

The route of Stane Street through Ashtead: a missing link

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Abstract: A re-examination of evidence, documentary *versus* archaeological, in support of two competing claims for the route of the Roman road proceeding from 30 Acres Barn, Ashtead, to Epsom, concluding that it turned at Langley Bottom northwards along the edge of Woodcote Park.

Key words: Thirty Acres Barn, Shepherd's Walk, Nutshambles, The Port Way, Langley Bottom, Woodcote Park.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most debated and controversial topics in the history of the northern Mole Valley is the route the Roman Road known as Stane Street took from the vicinity of modern Dorking to Epsom. Stimulated by the article by Matthews (2018), this investigation re-examines the two competing claims on the basis of both documentary and archaeological evidence, considering the key sites in turn, with a view to resolving this matter.

BURGH FORD

A former Surrey County Archaeologist has opined that staging posts [mansiones] on the Roman road, which the Saxons called Stane Street, could have been at Burford [Bridge] – Burgh Ford/ “fortified crossing” of the Mole, near Dorking - and Ewell, in each case adjacent to a river. Discussion of 'The Third Mansio' appeared as a note by Kenneth Neate (1972).

A footbridge at Burford had been established by 1534, but for wheeled traffic a ford is believed to have continued in use until the construction of the turnpike road under an Act of 1755.

In connection with the erection of the modern

Burford Bridge, excavations carried out in 1937 at the site revealed a “flint-surfaced approach to [a] ford at low level having all the signs of Roman workmanship”. As recorded in *The Times* of 25 March 1937 (Anon. 1937): "Recent extensive works being carried out by the Surrey County Council in connection with the new by-pass road and the new bridge to carry it, and by Messrs. G. S. Faulkner for a new sewer, seem definitely to disprove a Roman bridge. On the north bank have been found three roads sloping down to the water at different levels, the lowest of which, a 1½ ft - thick flint road—almost certainly Stane Street—runs sharply to a little below present water level. On the south side a ford of later date has been confirmed by a deep trench cut in the west side of the modern road for the Mickleham and Westhumble sewer. The trench, 183 ft long and ending at a point 150 ft. south of the water, showed the following horizons, top to bottom : Tar macadam 1 ft, flints 6 in., filled chalk lumps, deepening towards the river from 3 ft 4 in to 5 ft 3 in, and a solid flint road deepening from 12 in to 21 in. and laid on virgin chalk rock. This bottom road—not Stane Street, the line of which is some 25 yd westward—slopes sharply down to water level. It is obvious that when the first bridge was built a little east of the Roman road the lowest road was covered with chalk to raise the level to the

top of the bridge. The most recent road was accommodated to the level of the present bridge, which, according to the Surrey CC records, was built only some 52 years ago. How often the bridge has been reconstructed is not known, but it is practically certain that the Roman traffic crossed by a ford. Under present flood conditions this might seem unlikely; but even to-day for a great part of the year the Mole could probably be forded here on a masonry platform a foot high”.

MICKLEHAM DOWNS PORT WAY

Before the creation of the Horsham to Epsom turnpike, after 1755, the route to Leatherhead *via* Mickleham Vale remained difficult or even impassable for vehicular traffic. Consequently, the Roman road had turned off ascending to Mickleham Downs. In a Report to Surrey County Council & Surrey Archaeological Society in March 2000, the late Christopher K. Currie (2000) remarked on Stane Street: “Where this road passes through the Leatherhead portion of the study area, it is well defined by a raised causeway for the most part. Medieval documents record the road as Port Way, an important through road from London to Dorking”. A length of Stane Street coming over Leatherhead Downs from Mickleham was labelled The Port Street during the fourteenth century.

