

THE ROMANCE OF THE FIRST STOREY



The earliest individual reference we have in our Storey sources is to a chap named Styr in the late Tenth/early Eleventh Centuries.

Under Aethelred II the Bishopric of Durham, the spiritual home of the cult of St Cuthbert, was in dire straits. Styr "prevailed upon the King to give Darlington to St Cuthbert with sake and soke, and that he had himself bought other properties for the Saint, of which one at least, was to be subject to the Saint's courts of justice"(2)

This reference not only shows the great power and wealth of the man, but that on his estates he held power of sake and soke, of jurisdiction in his own right over both higher and lesser justice, on many of his widespread estates.

We have assumed him to be a descendant of an Old Norseman settled in Cumbria in the previous centuries. And so he might be. I wrote to you before that " I believe that I might have discovered for myself the storey of our greatest tenth and eleventh century ancestor, that Styr whom I once knew only as a pious benefactor to Durham Cathedral. Instead he was a mighty Norse warlord of Strathclyde and Deira who served loyally the King of England and the High Reeve and Earl-King of Bernicia, whose grandson took the sunder of Cumbria in the name of Siward, Earl of Northumbria (Bernicia and Deira); whose daughter married into the family of the last English King of the North. Through the royal family of Bernicia came Henry the I's Saxon bride Margaret or Maude."

Early Eleventh Century England was a wild and turbulent place. Many Powers vied for the North. The old Kingdom of Northumberland was split by Viking attack and steadfast English resistance into it's constituent halves of Bernicia (from the Firth of Forth down to the Tees) and Deira (Yorkshire). The latter was occupied by the Vikings in the 870's, but Bernicia remained English under the heirs of its' ancient Royal family, the High Reeves, centred on their impregnable Rock of Bamburgh.



The Kings of Wessex, heirs of Alfred (died 899), slowly spread their power North, conquering the Danelaw, and this incorporating the older English Kingdoms of the North now ruled of the Danes and Norse. By 920 they had secured England to the line of the Mersey and Humber. By 955 they were securely in control of Deira with it's capital at York. The independent royal family of Bernicia too swore allegiance to the King of England, and the English King responded by restoring the family to the now subordinate Earldom of the whole of Northumbria. Their ties of kinship, land, and loyalties were to need strengthening in their greater Earldom.

Then there was the newly resurgent Kingdom of Strathclyde, assertive now that Northumbria was weakened with only Bernicia holding the English line against them and the Scots, the traditional enemies of Northumbria. In 1006 Earl Waltheof of Bernicia's son, Uhtred, a mighty warrior, destroyed the Scots and emulated the Maccabees by decorating the walls of Bamburgh with their heads (the women who prepared the heads for display received a cow each. Good rates).

The Scots had been eying both their neighbours in the South. Strathclyde and Northumbria. Northumbria had for 400 years ruled Scotland to beyond Edinburgh. Whatever their Celtic British admixture, the people were English and spoke English. Gradually the Scots, having mysteriously absorbed the Picts in the

previous century, had infiltrated the lands south of Edinburgh, the Lothians. Edgar, his attention elsewhere, gave his Earldom of Northumbria no aid, and even tacitly accepted this slow annexation down to the modern border of the Tweed. Of course, the people on both sides of the Tweed still spoke English, and were one day to culturally dominate the whole of Scotland. The Borderers were one and the same people, on both sides.

In 1006 Uhtred had halted this inevitable progress. But in 1018 at the Battle of Carham the Scots and Strathclyde united in an invasion of Northumbria. The Scots won title to all Lothian, and later that year the last King of Strathclyde, Owain the Bald (the only salient fact by which he is remembered !), the Scot's ally at Carham, died and the Scots annexed his Kingdom. By so doing the Scots gained a claim to modern English Cumbria, the southern half of Strathclyde. But loyalties were weak there. And all that mattered was who held the ground. As the name implies, the people were a mixture of descendants of Romano Britons who called themselves Cumbrogi, or cives, citizens (of Rome), with an admixture of English and Norse settlers.



That would have opened up the English flank. Northumbria, unaided by its Southern overlords, had to act swiftly. Earl Siward of Northumbria annexed the land up to Carlisle.

