

Brief history of the Vere family in England, c. 1080-1225
Part One: Aubrey I de Vere

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(I have drastically revised this Brief History since I posted it on Academia.edu in fall 2014, a result of an investigation into his ethnic origins. This is a brief biographical sketch. It is my intention to publish a full account of the early history of the Vere family. For those seeking more information on family members whose names are indicated by underlining, please see the bibliography at the end of this document or contact me through Academia.edu.)

The Veres, while not among the wealthiest or most prestigious families in medieval England, nonetheless successfully established themselves among the elite after the Norman Conquest. Their acquisition of hereditary royal office, the master chamberlainship of England, and the earldom of Oxford, as well as several advantageous marriages, gained them status and land. Members of the family founded several religious houses and contributed to many others. Several obtained high office in the Church and in royal administration. The name of one Vere male is linked with Magna Carta. Who were the Veres, what do we know of their achievements, and how do they fit into Anglo-Norman and Angevin English history and society?

The origins of the Vere family are difficult to determine. Several men in England in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries bore the toponymic *de Ver/Vere* or the Christian name *Albericus* [Fr: Aubrey]. Determining their continental backgrounds and their relationships, if any, is nearly impossible, given the dearth of evidence.¹ The Vere lineage that later acquired the master chamberlainship and the earldom of Oxford, however, most likely originated in the area

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. In Domesday Book, in addition to Aubrey de Vere, several men bear the toponym de Ver. Their relationship, if any, is a matter of pure speculation, since the surname “de Ver” need not refer to the same place of origin or infer ties of kinship or marriage.

The Christian name of *Albericus*, while not widespread, was not uncommon in that period; in Domesday Book, for instance, Albericus de Courcy, made earl of Northumbria by William the Conqueror in 1080 who voluntarily surrendered his English holdings and title in favor of his continental possessions in 1086. A Devonshire landholder was recorded as *Alberi* and an *Albericus* was holding a single manor of Geoffrey de la Guerche in Leicestershire, but nothing connects Aubrey de Vere with either of these counties or with de la Guerche.

of Ver, in the diocese of Coutances on the Cotentin peninsula in western Normandy.² The first of the Veres of England known with any certainty, Aubrey de Vere, first appears in the Domesday Book of 1086 as a baron and a tenant. His non-royal lords were Geoffrey, bishop of Coutances; Count Alan Rufus of Brittany, lord of Richmond; and Odo, bishop of Bayeux.³ Aubrey's wife is clearly stated in Domesday Book as holding the small estates of the honor of Bishop Odo, while those lands he held in his own right of Bishop Geoffrey and Count Alan were more substantial. Even combined, however, his holdings of other lords were far outstripped by the land he held directly of King William I.

Many have assumed that he was a vassal of Count Alan or Bishop Geoffrey and that one of those lords had granted Aubrey his first lands in England, but it is more likely that the king had been the first to grant him land. He then gradually obtained additional holdings from other lords, just as many Domesday lords had done.⁴ By 1086, he was a moderately wealthy man by the standards of the day. He had properties in nine counties, stretching from Hampshire and Wiltshire, Berkshire and Middlesex, east into Essex, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, and Huntingdonshire, then northwest to Northamptonshire. The value of all his holdings in that year was recorded at just over £300; Domesday Book values are stated for administrative purposes

² Ver, La Manche, cant. Gavray, arr. Coutances, in what was called Lower or western Normandy. The lords of that place used the toponym *de Ver* through at least the 13th century. No evidence of a relationship between the English Veres and this family has been found, but many with Norman toponyms in Domesday Book cannot be linked to castles or lordships on the continent.

³ He also held Huntingdonshire property of Ramsey Abbey and may have held two hides of the abbess of Shaftesbury in Wiltshire as *Albericus miles*.