AN 18TH CENTURY OBSERVATION – PEBBLE LANE, ASHTEAD, TO WOODCOTE PARK, EPSOM

William Bray FAS, read a paper to the Society of Antiquaries, London, on 24 & 31 January 1788 (Bray 1789), providing “Some account of a Roman Road leading from Southampton by Chichester and Arundell through Sussex to London, so far as the same is found in Surrey”. In particular, Bray remarked: “. . . it would come out on Mickleham downs. It is accordingly seen there in a ridge of considerable extent, terminating at the entrance to a lane called Pebble Lane, which runs between Leatherhead on the left and Headley on the right. This lane seems to derive its name from the road. At the end of the lane, the right hand hedge stands on a bank

[Nutshambles] that has much the appearance of a raised ridge. The line directs you to the back of the late Lord Baltimore's park in Epsom called Woodcote . . . out on Epsom Downs at the foot of the racecourse [Langley Vale]. There a large layer of flints has been very lately dug up for mending the roads, which seemed to me, as I rode by it, to have run in a straight line, and may well be supposed to have been part of this road; but I am not sufficiently informed to say this with certainty. I have searched for, but have not been able satisfactorily to recover, the track any further”.

Bray's reference to 'Pebble Lane' in fact related to the ancient, possibly Iron Age, Harroway wending up Green Lane [from close to the present Knoll roundabout at Leatherhead] before veering off towards Headley and Pebblecombe aiming for the North Downs/Pilgrim's Way route into Kent. Green Lane itself, called 'London Road over the Downs' on milestones of 1745, continued to meet Stane Street (also known as Pebble Lane) close to Thirty Acres Barn. This junction appears on the 1638 Lawrence Survey map of Ashted where the South [Common] Field met The Breach.

An Ashted Court Roll of 24 January 1575 in the Surrey History Centre (444/1/1/) refers to “. . . the Common fieldes beneath the Portway . . . “ which establishes that the Port Way, Pebble Lane and Stane Street were synonymous with regard to the track running alongside the South [Common] Field to become “London Road to Leatherhead” on the Lawrence Map (now Shepherds' Walk on which stands Thirty Acres Barn).

THE WOODRUFFE STABLES ALIGNMENT

Hampton (1995) remarked that: “The alignment of the Roman Road then continues that of Pebble Lane across the fields to the Woodruffe Stables, attested by excavation [In the vicinity of 30 Acres Barn; Fox (1950)] and crop marks recorded on air photographs [His own, as in a sketch reproduced in Surrey Archaeological Collections, 2008]”. Hall (2008) discusses the Pebble Lane alignment to

Ashted Woodruff Stables (Fig 1), a vantage point on the 100 m contour, and remarks that aerial photographs had not revealed traces of the road extending into Woodcote Park. He

notes that the route into Ewell might not have been exactly as suggested by Winbolt (1936a, b) and recognises that identification of a point at which to excavate Stane Street at the eastern

