

THE BURGHAL HIDAGE - SOUTHAMPTON

By DAVID HILL

THE *Burghal Hidage*, dated about 920, is a vital document in the study of the origins of English towns. Not only does it provide a list of Saxon *burhs* or fortifications, in the reign of Edward the Elder, but it offers a conversion from which the length of the burh wall can be computed from the hidage, the Saxon land and tax unit.

The assessment for Southampton (fig. 12) is 150 hides, a tiny circuit compared with the 2,400 hides of Winchester, and equalling only 619 feet. The difficulty of reconciling so small a circuit with what is already known of Saxon towns has led to a variety of explanations: The assessment has been dismissed as 'clearly a slip'¹; impossibly small to cover a town as important as 10th century Southampton², and L. A. Burgess suggests that the burh might be represented by the mound of a windmill which apparently existed alongside Canshut Lane³ or a strong point on the perimeter of a small stockaded settlement.⁴ Finally, Miss Robertson notes the alternative reading of one of the manuscripts of the *Burghal Hidage* (*Liber Rubeus Scaccarii*) which could be read 'then belongs to Portchester 500 hides and 150 hides. To (South)Hampton and to Winchester belong 2,400 hides'.⁵

However, the text of the *Burghal Hidage* can be re-established and shown to be internally consistent. It must also be clearly understood that a Saxon burh provided a refuge for the population and so was in complete contrast to the Norman motte, which was the stronghold of a small military caste. The alternative MS. reading depends on later MSS. which frequently omit the verb 'belong'. Careful comparison shows clearly the text reads 'then belong to Portchester 500 hides, and 150 hides belong to (South)Hampton; and to Winchester belong 2,400 hides'.

By comparison with other Saxon burhs, we might expect a burh to follow the example of Chichester, Portchester, Winchester, Exeter and Bath and use standing Roman fortifications. Southampton still had in Saxon times a strong Roman fort guarded by a 10 feet thick stone wall, three bastions, two ditches and an outer bank.⁶ The walls of this fort remained until deliberately pulled down in Elizabethan times. It is inconceivable that the inhabitants of Saxon Southampton would have ignored this first class defence only three-quarters of a mile from their town to travel a similar distance to a stockaded defence somewhere to the north of Bargate.⁷

In common with other burhs the calculated length of wall at Clausentum would run from river to river across the promontory. The length of the sides of the fort covered by substantial water defences was not included.⁸ The excavations at Clausentum have established a wall approximately 625 feet long⁹ which, using the conversion

¹ H. R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest*, p. 136.

² A. J. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, p. 495.

³ L. A. Burgess, *Origins of Southampton*, p. 29.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵ A. J. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, p. 495.

⁶ D. M. Waterman, *Excavations at Clausentum 1937-8*. Ant. J. XXCII, p. 151, *et seq.*

⁷ The site would have been reached by a ford across the Itchen which existed until recent times near Northam Bridge. *V.C.H. Hampshire*, Vol. 1, p. 334.

⁸ Compare sites at Wareham, Lyng, etc.

⁹ D. M. Waterman, *Excavations at Clausentum 1937-8*, taking length of inner ditch shown p. 152.

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Based on the Ordnance Survey
1:25,000 sheets SU 41/41.

