

Westward From Winchester

Crossing The Test

BEFORE we get down to business I should like to explain to at least three people who showed a mild interest in the articles which have appeared under this heading in the *Hampshire Chronicle*, that when they stopped last year I thought I had done my worst for Hampshire and was free to become a nuisance in neighbouring counties.

Hampshire felt otherwise, and kept nagging that until I had tackled the story of the River Test I had not really started the job. In the end I had to give in, and this and a few succeeding articles are the result, because I seemed to find that the early history of England is not so much the tale of Winchester as the tale of the Test and, in lesser degree, the Avon.

The River Test makes a wide arc across Hampshire, demanding recognition by any traveller westwards. Pre-Roman peoples used a downstream crossing at Kimbridge near Mottisfont and a central one at Stockbridge (late Stoke), but avoided a major east/west crossing upstream by taking their trunk road, the Harroway, north of the river.

Roman engineers met it in forthright fashion, downstream at Nursling on

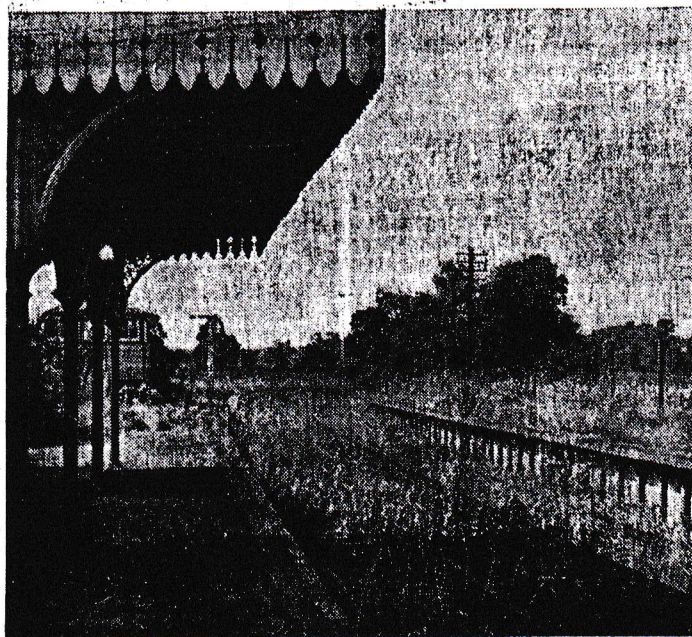
A.D. 60, which was so obviously destined for export. But which way was it going? Across the Test through Winchester? or downstream to Lepe or Nursling? It could have told us so much, that pig—as its fellow may yet, should one appear nearer the coast.

In due course came the Saxons, who established a hamlet near the old Roman camp at Ashley, east of the

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Horsebridge (for King's Somborne). The line of trees on right marks the Test where the Romans crossed it

the Poole Harbour road, centrally at Horsebridge (which was probably a ford of long standing), and upstream at Bransbury Common on the Cirencester road which was once called the Icknield Way. Later ages made Redbridge and Romsey their main lower crossings, with Stockbridge and Whitchurch higher up.

Horsebridge

Other than Stockbridge, the earlier routes have either vanished or ceased to be important, a fact of peculiar significance in the case of Horsebridge, which offers a direct western road from Winchester that no subsequent alternative could better. It can only be a matter for regret that this fine Roman thoroughway is no longer open, for though minor local sections are still in use, what must at one time have been a straightforward arrangement of causeway and bridge over the Test has long since disappeared, to be replaced by a clumsy series of diversions around Horsebridge and Houghton.

It was said that the piles of the Roman bridge were found when the Andover canal was being dug near Horsebridge lock. At about the same time, if you recollect, in 1783, it was here at Bossington west of the river, that one of our most tantalising Roman roadside relics was turned up: that pig of Mendip lead, dated back to

crossing, but tended to start afresh with settlements along the river bank. On the western side they seem to have deliberately rejected the Roman way for an almost parallel road that runs along the Wallop brook to Broughton.

Norman Developments

Early Norman reaction looks to have been quite different, for there must have been powerful reasons for maintaining, or reviving, the Roman route to Old Sarum, with three key sites being developed in Wiltshire south of it—Clarendon Palace, the market town of Downton, and eventually Salisbury itself (New Sarum). If the old bridge had collapsed it would have been repaired, or some alternative brought into use. First of the new enterprises, soon after the 1066 landing, had been the great palace at Clarendon which must surely have been reached from the Roman highway. A direct route between road and palace, by Winterslow Common and Pitton, is clear on old maps, though in those unsettled Norman times no defenceless building such as Clarendon would have been contemplated without the certainty of protection by troops at Old Sarum two miles away, which again depended on the Roman road system.