⁴⁴ The very nature of the Domesday Book, especially entries in the more processed volume containing all counties but Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk, makes it difficult to assess the order or date of acquisition. If forced to guess, I think that he gained the tenancies in Berkshire and Hampshire from the king first—they lie within 10 kilometers of the road between London and Southampton via Winchester, the route often taken from by the court going to and from Normandy. One clue that he held at least one Hampshire manor by 1070 comes from the entry for Hartley Wespall. Then perhaps he was enfeoffed by Geoffrey bishop of Coutances. Next, by royal grant, the substantial estate of the Anglo-Saxon thegn Wulfwin that established Aubrey as an important baron, possibly in the mid- to later 1070s but certainly by 1083. As a consequence of that grant he seized land from Ramsey Abbey in Huntingdonshire. Only after he held land at Great Canfield, Essex, as part of his barony did he seek from Count Alan another holding in that parish, as well as the nearby Beauchamp Roding, to hold of the honor of Richmond.

and the actual value may have been higher. Another way to measure his wealth is in the number of knights Aubrey was to provide the king from the estates he held directly of the king—later sources suggest that was about thirty warriors. He was therefore in the top two hundred and fifty barons or tenants-in-chief in England, but not in the uppermost tier of the new aristocracy. To compare his quota of thirty knights, the greatest men in the realm were required to provide over one hundred knights each.

His relatively modest wealth renders the claim that Aubrey de Vere married a sister or kinswoman of William the Conqueror, recorded in some late medieval and early modern sources, quite impossible.⁵ That claim may be founded on other mistaken notions, such as the assertion that he was descended from Roman emperors. His fictitious family line supposedly passed through a kinsman of Charlemagne to the counts of Guînes, one of whom Aubrey was said to have been. These stories can be consigned to the realm of wishful thinking, most likely created by those hoping for patronage from the earls of Oxford, but they have unfortunately dazzled some genealogists and amateur historians to the present day.⁶ We know nothing of his parents, although many centuries after his death a monastery associated with the family claimed his father was named Alfonso de Vere and there is an *Albericus de Ver* who witnessed a charter issued by Conan II, duke of Brittany, in or soon after 1050.⁷

⁵. John Weever's *Ancient Funerall Monuments* of 1631 quotes an epitaph supposedly on Aubrey's tomb: "Here lyeth Aulberye de Veer, the first erle of Gyney, the sonne of Alphonsus de Veer. the which Aubrey was the founder of this place [Colne Pr] and Bettys his wife systor of King Willia' the Co'querour. He had sons Albericus who in deed and charters is named only *camerarius Angliae*, Rogerus, and Robertus." [quoted in *Monasticon Anglicorum*, IV, 98]. Aubrey II was often referred to as *regis camerarius* (king's chamberlain). The list of Aubrey I's sons excludes William, who was buried at Colne Priory. The information reported by Weever is flawed and probably reflects late medieval genealogical invention to elevate the origins of the Vere lineage. The epitaph given in the history produced by Colne priory's mother house, Abingdon Abbey, is quite different.

⁶. See, for example, <http://www.houseofvere.com/>

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The witness was probably the father or close kinsman of Aubrey I, rather than Aubrey I himself. Scholars have revised the date range for the charter from 1056-66 to 1050-1055, and favor the early years of the latter range. Conan issued the charter near Tours on a journey to visit Blois. To be traveling in his entourage, the witness would have been about the same age or older than Conan, who was born c. 1032/33; K. Keats-Rohan, *Domesday People: A Prosopography of Persons Occurring in English*

As mentioned above, Aubrey I had married by 1086. His unnamed wife is mentioned as holding Essex estates of the bishop of Bayeux in Essex in Domesday Book. She was probably the daughter and heir of a minor tenant of Bishop Odo, as her estates were small but held in her own right. Dowry land would probably not have been listed in Domesday Book in her name, having passed into the possession of her husband at their marriage. In or around 1111 he was married to a woman named Beatrice. As their eldest son had died before 1107 and that son was in his later teens or early twenties at the time of his death, Aubrey's wife in 1086 was almost certainly the same Beatrice. It is unusual for a young woman to be listed in Domesday Book as holding in her own right; the most likely explanations are that she was the heiress or the widow of a minor tenant of the bishop. If the latter, she must have been a relatively young widow and the land was her dower property.⁸

