

HILLAM: EARLY HISTORY

By Jenny Hoare, Hillam resident 2018

The earliest information we have on Hillam is in its name. The Old English form of the word "hill" was "hyll;" "hyllum" was the dative plural of this, and means "on the hills" or "at the hills."

Before spelling became fixed, the name appeared in various guises, including: Hillame, Hillom, Hillum, Hyllum, Hilham, Hilton, Higham. It also gave rise to the surname Hillam.

Although now there appear to be no other Hillams in England, this has not always been the case. A settlement of the same name, situated under 10 miles away, near Aberford, was abandoned in the 15th century for reasons unknown. The Domesday Book mentions a Hillam (spelt both Hillun and Hillam) in what is now Lancashire.

Unlike the Hillam near Aberford, which has been the subject of archaeological exploration, our own village has not been investigated, and moreover not a single find of any early artefact has been brought to our notice. The closest we come to unravelling ancient mysteries is in information from the Heritage Unit of North Yorkshire County Council. Their Sites and Monuments Record lists a stone cross in the centre of the village. It is described as being medieval or later, and was shown on the 1907 Ordnance Survey map, but by 1963 "only a badly weathered socket stone remained." No further details are available, and, of the people approached to date, even nonagenarians have no knowledge of the existence of the cross. Could the socket stone be the small square trough now planted with flowers?

One other possible medieval structure is recorded by the Heritage Unit: Maspin Grange Farm may have been the site of a monastic grange, perhaps dating from between 1066 AD and 1539 AD. It is marked on OS maps, but there is no other evidence.

Early documentary evidence, however, is more positive. Mentions of Hillam are not uncommon; the oldest record we have so far discovered which names our village predates the Domesday Book (in which our own Hillam does not appear). The document is dated 963 AD and was written partly in Latin, partly in Old English. It is a grant to Aeslac by King Eadgar (or Edgar), who reigned from 959 to 975 AD, and was the great-grandson of Alfred the Great and the nephew of Athelstan. The grant was apparently made as a reward for good services, and included land in Sherburn and nearby settlements, one being Hillam. The wording is: "on hillum tyesra oxena gang," meaning "in Hillam two oxgangs." An oxgang was related to the amount of land an ox could plough in a year; this was very variable, but was roughly equivalent to 15 acres. It is known that Selby Abbey acquired land in Hillam through gifts or bequests, either direct or to the See of York, and it seems likely that Aeslac's land eventually came into the Abbey's ownership in this way.

The full text appears in *Cartularium Saxonum* vol. 3 (ed. Walter de Gray Birch, London, 1885-93) and also, with variants and annotations, in *Early Yorkshire Charters* vol. 1 (ed. W. Farrer, C. T. Clay, Edinburgh, 1914-55).