But whilst the comforts of the palace and the thrills of its great

hunting woods of Clarendon and Buckholt were being enjoyed west of the river, the same thing on a slightly smaller scale was happening east of it, in what came to be known as "John o' Gaunt's Park." In fact the King's Somborne manor with the forest of West Bere had been royal property at Domesday, but in addition a Norman castle was built about 1200 at Ashley, the only purpose of which would have been to protect the Roman highway. There is perhaps a link here with the graves of numerous early Norman malefactors (poachers?) whose decapitated bodies have been found on both sides of the river at Stockbridge.

A Norman king, therefore, could hunt his way from Winchester to Clarendon along the line of the old Roman road, with full military protection and excellent halfway quarters. Such a king was John who in the early 1200's was certainly savouring the pleasures of the route. What is so curious is that at exactly the same time Stockbridge was being developed as a market town; the fortifying of Ashley on the royal Roman road coincided with the expansion of Stockbridge on the commercial Norman one—which was perhaps a shrewd form of pro-Stockbridge propaganda.

Stockbridge

At any rate, by the end of the 1200's another keen hunting king, Edward I, is recorded as making the Clarendon/Winchester journey via Stockbridge, and though that may be slight evidence, I think that the course of events supports a decline of the Roman road from the 1300's onwards, perhaps coincident with the main London road being routed through Andover, not Winchester. This decline would have spread backwards from the river, after the bridge fell into disrepair. On the eastern side the road would have had to journey upstream to find the Stockbridge crossing. (Beresford in *Medieval Archaeology* vol. 3, 1959, tells us that Stockbridge was known

as "The Street of King's Somborne"). It would not be long before a more direct Stockbridge/Winchester route, on the lines of the present one through Weeke, became recognised.

West of the Test the Stockbridge link with the Roman road shows clearly on old maps; it ran on a diagonal through Broughton to a junction near the county boundary beyond Buckholt Farm. This in turn was replaced by the Salisbury route via Lopcombe Corner which we follow today.

Firm support for this view comes from the Bodleian map of Britain of about 1325, which gives the main western road to London as being routed through Winchester, Alton and Farnham. By the time our next clues are available in the early 1500's the Salisbury/Andover/Basingstoke route had become the main London road, but never, until this present motoring century, was the Salisbury/Stockbridge/Basingstoke road regarded as the major highway.

All this seems to make sense in relation to the medieval world as we begin to understand it. The 1200's were times of deliberate commercial expansion, which in Wessex was fostered by bishops as well as kings. It centred on sheep production and wool treatment, much of it for export, with Winchester a key centre. The encouragement of Stockbridge as a market and transport town (which was contemporary in the early 1200's with the encouragement of other Hampshire markets like New Alresford and Overton) was probably aimed at strengthening pastoral communications between the all-important centres of the wool trade.

The Stockbridge crossing was in fact a commercial one which gradually took over all types of traffic as the wars and plagues and changing habits of the wealthy in the 1300's introduced a decline in the sporting and economic affairs of the region that was to affect it for centuries.

There is one further fact about Stockbridge which would help its popularity — the open plains that led to it were of greater appeal to the traveller than the dense forest lands to the south. It was these same forests, West Bere and Buckholt and Clarendon, which so delighted the hunting Norman kings, and resulted in the continued maintenance of the old road that pierced them. Even as late as Leland's time in the early 1500's they were of considerable dimensions, and for much of his journey from Salisbury to Stockbridge along the present route he had Buckholt wood well in sight. It was "a great thing, where in times past by likelihood hath been a chase for deer." By contrast his own route, almost all the way from Salisbury to Winchester, lay "by champion ground barren of wood, with the soil of white clay and chalk."

Stockbridge to Basingstoke

Tracks from Stockbridge towards Sutton Scotney and places east of it must have existed from very early times, and with the building up of the Testside town, and the increasing use of it as a way to Winchester, it would not be long before it became recognised as a throughway to Basingstoke. I should think (as is discussed in a further article) that the original route, after reaching Sutton Scotney, followed the existing valley way, along the stream that led to Alresford and Odiham, but which at Micheldever met the Saxon road linking Winchester with Popham and Basingstoke.

