

Lists of knight's fees in Kent : 1242--3 : Aid for the king's crossing the sea to Gascony : Introduction

In the second week of December 1242, in connection with "the aid for the king's crossing the sea to Gascony" (or "the scutage of Gascony", as it was less formally known), writs were sent out from the Exchequer ordering every sheriff to draw up a list of the knight's fees in his county. He was to make the necessary investigations "upon the oaths of twelve good and lawful men, knights or others, who could be held responsible if found negligent or partial. According to the writs, the juries had simply to ascertain the number of fees in each county, whether held directly of the Crown or of mesne <intermediate> lords who in turn held of the Crown. The writs were, however, accompanied by definite instructions, which explained and enlarged the scope of the enquiry. Returns were demanded as to the tenant, the overlord, and the locality of each fee, and the honour of which it formed part. ... The sheriffs were furthermore directed to prepare separate rolls, hundred by hundred, enumerating the remaining towns <villages> of the county, that is to say those which were not held by military service, and stating the names of the owners and their respective tenures. They were also required to exact the scutage from all defaulters, and to deliver the money and the inquisitions at the Exchequer by the 27th of January, 1243" (Book of fees, pp 638--9). Of the documents produced in response to these writs, most appear to have been lost; so have the accounts for the scutage itself, which were entered on a special-purpose roll. (Some unpaid debts were transferred to the great roll in 1244, after the separate scutage accounts had been closed.)

The sheriff of Kent at the time was Bertram de Crioil; his deputy was Johan de Cobham; I do not know which one of them took charge of this assignment, but somebody certainly did. A list of knight's fees for the county of Kent, compiled in Dec--Jan 1242--3, was submitted to the Exchequer. It does not survive; but there are two derivative versions of the text, produced inside the Exchequer, from which it is possible (with the help of some background knowledge) to arrive at a rough reconstruction of the form and content of the primary version.

Both of the derivative versions were copied into one of the Exchequer's registers, the "Book of Fees" (E 164/5--6); through that channel they became known to antiquaries such as Thomas Philipott. (Philipott thought that they were connected with the aid of 1235--6, but he was certainly wrong about that -- or, to put it more kindly, he was almost but not quite right.) With the rest of the book, both lists were printed by the Record Commission in 1807 (under the quaint title "Testa de Nevill"); but that edition has long since been superseded. A new edition of the contents of the "Book of Fees" was produced by the PRO in 1920--31. It is a fine piece of work, meticulous without being fussy. For the two lists relating to Kent, the PRO edition was based, not on the copies in the register, but on the surviving originals. My translation is taken from the printed text; I have not looked at the documents themselves.

Unexcitingly, I call the three versions A, B and C. Version A was the list compiled and submitted by the sheriff of Kent. As the derivative versions prove, by their existence as well as by

their structure, it was organized cadastrally, lest by lest and hundred by hundred. In version B the lests persist but the hundreds disappear: within each lest the entries are grouped by barony. In version C the lests also disappear, and the entries are grouped by barony, across the county as a whole. Within each section the order of the lests and hundreds is approximately preserved (quite well for the lests, only rather vaguely for the hundreds), but there is no indication of this in the actual text: one has to look for it to see it. So B is a transitional version, halfway between A, which was fully cadastral, and C, which is fully feudal. It was C which was used for checking the scutage account -- as is clear from the extensive annotation which has been added to this version.

From the fact that it put itself to so much trouble, it is clear that the Exchequer was working on the assumption that future aids would be collected in the traditional way -- from the king's tenants in chief. The only difference would be that each tenant's contribution would in future be calculated from the number of fees reported by a jury of his neighbours in 1242--3, not from the number volunteered by his predecessor in 1166. But that is not what happened. Future aids, so far as we have any record of them, were all collected in the same way as the "scutage of Gascony" -- by the sheriff, or by someone appointed for this particular purpose, directly from the person who was actually in possession. It turned out, that is, that the Exchequer had been wasting its time: in the slightly longer run, version A would have been the most useful one to keep.

Almost without exception, identical entries occur in B and C. Only the arrangement differs; the entries themselves are the same. I have numbered them as they appear in B. (The first digit denotes the lest; since there are more than a hundred entries in the lest of Aylesford, four-digit numbers are needed.) By using the same numbers in C, I hope to have made it obvious how the entries were reorganized. Just one entry included in C is not to be found in B (6049); nine entries included in B are not to be found in C (1003, 3007, 4021, 5096, 5102, 5104, 6041--3). It is possible that some entries were omitted deliberately; but mostly the discrepancies seem to be accidental.

Two large omissions are common to B and C. Neither version includes the archbishop's fees; neither version covers the hundred of Milton. Presumably this means that the sheriff of Kent was not responsible for collecting the scutage from the fees in question. The archbishopric was vacant at the time (a new archbishop had been elected but not yet consecrated), and the agents whom the king had put in charge would probably have collected any payments which were due. In the hundred of Milton some similar arrangement may have been in place. If the Exchequer wanted lists of those fees, apparently it knew that the sheriff of Kent was not the man to ask for them.

On the whole, the Exchequer scribes did a good job. If they had asked for my advice, I would have suggested that they should make a separate section for "Fees of Walter fiz Robert", and another for "Fees of the heirs of Robert Arsic"; and I would have tried to dissuade them from treating the bishop of Rochester as one of the king's tenants in chief. For the rest, however, they seem to have had the facts well under control. (Not having seen the originals,

I cannot say how many scribes were involved. The spelling in C is fairly consistent, and I would guess that it may be the work of a single scribe. The spelling in B is more variable, and I would guess that this version may have been the work of a team. But these, I repeat, are just guesses.)

To reconstruct version A, we have to start by deciding which hundred each entry belongs to. For the most part, this is not difficult to do. From the evidence of later aids, and from other indications, we know how the places fitted into the system of hundreds. But that is only a start. For a full reconstruction, there are more objectives that we should have to aim at: within each list, to fix the order of the hundreds; within each hundred, to fix the order of the entries. These further objectives are only very approximately achievable.

My own attempt at a reconstruction will be found in one of the accompanying files. Since I use the same numbering there as for version B, it ought to be easy to see how I have rearranged the entries. There are several places mentioned which I have failed to locate; but the number of failures is not large enough to deter me from making the file available. As long as it is clearly understood that the file called "version A" is a reconstruction, and only a rough reconstruction, I hope it will be useful to have the text in this form.

The other two files can stand on their own feet. I have inserted some headings and some comments of my own, where they seem to be needed; otherwise these versions are straightforward translations. I omit almost all of the annotation added to version C: these notes are significant for the fact that they exist (they prove that this was regarded as the final version), but only a few are significant for what they say.

Reference

The book of fees, commonly called Testa de Nevill, 3 vols. (HMSO for PRO, 1920--31).

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