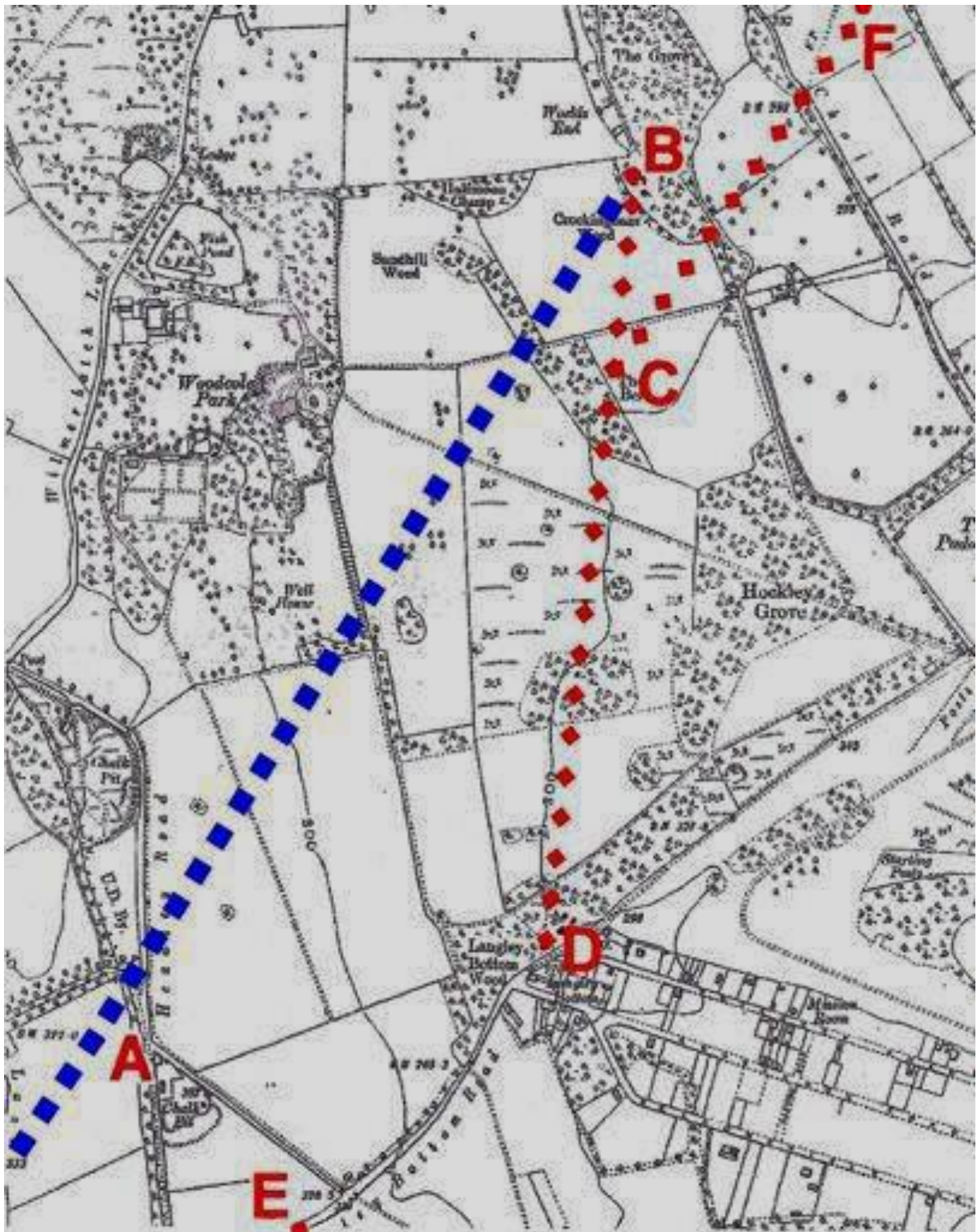


Fig. 1. Extension of Pebble Lane alignment from Woodruff Stables (A) to Winbolt's 1936 excavation (B), showing part of The Portway (D–E) and with indicative lines of Dorking Way from Langley Bottom to World's End (D–B) and the branch of Dorking Way towards Epsom parish church (C–F). Causeway access to Woodcote Park from Chalk Lane appears north-east of C. Reproduced from Bouchard (2012).

