

Introduction

Wheatley's early story is older and more exciting than the village name suggests. In the twelfth century, Anglo-Norman clerks recorded the sound of the name - *Wateiea*, *Hwatelega* and *Watelega*. The sound on villagers' lips came before the written record and its various spellings. This particular *wheat leah/leigh/ley* was simply "open land where wheat grows". Many unremarkable crop *leahs* are found throughout England.

This book explores that early story. It also describes the two miles of public footpath from Wheatley to Cuddesdon which crosses Bullsdown, Castle Hill and Cuddesdon Brook; it follows the return road past Coombe Wood, over The Howe by Ladder Hill, down to Wheatley centre. The walk is one of great beauty and tranquillity, much of it through private working land which, as the earliest cultivated part of Wheatley, gave the village its name. "It's a place where I'd like to be buried" said a villager recently; "Wheatley and area deserve an intensive study" wrote a leading professor of Roman British History, also recently. The beauty of the landscape hides its interest.

Morning and evening sunlight shows up ridge-and-furrow, old hedgelines, contours and sherds in the topsoil. They all had owners, names and a story. In fact, Wheatley's earliest story is imprinted in the ground rather than in books. This is an attempt to read it.

Britain's Roman phase began with the invasion by Claudius in AD 43. It ended effectively with the evacuation by Honorius in AD 410. By that date, Germanic settlers had already entered the island. The growth of their Anglo-Saxon or Old English culture continued until and beyond the Norman invasion of 1066. *Britannia* became *Englaland*. After 1066, English and Norman cultures combined to give us much of our present framework of life.

Romanised-Celts, Saxons and Normans settled Wheatley and tamed its lands. They knew its fields, roads and fords even better than the present inhabitants because they made them.

John Fox
Wheatley 1995



Patterned "Kentish" dish-brooch, bronze-gilt, from the Bullsdown burials.

Chapter 1

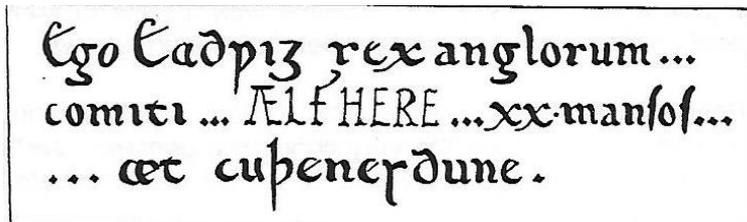
Wheatley before 'Domesday'

1. The 'Domesday Book' Record, 1086-87

The commissioners who compiled 'Domesday Book' travelled the lands of William the Conqueror throughout 1086. They took the names of key settlement centres and ignored the names (but not the land) of lesser hamlets. The growing settlement on the downs northwest of *Codesdone* in *Oxenfordscire* was included but not by name. *Hwatetega* on rustic lips could not compete with the ancient, more striking *Codesdone* (Cuthwine's Hill) already long recorded. The commissioners did take note of Sueting, a Saxon who held land in Wheatley from Abingdon Abbey. They misplaced his 180 acres somewhere in Garsington - clerical slips happened, even in 'Domesday Book'.

Generally, 'Domesday Book' was thorough - hence the comparison with the Judgement Day tally. The King needed to know the country's tax potential. Under oath, local jurymen detailed the settlements around Wheatley. *Codesdone* (Cuddesdon), *Gersedune* (Garsington), *Fostel* (Forest Hill), *Stantone* (Stanton), *Eltone* (Holton), *Horspadan* (Horspath), *Mideltone* (Milton), *Pereiun* (Waterperry), *Scotorne* (Shotover) and *Celelorde* (Chiiworth) were formally entered on the parchment pages of the King's land register. Even Coombe Wood was measured. Wheatley's existence was known to both commissioners and jurymen but 'Domesday Book' was not a place-name gazette. *Codesdone* lands included what was known as *Hwatelega* and that was enough. Much of the *Codesdone* entry - 24 villagers, 12 smallholders, 18 ploughs, 2 fisheries and 60 acres of meadow - refers to Wheatley. How much, it is impossible to calculate.

2. The Royal Charter, 956



"1 Eadwig king of the English...(do give) to Ealdorman Aelfhere... 20 hides (of land)...(in a place long known as) aet Cuthenesdune". AD956

Long before 'Domesday Book', the boundaries of the Cuddesdon-Wheatley lands had been described in another royal document. In January 956, at the age of sixteen, King Eadwig was crowned at Kingston. His coronation stone is still kept there. To mark the occasion many royal gifts were distributed to religious houses and to the nobility. Eadwig depended heavily on their support and advice.

Aelfhere, a notoriously powerful *Ealdorman* or Earl who governed Mercia (central England north of the Thames) received a gift of over 2500 acres in the form of an estate known by ancient tradition as *Aet Cuthenesdune* (Cuddesdon Region). The title deed was witnessed and signed by the *Witan* or Council, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, bishops, dukes and the king's twelve-year old brother Eadgar, soon to break away as usurper 'King' of Mercia.

This charter or *land-boke* still exists. In Old English it describes landmarks which can still be seen in *Cuthenesdune* (Cuddesdon), *Fost*(Forest Hill), *Healhtune* (Holton) and Wheatley. The one estate took in all or most of these modern civil parishes. Some of the modern boundary names have survived the thousand years - Dry Brook, Mariweil, Chalgrove, Hollow Brook and the Thame river. They are still boundaries today. Major landmarks like Coombe Wood and the Thame still carry the oldest names - Welsh or Brythonic Gaelic (*Cwm* = valley; *Thame/Thames/Tamar*= dark water).

THE THAME

tame, ~

Shortly after receiving this gift, the "faithful" (a hope, not a description - he turned Eadgar against his brother) Aelfhere made over the estate to (St) Aethelwold of Abingdon Abbey. For the next six hundred years St Mary's Abbey was chief landowner, corporate lord of the manor and spiritual administrator of Cuddesdon-Wheatley until the destruction of the monasteries by Henry VIII. By then it was a vastly richer institution. An early stay at Abingdon in 1518 is said to have given the King the idea of commandeering church wealth to resolve his debts.

3. The Landmark Clues

Boundary points described in AD 956 reveal a long established estate. What is now Wheatley centre was a T-junction for two Saxon roads, one taking the ridge to the north (Old London and London Road), the other crossing from Garsington to meet it, over the brook (culverted under High Street) up a *hollow/sunken way* (Holloway) in the direction of the *hollow/sunken town* (Holton). Both roads are described as *straet* (paved, usually old Roman roads). Old London/London Road was part of a *straet* also described in Old English as a *herpaeth* (army road) running from London to Worcester, across the Thame and through Forest Hill and Islip.

956 -AD

HOLLOW BROOK

holanbroc...

Other tracks give further clues to ancient activity. While the main river crossing was called the *herpaethford*, the next ford downstream (at Cuddesdon) was the *cattle ford*. Cattle need meadows and droving tracks - pastoral farming. Two "headlands of ploughlands" are also noted in AD 956, both of them on the Garsington-Wheatley *straet*. A headland was a bank of sods and plough scrapings which gradually built up *over many years* at the head of plough furrows.

Ditches, a stone bridge in Holton, a clearing by peasants {*ceorla graf*- churls' clearing - Chalgrove in Westfield, Shotover) and marginal farming by the very poor {*hina gemaes* - serfs strip - Vent Farm towards Forest Hill) also indicate intensive activity on Wheatley land long before 956.

Archaeology helps make up for the lack of written records before the 956 charter. *Aet Cuthenesdune* was "long called" that. The discovery of a large Roman farmhouse {*villa*) on Castle Hill, a small one in Cuddesdon, followed by the uncovering of a "royal" Saxon burial at Cuddesdon and a large Saxon cemetery on Castle Hill make it clear that the two hili-spurs formed the heart of the *Aet Cuthenesdune* estate.

"It is right to pursue the relation between the Saxon settlement and the Roman villa. Boundaries and landholdings are more permanent than the residences of the people who own and work the land ...shrines and mausolea also ought to be expected on an estate...Wheatley and area deserve intensive study." {*Professor Peter Salway, author of the standard Oxford History of Roman Britain, commenting on Wheatley finds, 1985*}

The arable island extending southeast of the present village and above the floodmeadows of the Thame seems to have been the site of the original *wheat leah*. Three adjoining downs make up the ridge:

1211

THE HOWE

Le ho.

1. *The Howe* (as in Plymouth *Ho*) extends from Shotover, west of the disused windmill. It ends at the northern side of Coombe Woodon Ladder Hill.
2. *Bulldown* (whence Bullingdon) runs southeast from Ladder Hill, topped by Castle Hill Farm (formerly the lands of Rectory Farm).
3. *Castle Hill* (*Garswell Hill*) runs on from Bulldown, the lowest of the downs (*dunes, duns or dons*), sloping down towards the Thames flood meadows.

Either side of the ridge run two streams. *Barreldale, Holbroc* or *Common Brook* to the north, runs from several Shotover springs, through Westfield (where it filled a tank-wash for wartime exercises on Shotover Plain), along High Street to Old London Road and the river at Wheatley Bridge. Since at least AD 956, together with Old/London Road, it has been the northern boundary of the Saxon estate, the medieval parish and the modern civil district of Wheatley.