His agent and kinsman, Gospatric son of Uhtred and grand-son of Styr, was to act for the Earl, guaranteeing a group of landowners their property in "Gospatric's Writ". This document actually associates Gospatric with the landowners, who describe themselves as "men who used to be Cumbrian (Cives/civitates)", dwelling in the land bounded by the Pennines, the mountains of the Lake District and the Solway Firth. It is "exactly the sort of guarantee that would be sought by persons who had experienced a recent change of overlordship" (2). Siward was obviously buying off Gospatric's claims to Northumbria with Cumbria.



And now Styr re-enters the Story. Earl Uhtred had succeeded his father Waltheof the Elder as Earl of Bernicia, and as a great warrior was just what King Aethelred II the Unraed needed to hold the North against the renewed ravages of the Danes under King Sweyn and his son Canute. He was promoted to Earl of all Northumbria. And, as I said, needed all the ties he could in southern Deira. In around 1004 he divorced his (first) wife, the daughter of the Bishop of Durham, and married the daughter of Styr.

What follows comes from the pen of an anonymous cleric who included it as an aside. What he was really writing was a formal claim to church lands. But what he says in that aside (3) raises a lot of questions for any interested Story/Storey/Storie.

Remember, Uhtred was not only an Earl, one of the half-dozen or so most powerful men in England, but also descended from royalty. Who was Styr, who persuaded him to divorce his wife and marry his daughter ?

Stor and Styr are synonymous and cognate in Old English.

The text says that he is a "civis divitis". Most historians see that as meaning he was a citizen of York, the only real city in the North. But it is impossible that a warrior noble like Uhtred would marry such, however wealthy and powerful. Others say that it was merely a Latin honorific for a great man. But I suggest that there is a simpler answer. He was a Cumbrian. Who proudly took as their name their title of long-ago, Citizens of Rome, who stood against the barbarian hordes of Angles, Saxons, Scotti, and Pict. Cymbrogi. A Citizen forsooth ! And a member of the North British Warrior Aristocracy.



Styr is recorded as having lands as widespread as Derbyshire and Teesdale, in the South of Strathclyde and the North of Deira bordering on Bernicia. A village near York, Stearsby, bears his name. I believe that, unrecorded by our Northumbrian annalist, he was also a magnate in Cumbria, the land his Grandson Gospatric was to annex under Earl Siward of Northumbria.

This is supported by the name of his father, Ulf. Styr Ulfson. We had supposed a Stor to be the first of his clan to arrive in Cumbria. Perhaps his son used merely the personal name Ulf rather than his father's nickname Stor ? Perhaps the nickname/byname reverted to his grandson who was also nick-named Stor/Styr because of who he was, and it was he who was to make it on the International stage by virtue of the wealth and power his forebears had gained ?.

Or perhaps, more simply, our Stor/Styr of history was not merely the descendant of a Stor, but The Stor himself, the one from whom we take our lineage ?. This Stor/Styr of recorded history was certainly a man great enough to be the man who would give his name and protection to a Clan. He would be able to "hire" an Earl/King !

Remember that the MacDonald's and so many more Highland clans take their descent from Somerled Lord of The Isles, who lived over two centuries later than our recorded Styr. Two hundred years is a good lead in the breeding stakes !. Through Styr Earl Uhtred gained a power-base to the South in Deira, and to the West in Cumbria. But as well as the advantages and the huge dowry he would have gained, there was a catch.

Styr demanded one extra condition for the marriage in c. 1004. That (3) "Uhtred married Sige, the daughter of Styr, the son of Ulf, a civis divitis, on condition that he would slay his deadliest enemy, Thurbrand" Thurbrand was a rival magnate with whom he was at feud. Styr hired one of the greatest men in England to act as his hitman !. It is as if one were to hire a modern Western European or North American Head of State to knock off a quarrelsome neighbour with whom one had a land dispute !.

As it so happened, affairs of State did get in Uhtred's way, and he could not give priority to his father-in-law's feud. Sweyn and Canute were ravaging England, and Uhtred was the commander of the English King Aethelred's forces in the North. Both Styr and Uhtred are recorded as being loyal to King Aethelred, and one would assume that they fought together. Uhtred's campaigns took him far and wide, and he was victorious. Thurbrand however backed Canute. He also knew of the contract out on his life. By 1016 Aethelred was finished. His son Edmund Ironside fought Canute to a standstill, but soon died. Canute summoned Uhtred to a parley. Uhtred had no choice. He travelled to a meeting-place, a thegn's hall, with 40 companions. They entered, unarmed. Canute was not there. Thurbrand was. His armed men attacked the unarmed 41, and after a brief melee 41 corpses lay on the rushes.

