office makes **no reference** to this ‘quaint belief’ in their article on the Warwickshire bear and ragged staff, and the role which they play in the history of the Beauchamp family and of the present County Council. *As is shown later, it is a case of ‘confusing’ two bears.* This ‘belief’ is recorded here *purely* in the interests of ‘completeness’, but **no**, it seems virtually impossible that Urso should have had a Celtic pedigree, despite the ‘tempting similarity’ between ‘Urso’ and ‘Arto(s).”

### ***Appendix 3 - The Heraldic Shields of the Beauchamp and d’Abitot families.***

#### Principal references.

- (1) “Victoria County History” - Worcestershire, (mainly) vol. 3.
- (2) “The Heraldry of Worcestershire” (1873) - Grazebrook.
- (3) ‘Boutell’s “Heraldry” (1863) - revised 1985 by J. P. Brooke-Little (Ulster & Norroy King of Arms) - *‘Boutell’ is for ‘armorists’ virtually their ‘bible’.*
- (4) “The Oxford Guide to Heraldry” (1988) - Woodcock & Robinson, respectively Somerset Herald and Fitzalan Pursuivant
- (5) “Basic Heraldry”(1993) - Friar & Ferguson.

Grazebrook describes some fourteen heraldic shields as belonging to branches of the Beauchamp and d’Abitot families in Worcestershire. No account is taken of the Beauchamp ‘empire’ outside the county. Two of those fourteen may be considered to have links with Redmarley, these are the “shields” printed on the (2002) Millennium Map of the village. As will be seen later, the ‘**older**’ [tempore **Edward I** (1272 - 1307)] of the two shields is the one illustrated on the **right** - the ‘red and yellow’ one. (One cringes almost to describe it in such banal terms. It should be described as a shield ‘per pale (divided down the middle) or (gold) and gules (red) with ‘roundels’ counter changed). The ‘**newer**’ shield in terms of antiquity [tempore **Edward II** (1307 - 1327)] is described as a shield ‘ermine’ (one of the two ‘furs’, with little ‘tails’), a ‘chief’ (top) bande with six or and sable (striped with six gold and black (sable) diagonal ‘bands’)

***In the history of Heraldry there is one particularly important event and date which is quoted by virtually every “authority”, headed by Boutell.***

**True Heraldry** has been defined “as the systematic use of **hereditary** charges and devices centred on the shield. The earliest known decorated shield which satisfies this definition is that which **Henry I of England** gave to his new son-in-law **Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Anjou** when he knighted him on the occasion of the marriage of Geoffrey to his daughter in 1127 “Woodcock & Robinson (vide supra) add that “this event, the earliest documented example in Europe of arms on a shield is, uniquely, recorded in both written and pictorial form. The

contemporary chronicler Jean Marmentier describes the occasion in manuscript, meanwhile the Musée Tessé in Le Mans, Normandy, preserves an enamel portrait of Geoffrey holding the shield. This 'portrait', an usually fine example of mediaeval art, used to be on the tomb of Geoffrey in the Cathedral, where he was buried on his death in 1131. The same 'shield' appears on the tomb in Salisbury Cathedral of Geoffrey's grandson, William Longesépée ('long sword') who died in 1226. The "arms" were clearly being treated as *hereditary*.

Right from the start *the formal granting of arms was regulated by the most precise set of rules*. Initially the records were kept on behalf of the monarch by the Exchequer on the Pipe Rolls (documents so called because they were stored 'rolled up like a pipe'). Pipe Rolls exist in almost unbroken sequence from the above period until about the 1830's when they gave way to new 'office' methods. They are preserved in the Public Record Office. The documents recording Grants of Arms were transferred to the **College of Herald**s on its establishment by Richard III in 1488. The great significance of **1127** for the 'armorist' is that it marks the beginning of the new *disciplined art and science of Heraldry*, in contrast with the unproven, unregulated, and often chaotic world which had prevailed before, and where not infrequently bizarre fantasy played its part. 'Devices' of this latter type go back to the very earliest periods of human history, and as far as the 'authorities' quoted earlier are concerned, they are styled not even 'pre-heraldic', but '**proto-heraldic**'. It will be noted that all the dates quoted by Grazebrook are 'post 1127' - nothing is reliably 'truly Heraldic' before that date. [There is even more than one account of the early 'history' of the English royal arms as emblazoned on the 'national' football shirts (vide Friars and Ferguson op.cit)].