Was Aubrey I a royal servant or administrator? The evidence is slim, but the conclusion that he served the royal family in several capacities seems inescapable. Again, the earliest hints of his service are in Domesday Book. An Aubrey the queen's chamberlain held a small manor in Berkshire, about ten kilometers southwest of Windsor—he was the only man named Aubrey holding land in that county. It appears that he was also known as Aubrey the chamberlain, who held manors in Hampshire and Wiltshire.⁹ Queen Matilda had died in November 1083; there is no indication of how long he had served as her chamberlain but she had spent most of her time in Normandy. He may have transferred to the king's household before the Domesday Survey was conducted in 1086. There are no certain references to Aubrey de Vere, Aubrey the chamberlain,

Documents 1066-1166, v. 1 (Woodbridge: 1999), p. 131. If this man were Aubrey I, his birth in or before 1033 would mean he was at least 78 when he retired from royal service, a rather implausible scenario. That is why some suggest that there were two men named Aubrey de Vere, father and son, between 1066 and 1112. That is possible but not probable, given the report of the Abingdon Chronicle about the age and health of the founder of Colne Priory.

⁸ Her lands were valued at under £5. These properties do not appear in later inventories of Vere lands, but there are no inventories until almost two centuries after 1086. When Bishop Odo lost his barony, it was dispersed, which might have caused the family to lose these small holdings.

⁹ For Aubrey the chamberlain, Hartley Wespall, Hampshire; Deverel and Smallbrook, Wiltshire. What ties these manors to Aubrey *miles* is the Wespall family, who held or claimed all these these lands in the mid- to later 12th century; *Victoria County History, Hampshire*, 13, p. 195; *Curia Regis Rolls*, I, (1922), pp. 161, 217, 321, 472; *Curia Regis Rolls*, II, p. 64.

or the like between that date and 1100. Perhaps he served as a chamberlain for Prince Henry in his short-lived role as count of the Cotentin in western Normandy in 1088.¹⁰ On April 3, in 1102 or 1103, at Westminster, “A. de Ver” attested the king’s charter to the great abbey of Bury St. Edmund along with three high-ranking clergymen, Roger Bigod, and Robert fitz Hamo.¹¹ Roger was Henry I’s *dapifer* or steward and Robert fitz Hamo was the son of William I’s steward, so these laymen were both associated with the royal household, suggesting that Aubrey was as well. Sometime between 1100 and August 1107, Aubrey the chamberlain granted land on the Cotentin peninsula to the Norman abbey at Monteburg.¹² Could Henry have called on his mother’s former chamberlain to set up the household for Queen Edith/Matilda, his new wife, in or about 1100? After all, there had been no queen of England since his mother’s death and the previous queen’s experienced chamberlain would know the proper protocol and routines.¹³

If he did serve once again as the queen’s chamberlain, King Henry soon called upon Aubrey to take up additional or other duties. In one of the king’s *acta*, an “Aubrey of Berkshire” is mentioned, and in three others regarding Berkshire, *Albericus* is one of those notified by name or indicated as a man who was to ensure that the king’s orders were carried out. It was not uncommon for men to be referred to in one document with a toponymic such as “de Vere”, and in another, by reference to an office or a county. While his exact role in Berkshire is unclear, he was certainly not the sheriff, that office being held by Hugh de Bocland in those years. Aubrey

¹⁰. A copy of a pancarte for Lessay Abbey in the Cotentin includes *Alberici camerarii* among the signators. The signatures must have been obtained at various times, but they were all later copied as if everyone witnessed at the same time. As that was impossible, many to labelled the document a forgery. David Bates has established its veracity; Bates, “A charter of William the Conqueror and two of his sons”, *Tabularia* (2005), p. 20-23. Aubrey may have accompanied King William when he visited Lessay, probably while on campaign in 1084, or either Duke Robert Curthose or Henry, the king’s sons, in 1087.

¹¹. *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum, 1066-1154: Regesta Henrici Primi* (Oxford: 1956), pp. 31-2, #644.

¹². Robert Bearman, *Charters of the Redvers Family and the Earldom of Devon: 1090-1217* (Devon: 1994), pp. 57-59, #5.

