

# MALVERN CHASE

AN EPISODE OF  
THE WARS OF THE ROSES  
AND  
THE BATTLE OF TEWKESBURY

W.S. SYMONDS

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## *Chapter One*

I AM one of that race which was English before William the Norman conquered our country. One of my ancestors followed Robert of Normandy to the wars of Palestine, and from plain John Birts changed his name to John de Brute. The Roman poet called the great Saxon race from whom we sprang 'sea wolves that live on the pillage of the world', and I fear that this was too true of their earlier history; but when the land was conquered, they soon settled down around the villages of the forest glades, or by the banks of the rivers, each settlement being independent of its fellow settlement.

The Birts who assisted in the Saxon conquest of England were landholders in a land of Birch trees, and land tillers before they crossed the seas. Their first settlement in this country was on the banks of the Severn, below the site of the ancient town of Theocsbury, at a place called Deorhyst. At Deorhyst, the religion of the Cross succeeded the pagan worship of Woden, the War God, earlier than in many parts of Saxon England, and a priory was founded in Saxon times.

Here, on the conversion of the Birts to Christianity, the sacred rite of baptism was performed by immersion in the waters of the Severn, and when they died, our Edwards, or Ealdwulfs, and their Ethelgifas were laid in the grave to the ringing of the passing bell. For many years the Priory of Deorhyst acquired great and deserved celebrity among the early Christian establishments.

It was rich and flourishing when the fires of the Danish invasion wrapped in flames its great wooden structures. Church and Grange were alike destroyed, and the family of the Birts had, like the Prior of Deorhyst himself, to take refuge in the dense forest which stretched from the Malvern Hills to the Severn, and Worcester to Gloucester, which in after times became the Malvern Chase of the haughty Norman conqueror.

From old traditions handed down through long generations of the Birts, it is well nigh certain that at the time of the burning of Deorhyst, a family of Saxons had settled in a glade in the forest near to the old Roman trackway which led from Gloucester across the Malverns to Saxon Hereford. Here, too, an ancient Christian church was built of forest oaks with nothing of stone save mayhap the font, and it was called Pendyke from very early times, the church being built at the head of a dyke or trench, which was once a boundary of British tribes before the Saxons landed in Britain or the Romans either.

The family who dwelt at Pendyke<sup>1</sup> bore the name of Kitel, and in Saxon times the Birts of Deorhyst, and the Kitels of Pendyke, were mighty hunters in the forest, and many a wolf and many a wild boar fell before their spears. It was to the Kitels that the Birts fled for safety at the burning and sacking of Deorhyst by Sweyne, and it was by their aid that our family reclaimed some hides of forest land within a short distance of Pendyke and established a settlement, to which they gave the name of Birtsmerton, or the ton or village where the Birts settled, close upon the borders of a great mere or moorland swamp.

The time came when the Kitels and de Brutes were no longer contented with their wooden granges and barns in the forest glades; moreover, they were always in danger from the troublous Welsh; so they each built their Keep or strong tower, round which the ton or village clustered, one at Pendyke, on Kitel Hill, and the other at Birtsmerton, while close by each was erected a little church, for our gallant ancestors were God-fearing men.

Birtsmerton Keep was small, but strong, surrounded by massive stone walls and a deep trench or moat. A little stream fed this moat and ran through a large upper fish-pool, which answered two purposes, it fed the moat with water and the occupiers of the Keep with fish on fast days. The only entrance to the Keep was by a drawbridge across the deep, dark

moat, and a strong portcullis hung from the battlemented gateway, which was loopholed for archers, while from a niche looked down our patron saint, St Gunhilda. It was a forest Keep, and, when the farmer became a knight among Normans, he still followed in the footsteps of our Saxon forefathers. He kept large droves of swine to feed upon the acorns and the beech mast on the Swineyard Hill of the Malverns, which rose above the Norman Chase and forest, but it never was a great stronghold in which a crowd could be banqueted or a numerous retinue summoned to arms.

My grandfather, Giles de Brute, pulled down the Keep, leaving only the basement, and erected the manor house in which I was born. Instead of the tower-like Keep with its round lights for windows, we had a comfortable dwelling with hanging roofs and gables, and my dear mother always pointed with pride to our windows filled with glass. Indeed, neither at Kiteel Keep or Castlemereton are there now such lattices which can be opened or shut at pleasure, neither are there such andirons for the burning logs in the winter time, or so fine a vent to carry off the smoke as in our Hall. Then our bedrooms are far larger and more lofty than the little cub-holes which our ancestor Sir Giles and his dame used to occupy, up the winding stone staircase of the Norman Keep. The walls too are painted with the romance of George and the Dragon, and with Noah's Ark and the wild beasts which came out of it.

Our tenants were thirteen in number, and they did service for the land they occupied, which was taken in from the forest, and the gift of the Red Earl of Gloucester, Gilbert de Clare. Besides this, there were two hundred acres of arable and pasturage for the stock of the home farm, which consisted of oxen and heifers, calves and sheep, geese and capons, cocks and hens. These, with the gardens, fish-ponds, rabbit-warren, and pigeon-house, kept us well provided, and right hospitable my father was to poor as well as rich.