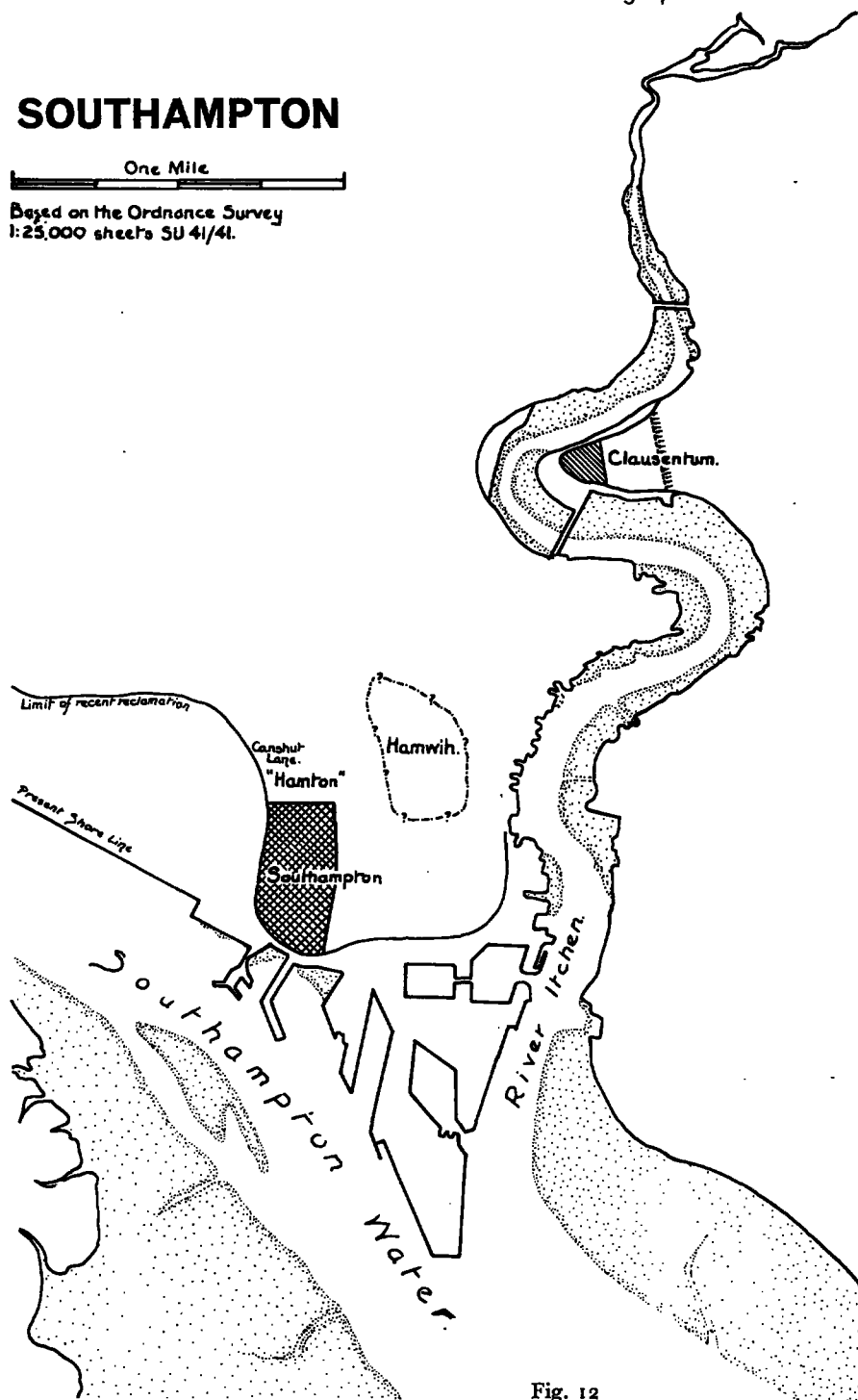


Fig. 12

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supplied by the Nowell Transcript of the Burghal Hidage, is strikingly close to the 619 feet we would expect.¹⁰ The difference *could* be explained by the rounding off to the nearest 10 hides. It would appear then that here at Clausentum is the burh of 920, and the paucity of finds revealed by excavation is a good illustration of the use of a refurbished fort which was only a refuge. The mercantile activities of Saxon Southampton continuing in the unrestricted site of *Hamwih* farther south.

¹⁰ Miss Robertson, when questioning the assessment for Southampton, notes that 650 hides for Portchester would give a better correlation with the existing walls than the 500 hides in the best versions, but here again

the land length of the walls (as opposed to the total length taken by Miss Robertson) is approximately 2,090 feet as compared with the 2,060 feet we would expect from the Burghal Hidage.