

**THE WAPENTAKE OF WIRRAL: A
HISTORY OF THE ROYAL
FRANCHISE OF THE HUNDRED
AND HUNDRED COURT OF
WIRRAL IN CHESHIRE**

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The Wapentake of Wirral: A History of the Royal Franchise of the Hundred and Hundred Court of Wirral in Cheshire by Ronald Stewart-Brown

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THE WAPENTAKE OF WIRRAL



THE WIRRAL WAPENTAKE COURT AND MANOR HOUSE

From a photograph by JOHN BISHAM, Esq.

Frontispiece

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THE WAPENTAKE
OF WIRRAL

A History of the Royal Franchise of the
Hundred and Hundred Court of
Wirral in Cheshire

With

An Appendix containing a List of the Officers and Lords
of the Hundred from the Fourteenth Century; a
Series of Leases of the Hundred from 1352
to 1786; and the Crown Grant of the
Lordship of the Hundred in 1820

BY

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PREFACE

LITTLE more than fifty years ago, within the memory of some now alive, there existed in Wirral a court of so-called justice owned by a private individual and upwards of a thousand years old. The power of summoning jurors, of fining offenders, of deciding the law, of ordering payment of debts, of levying distresses, has so long been associated by the present generation with courts administered by officials of the State, that it is difficult to imagine such powers in the hands of a private citizen. Yet for some years in the fifties the inhabitants of Birkenhead, Tranmere, Bebington, Neston, and other parts of Wirral went in daily fear of such a court.

The only attempt at an account of the Wapentake or Hundred Court of Wirral is contained in the last chapter of Mrs. Gamlin's book "Twixt Mersey and Dee" (Liverpool, 1897) and deals only with the last forty years of the Court's existence. The author apparently obtained most of her information from a small pamphlet entitled "A Free Village Library, Bebington," published in 1878 for Mr. Joseph Mayer, F.S.A., containing the substance of articles which had appeared in the *Standard* news-

paper. Mrs. Gamlin's story, so far as it goes, is interesting, and suggested the need of a fuller account, but it contains many inaccuracies.

So extraordinary and incredible were these last years of the Court that the writer of Mr. Mayer's pamphlet classes the Wirral Wapentake with the "Cheiro-therium," traces of which were found near Bebington, and it was the performances of such a mysterious and powerful monster as he made it out to be that aroused my interest and led me to make the investigations the results of which are here set down.

The Hundred Courts of the County Palatine of Chester have been neglected by the writers of Cheshire history. One naturally turns first to the pages of Ormerod for information, but that given by him is very meagre. The Court of Wirral is dismissed with the bald and misleading statement that in 1816 it was farmed under the Crown, but it was no longer in existence. The accounts of those of Broxton, Eddisbury, Northwich, and Nantwich are scarcely any fuller. A little more detail is given of those of Macclesfield and Bucklow, and in the latter case dates and references to two Crown leases are given. In Mortimer's "History of the Hundred of Wirral," where one would expect to find full details, very little more information is given as to the Court of that Hundred. He prints (with many errors) a copy of the deed under which it was granted in 1820 to John Williams, but makes no attempt to carry the matter further. Sulley,

in his "Hundred of Wirral," makes no reference to the Court at all. Other writers on Cheshire history either ignore the Court entirely, or just mention its existence.

It will be seen, however, that there are in the Cheshire Recognisance Rolls and Ministers' Accounts, and elsewhere in the Record Office, a series of Leases and records of the officers of the Hundred Court of Wirral from the year 1352 down to the year 1820. It is true that Ormerod refers to a few of the entries on the Recognisance Rolls, but chiefly in footnotes and merely for the purpose of recording the names of the office-holders for genealogical purposes. I think I may claim to be the first to make any extensive examination of the Cheshire Ministers' Accounts for historical purposes. About 250 years have been examined. The series of leases have never been dealt with before, which is remarkable in view of the fact that they are leases of the "Hundred of Wirral," upon which two special works have been written.

As some of the oldest courts of justice in the kingdom, the Hundred Courts seem to deserve fuller treatment than has been given to them, and I have here endeavoured to trace, from such records as exist, the history of one. I am not aware that the devolution of a Hundred franchise has ever been traced in detail before, though a similar chain of documents might perhaps be unrolled for other Hundreds. But very few Hundred Courts were at all active after the end of the eighteenth