¹³. The earliest chamberlain of Queen Edith/Matilda generally recognized appears first in 1104; Lois Huneycutt, *Matilda of Scotland: A Study in Medieval Queenship* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: 2003), p. 100. Aubrey de Vere could have retired from the office or been reassigned once the household was operating smoothly, for by 1100 Aubrey probably would have been over sixty, possibly in his mid-sixties.

was most probably a local justiciar, a royal agent whose authority has been debated.¹⁴ These four references to Aubrey “of Berkshire” appear in documents that can be dated between 1100 and the end of July, 1106, and three had to do with Abingdon Abbey in that county.

It is precisely in that period when events transpired which link Aubrey I de Vere directly with Abingdon Abbey. The Abingdon chronicle, written in the 1160s, records that Geoffrey de Vere, son and heir of Aubrey I, was tended through a serious illness by the abbot there, the Tuscan physician Faritius. Geoffrey recovered but within months suffered either a relapse or another illness which proved fatal. He was buried in the “better appointed part” of Abingdon Abbey. Faritius had attended the queen when she was pregnant and thus had an excellent reputation in England but, unless Geoffrey had been in the general vicinity of Abingdon, it is unlikely that he would have been taken there to be treated. He probably fell ill at or near Burley, Berkshire, where Aubrey “the queen’s chamberlain” had an estate in 1086. We cannot date precisely Geoffrey’s death, but it probably occurred late in 1103 or early in 1104, when Aubrey of Berkshire was acting as a royal agent in the county. Alternatively, Geoffrey might have been educated at Abingdon Abbey, as were his near contemporaries Waleran and Robert, twin sons and heirs of the magnate Robert de Meulan, earl of Leicester. The school there had an excellent reputation in Anglo-Norman England. Geoffrey’s presence at the abbey, therefore, cannot prove that his father was Aubrey “of Berkshire” or Aubrey the queen’s chamberlain, but it adds substantial weight to the argument that he was.

In or soon after 1107, however, Aubrey the chamberlain and Aubrey de Vere appear in association with the county of Northamptonshire and we hear no more about any Aubrey in Berkshire.¹⁵ Henry I granted to Aubrey de Vere the socmen of Wold in Northamptonshire, with

¹⁴. Judith Green, *The Government of England Under Henry I* (Cambridge: 1989), p. 108; H. A. Cronne, “The Office of Local Justiciar in England Under the Norman Kings,” *Univ. of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 6 (1958), 18-38.

¹⁵. One obstacle to overcome when trying to decide whether Aubrey de Vere was Aubrey the chamberlain and/or the queen’s chamberlain has been the fact that his descendants did not hold the properties in Berkshire, Hampshire, and Wiltshire. When the Veres relinquished or exchanged their lands in those counties is unknown, but it was likely by c. 1120, when the Northamptonshire Survey shows Aubrey the chamberlain holding two manors of the king his father had not held in 1086.

the rights of sac and soc, toll and team—ancient rights of jurisdiction and privilege. Aubrey the chamberlain had leased land at Twywell, Northants., from Thorney Abbey for his lifetime by Christmas day, 1107/1109, for on that feast day the king stipulated that Twywell was to return to the abbey on Aubrey's death. Henry addressed a notification to three Northamptonshire men, including Aubrey the chamberlain, between 1107 and 1111, and in another directive issued between 1106 and August 1111, indicated that if the bishop of Lincoln had been disseized of certain lands in the county, Aubrey the chamberlain was to restore the land to the bishop.¹⁶ In these *acta* Aubrey the chamberlain was expected to play much the same role as Aubrey of Berkshire had played in that county, so he probably was the local justiciar in Northamptonshire. Why the change in locale? Of the many possible explanations, perhaps the most likely is that he had given up or exchanged (or even sold, to the degree that such an act was possible) properties in Berkshire, Wiltshire and Hampshire for land and privileges in Northamptonshire. In that county Aubrey de Vere held two manors of the king that had formerly been part of the Mowbray honor; his son is listed as holding manors at Islip and Drayton there and Aubrey I may have received them initially. By the mid-twelfth century the Veres held several additional Northamptonshire estates of other lords, such as Bury St. Edmund and King David of Scotland, as well as the lease on Twywell. This could have been a reorganization of the Vere honor, expanding in a county where they had demesne estates and jettisoning one or more isolated properties in outlying and distant counties. Some or most of the estates he held in Berkshire, Wiltshire, and Hampshire might have been held by sergeanty and so were relinquished when he retired from service; Domesday Book seldom distinguishes the terms of land tenure.¹⁷ He may have also been disappointed when, on the retirement or death of Robert Malet, the master chamberlain of England, around 1106, King Henry allowed his office to go unfilled. In that year, the king had defeated his brother Robert, duke of Normandy, and reunited England and the