The more direct short cut over the downs from Sutton Scotney to Popham-lane would have come about as soon as the traffic warranted it, not impossibly with the offering of facilities (hitherto only available at Micheldever) by some enterprising Boniface whose premises on the

crossroads would later find fame as the Wheatsheaf, Popham-lane. The exact route, like many another, could become a source of friction between neighbouring parishes, both intent on avoiding its maintenance. It was only when the turnpike was made in the 1750's that it was finally settled.

The road followed by Ogilby's surveyor in 1675 ran rather closer to Micheldever than it does nowadays. Although it approached Sutton Scotney, as at present, through "Cranborne, a small village," it was apparently in sight of Micheldever church. Ogilby is usually most careful in references of this nature, and he makes a curious slip in showing the "bourn" at Cranborne, but omitting the larger stream at Sutton Scotney. It is not impossible that his surveyor confused the two, and was in reality taking a route far closer to the valley than he realised.

Even more striking evidence, relating to the same locality sixty years later, comes from Milner's History of Micheldever. Read in conjunction with the uncertainty of Ogilby's route, it provides a vivid illustration of the slow process by which the whole course of a road could be changed, with the offending parish cutting up or otherwise obstructing the old highway, and throwing open a path to the new (in the next parish).

It was a case concerning the same hamlet of Cranborne well north of the stream, that Cranborne through which the present highway A30 runs, and its neighbour Hunton, a hamlet on the north bank of the stream. Milner quotes a court roll of 1734 presenting "the owners and occupiers of lands in Hunton for turning the King's Highway out of the tything of Hunton into the tything of Cranborne without any legal authority." The quarrel continued at any rate till 1740 when the last recorded complaint was made to compel the inhabitants of Hunton to return the Highway where it anciently went through their own tything. As we know, they never did.

Lost Courses

It is a coincidence that this article should finish, as it started, with a lost route. The reason for the decline of Micheldever as a road centre remains to be considered, but here it is enough to note the real disadvantage of our modern highway system in having no straightforward link with Stockbridge and the west, through Micheldever, from places east such as Alton and Petersfield.

As regards Horsebridge, I would commend to your notice the photograph of the disused railway line at what, till recently, was Horsebridge station. The land in front of you is that where those commercial imperialists the Romans (and maybe others before them) took their trading road across the river Test. Later it was called the royal road, when imperial Saxon and Norman kings knew it. Then for a few short centuries that piece of land may have been closed to all but local traffic, for the wealthy huntsmen had departed and the wealthy fishermen were yet to come.

But it never slept, that piece of land, for the mill was there to grind the corn that kept its folk alert. And commerce took a hand once more, and here imperialist Georgians built their canal that would make them busy and prosperous. And in time the canal gave way to a newer form of transport that was making a fresh empire—the steam engine.

Now all are gone: the road and the bridge and the canal and the railway, even the mill. And now there is no fashion for building empires.

What happens next? I have said that in the Test is written the history of England. Indeed that piece of land is the Test of England.

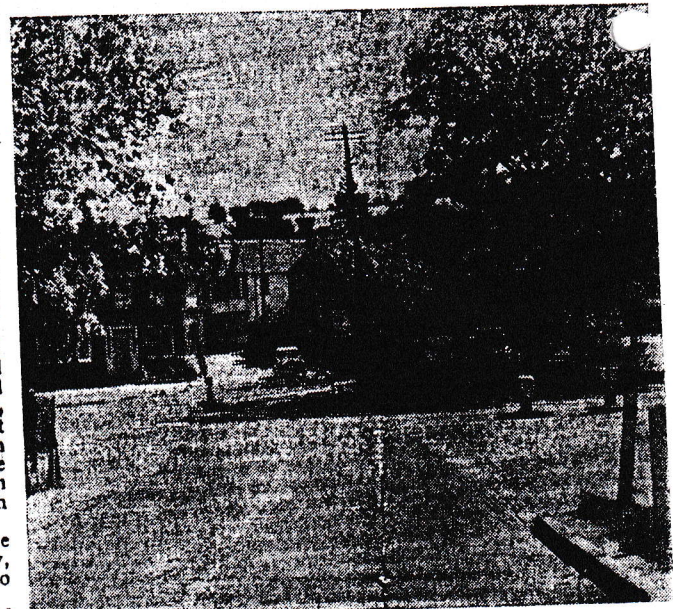
C. Cochran.



At Pitton (Wiltshire) is this surprising modern recognition of the long-vanished route from Winchester to Clarendon



The Roman road connecting with Norman Clarendon led through the hunting ground of Buckholt



Stockbridge east: road, r. foreground, to old canal inn (later r., by Norman church, first way to King's Somborne; centre, way by Weeke to Winchester; l., third way by Sutton Scotney Basingstoke