Cumbe Broc (Cuddesdon Brook) rises from powerful wellsprings in Coombe Wood (*Cumbes; Cumbergrave*) and forms a natural manorial and modern civil boundary with Cuddesdon down to the Thames. Both streams are still known in pre-Conquest English as "brooks". The Thames flowing from north to south across the eastern end of both Wheatley and Cuddesdon forms another natural boundary for the ancient settlements and latterday parish communities. During the English Civil War it served as a "moat" for the royal capital at Oxford, threatened by Parliamentary troops from the south east

1362

COOMBE WOOD

Coombe paye

In Roman times there may have been a tenant farm at Cuddesdon or Milton and a labourers' settlement at Holton. The assumed 900 acres of the Wheatley *villa* farm match the size of an intensively studied Roman *villa* estate at Ditchley. By AD 956 it was the nucleus of a much larger Saxon estate of some 2400 acres. From this Saxon royal estate grew the various settlements of Cuddesdon, Wheatley, Garsington and Holton.

4. The Soil Evidence

In the 6th century AD a settlement of Saxons, known for convenience as "West Saxons", lived on these downs. Part of their cemetery was found in 1884. At Lechlade, well west of Wheatley, 100 burials from the period AD 480-610 were found in 1985, together with signs of farming there under "British" authority. The Saxons buried at Wheatley were from the same period and may have intermarried with the last generation of Roman-British inhabitants here. At nearby Dorchester this seems to have happened a century before, just as Rome withdrew from the island.

We speak of "Dark Ages". The phrase describes what we do not know. Increasing evidence now suggests an immensely cultured and well connected early Saxon civilisation. They were not simply plunderers. The earliest came to England as mercenaries to defend the island. To such settlers and their successors land meant more than loot. The new race were also outnumbered in places like Dorchester, Lechlade and probably Wheatley, faced with land already boundaried and worked for centuries under Romano-British *villa* civilisation. The native population quickly diminished due to flight westward and epidemic, but overall the Saxon settlers probably fitted into the post-Roman

scene more peacefully than we realise. The withdrawal of Britain from Ireland and from India are instructive parallels to Rome's final curtain in this most northern province.

The cemetery of the Wheatley Saxons was uncovered on Bullsdown in 1882-84, near the site of a Roman *villa*. It is evidence of "the only early Saxon settlement known in the area between the Chilterns, the Cherwell, the Thames and (Aylesbury)." (*British Archaeological Report 1 1974*). Besides the usual warrior farmers' spears, knives and shield-bosses lay jewellery, weigh-scales and signs of contact with Roman culture.

[Image removed for copyright reasons]

Saxon burials, Bullsdown, May 1883, looking southeast with grave 32 in the foreground. Bishop's Park Cuddesdon is background, right. Note the lunch bottles by the wheelbarrow. (*Henry Taunt, Courtesy Oxon County Libraries*)

An unusual Saxon burial from the same period had already been discovered in 1847 at Cuddesdon, the next spur of high ground to the south. Recent scholarship and a trial-dig at Cuddesdon in 1970 suggest fascinating connections between the two sites and with early Saxon royalty. It seems to have been from this period that Cuddesdon-Wheatley became the single royal estate recorded as *Aet Cuthenesdune* in later Saxon times. It made strategic sense - two crossings of the river Thame commanded by one property on the two hill spurs.

Before the Saxons came, Romanised-Britons farmed the area. In 1845 a Romano-British building complex of impressive size was discovered on the end of Castle Hill. For a period of at least 200 years (the timespan between George III and today) a *villa* house commanded a choice, elevated position looking southeast over the river from high ground. The well-drained heights were under plough and pasture.

Wheatley *villa* was evidently larger than its neighbours at Cuddesdon, Milton, Beckley and Islip. The owners - probably several over such a long period - were probably of Celtic-Belgic stock, with Roman tastes and habits - gentry rather than aristocrats, like the Anglo-Indians and the Anglo-Irish. It is as much a mistake to think of the Romano-Briton as a homesick Italian pining for a better climate south of the Icknield Way as it is to think of the Saxon as fully employed in looting and raping. *Villa* folk heroes were Caractacus and Cymbeline rather than Horatius or Aeneas, although they would know of them too. Romano-British dead were buried on Ladder Hill and Coombe Wood, by the *straet* which now leads to Garsington and near a spring-grove.

The *villa* buildings were in ruin by the time Saxon funerals took place further west along the Castle Hill skyline. This does not mean the villa-lands were no longer worked. A farm is not a farmhouse. The arable fields were probably the reason for the Saxons crossing the river and climbing the hill in the first place. If they then began to farm part of the old Roman estate, fitting in with a local population already

in possession, their settlement would have taken place somewhere between Coombe Wood and lower Ladder Hill, alongside the natives and away from river and flood. This area (now a housing development on the station and timber yard sites) has long been regarded as the original site of Wheatley, *Old Watele*.



5. Summary of the Evidence

A pair of Romano-British houses and surrounding lands occupied adjacent hills at Cuddesdon and Castle Hill, AD 150-400. The Wheatley *villa* seems to have been the larger. A minor Roman road ran along the western edge of this estate, and burials took place along it.

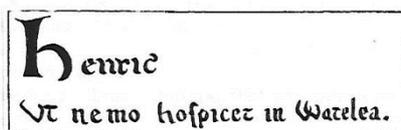
A century after the collapse of the *villa(s)* important Saxon burials took place on the same two hills. The Wheatley burials were the more numerous, but the Cuddesdon burials were "royal". By AD 956 the two hills were the heart of an ancient royal estate "long known" as *Aet Cuthenesdune*, with old chartered boundaries and signs of long developed agriculture. Cuddesdon (*Cuthwine's/Cudden's Hill*) was the heart of the settlement. The estate was important enough to form a King's gift to the most powerful noble of the time.

Boundaries recorded as already ancient in AD 956, were observed for another six hundred years when the estate was owned by Abingdon Abbey. Ecclesiastically, it was the medieval parish of Cuddesdon-Wheatley; feudally, it was two distinct manors, Cuddesdon and Wheatley. Only in the 19th century, after Wheatley had outstripped Cuddesdon, was this ancient estate finally split into the church and civil parishes of Cuddesdon and Wheatley. Cuddesdon Brook was nature's ready dividing line. There is a strong hint of continuous settlement at Wheatley, within continuous boundaries, over two thousand years.

Pre-Roman Belgic settlers in the mould of "Asterix" (cousin "Wheatbix" was invented in 1985 by primary pupils) probably farmed here. Agriculture was one reason for Rome's occupation, besides rumours of gold, silver and lead and a need to close a bolthole for Gallic resistance. Before the Belgic Gauls came Stone and Iron Age folk. Their flint tools are found in many Wheatley fields; local trackways over high ground, better known elsewhere on a grander scale as "ridgeways", may also be their monument.

6. The Royal 'Forest'

In 1135, two centuries after King Eadwig's grant, Wheatley was a manor distinct from Cuddesdon, with its own distinctive name. The Abbot of Abingdon persuaded the King to relieve Wheatley of hospitality duty towards the King's "huntmen and marshals of Court". Coombe Wood was also the Abbot's keptered warren, serving the abbey kitchens. With the vast royal '*forest*' (including *Kyngeswode*, Shotover) on Wheatley's northwest boundary and a major road from London running on the eastern edge towards the '*forests* and royal palaces of Beaumont (Oxford) and Woodstock, this relief from billeting and victualling was no small matter. It is also a clue to Wheatley's role before the Normans.



"(From King) Henry (1) ... that no one is to be quartered on Wheatley." AD 1100-35

Royal *forests* grew up in late Anglo-Saxon times. Strict laws governed areas designated as "*forest*" ('outside* Common Law; "foreigner*", outsider, is from the same root; the word does not imply trees!). These laws are known to every child through Robin Hood - a Robin-O-The-Wood was known even on Shotover in the 13th century. The Norman invader took over and enforced enthusiastically these Saxon laws of exclusion. Royal *forests*, which formed part of the King's living, were abolished in 1662.

The King's retinue had to be fed when the King was in "*forest* lands. Throughout the year *forest* officials and even the royal hunting dogs had to be supported. The estate *Aet Cuthenesdune* may have formed a royal farm in later Saxon times, a 'service' area for royal retinues on the road. It was in royal hands before AD 956, already an ancient estate. It continued to owe billeting duties until 1135.

Fortunately for *Watelea*, a Lord Abbot had the King's ear. To request of Henry I that this last remaining burden be lifted from this section of royal estate now in religious hands was reasonable. The King's agreement was an act of royal piety.

Chapter Two

Walking through Wheatley's Early History

1. The Railway Crossing

The Public Footpath from Jackie's Lane crosses the former railway. A packhorse way led up to Bullsdown here, long before railway days. (*Jagger* was a nickname for a packhorseman and may explain *Jackie*). *The* trackbed is now sliced by the back gardens of Beech Rd, but a couple of sections of original broad-gauge line stand as fence posts on the side of the Path. Brunel's 7 gauge required a generously wide trackbed.