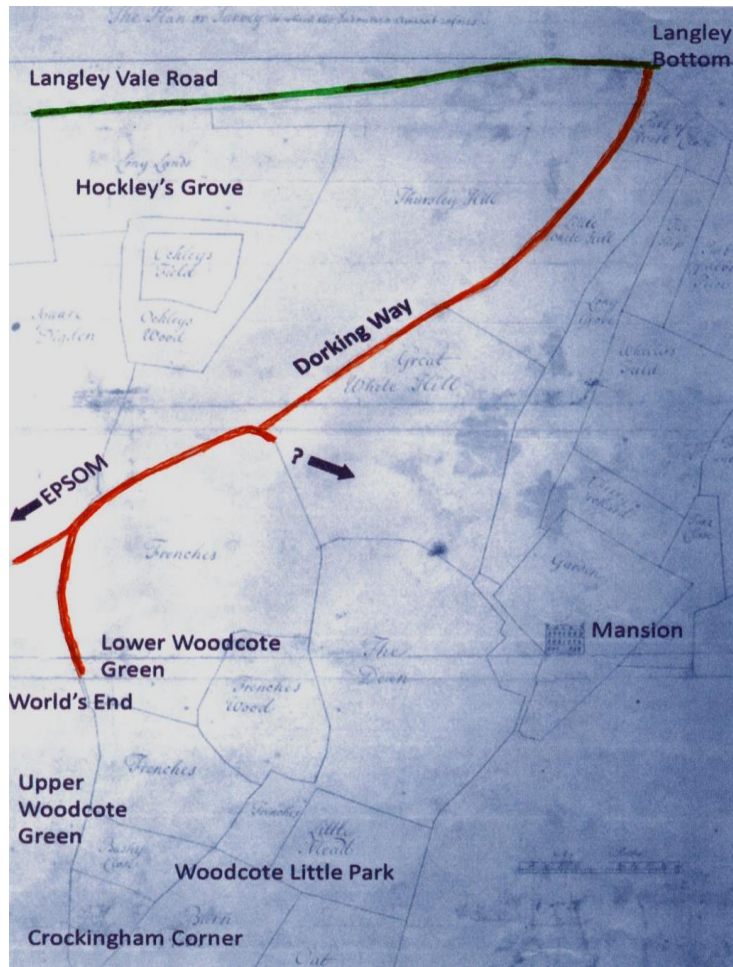


Fig. 2. *The 1726 plan of Woodcote Park the archives of the Royal Automobile Club (© 2012), with key localities and routes indicated. NB: North is at the bottom of the map.*

boundary of the RAC golf course had been fortuitous. A straight line drawn on a modern OS map actually shows a fall to 70 m before a rise back to 90 m at The Grove. This begs a question why the Romans would not have avoided a valley bottom into which rainwater drained from the Downs.

Hampton had discounted Shepherds' Walk as merely a bridleway diverging to the north-west. As noted above, however, the Lawrence Survey Map of 1638 clearly identifies this length of track as the “London Road to Leatherhead”. It extended along The Breach to reach the Ashtead/Epsom boundary at the Nutshambles (Motschameles/ Motshambles) Bank. Thereafter in Epsom from the Chertsey Cartulary, 1495, it was again called The Portway before Abbot's Denelond (Downland, the Epsom and Walton Downs, Langley Vale).

THE NUTSHAMBLES EARTHWORK

This feature was discussed by the late Dorothy Nail (1965) as the meeting place of the Copthorne Hundred, a linear earthwork which may be traced on the ground from what was the Pleasure Pit to Nutshambles (NGR: TQ 20065787 to TQ 20105744). It was excavated between 6–17 July 1964 by a team led by Colin C. M. Coward at Grid reference TQ 20185709 [adjacent to Down Close on the Headley Road] and their findings were published (Coward 1965). It was suggested to have been defensive but perhaps not connected with Stane Street having regard to what was then thought to have been the route of the Roman road, but with its intersection obliterated by Woodruff House. Nevertheless, the excavators recognised that “It could be a late Roman work built to cut Stane Street” and this idea would surely have been reinforced had they considered it spanned

the only clear transit entered by the Port Way from The Breach. Nail (1965) went on to remark “The linear earthwork, on part of which the ancient hedge grows, can be traced on the ground for one and a quarter miles from Pleasure Pit, Epsom, almost to Walton Hurst Farm. The bank and ditch must originally have had an overall height of about 10 feet and width of about 35 feet”. Such an enterprise would have been beyond meagre local resources in Anglo Saxon times and probably needed the manpower which could have been called upon by Roman military engineers.

A JUNCTION AT LANGLEY BOTTOM: THE DORKING WAY

In a Ewell manorial register of 1408, The Portway, repeatedly referred to as a landmark, is described as “the Portweye leading from Codyngton [Cuddington] to Leddred [Leatherhead, apparently *via* Ewell]” (Deedes 1913: 58). Over the years which have followed Mr Bray's fruitless search for an extension of the track up and beyond Epsom Downs no 'concrete' evidence for such a course has emerged. Bray's casual observation led others

