

Bruton's dovecote

A friend who was visiting Bruton recently asked me about the history of the dovecote. When I said that I didn't know much about it, an eyebrow was raised and a remark passed about how someone with an interest in history *should*, really, know more about the ancient monument visible from their kitchen window.

I did a little investigating.

It's hard to imagine, now, but Bruton was once just a clearing in a great forest that stretched east all the way to Frome and westwards beyond Castle Cary. The hill where the dovecote now stands and the River Brue decided the town's location. It's not actually known how old Bruton is, but its first settlement was probably Celtic (Iron Age), and later there were almost certainly Romans here, perhaps a villa or two in the forest. A few coins have been found and there are Roman roads close by.

Later, the town became a royal borough of the Saxon kings, since boroughs were created in places that were suitable for trade and defence. A settlement on a river was, of course, ideal – the network of rivers and waterways in Wessex being the A and B roads of their time, connecting small settlements to the busy Saxon port of Bristol where slaves were bought and sold along with wool, fish, wine and grains. The first structure built on the hill where the dovecote now stands would have been a lookout tower. Although all borough towns had walls constructed around them to protect their wattle and daub houses and church, knowledge of the enemy's approach was a distinct advantage.

When the Domesday Survey was taken in 1086, William the Conqueror held the town, then called Briwetone, along with:

1 swineherd

6 mills

50 carucates of arable (the amount of land tillable by a team of 8 oxen in a plowing season)

38 acres of meadow

1 wood 5 miles long and 1 mile broad

The wood was Selwood, and only William and his men had hunting rights. There was now a royal guard stationed night and day on the lookout hill, keeping an eye out for poachers, deadwood thieves and other enemies of the king. Even trees that grew on private property, if they were within a certain radius of the wood, belonged to the king.

The tower that became the dovecote was built by the Augustine monks whose priory dominated the town for almost four hundred years from the mid-twelfth century. Park Wall, which flanks the road between the church and King's School, is all that's left of the Augustine abbey. The tower itself was not built until the sixteenth century, and was originally in the deer park of the abbey. It was adapted from a gabled Tudor tower, and has, since its construction, been variously used as a house and a watchtower. It was converted to a dovecote in the 1780s for breeding and keeping doves and pigeons as a food source.

Now, Bruton's iconic tower still keeps watch over a town that has, for centuries, been a little special. It attracted kingly interest even before William the Conqueror; there was a royal mint here in the tenth century, in the time of the Danish King Canute. But the currency that really made Bruton a celebrated and wealthy town was weaving. King Henry VIII's historian, Leyland, observed on riding through the town in 1540 that: 'this town is much occupied with the making of cloth.' The woollen industry prospered over hundreds of years and made way for a silk factory on Quaperlake Street by the end of the eighteenth century.

The great American author, John Steinbeck, came to Bruton in the 1950s to research and write his *Acts of King Arthur*, a translation of Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*. Steinbeck was drawn by the landscape and history, believing this to be where Arthur lived and fought. The River Brue runs from Brewham, a few miles away, to the sea, passing through Glastonbury, and into its waters the sword Excalibur was cast after King Arthur was killed in battle.

But that is a tale for another time.

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