From 1864 Wheatley Station served the old Mid-West section of the GWR complex. For two years the village hummed with the excitement of a goldrush. Migrant workers camped and lodged on the village to level, tunnel, bank, cut and bridge. The vicar, pioneer of a new parish, supported the railway; new horizons, he hoped, would open up and, more to the point, sober up the village.

Camps held over one hundred navvies. Others with their families lodged with villagers. The landlord of *The King and Queen* supplied beer - carried on shoulder-yokes by the bucketful. A nonconformist Scripture Reader worked the line. The vicar appointed a Railway Curate who conducted baptisms, marriages and funerals. Village traders did well from the newcomers. The vicar received a large ammonite dug from the Horspath tunnel. Navvies shovelled tunnel-spoil day and night to create the river embankment. The sinking of the hollow pillars and positioning of the bridge girders provided a spectacle. Evening entertainment was provided for the workers in the school. Wheatley railway, on a smaller scale, had all the ingredients of the opening up of the American West taking place around the same time. Its first casualty was an elderly village lady struck by a train in 1868.

A century later the railway fell to Dr Beeching's axe. In peacetime it had carried commuters, milk, produce and shoppers to Oxford and London. In the Great War it carried two hundred Wheatley men to the forces and requisitioned farm horses to the artillery. Siegfried Sassoon came by train to Lady Morrell's anti-war community at Garsington. Hospital trains from Second War fronts came to the *57 (US) Army Field Hospital* (later *BMH Wheatley*).

Cowley works sent completed war vehicles along it and received crashed enemy aircraft for smelting. The line served as a relief track when the Blitz put main London services out of action. The Luftwaffe in turn bombed the line (behind Beech Rd and by Wheatley Bridge). An AA gun on Bullsdown fired in anger. Cowley factory was reconstructed in plywood at the Thame end of the railway to help confuse matters.

The late Dr Hassall travelled with the last train in full Doctoral robes. When asked by a journalist who he was, he replied, "Dr Beeching, of course". They dynamited the A40 bridge and then Ladder Hill Station Bridge. The last of Brunel's lines went out with a bang and, like an ancient trackway, left its mark on (and under) the landscape.

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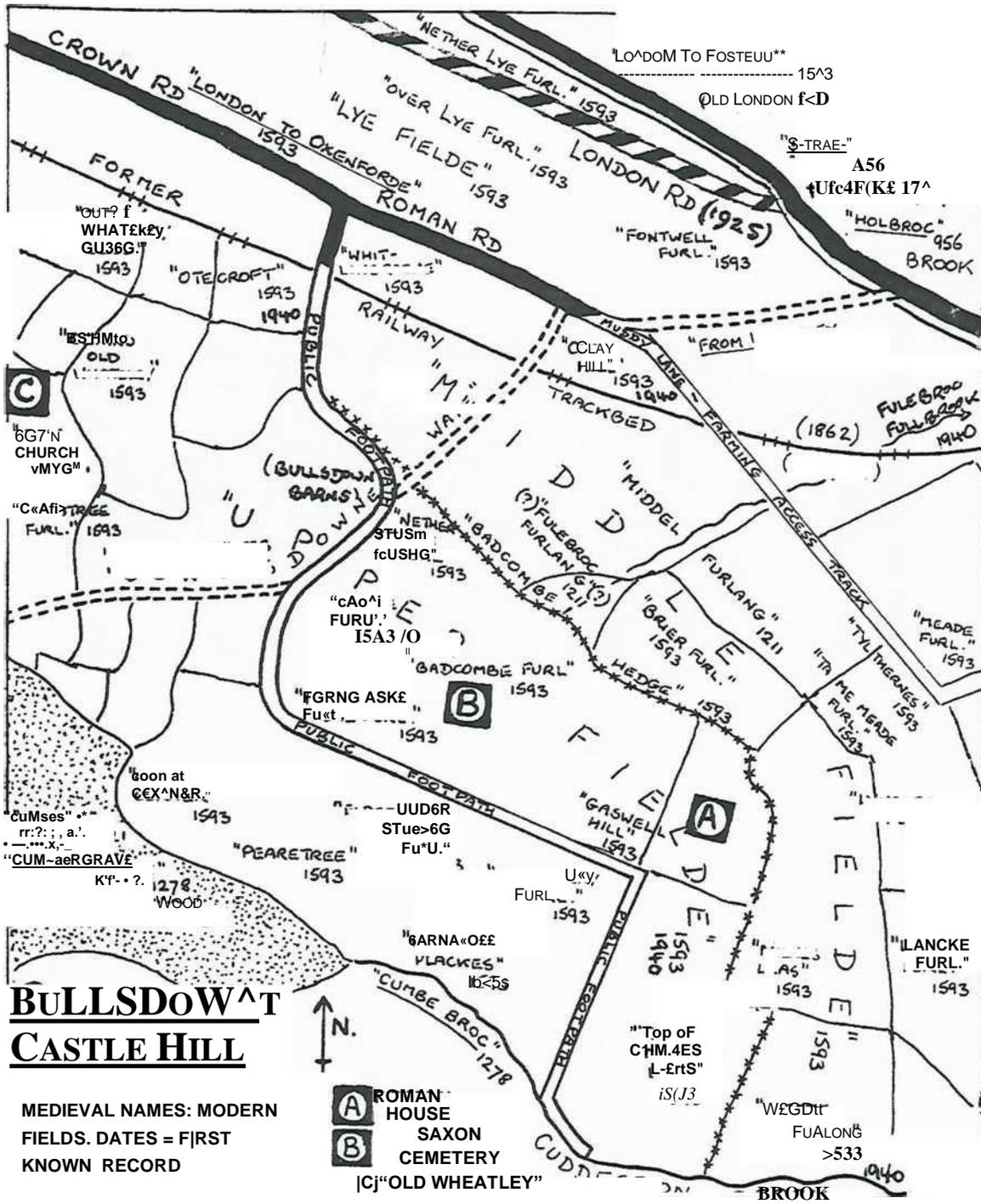
Steam train photographed c.1900 crossing the River Thames. Wheatley Bridge and Bridge House can just be seen between the railway spans. (Courtesy Tyndale-Biscoe family, U.S.A. and Kevin Heritage)

2. The Medieval Fields

The Footpath climbs gently across the old *Middle Field* before turning left across the front of the site of Bullsdown Barn. Land to the right now bordered by the back gardens of Ladder Hill, Beech Rd and houses on the station and timberyard sites is the site of the fields and (higher up) the fragile houses of *Old Watele*. A Tudor traveller noted "ruins and rubble conspicuous, bristling with brambles." The site and much of its arable became grassland with the temporary decline of population after the Black Death of 1348. Demand for enlarged grazing-land grew over the next few centuries. The village settlement moved down to the increasingly complex road system running through Wheatley valley.

The path turns left to head southeast along the line of an ancient hedge-and-bank (on the left) known in Tudor times as *Badcombe Hedge*. For centuries this hedge divided the medieval open *fields*, the older *Upper Field* summit from the later claimed *Middle Field* slope. Ridge-and-furrow is the remaining sign of medieval farming in Wheatley. Such furrowed allotments or *furlongs* abound through mid and southern England. Generally they originated in Anglo-Saxon times and reached their greatest extent in the 14th century. Arable became grazing land and preserved the last of the old ploughlines in their present fossil form, shown up today by January snow and May buttercups. Later farmers were unwilling to disturb them in case fields lost their fertility. By today's standards the system had been wasteful and untidy, the land held and worked in a patchwork quilt of allotments. On the other hand it meant that most had a share in better ground as well as worse.

Strips of such land, up to an acre or as much as a man could plough in a day, lay side by side separated by a double-furrow or grass bank. Groups of strips running in the same direction were *furlongs* (furrow lengths). Together, the individually named *furlongs* made up the open *field*.



By the end of the Middle Ages there were five such open *fields* in Wheatley - *Upper*, *Middle* and *Lye* Fields to the south of the village, the top, the slope and the flat. An *Estfelde* towards *Tame streme* was noted in the 13th century, the southern downs and watermeadows. On the other side of Wheatley, *Westfield* on the edge of royal 'forest' land still keeps its name.

The names of many *furlongs* were first recorded in the late sixteenth century. A few can be traced back to the early 13th century. Some even featured in a 1940 list of lands to be developed for wartime food production. *Weede*, *Brier*, *Feme Ash* and *Elder Stubb Furlongs* describe the state of the land before

clearance. Near the Manor House *Breachfield or Le Breche* in 1278 was "ground breached from the waste". *Clay Hill* is still a name both in Westfield and the old *Middle Field* - it tells a tale known to every Wheatley gardener, in 1211 *Fulebrocfurlang* marked a nearby "foul brook".

Pesticide was unknown: *Lowsie Bush Furlong* was a warning as well as a name. Earthy humour nicknamed *Short Shovel* and *Long Shovel Furlongs*. Early clearances took on their pioneer's names - *Barnardes Plackes* near Cuddesdon Brook - a plaque is still a small square. One *Barnarde* lived in Wheatley in 1327; a Stanton St John field was also *Barnardesland* in 1447.