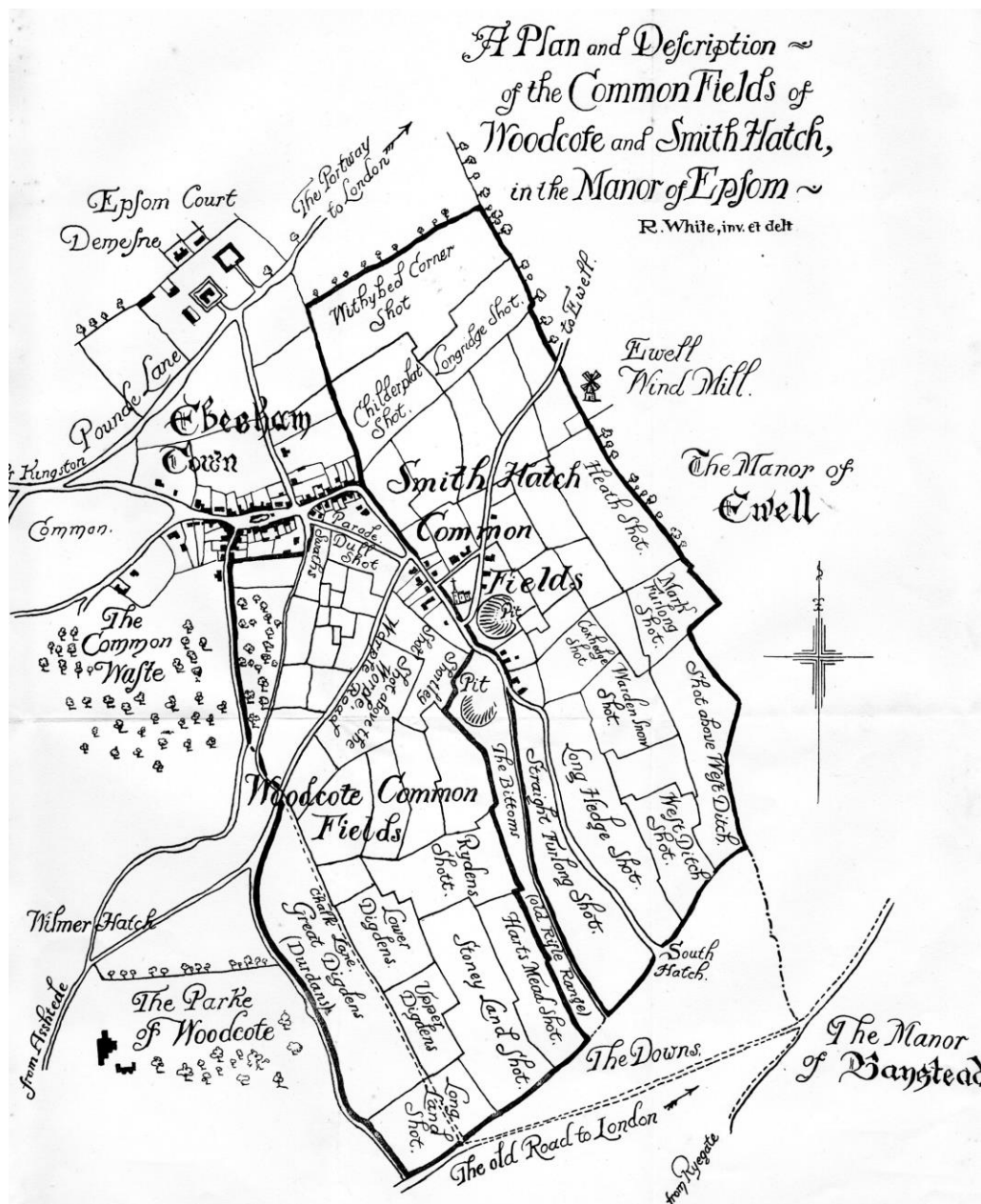


Fig.3. A plan and description of the Common Fields of Woodcote and Smith Hatch in the Manor of Epsom. Reproduced from White (1928: Map 2).

to seek Stane Street extending from the end of Pebble Lane to the Rubbing House (Downs Hotel), and beyond, as discussed by Winbolt (1936b: 147–151). He shared A. W. G. Lowther's feeling “that the Langley Bottom Road is not part of Stane Street, but part of the old road from Leatherhead on to the Downs”. A need to re-consider their conclusion arises, however, from a recently identified plan of Woodcote Park dated to 1726 (Fig. 2).

It has long been assumed that when a deer park came to be created in 1155, by enclosure of the south-western corner of Epsom manor, tracks which had led across it, from the Downs and Ashtead, were diverted around what became Woodcote Park. As already been intimated, what can be said with certainty is that, east of Motschameles (Motshambles/Nutshambles), The Portway is mentioned as a bound in the 1495 itinerary around Epsom in a document from the Chertsey Cartulary. The Portway, which linked a succession of Saxon villages, came over Leatherhead Downs from Mickleham as The Port Street and is generally accepted as following the route of Stane Street to Ewell. The next bound was Denelond (the Downs). The 1549 Rental for Epsom also refers to the bounds: “so by the lands of the said Abbot called Denelands as far as the way called Porteway and as far as the hedge called Motshanelis . . .” and mentions 'Dorkyngwey' in relation to particular holdings twice.

