

I was asked recently about the meaning of the word Wapentake, specifically the Claro Wapentake, that covers the area we live in here in Marton.

A wapentake is a collection of parishes, the word is equivalent to the more common 'Hundred' of more southern counties.

The word Wapentake is used only in the North of England and some areas of the Eastern counties: it is one of those words that carries with it clues to the long and complex history of this part of England.

Put simply Wapentake is rooted firmly in the Scandinavian dialects. In other words, it is a left-over term from the time when the Vikings ruled this part of the UK: this was when the centre of Viking power in England was the kingdom of Jorvik: Viking York.

It is recorded that the great Danish army, led by Ivar the Boneless and Halfdan, conquered York in 866AD.

Up until then the city was known by its Saxon name of Eoforwik.

Immediately the Vikings spread out from their new conquest, dispossessing the farmers and villagers across the county, claiming the land for themselves and no doubt dispossessing the native families from their new possessions.

Under its Viking rulers York became home to over 10,000 citizens, the second largest city in England, and as a great inland port was the centre of a thriving trade network stretching from the North of England across to Constantinople, the Black Sea and the Holy Land.

That Marton cum Grafton was affected in this process there is absolutely no doubt. The area around Marton became the Wapentake of Claro, and the centre of this new administrative area was a great Hill, called Claro Hill, the meeting place of the Scandinavian equivalent of a local court and parliament: the *Thing*.

Claro hill was therefore the meeting place of the people of Claro: it was an ancient and revered place long before the Vikings turned up: it was the site of burials, of religion, of ritual and the administrative centre of the region.

The last Viking King of Jorvik, the legendary Erik Bloodaxe, was driven from York in 954AD by the West Saxon King Eadred, who converted the city and its people back to the Saxon way of life.

York, and the surrounding area, remained Saxon after this, until the Saxon rule in all England was terminated by the Norman invasion of 1066. Yet York, and the area around York, retained many of the traditions and family links to the Scandinavian peoples.

The retention of the Wapentake is one example: the word means "Weapon Count" and is essentially a mustering of the men of the area who, by dint of their status of warrior, were entitled to a vote and to have a voice in the running of the area.

Another example is in the Domesday Book: Marton was owned by Gospatric, son of Arnkill, who, according to the 12th century chronicler Simeon of Durham was 'the greatest of the English thanes (Lords) in the North'.

Both the names of Gospatric and his father are Scandinavian in Origin, and it is probably no coincidence that when Harald, the last Viking king, decided to chance his arm at the disputed English throne in 1066 it was York he chose as his invasion site. He was clearly hoping that as King of Norway

he may be able to command residual loyalty in his endeavours from the local nobility. Sadly for Harald this was not the case. The Earls Edwin and Morcar engaged him in battle unsuccessfully at Fulford, and although they lost the engagement their efforts were enough to delay Harald long enough for the English King Harold Godwinson to advance his army north to assist.

In the end, although he was victorious at Fulford, Harald and 10,000 of his men, the worlds last great Viking army, remain to this day buried in the marshy fields somewhere around Stamford Bridge.

So where is Claro Hill, this great edifice where our ancestors met, to decide the government of Claro?

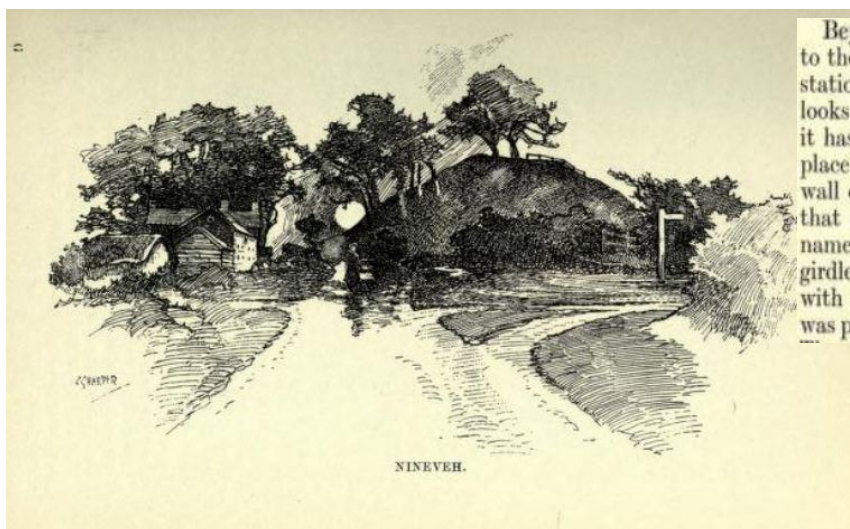
According to Harry Speight, writing in 1900 it was 228 ft in height and was only one of several such glacial mounds in the area, although, as it was the ancient Moot (Meeting) place, Claro hill was covered in burials and other earthworks.

If one looks at the OS map of 1855 its clearly marked: see below. It is beside the great north road and less than 2 miles from Marton, which was obviously therefore an important settlement in the Wapentake. Indeed, when William I ordered the great survey we call Domesday, Marton not only still belonged to Gospatric but it was his largest holding. It was here, down near the old Churchyard, that he had his Great Hall.



Claro hill was seen and described in 1902 by Charles G Harper in his book 'The Great North Road, York to Edinburgh'. He even sketched it as you can see below.

Unfortunately, he clearly was misinformed or misunderstood as he referred to the farm next to it as Ninevah, which is further North. The farm Charles drew is in fact Claro House Barn, a 500-year-old building which stood in sound condition until Amey, in building the incinerator on the site, demolished it, despite the protection afforded it by the planning authority.



Beyond Walshford Bridge the road turns suddenly to the left, and, crossing the railway at lonely Allerton station, passes a substantial red-brick farmhouse which looks as if it has seen very different days. And indeed it has, for this was once the "New Inn," a changing-place for the mails. Now on the right comes the long wall of Allerton Park, and presently there rises ahead that strange mound known by the equally strange name of Ninevch, a tree-crowned hill, partly artificial, girdled with prehistoric earthworks, and honeycombed with the graves of the forgotten tribes, to whom it was probably at once a castle, a temple, and a cemetery.

And Claro hill itself? That was removed, with little ceremony and no protest in the 1990's when the A1 was upgraded to motorway. This ancient survivor of Celtic, Iron age, Roman, Viking and Saxon lords finally succumbed to modern development. The only remaining evidence a few map references and the below sketch.

The name still lives on in our landscape in the tiny hamlet of Clareton, the Ton (settlement) of Clare, the forgotten and unrecorded Thane who gave his name to his village, the hill and ultimately the whole area.

After the Norman Conquest the name Claro as an administrative unit fell out of use and was replaced by Burgeshire. Indeed, Marton is referred to in the Domesday Book as Marton in Burgeshire.

This appears to be the area surrounding the Burgh (fortified town) of Aldborough. There were many small settlements that made up Burgeshire now lost to us: Hornham has become Ornham, but the settlements of Gristall, Ousebourne Moor, Lylands, North Thornborough, Knock Mill and Underfield are now lost.

As for Gospatric, his descendants gradually lost their holdings to successive Norman lords and incomers until, in 1318, the Scots invaded Yorkshire, burnt Marton, the hall and the church and no doubt were responsible for the loss of the above hamlets.

So Martone in Burgeshire vanished, to be reborn sometime later a mile closer to the Great North Road as Marton cum Grafton. Only the old church and the old graveyard remain as evidence of the original location of our village.

The Wapentake of Claro remains now as a name only too: the origin of the name and the great hill that gave its name to the Wapentake destroyed forever. And so progress is made.