3. The Climb

Below the modern power pylon the path climbs away from *Badcombe Hedge* (which continues south east towards New Bam, once known as Clay Hill Bam, formerly barns for Rectory Farm on Crown Rd). *Middle Field* stretched downhill from the hedge and sharp bank under the modern housing to the line of the old *Plough Rd* (now Roman Rd and Muddy Lane). This road led from the London-Worcester *straet* (Old/London Rd) behind the Plough Inn, a drover's inn, past the Crown Inn, via *Whateley (High) Street* to Shotover by Old Road. *Oxenforde* was a relatively modern creation, from around 900 AD, and this road is a diversion from the main London Rd. There was also a packhorse detour as well as a droving detour along the line of the ascending Public Footpath.

[Image removed for copyright reasons]

Silver penny of Aethelraed "Unraed" (*noble counsel - no counsel*) (975-1016), nephew of Eadgar, found near Crown Rd, 1957, a new route to the new *Oxnaford* in AD 1000. Reverse names an Oxford mintmaster. Aethelraed paid vast Danegeld and most of his coins are found in Scandinavia. (*Courtesy V&R Quartermain*)

Lye Feld, still known as Lye Piece, was the low lying area between the Plough Rd and The Common Brook on the ancient boundary *straet*, Old/London Road. It was split into *Over Lye Furlong* and *Nether Lye Furlong*, along the line of today's London Rd between Triangle and Garden Centre. This straight stretch of the London Rd was built in the 1920's as a public employment scheme; a milestone transplanted from the Old London Road can be seen opposite the car sales plot.

From the pylon the Path climbs sharp southwest onto the *Upper Field* levels. Castle Hill Farm buildings stand on the crest of *Bullsdawn*. This short section of path follows the old *Bullsdawn Way* which once led from Plough Rd, east of the first hedge on *Middle Field* to meet the present path at the pylon. A wide grassy baulk still marks its run. *Bullsdawn Way* led towards (Upper) Horspath and Shotover. A 1593 surveyor called it "a Way leading from Whateley Bridge towards Shotover" and it was again mapped as late as 1797. A *Way* was a right rather than a metalled road, a local as well as a national cross country track.

Bulldown Way formerly turned right at the farm buildings, towards the Garsington-Wheatley road, a paved *straet* in AD 956. To the east on the left of the footpath, *Bulldown* itself forms a natural amphitheatre where it joins *Castle Hill*, the last and lowest of the downs. Across the bottom of this half-bowl runs the hawthorne and blackthorn of *Badcombe Hedge* dividing *Middle* and *Upper Fields*.

4. Coombe Wood (Private property and conservation area)

Beyond the farm buildings the Path points directly down to *Coombe Wood*, also known as *Coombe Piece*. *Cumbes* (there is more than one valley or *Cwm*) was the name in 1221, *Cumbergrave* in 1278 and *Coombe Park* in 1321. This wood has kept its shape for centuries due to the lie of the land at the head two *cwm*, *cumbs* or *combs*. *Cwm Rhondda* and even *catacomb* are from the same root.

The name is pre-Roman; the powerful springs within the wood seem to have provided water for the Roman villa which lay on the same contour level; *Cumbergrave* may have been a cult-grove, all of which were destroyed during the last Christian century of the Roman Empire. Only one spring cult grove has ever been positively identified in Britain. Nearby, *Wheatley's* Roman burials took place on the top of *Ladder Hill*. *Abingdon Abbey* had its rabbit Warren and keeper here; *Windsor Castle* took its timbers from here as it took men (or money in lieu) and stone from *Whatelee*. The royal gift of AD 956 had made no exemption from helping the king with his wars, bridges or castles.

Behind *Coombe Wood* on the *Garsington-Wheatley road*, an ancient crossroad was mentioned in the 956 charter, where the main *straet* crossed a track leading from *Cuddesdon* to *Shotover*. The lost arm is now a lane running northwest from the T-junction for *Cuddesdon*.

5. Bulldown.

A long straight section of Path leads from *Bulldown* to *Castle Hill*. On these two hills the earliest *Wheatley* folk worked and were buried. The village probably takes its name from this "open space where wheat grows".

Bulldown crest is the slight rise of the field behind the farmhouse. Various known as *Bowlesdowne* and *Boeslden*, it is thought to have provided the name *Bullingdon* (*Bullingdon Green* in *Lower Horspath* and the old *Bullingdon RDC*.) It may be a corruption of *Bula's Dun*, *Bula* being a settlement leader and *Dun* (*Dune*, *Down*) being a hill. The next height south was *Cuthwine's Dune* (*Cuthenesdune*, *Cuddesdon*)

A district legal survey (*Hundred Court*) of 1278 records the whole of this as *La Dune* and under cultivation. *Bula's Dun* may have been the court meeting site and the name *Bulesdun* (1182) and *Bulledon* (1205) migrated westwards, downhill along with (*Lower*) *Horspath*. Meetings of the *Hundred Court* were certainly recorded in both villages.

6. The Saxon Discoveries

La Dune created great excitement in the autumn of 1882. Farm workers clearing stone before steam-ploughing came across shallow graves. Perhaps the stones once marked the graves - they loom large in the photographs and the area is littered with loose limestone. (In 1955 pipeline excavators took a single one ton block from the hill.)

At least 46 and possibly as many as 60 graves were found between 1882 and 1884. Ashmolean experts were only called in after some months. Ploughing had disturbed many graves already over the centuries. *Henry Taunt*, the photographer with an eye for local history, brought plate cameras from his shop on *The Broad*. The results, reproduced in this book, were salvaged from

[Images removed for copyright reasons]

Excavating Saxon Grave 32, Bullsdown, May 1883. The grave, to toe right of the picture, is enlarged below. A knife, amber bead, brooch and cosmetic tweezers were found with skeleton. Note the stones piled from the field and the lone tree trunk where the present farmhouse stands. Neither workman was from Wheatley.

(Henry Taunt, *Courtesy Oxon County Libraries*)

Saxon Grave 14, Bullsdown, 1883. With the bones of a middle aged woman "of some status⁰ were found:-

Two bronze-gilt dish brooches (sholder clasps) with garnet centres and linen from shroud or dress; (centre)

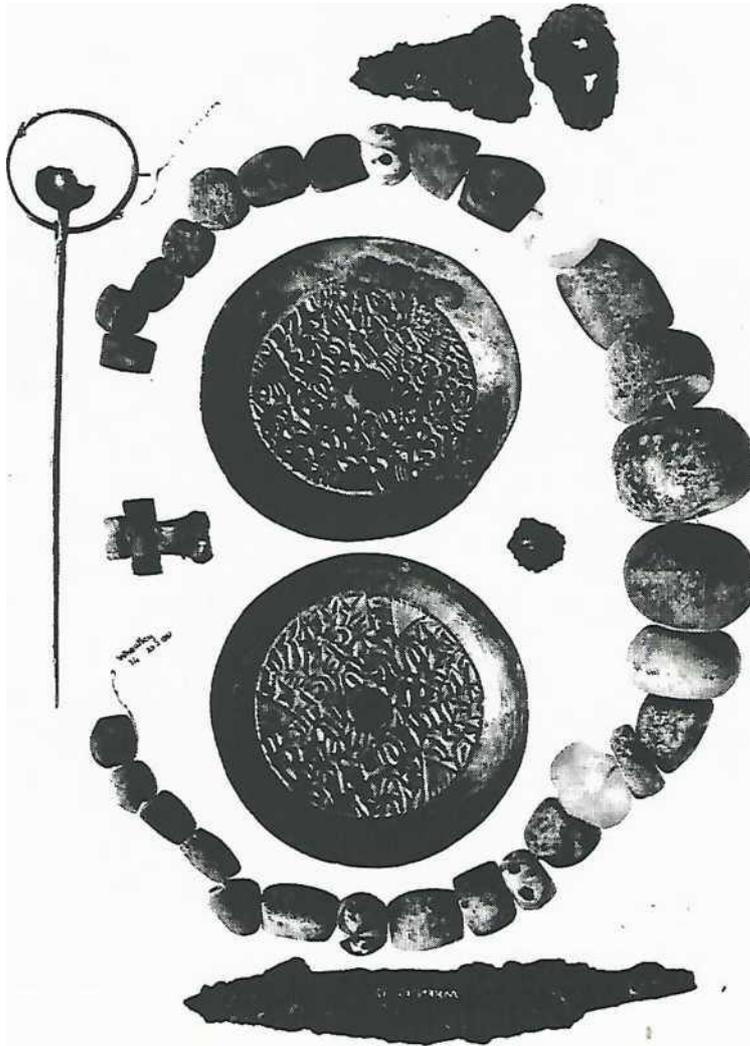
A silver ring on third or fourth left-hand finger bone; (mid-left)

A 6" bronze knife attached to a bronze-buckled belt; (bottom and top)

A necklace of twenty five amber, three glass and two crystal beads;

A Celtic silver ring-pin. This and a dish-brooch were kept by a workman who finally sold them to the *Museum*. See page 14 for illustrations. (*Courtesy, Ashmolean Museum, permanent display.*) rubbish outside the shop forty years later. Villagers regularly climbed the hill to view the work. The vicar made regular entries in his diary. Word of every new find circulated: it was said in Wheatley pubs that a battlefield had been found, or at least a cemetery of monks - local lore of castle or monastery on the hill had persisted for centuries. One workman pocketed a gilt brooch and a silver pin which turned out to be one of the most important items. A man of sense as well as taste, he declared them to The Ashmolean, for a fee. Work ended in the autumn of 1884, due to lack of funds rather than completion. This was, according to the latest analysis, "the only known Saxon settlement between the Thames, the Chilterns, the Cherwell and Aylesbury." We now have the advantage of a hundred years more scholarly understanding of the Saxons.