Thurbrand was victorious. He had saved himself and served King Canute well by killing a rival.

A bloodfeud that was to Survive Anglo Saxon England began. All started by a fellow called Styr. Who could really stir it !

Earl Uhtred's son, Early Ealdred, was to kill Thurbrand. In 1038 Thurbrand's son Carl was to kill Ealdred. And Earl Waltheof, the last Earl of Northumbria of the ancient Bernician royal line, who is said to have fought at Hastings with Harold II against the Northmen led by William The Bastard, who had submitted to William in 1066 at London after Hastings, had risen against him for a second time with the Northern Earls in 1069, had again been reconciled with William who gave him his daughter Judith in marriage.



Free now to look to family business, in 1072 Waltheof finally took a bloody revenge in the bloodfeud that had begun almost 60 years before. On hearing that Carl, all his sons and grandsons, and all their families, were to enjoy a family celebration in one Hall, Waltheof organised a Commando like assault, probably both by sea and land, on the thegnly Hall. There his men killed every male descendant of Thurbrand (except for two, one a gentle soul, and the other a neighbour of Waltheof's). Waltheof did not lead the attack in person. He had proved himself one of the bravest warriors in England. These men were beneath him.

The King, William the Bastard, loved Waltheof. He respected him as an honourable enemy though two wars, and as a friend. When his daughter Judith, Waltheof's wife, came to him with whispers of Treason by her husband Waltheof, he had to act. Waltheof was executed in 1076. With him ended William's dream of an England ruled jointly by English and Norman. It was to take 300 years for both Northmen and English to both call themselves Englishmen. William the Bastard ensured that his daughter never again lived as a free woman.

She died locked in a nunnery cell.



Styr was the grandfather of two sons, Eadwulf Earl of Bernicia, and Gospatric, he of the Writ. Gospatric too was involved in a late Northumbrian feud. He fell foul of Tostig, King Harold II's traitorous brother, and was murdered. Harold was to crush the unhappy rule of Tostig as Earl of Northumbria, which indirectly led to Stamford Bridge and Hastings.

But Sige also had a daughter by her second husband, Sigfrida, mother of a Bernician Earl. That Earl's cousin Gospatric, ousted from English Northumbria, held Northumbria North of the Tweed (the Lothians) for the King of Scots against William The Bastard. As such his issue were to marry into the Scots Royal Family. And the royal family of Bernicia married directly into the Scots and later British royal families when Waltheof's daughter Matilda married David I.

Here endeth the Whimsy of Styr. An Enjoyment. Much is left to be researched, and much can not be discovered. It is all based on two pages in an anonymous letter written by a cleric for whom the subject matter was almost totally irrelevant. For that anonymous cleric, an aside, in fact. A whimsy.



Sources :

1 - Anglo Saxon England, Stenton, OUP quoting Symeonis Mon

2 - Bloodfeud, Fletcher.

3. Durham Anonymous. Corpus Christi College, Cam..

PS - And as Storr/Stor in ON means large, so Stor in OE means strong and violent as in thunder. It's synonym Styr in OE (meaning of the noise, shout, of the storm) was pronounced the same way. And still survives as a related verb in stirring up, action, motion, excite (of the mind), with the basic elemental forces of the wind, storm, and thunder.

Stor and Styr are both synonymous and cognate.

A Postscript :

This burst of historical research, this Romance, this "whimsy", is of a Storey long long ago.

It was begun by my taking note of the first mention of a Story in "Storeys of Old". If the bloke was historical, that history could be found!

It is a romantic tale. The very best.

This was a man who toyed with and used Kings. Among them the most famous in our History.

Old Stor/Styr, a lifelong Loyalist of Aethelred the Unraed (Unready), apparently also reconciled himself to King Canute after the slaying of his son-in-law Uhtred and after Aethelred's death. There is no mention of his violent death in the Bloodfeud he had instigated. He obviously reconciled himself to Canute before Canute's man Thurbrand could move. But although Styr evidently died a great noble, with lands in Deira, Bernicia, and Cumbria, his children by his daughter's husband, the Earl/King he had contracted to start the Bloodfeud, was sucked into it for generations.

A Man for his Times !

"Nothing matters very much;
and very few things matter at all"