¹⁶ *Regesta Regem Anglo-Normannorum* II, # 849, 975, 996; *Monasticon Anglicanum*, II, p. 603-4.

¹⁷ Aubrey the chamberlain also had a house in Winchester about 1110; *Victoria County History, Hampshire*, I, p. 534. As an urban property, it could be sold, while land held by feudal tenure supposedly could not. Apparently there were ways around that restriction.

duchy under one rule. William de Tancarville was the hereditary master chamberlain in Normandy; Henry had no need of a separate and equivalent household office for England.

By 1107, Aubrey I may have been in or near his eighth decade of life. While he and his wife are said to have made the journey to Abingdon several times to visit their son's grave and speak with the abbot and monks, the Abingdon chronicle claims that the couple eventually considered the long distance from their estates in Essex, where they were spending most of their time, too difficult to travel. That is a reason given for Aubrey's plan to found a cell of Abingdon Abbey at his manor of [Earls] Colne, Essex, close to Aubrey's honorial *caput* at Hedingham. Building works were sufficiently completed at Colne by March 1111 for Abbot Faritius to arrive to take formal seisin. Present at that ceremony were Aubrey I, his wife Beatrice, their surviving sons Aubrey II, Robert, Roger, and William, and Vere tenants and neighbors. Six monks were transferred from the Berkshire mother house and Abbot Faritius returned to dedicate the new priory chapel.

In the later months of 1112 or early in 1113, Aubrey I took the habit of a Benedictine monk at Colne and died, probably shortly thereafter. Other aristocrats of his generation had also taken the cowl in the last years of their life, so his act was a not uncommon expression of elite piety for those who had survived to old age. His youngest son, William, was not long in following his father to the grave and the two were entombed in the priory, which had clearly been intended as a Vere family mausoleum. His heir, Aubrey II, confirmed his parents' grants to Colne Priory and made a further grant from a Northamptonshire manor in memory of his brother. He had taken over the administration of his patrimony when his father entered monastic life.

The monks of Colne much later commemorated their founder with an epitaph on the tomb of Aubrey and William:

They withdrew from life, desired in their wishes and hearts,

Barbarian and Scythian, Gentile and Israelite.

Each sex and age equally has these limits:

See the boy, see the older man, the one father, the other son.

They came beneath one law, one fortune, one land.

Not all Athens, which he drank up, availed for the young man,
Not famous strength or wealth for the old man.
But their faiths availed, and the estates which we record [here].
Let us pray that they may avail, may avail for ever more.¹⁸

The composition is a demonstration of the learning of its author rather than a revelation of the lives or characters of the men who lay within the graves, and so cannot satisfy our desire to know more about these individuals. Was Aubrey I famous for his strength? How old was he when he died? And did young William thirst for knowledge of the ancients, particularly the ancient Greek learning that became available in western Europe during his lifetime? These questions must remain unanswered.

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¹⁸. For the last days of Geoffrey, Aubrey and William and the founding of Colne Priory, see *Historia Ecclesie Abendonensis: The History of the Church of Abingdon* (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2007), pp. 82-91. If Geoffrey fell ill when at Burley and especially if he were not the only person to fall seriously ill there, his parents may have considered the environs insalubrious. Malaria is a good candidate for Geoffrey's illness, for Burley was situated near marshlands where mosquitos could breed and transmit the disease, which was endemic in medieval and early modern England.

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