It now appears the burials took place between 480-600 AD. They were largely Germanic, what chroniclers called "West Saxons". A similar cemetery found at Lechlade in 1985 proved Saxon and Celt were living in harmony much earlier than once thought. The skeletons of women and children alongside the men suggested a stable community. There may also have been cremation bowls. Grave goods suggested links with metal and jewellery workers. These ranged from weapons and personal decorations to weigh scales and weights. (Swords, shield bosses and jewellery, including amber, crystal and garnet, are on permanent display in The Ashmolean). Celtic and later Roman items suggested that some of the people buried were Romano-British rather than German, living links with the former Roman estate. To the 20th century walker, such remains are of historical interest. In the winter twilight of a 6th century day they were someone's kith and kin. Bone joints roughened by premature arthritis, teeth worn low by stone-grit in the bread, a taste for ostentatious jewellery, an ivory comb only hint of the people involved. Tufts of fur, wool and dyed linen suggest the texture of their clothing and the cold they felt.



Early Saxon finds from Grave 14 in Bullsdow excavations, 1883.

Chapter Three The Roman Villa

1. Castle Hill

The Footpath continues along the ridge, parallel with *Badcombe Hedge* below, to the north east and Cuddesdon Brook (*Cumbesbroc* in 1278) out of sight but marked by trees, below to the southwest. One medieval field by the brook was called *Pearetree* or *Peretrey* a reminder of the fruit which gave Woodperry, Pyrton and Waterperry their names.

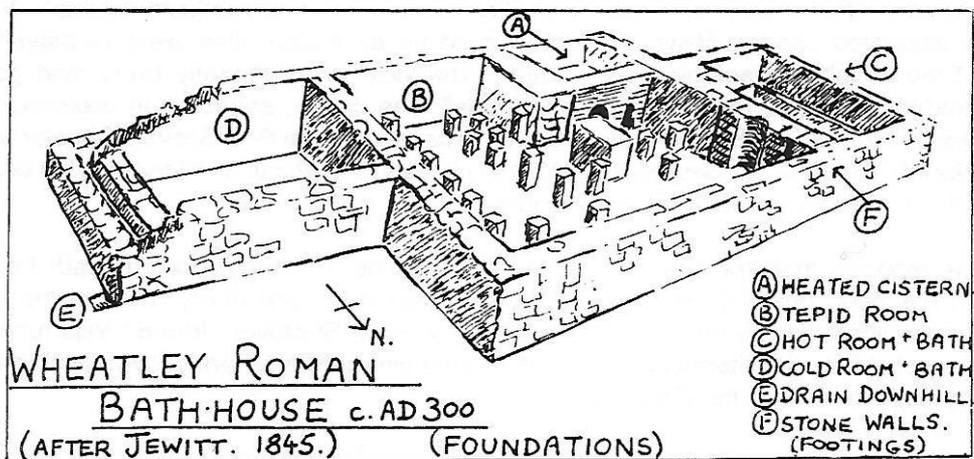
Aerial photographs show faint cropmarks on fields to the southwest. They may be archaeological traces, but are more likely to be limestone beds. The surveyor for All Souls College in 1593 also noted *Milne Leas Furlong* and *Milne Way*, probably a reference to a path to Cuddesdon Mill just out of sight on the Thame behind Cuddesdon Spur. The line of the present Footpath, a village short-cut to Cuddesdon parish church and mill, is ancient. In 1593 a *Crosse Furlong* was noted where the Footpath crosses *Bulldown Way* near the farm buildings.

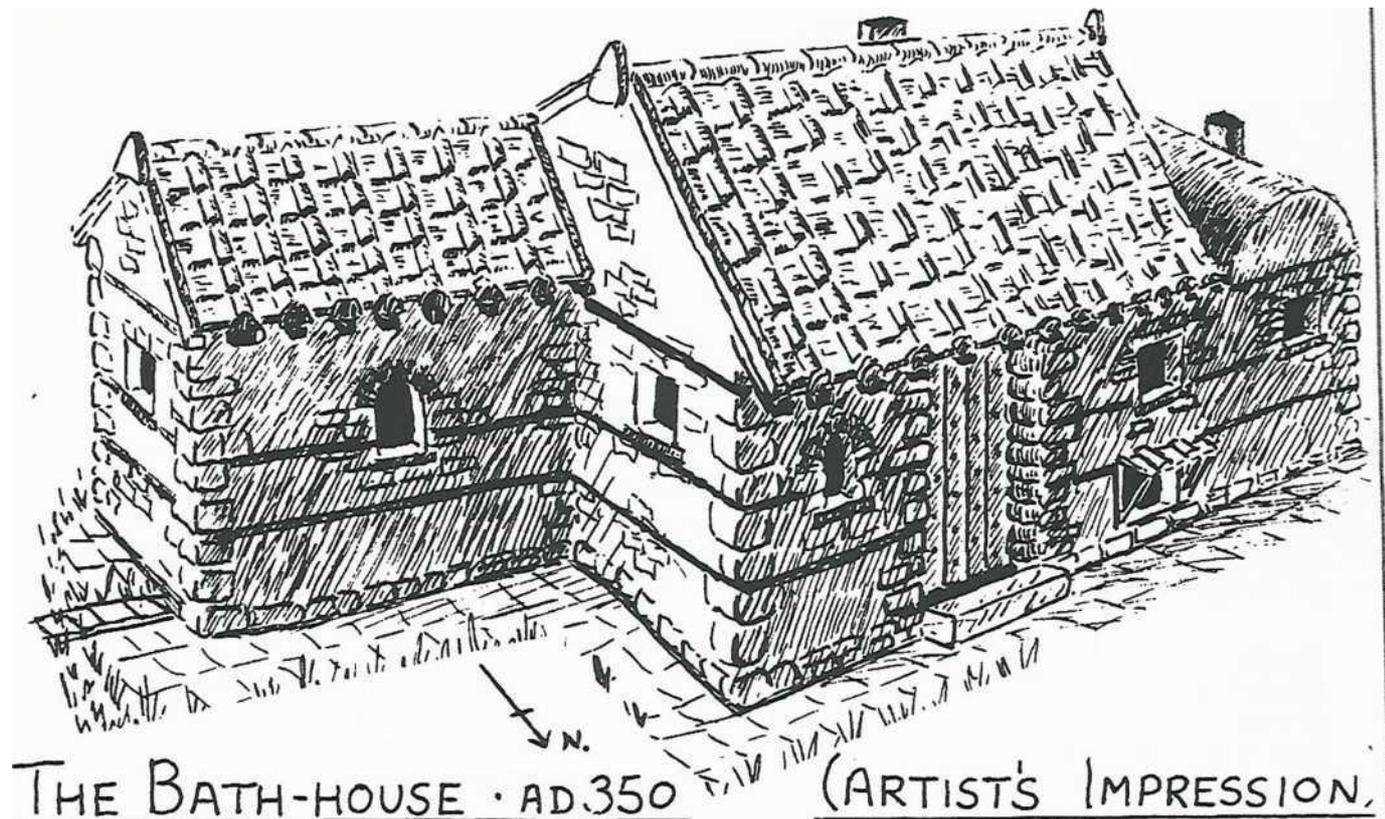
Castle Hill never knew a castle. In 1593 no ruin was marked on *Gaswell Hill*. In 1211, part of *Middle Field* called *Middelfurlang* was described as being "by the old monastery" (*advet'monast'm*). Wheatley had no monastery either. Stone ruins and an old cemetery may have given the ruined Roman landmark a new identity by Norman times. Monasteries were models of stone building and marks of civilisation. A "monks' cemetery" was still the local explanation for the finding of Saxon graves in 1882. The record of 1211 also speaks of the "old land" (*vet'm t'ram*), *Bulldown/Castle Hill* heights under cultivation for centuries already.

Gaswell is likely to be a corruption of *gars* (grass) and *well* (spring stream, cistern, hole). A Roman bathhouse stood here, complete with cistern and water supply. A village tale even told of a plough team which disappeared into a hole on the top fields! Alchester Roman site also has its Castle Hill, near a bathhouse complex.

2. The Roman 'Villa'

In 1845 excavators found the footings of a stone bath house, with two-foot thick walls and a brick and plaster interior, on the end slope of Castle Hill. "Sweat houses" were as much part of British, Irish and Scandinavian culture as they were of the Roman. The Wheatley facility offered a heated room (14' x 12') and plungebath (8'x 4*). Water was piped from the southwest (Coombe Wood direction) and drained by a gutter to the southeast. Hot air was fed into a two-foot underfloor cavity (hypocaust) and through clay flue-tiles in the walls from a largewood burning furnace. Bath houses were usually sited away from the main building in case of fire.