From the very earliest mediaeval period in Europe the (often 'monastic') 'artist', - practicing his craft on parchment, stained glass or stone saw nothing incongruous in attributing 'arms' to Adam and Eve, even the Devil. David and other Old Testament heroes (and villains) were similarly 'honoured'. From the New Testament period and later, not only the Evangelists but a whole series of obscure saints were also accorded this mark of 'distinction'. Turning to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary with Urso, the 'knights' who fought at the Battle of Hastings also had their insignia, though historians (eg. Woodcock and Robinson - v. supra) note particularly that in the Bayeux Tapestry, these noblemen do not bear their 'devices' on their shields, (an '*essential*' in the *basic definition of 'true Heraldry* - vide supra.) Their 'insignia' are displayed separately on banners and pennons along the border of the Tapestry. The 'markings' on the shields simply indicate the bands of leather and metal necessary to strengthen the wood of which they were made.

We may easily imagine that a man of Urso's ambitious character (harmless enough in this instance), would certainly not have been slow to acquire for himself a 'heraldic device' of some sort. We must remember, however, that he was living wholly 'pre-1127'. There are so many other missing 'certain facts' in our knowledge of the man - precise dates of birth (leaving aside the 'Lincolnshire adventure'), - date and place of marriage and death, - burial place, - where, for certain, did he live, - what else did he do beyond behaving as the 'terrible Sheriff?', *that it comes as no surprise that we do not know what his 'shield', if he had one, really was*. The 'sources', from Nash onwards, are careful not to commit themselves. Other factors concerning Urso are also *frustratingly impossible* to actually prove. Nash tells us that '**Urso had a bear**' as his 'badge' - an appropriate and quite common 'device'. Urso's bear, says Grazebrook, was '**couchant**' (lying down), and Nash says it was to be seen carved at the corners of the tower of the (14<sup>th</sup> century -

therefore post Urso) Naunton Beauchamp Church . (The present Church is mostly 19<sup>th</sup> century). The *'other bear'* of Warwickshire and the House of Beauchamp, on the other hand, is a **bear standing and supporting a ragged staff** - heraldically quite different! This is the (Beauchamp) 'bear and ragged staff' to be seen in Elmley Castle Church as a panel on the bowl of the font - an attractive artifact described by Pevsner as having a Tudor bowl on a 13<sup>th</sup> century base. Warwickshire County Record Office, in its website "The Warwickshire Bear, the County and the House of Beauchamp" significantly makes *no reference* at all to Urso and 'his' bear.. "Their Bear" is the symbol of the two entirely legendary **Earls of Warwick** Arthgal and Morvidus.

We return now to the *'shields', as opposed to the 'badges'*, and to the essentially 'post 1127' commentaries of Nash and Grazebrook - (Planché makes no reference to heraldry). **Grazebrook** describes ten different shields based on the 'tinctures or and gules' (gold and red colouring) as borne by the Beauchamp's and their descendants from as far afield as Warwick and Abergavenny. These 'tinctures' may be fairly regarded as typically 'Beauchamp', a supposition confirmed by Grazebrook when he notes that a 'pre-1066' ancestor '**Hugh de Beauchamp** [from Avranches (Normandy) - Planché]' "*reputedly*" bore a 'device' "Gules, a fesse or" (red with a gold horizontal band). *Grazebrook also adds two d'Abitot but 'non- Beauchamp' arms for our consideration.* **Nash** takes the matter forward when he says (see page 1 above) that Walter de Beauchamp and his heirs, the succeeding members of the 'Beauchamp of Elmley' family, bore arms 'party per pale Gules and Or, three roundels counter changed'. *Nash makes it clear that they are the hereditary arms of the Beauchamp family, not specifically of Urso nor of Emmeline.* Urso was totally unrelated to Walter before Emmeline's marriage, and even then he was 'only' the father-in-law, a relationship of no armigerous consequence. If Emmeline had inherited her father's 'arms' at his death, which she was entitled to do, in the same way that she inherited the rest of his estate, there being apparently (*though Grazebrook casts some doubt*) no male 'heir', then according to the strict rules of heraldry, her 'arms' would have had to be in the form of a small *'charge in escutcheon of pretence'* in the centre of her husband's shield, (Friar and Ferguson p. 142). No such 'charge' appears to have effected on the Beauchamp shield, so we still do not know whether Urso actually had acquired arms for himself, legally or otherwise, nor what they might have been. Of all the 'heraldic shields' mentioned above, ***three are worthy of further consideration.***