The following 18th century plan shows the track turning off at Langley Bottom to descend in a north-easterly direction towards World's End. In that period, it seems to have been part of the track-way described as a “lane leading from Dorking towards Epsom” otherwise, in the other direction, “the King's highway leading from the town of Epsom towards the downs” and to have connected with Woodcote End via Upper Woodcote Green. It also appears on a map reconstructed by Reginald White (1928).

Another 18th century map of “The Common Field called Woodcote” indicates a branch following the line of Stane Street established by Winbolt from Woodcote Park into The Grove of Durdans. It proceeds from 'Great

Digdens' (Durdans) as 'Dorking Road', passing Dorking Way Shot to Shortley Shot. A lease from 23 July 1756 [Surrey History Centre SHC_COL 4073/11] mentions that Shortley Shot abutted on Dorking Way.

On the basis of conventional wisdom, it had been believed that the track from Woodcote End, Epsom, past Upper Woodcote Green had been closed off at World's End since the 12th century. Documents recently discovered in the Royal Automobile Club's archive, however, reveal that this route to the Downs continued until about 1740. Further evidence is presented on Epsom History Centre's website (<http://www.epsomandewellhistoryexplorer.org.uk/WoodcotePark.html>), which also features a larger version of the 1726 plan of Woodcote Park Estate (Fig. 2) which shows it running up Thursley Hill to reach Langley Vale Road opposite the approach to Langley Vale Farm. This accords with “A plan and description of the Common Fields of Woodcote and Smith Hatch in the Manor of Epsom” White appended (Fig. 3) to his book *Ancient Epsom* and was mentioned as “the old road passing between what are now Durdans and Woodcote Park to Epsom Downs to the West of the present Saddling Paddock” (White 1928: 50). What White did not mention were references to a branch of 'Dorking Road' which had turned eastwards, across Great Digdens and Chalk Lane to pass below Lower Digdens (Square Digden on the 1726 map) but above Shortley Shot [Surrey History Centre SHC_COL 4073/11], towards the parish church.

Napper (1888: 341) recorded having been told of “a road called Roman, running from Ashtead to Epsom, as I understand, between Woodcut Park and Durdans, which is evidently a junction of the (so-called) Stane Street with the other road through Ewell . . .”.

STANE STREET FOUND IN WOODCOTE PARK

The Times of 6 May 1936, reported: "By courtesy of the R.A.C. between the fourth green of the golf course in Woodcote Park near Epsom and the Park wall, I found Stane Street

on April 30. A line laid across 25 in O.S. sheets in continuation northward of the 'Pebble Lane' straight on Leatherhead Downs leaves Woodcote Park through the north boundary near the corner where the Park, Durdans, and General Northey's estate meet. As found, Stane Street was only four yards east of the presumed line. The condition of the road was good, because till recently it was in woodland. The cambered surface, the centre of which was only 4 in under the grass, measured 21 ft, and there was a shallow ditch 3 and a half feet wide at top on either side. The metal was gravel pebbles from the bed just below the Club House, and flints, grouted in with yellow sand. A thickness of some 10 in of this lay on browner damp sand quite devoid of metal, and this again on pure clay. The eastern ditch had evidently been filled up in comparatively recent times. This section is 1 and a half miles, 237 yards from the north end of Pebble Lane, and nearly 1 and a half miles from Windmill Nurseries, Epsom, and finally disposes of the theory of Roach Smith and others that Stane Street went by the Downs Hotel, near Epsom Racecourse. That at a midway point at a distance of some 3 and a half miles, over rolling country where there is no surface trace, the road could be located within a 40 ft cross-trench, speaks eloquently for the accuracy of the O.S. maps and for the capacity of Roman road engineers to lay a straight road trace. S. E. Winbolt" (Anon. 1936). This is, however, exactly where Dorking Way continued southwards from the gate at World's End.