BASED ON DISCOVERIES IN AND AFTER 1845 AND OTHER SITES

Remains of a large house were found due north of the bath house, making the whole complex about 190' in length. The main house was also heated underfloor. Coins of Maximian (286-310) and Gratian (367-383) suggested the main span of occupation, a period when *villa* prosperity peaked in southern England. Marks left by cats, dogs, sheep, birds, beechnut leaves, fingers and even raindrops have been detected on tile fragments.

The building seems to have been larger than Roman houses at Cuddesdon and Little Milton. Roman settlements of some sort also lay at Holton and Camp Comer on the A 40. *Villa* houses have been found at Beckley, Headington and Islip. The road from *Alauna* (Alchester, now a field near Bicester) ran through Beckley, Headington and Cowley to join the line of today's road to Dorchester (*Dorocina*) another small Roman town. Cirencester was the regional capital, *Corinium Dobunorum*, the town of the Dobunni tribe. The land grant of AD 956 calls two Wheatley roads *straet*, a word which usually denotes a paved, Roman road.

For some years after 1845 the ruins, under a shelter, were one of Wheatley's "sights". They featured in the *Illustrated London News*, the school held an exhibition; tiles were displayed in Norwich and at the British Archaeological Association. The vicar noted "chiefly baths and good masonry, secured by a shed ... the bricks are admirable". The clergy, schooled in classics, took particular interest in the site. The Bishop presided over excavations; the Rev Greville Chester took tiles home to Norfolk; the Vicar of Beckley viewed the site with the Vicar of Wheatley, no doubt comparing it with the *villa* house found in his own parish.

By 1872 it was reported that "the shed built over the remains of the hypocaust (bath house heating system) has been pulled down and the place ploughed up and every trace of the villa destroyed, about ten years ago by the orders of the then owner of Shotover House." *Villa* ruins at Beckley and Stonesfield were obliterated at about the same time. More recently, town remains at Alchester were ploughed up after the Great War.

It now appears that this report was incorrect. Assistant Ashmolean Keeper Arthur Evans (who later excavated Knossos in Crete) stated in a letter of 1883, "I have since been given to understand that these substructures have not been destroyed but only filled in again". One elderly villager who died around 1970 remembered visiting partly visible ruins as late as the 1890's.

3. The Roman Inhabitants

The Bullsdown/Castle Hill crest can be bitter in winter, silent on a still, frosty morning save for a surprised fox padding back to his earth in Coombe Wood or the shriek of a peacock. The cold of a Romano-British winter created an Empire-wide demand for Britain's duffel-coats and plaid blankets. Emperor Diocletian singled them out for particular mention in price-fixing legislation around AD 300. The famous wool came from sheep like those on this mixed-farming estate. Another answer to the British cold was the wood and charcoal fired *hypocaust*, Wheatley's earliest central heating installation.

In summer the crest can also be refreshing, above the humidity of the river and local streams. On a warm evening, land over to the Chilterns and towards Brill hazes with a steel-blue dusk. Night was a time for bolts and bars. Wildcat, boar and bear stalked the land between the estate and nearby woods. Darkness and ghosts worried inhabitants even more than the wild. Looking out at dusk, a neighbour's smoke spiral at Cuddesdon or the light of his rubbish fires would soften an isolation hard for us to imagine on a twentieth century evening as electricity lights up roads, houses and traffic wherever the walker looks.

The farmers here were almost certainly of Romano-British stock, Dobunni or Catuvellauni by descent - this was border country between the two tribes. They would have had corrupted Roman and Romanised British names. (*Corlinus* scratched his name on a dish at Alchester - a name linked with an Italian hill town and immortalised by Shakespeare.) Many names and distinct families would have owned this land over two centuries.

They would have known Dorchester, Alchester and Woodeaton Temple in the same way that modern Wheatley knows Banbury, Wycombe and Thame Show. The Woodeaton shrine was dressed in Wheatley stone. Occasionally they might have visited Cirencester, the cantonal town, Silchester in the next region and even London, the provincial (*diocesis*) capital where coins were minted. If later owners were Christian they would know of the *overseer* (bishop) at Cirencester and the church at Silchester.

Sandford produced a good imitation Samian pottery. Everyday grey and cream kitchenware came from Headington and Shotover kilns, the pale *mortaria* (grating bowls) fragments still distinguishable by their silica flecks. Tools would have been made on site in the villa forge. The whole area has surface iron ore and traces of slag. Tiles and bricks were also made on site by travelling brickmakers. Wheatley offered clay and stone in some abundance.

Country-folk placed less trust in cash after inflation bit deep at the end of the third century and again decades later. Finds indicate that they lost their small change (*foiled*) by the river as they crossed, fished or bathed. They dropped coins in the bath house as they stripped. On the land they also lost them by the *straets* skirting the estate. Two miles north at Thornhill, someone paid a deposit account of 560 coins into the soil in the forlorn hope of reflation in better times, inflation coppers (AD 260 -378) found on Castle Hill over the years were not worth picking up by ancient loser or modern finder. (The date of a coin is rarely the date it is lost - Victorian bun pennies still circulated in 1965; stray Roman finds were even passed as farthings in some rural parts of Georgian England?)

The early fourth century owners would have been prosperous, but not aristocrats. A bath house, mosaic (one black *tessera* has been found) and marble-effect piaster were not unusual, nor were they marks of a humble cottage. They are a sign of revived country life in the fourth century. The countryside was probably safer than the declining towns like *Dorocina* or *Alauna*. The Wheatley farmer could even have been a manager for an absent owner.

The best known Roman period stories - the Gospel parables - abound with absentee landlords leaving stewards in charge. The Prodigal Son is actually set on a *villa* estate, possibly on high ground like the Wheatley estate: the father saw the son coming a long way off. Like the understanding father, the Wheatley owner would also have had a vital signet ring for legal contracts. The main approaches to the Castle Hill house would have been a trackway from the Garsington-Wheatley *stræt* and a track from the *stræt* which crossed the Thame. From these tracks the medieval path system grew up.

Children would have played round the stone, pantile-roofed buildings and under timber verandahs. Irish wolfhounds padded in and out. Funerals went from here to the edge of the estate at Ladder Hill, away from the floodlands, by a *stræt* and near a grove. Oxen pulled ploughs over land producing grain to feed a population thought to be greater than that of 1066. The surplus went to central government as tithe. Meat at table was cut from wild boar, red deer, brown bear and longhorn beef. Greyhounds shared with wolfhounds the reward scraps after a day's chase. They would also have licked the spellings of Britain's famous beer from the crude (but warm) black-and-white mosaic floor. Conversation would have been in an early version of Welsh (Brythonic Gaelic) with Latin imports.

The currency collapsed after AD 400. Local potteries closed about the same time. By AD 450 *villa* buildings had decayed and were abandoned when the first inquisitive Saxons climbed the slopes to squat near the local inhabitants. Part, if not all, of the land would still be under cultivation. Estates in Ireland continued to flourish around the ruins of mansions gutted in the "Troubles" of 1919-22. The farmhouse is the least important part of a farm.

Ash and soot some thirty feet north of the bath house made the 1845 excavators conclude that it was probably burnt in the "retreat of the Romans", an oversimple view from a time when Napoleon's retreat from Moscow was still a memory. Collapsed buildings make handy rubbish pits, com drying areas, cattle byres and sources of stone and brick. Iron and glass smelters also left traces. Saxon children no doubt loved bonfires as much as modern children. Enough survived to be a local landmark in 1211.

[Image removed for copyright reasons]

Small bronze of Emperor Constantine (306-37), with septre, found between High St and Church Rd, typical of Wheatley finds. Reverse shows the London mintmark PL. (Courtesy S. Hipkiss)

Chapter Four Landmarks

The Footpath "crossroads" on Castle Hill offer a spectacular panorama. Stokenchurch communications tower stands on the far horizon above the Icknield Ridgeway, direction "12 o'clock". On the nearer horizon stands the metal-capped tower windmill at Great Hasley. Below that, the River Thame meanders along a course which has changed over the centuries, but not so much that the "Dark River" (as in *Thames* and *Tamah*) would not be recognisable to ancient residents.

At "2 o'clock" lie the Miltons. Beyond Little Milton, at Ditch End Farm, the site of a small three-roomed Roman house, 25 yards long within a protective ditch, was spotted from the air in 1949. At "3 o'clock" Cuddesdon spur is crowned by the site of the Bishop of Oxford's former Palace and Park.

During alterations to the entrance gates in 1847, a significant early Saxon burial was discovered. It was probed again in 1970 when remains of a woman and child were found. Several (possibly up to 10) skeletons were buried face down, head outwards and legs crossed, in radial formation. With them were found two ornate blue-glass vessels, a bronze Egyptian (Coptic) "bucket" (*isitula*) and two sword blades. Clock-burials are thought to be linked with ritual sacrifice and to focus on a burial mound (barrow) at the centre. If the two "sword blades" were a long and a short (seax) blade, buried with a cremation urn (? the *situla*?) they indicate a royal burial.