### ***Three "Redmarley" Heraldic Shields***

***The first shield*** identified by Grazebrook (Vol.1.p 1) as being associated with Redmarley is termed "**Abbetot of Elmley Castle**" (sic). It is the familiar 'red and yellow shield' more properly termed 'per pale Or (gold) and Gules (red) three roundels counter- changed'. After a brief preamble reviewing the 'history' of the d'Abitot family, he tells us that this shield is known to have been borne by one **Geoffrey d'Abbetot** in the reign of Edward I (1272 - 1307). (Note that he does not say that Urso bore it - see earlier references to 'true Heraldry'). "Geoffrey held seven hides of land in Redmarley from **William de Beauchamp**, Urso's heir. This **William de Beauchamp** died in 1298. At the beginning of the next reign (Edward II - 1307- 1327), the name of a certain William d'Abbetot occurs among the 'knights' of Worcestershire." (see 'third example' below). Threading one's way through the complex 'genealogy' of the VCH.Vol.3 p342, it appears that *'this Beauchamp'* was probably the 'great, great, great grandson of Walter and Emmeline Beauchamp. [Add one more 'great' to establish his relationship(?) to Urso!]. The **genealogy of the d'Abitot's** is equally lengthy and **much more uncertain** (ibid. p 482). The 'Beauchamps'

at this stage were all baptized as either 'Walter' or 'William' in an irregular sequence, while the d'Abitot's in their turn favoured some three Geoffrey's, two Osbert's and two Ralph's ranging through father, sons, grandson, uncles and a nephew. The issue is further complicated by a lack of definite answers as to the 'remaining?' half of Urso's inheritance (vide Benfield, supra) and the 'mystery' of Adeliza's estates and Roger's 'possible' heirs (Grazebrook).

**The second "example" in Grazebrook (Book 1 - p 151)** is entitled "**D'Abbetot or d'Abitot of Redmarley d;Abitot**". It is exactly the same shield as above, viz. 'per pale Or and Gules, three roundles counter changed'. The quoted 'authority' is the College of Armorsists (Heralds) - Folio 30. - a detail omitted by Grazebrook in the first 'example'. *The preamble is refreshingly candid. "In what way this family is related to Urso d'Abitot, the Sheriff, is not clear", says Grazebrook. We have no difficulty in agreeing with him!* The earlier reference to "Geoffrey d'Abitot holding seven hides of William de Beauchamp (tempore Edward I)" is repeated. An oblique reference by Grazebrook to a distant relative of Geoffrey, a certain "William d'Abitot of Warwickshire living temp. Henry VII (1485 - 1509)", whose 'heraldic roundels' are described as 'bezants', seem to interest him. Presumably this is because the 'bezant' [a round coin named after 'Byzantium' (Constantinople)] is often used in Heraldry (vide Friar and Ferguson) to indicate that the bearer of the shield had fought in the Fourth Crusade which ended in 1204 with the 'sack' of that city. The VCH however, seems to accord no such distinction to a d'Abitot.

**The third "example" is in Grazebrook (Book 1 - p 152)**. This is the only "d'Abitot" shield to be illustrated in the VCH Worcs (Vol 3 p 483) - the section devoted to *Redmarley*. It is described as being 'ermine, a chief bendy of six Or and Sable' - (white ermine fur with black 'tails', at the top six diagonal stripes 'sinister' (inclined to the left), three gold, three black), the shield of "**d'Abitot of Worcestershire**" as borne *tempore* Edward II (1307 - 1327) by Sir William d'Abitot. This appears to be the 'William d'Abitot' already briefly referred to as "*one of the knights of Worcestershire*" in the 'first example' above.