THE 'DIVERGENT' WAY

In his monograph on Stane Street, Hilaire Belloc (1913: 111) issued a caveat [with added emphasis, in regard to Shepherd's Walk – Langley Vale Road,]: "... it must be noted that a way which is **traditionally** of Roman origin diverges at this point near Thirty Acres Barn from the Stane Street, and points in the direction of Croydon . . . This divergent track has survived. It can be followed very nearly to the Grand Stand of Epsom Racecourse. On the direct line which I suppose for the true Stane Street **no** relic remains . . . but it must be remembered . . . the diverging road itself disappears after the first few hundred yards,

and that there is no trace of it between Epsom Racecourse and Croydon "

WINBOLT'S 'ROMAN ROAD' FROM DURDANS, EPSOM

White (1928: 50), claimed, in consultation with Winbolt, to have identified "a portion of an undoubted Roman road" through Durdans Estate. Nevertheless, what he describes is evidently the causeway created by the 5th or 6th Lord Baltimore to provide a new carriage-way from Chalk Lane to the front of Woodcote Park mansion – as depicted on Roque's map of 1768. It may well have incorporated metalling recovered when the Dorking Way cart track was rendered redundant.

CONCLUSIONS

An hypothesis that Stane Street extended in a straight line as a continuation of the Pebble Lane alignment in a field to the west of Shepherds' Walk was reported by Margary (in Fox 1950) to have been confirmed as a finding by Samuel Edward Winbolt "under the tilth" (Nail 1965). It was followed by an Ordnance Survey excavation in 1948 at TQ 19622 57035 (Fox 1950). On a current OS map the dig-site is represented by the end of a dotted line in the middle of a field, lying between Grey's Lane footpath and what has become Ermyn Lodge. The excavator remarked that: "On the 5th December, 1948, the investigation was carried a step further, when the road was again 'found' in a field centred on National Grid reference 51/1957/97 63 Surrey 6 in quarter sheet 19, S.W. [TQ 199 75763]. The field had four 'guide furrows' cut across it in preparation for full ploughing. Where these furrows crossed the supposed line of the road they raised themselves as much as 9 in, the four 'bumps' lining up where, by measurement, the road was estimated to run. In so far as it is desirable to prove the existence of Stane Street at this point nothing further need be done."

From the subsequent aerial observations, however, it appears that the humps indicated the parallel ditches which extended between Tudor Croft and Larch Field to Woodruffe Stables. These look very much like preparatory work which came to be abandoned: no

corresponding cutting was found when the Coward excavation took place across Nutshambles Bank. That earthwork appears to have been established in antiquity to flank an established track down to Langley Bottom. No evidence appears on the surface, or has been unearthed, on the presumed diagonal crossing of Woodcote Park to The Grove – there is some ambiguity over the alignment of Winbolt's 1936 'discovery' but his reference to an eastern ditch and photograph of the road's 'Eastern half' leads one to infer that it was north to south, leading to Langley Bottom following the Dorking Way.

Salway (1993: 388) observes that “Roman roads were normally surveyed in straight sections, within an overall long-distance alignment, changing direction at convenient sighting points and making the best use of the local terrain . . . Irregular stretches reflect special difficulties such as descending an escarpment”. Speculatively, the Thirty Acre Barn to the Grove projection had been undertaken on the usual line of sight basis but the ground work was aborted, possibly to avoid need for an embanked causeway across the valley floor (eventually comprised in Woodcote Park). Passage was subsequently Langley Bottom before continuing its descent down the eastern side – simply a matter of adapting to the topography.

Under consideration has been Stane Street in it's later guise of The Port Way passing through Nutshambles pre-Saxon defensive earthwork before making a dog-leg turn to continue to The Grove, and then eastwards to Epsom under it's local; name of The Dorking Way. The latter continued to function until *circa* 1740. For the 1755 Survey of Epsom, numerous references to the 'Dorking Way' appear as abutments amongst descriptions of plots in the Common Fields but “A capital messuage call'd Woodcote coach houses stables and several other outbuildings courts yards gardens orchards and several parcels of land and woodland (all now inclos'd in a park) containing in the whole three hundred acres more or less [abutted] on the chalk lane leading from the town of Ebbisham to Walton [Chalk Lane] on the east part on the common on the

west part on the road leading from the Downs to Leatherhead and Dorking on the **south** part [Langley Vale – Pebble Lane]”.

To be desired, one could suggest the need for an archaeological investigation immediately within the Woodcote Park curtilage at Langley Bottom searching for remnants of the robbed out Dorking Way.

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