Cuth-, as in Cuddington and Cutteslowe, is a known name in the early Saxon royal families. *Cuthenesdune* was still the key name for the land in AD 956 when it was described as an already

ancient royal property. The Wheatley Saxon burials on Bullsdown may have been those of the main settlement. The grave goods from the "royal" burial were sketched in the Bishop's Palace in 1855. When the Bishop's London home was cleared by auction in 1873 after his death, a passer-by bought an "old bronze bucket and some ancient glass" for five shillings. In 1959 a blue-glass beaker holding flowers in a Warwickshire home was recognised by a member of The Ashmolean staff and matched the 1855 sketches. It was later bought and displayed in the Museum. The other items are still missing.

Another small Roman building, "a simple house of the third century" with coins and artefacts dating to around AD 350 and a possible bath house, was discovered in the Park in 1916 and again probed in 1921.

Behind, at about "6 o'clock", lie Coombe Wood and the Ladder Hill-Garsington *straet*. Roman burials, both coffin and cremation, have been found by the road at the top of Ladder Hill. (Not every village find has been recorded!) Between "7" and "9 o'clock" lay a scattered Roman settlement at Holton and, behind the immediate horizon of Holton Park, more Roman farm houses at Headington, Beckley and Islip.

Wheatley Bridge lies at "11 o'clock". Despite the name, it has never been in Wheatley since it replaced the Saxon ford, nor has it been in sight of Castle Hill since the building of Bridge House (later *The Bridge Hotel*) at the end of the last century. The Bridge is first recorded in the 13th century. The ford used by Romans and Saxons was recorded in AD 956 as part of the *straet* to Worcester. It was part of the main route from London to Worcester, via Islip, home of Edward the Confessor, to Worcester and Wales. Older villagers still refer to the Forest Hill road as "The Worcester road". The Wheatley crossing was called the *herpaethford* ("army path crossing") and is probably still marked by the present, invisible Wheatley boundary on the river immediately downstream from the bridge. It was probably also the *Lendeford* ("land boundary ford") named in 1211. Medieval bridges superseded the fords, but alongside them. The bridge was first known as *Harpesford Bridge* as well as *Watelea Bridge*. The angle between bridge and ford became known as *Wheatley Bridge Comer*. Part of the 10' wide medieval bridge of several arches is still visible under the eastern dry span of the 19th century bridge. More remains must be embedded in the road approaches.

[Image removed for copyright reasons]

The Cuddesdon Bowl, found in Saxon burials, Bishops Palace Park, 1847, Lost with other finds in 1873, it was rediscovered in 1959 holding flowers on a window-sill I English-made and a status luxury, it had seen much wear before being buried around AD 600 in a "princely" grave. *(Courtesy Ashmolean Museum, permanent display)*

[Image removed for copyright reasons]

Wheatley Bridge and the 'young¹ railway from the Saxon excavations, Bullsdown, 1883. Badcombe Hedge runs across the bottom of Badda's Cumb; two of the three elms survive. Rail and road crossings of the Thames are clearly visible, before trees, Bridge Hotel and supermarket obscured them. Far more foliage covers today's landscape. (*Henry Taunt, Courtesy Oxon County Libraries*)

The *herpaeth* or *straet* which crossed the ford in AD 956, led past the present Plough Inn site and along Old London Road, keeping Hollow Brook on the *left*, thereby avoiding a crossing. (The Brook has since been culverted to flow to the river north of the lower London Rd; remains of the old channel and culvert can still be seen across the road.) It then followed the line of upper London Road towards Forest Hill. Numerous roads branched off - a drover road from the side of the present Plough Inn, up the slope of Bullsdown; a packhorse (*jagger*) road also up the side of Bullsdown; *Whateley (High) Street*, for packhorses, along Crown Rd and High Street, to join Old Road over Shotover towards Oxford; *Backside* or *Back Street* (now Church Rd) above the High Street level, also led towards old Road but out of reach of the floods and better for coaches.

Other river fords were noted in AD 956 - *Hollow* and *Cattle* Fords, one possibly in sight of Castle Hill, the other probably the Cuddesdon crossing. Roman, Saxons and Normans fished this part of the river, as do modern anglers. "Fisheries" (fishtraps) here provided for the kitchens of Abingdon Abbey and nearby field slopes turn up hundreds of fresh-water oyster shells. A theory that Holton Mill is pre-medieval and that the river served as an ancient waterway still needs examining.

AD • 956 HER PAETHFORD
herpæþford ...

Chapter Five Return Road to Wheatley

1. Cuddesdon

The Footpath leads downhill, southwest across Cuddesdon Brook, a natural boundary for medieval manors and modern civil and church parishes. It may once have divided two Roman *villa* properties too. The path heads up a steep slope towards the trees and former site of the Bishop of Oxford's Palace, burnt down twice, once during the Civil War and finally in the present century.

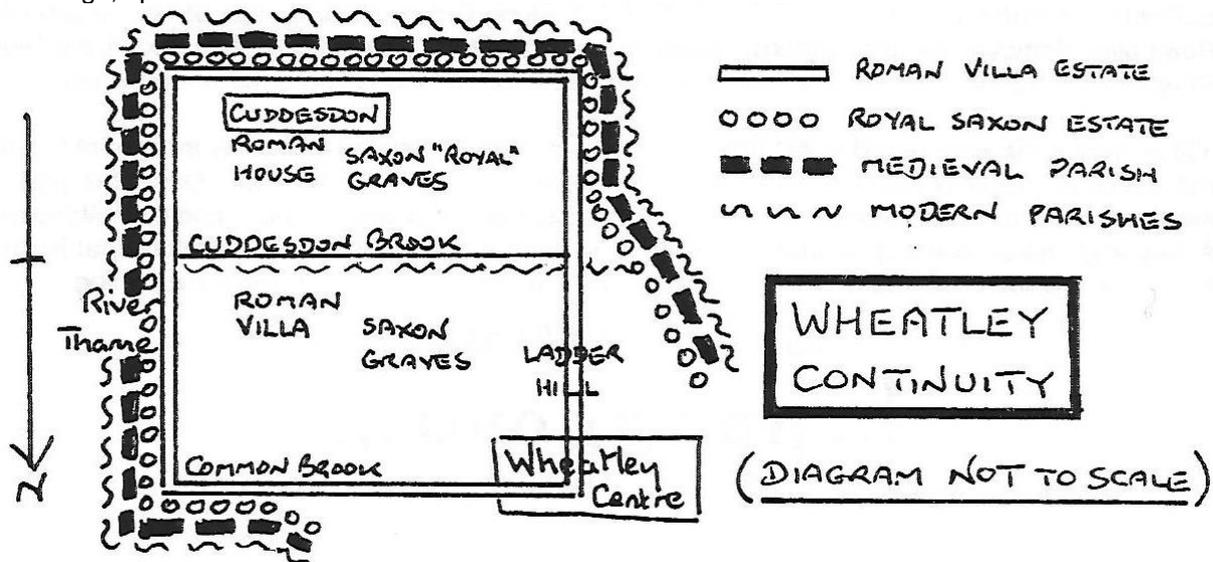
In the mid-1840's the Palace grounds were emparked by the then new Bishop, Wilberforce, notorious as "Soapy Sam" for his damaging public debate with Huxley on Darwin's theory of evolution. His Palace and Park have gone, but the site revealed an important Saxon burial and a small Roman house.