#### ***Appendix 4 - "Redmarley" in the Domesday Book***

The **Domesday Book**, our earliest 'public record', is a unique achievement. No other Western European state has anything even remotely comparable until the nineteenth century (Hine op.cit.supra et passim). The Survey is far more than a fiscal record. It is a detailed statement of lands acquired by the Conqueror since 'Hastings 1066'. King William was the only **landowner**. All his subjects were merely his **tenants**, in descending order of their status in the feudal hierarchy. The Domesday Survey is a record of the 'resources' of these lands, both 'human' and 'in kind'. We learn of their present value, and their earlier value T.R.E. (in the reign of Edward the Confessor). As is generally known, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that at his Court held at **Gloucester at Christmas in 1085** the King "had much thought and held deep speech" with his Council which resulted in the royal command that the Survey be compiled with the utmost speed. Much excellent 'literature' exists on the compilation of this huge undertaking. In short, a contemporary annotation on one of the volumes of the Survey tells us that the work was carried and 'ready for use' in less than a year, before the end of 1086!

The Survey is written in a 'monastic shorthand' based on eleventh century ecclesiastical Latin.. The text, translation and notes below are essentially those of the authoritative Phillimore/Morris "***Domesday Book - Worcestershire***" (1982). (Morris is able to use the specially designed "Farley" type of 1783, which cannot be reproduced here)

De ipso M(anerio). ten(et) Vrso vii hid' ad **Ridmerlege**. Wills de eo ii hid' ex istis. In d'nio sunt iiii car', xxiii uilli,(villi) ix bord' cu(m) x car'. Ibi vi serui,(servi), ii ancillae, molin' de v sol' viii denar'. Silua (silva) i leuu' lg', dim lat. .Valo' viii lib', m x sol min'. Azor et Goduin tenuer(unt) de E(pisco)po' deserui(erunt)

Urso holds 7 hides of this Manor at **Ridmerlege** . William holds 2 hides of them from him. In the 'lordship' there are 4 ploughs, 23 'villagers' and 9 'smallholders' with 10 ploughs 6 male 'slaves' and 2 female 'slaves'. A mill worth 5s 8d'. Woodland 1 league (about one and a half miles?) long and 'a half' wide. The value (at the time of Edward the Confessor) was £8, it is now 10 shillings less. (At that time) Azor and Godwin (Saxon thanes?) held it from the Bishop (of Worcester) and gave (military?) service.

Notes: Morris reminds us again that the village name is "derived not from Urso himself, but from a junior branch of his family who were sub-tenants of the Beauchamps in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries". *William's 2 hides* may have been at Innerstone (VCH iii p484). *The 'lordship, domaine' (d'nio = 'dominio' from 'dominius')* was the land farmed for the lord's 'private' use. The 'ploughs' included also the oxen (usually 8 per plough). In descending order the *Peasantry* were divided in to the '*freemen (liberii)*', the '*villagers (villanii)*' the '*smallholders - (bordarii)*', the '*cottagers (cotarii)*' and at the 'bottom of the heap' the '*slaves, (servii and ancillae)*'. The higher the 'freedom' status, the greater the amount of land cultivated. The 'servii' were devoid of all such advantages. The exact population of the 'manor' is unknown, since only 'heads of households' are listed. Some 'authorities' favour 'multiplying by a factor of five, but even then the result is still very 'hit and miss'.

The 'Mill' would have been a watermill. Windmills were introduced from Holland only in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. (The VCH does not firmly identify the location of the '*Domesday' mill*. We read of a 'mill' known as 'Pauntleys' (1339); Bury Mill and 'Flaxeorde' Mill (15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> cent.) and others still later). The decline in property values (in this case that of the Mill), though not universal, is certainly a common enough feature in Domesday. The countryside (and the towns) were still recovering from the 'knock on' effect of the devastation, both material and economic, caused by the Conquest of 1066, and the widespread unrest and rebellions which followed (examples were noted earlier). Moreover, to make matters worse, the years 1083 and 1084 were characterized by disastrous harvests, the effects of which were still being felt as the Domesday Commissioners made their rounds. The population of the country at the time is unknown for certain, but it is generally assessed at about one and a half million, compared with an equally approximate estimate of about four million 'indigenous inhabitants' at the time when the Romans departed in the fifth century AD. Reluctantly one feels that England was not a happy land as the eleventh century drew to a close. It is beyond the scope of our present remit, but there seems a promise of much more hope in the next century.

Source: Eric Smith