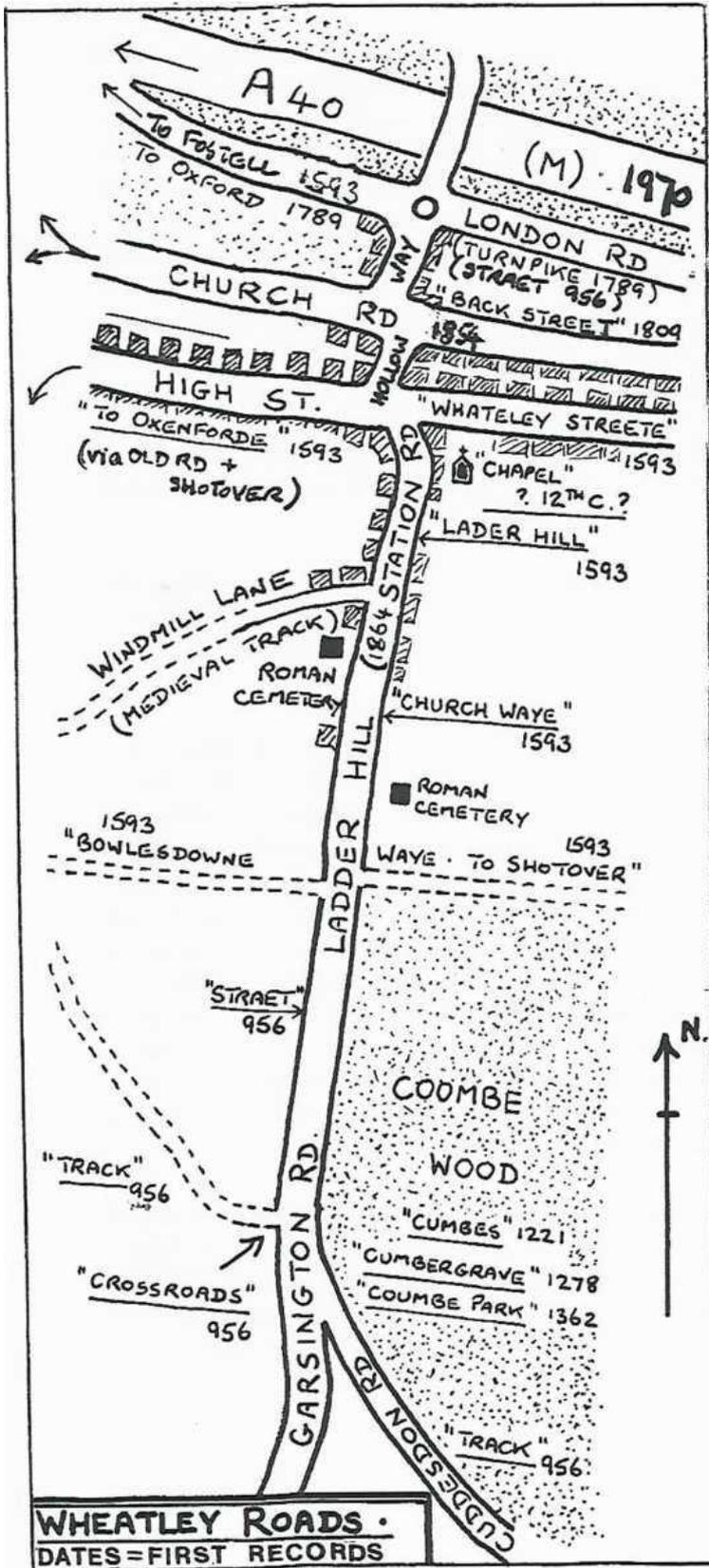
The present inhabitants of *Cuthwines Dun* may never know who *Cuthwine*, *Cuthene* or *Cudden* was. His *Dun* was a site of some importance in very early Saxon times. The *Cuth-* root attached to it is a feature of early royal names of the "West Saxons" in the 5th century AD. It appears also in Cuddington, Cuxham, and Cutteslowe (where there was a *Cuthenes Lowe* or burial mound.)

Other unknown Saxons gave their names to landmarks. Kinship ties were the source of power in Germanic tribes. *Lahha* was linked with a pool and *Eanfrith* with a barrow mound on *Cuthenesdunds* late Saxon boundary (AD 956). Elsewhere on the same estate, *Bula* features in Bullsdown and *Badda* gave his name to a *combe* where the main Saxon cemetery lay. *Ceobba* gave his name to a wood (Chippinghurst) and *Babbe* was linked to a slope or cliff in Wheatley. *Ceola's* memory was kept in Chilworth and *Boia's* in Boymere. A lady's name, *Lafdi* (or *Lady* for the Virgin Mary) was linked to another unidentified piece of Wheatley land.

If the 1847 'radiate' burials at Cuddesdon did point to a lost burial mound in the centre of the radius, it may have been looted long before. A "broken" or looted barrow was noted as late as 1240 near Horspath; there was another barrow at Garsington; an old field-name, *Drakenhord*, suggests treasure guarded by dragons! At Cutteslowe, in Oxford, the great barrow mound 'Jo we) was destroyed by the authorities in the 13th century after it became a robbers* den.

Cuddesdon parish church was once the church for Wheatley. An enlarged copy of the Saxon charter of AD 956 is on view in the porch. The road from Cuddesdon back to Wheatley follows the old route which worshippers and mourners would have had to follow for centuries until Wheatley came into its own as a parish. Once onto the Garsington-Wheatley *straet* at the T-junction, notice the lost fourth arm of the crossroad, now a farm track running northwest through high growth towards the stump of Wheatley windmill. We are now on the northwest boundary of the old royal Saxon estate and, presumably of the Roman *villa* estate. The name Hors(e)path on which the Track, Bullsdown Way and Windmill Lane converge, speaks for itself.





The road drops steeply into the village. Ladder Hill at this point was known as *Church Way* in Tudor times. A "corpse road", it led up from Wheatley chapel-of-ease to the mother church at Cuddesdon. Funeral corteges struggled uphill for centuries before the tiny chapel at the bottom of the hill was belatedly licensed for burials. Roman funerals also took place here - cremation burials were found at *Windmills* on the corner of *Windmill Lane*, in 1913, and at least one limestone coffin with skeleton at *New Place* in 1933. The lower part of the hill where the road met the *Hollow Brook* (now culverted under High Street) was known as *Lader Hill* (*Crossing Hill*) a reference to the crossing of the Brook. The crossing gave access, by *Hollow Way*, to the ancient *straet* or *herpaeth* (*London Road*) to Islip, Worcester and Wales, via Forest Hill. New houses cover the sites of the Station and timber yard which in their turn obliterated the original site of *Old Watele*. *The Railway*, (once *Station Hotel* and its semaphore signal remind us that lower Ladder Hill became *Station Road* in 1864. The former *Railway Inn* on High Street became *The Sandpiper* and then *The Common Room*. Bell Lane is a reminder of the two bells which rang for centuries from the medieval chapel-of-ease. These were replaced in 1794 with bells which were later transferred to the new parish church where they still ring. (Alongside them hangs a small Russian bell, brought back from North Russia by a soldier from the British anti-Bolshevik expedition of 1919.) The former chapel site, also known as *The Old Burial Ground*, is now the village War Memorial Garden. Wheatley lost nearly 50 dead in two world wars.

2. The Medieval Chapel

A gate in the wall on Bell Lane allows the walker into the Old Burial Ground where the graves date to the 18th and 19th centuries only. In 1854 closure and demolition notices were posted on the chapel. Work began on the new parish church on *Back Street* or *Backside*. Furniture and bells from

the chapel went to the new church and some of the old chapel windows are said to survive in a Wheatley house.

By the end of the Middle Ages English villages were growing out of their church buildings as a child grows out of shoes. Most churches extended to accommodate growing populations. Wheatley chapel was no exception, but the site, the upper part of the present Memorial Garden, offered no room for expansion and little room even for the dead. The building which was demolished in 1854 was only 60 years old. A chapel had stood on the site for several centuries, possibly earlier than the 13th century. Cuddesdon church was in existence around AD 1100 and may have been a pre- Conquest foundation. Cuddesdon-Wheatley estate was in the hands of Abingdon Abbey after AD 956. Land and revenue carried with it responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the inhabitants. The Abbey took tithes (tenths) of produce as well as rents; a tithe-storage barn still stands in the grounds of Rectory Farm on Crown Road. The tithes of Cuddesdon parish went to the Abbey until Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. Rectorship then passed, via the Crown, to the newly created Diocese of Oxford. For four centuries tithes due to the established church remained a source of friction and civil disobedience throughout the British Isles. The story is not quite finished. In 1936 they were commuted by the Government and the final payment of this agreed sum is due in 1996 I

Wheatley chapel-of-ease was for the convenience of a growing community at an inconvenient distance from Cuddesdon parish church. The revenues from that community continued to flow to Cuddesdon. Resentment increased until the sheer size of Wheatley made it imperative that it become an independent parish in the 19th century.

First mention of the chapel is in a London cleric's will of 1427. In the 1520's a friar celebrated Mass there on feastdays and a curate served Wheatley. In 1553, King Edward VI's commissioners searched out surplus and "Romish" fittings, but found only two bells, several vestments of continental make and a chalice with silver paten. The bells which gave their name to Bell Lane and *The Bell Inn* were audible over surrounding fields above the valley: in 1583 a witness in a legal deposition timed an incident by the bells he heard when walking in Holton. Local "memory" was summoned as evidence by both sides in arguments for and against a separate parish. It was not impartial evidence. Cuddesdon objectors to a separate Wheatley parish spoke, in 1644, of Cuddesdon's charge over Wheatley "four hundred years since". Wheatley chapel members asserted that some "hundreds of years the chapel has been built without all doubt on it It hath been said for generations past that two sisters, single gentlewomen, built it at their own expense, but their names were not remembered." By 1785, when the "decay and ruin" of the chapel was causing concern, it was declared that it was built "upwards of two centuries ago".

Cuddesdon church was dedicated to All Saints, Wheatley chapel to St Mary the Virgin, the title of Abingdon Abbey and of today's Wheatley Parish Church. During the English Civil War a stained glass window of St Nicholas was noted in the west wall. A century later the same window, surviving the Puritan hammer, was ascribed to "some apostle or saint". Possibly the title pane had been damaged. Nicholas was patron saint of travellers and road-merchants, as well as of children - an appropriate saint for an ancient road complex which has given Wheatley its shape.

Acknowledgements and Sources

Many people from the village and beyond helped compile the original version of *Roman and Saxon Wheatley*. They have been acknowledged in great detail in the First Edition and its re-print. For the sake of brevity, a list of written sources is appended which the keen reader may consult for further detail. The enormous detail of all known local finds supplied in the original publication has also been omitted or integrated into the new text. Thanks are due to the County Library for permission to publish the Taunt pictures and to The Ashmolean for permission to publish the Saxon finds pictures.

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