

THE NORTH DOWNS MAIN TRACKWAYS

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THE importance of the main trackway connecting the principal habitation sites of early Man in Wiltshire with the Channel coast in Kent is a matter of general agreement. West of Farnham the route bears the ancient name "Harrow Way," but eastwards from that point it has generally been associated with the term "Pilgrims' Way," from its supposed use by pilgrims travelling from Winchester to Canterbury. In recent years much doubt has been cast upon the authenticity of the pilgrim tradition, but this does not, of course, in any way affect the undoubted importance of the route to prehistoric and later traffic generally.

One curious result of the preoccupation with the pilgrim tradition, however, has been obliviousness to the existence of the main ridgeway along the Downs, although it can be traced almost continuously along their entire length, generally still in use as a road or track. Much has been written about the Pilgrims' Way, which usually follows the foot of the main escarpment, but I am not aware that any writer has even so much as hinted at the existence of an accompanying ridgeway, excepting for a brief reference by Mr. Belloc¹ to a "flanking road" along the Hog's Back in Surrey.

In my book, *Roman Ways in the Weald*, there is a short section dealing in general terms with this dual trackway, which would have been in contemporary use although not an engineered Roman road, but recently, thanks to the co-operation of the Archaeology Branch of the Ordnance Survey, I have had the opportunity of examining the entire route of the ridgeway in order to plot its course upon the maps, for in future it is intended to mark both tracks "Ancient Trackway."

It is perhaps scarcely necessary to describe the course of the ridgeway in detail, because it *is* the ridgeway and can usually be traced quite clearly as a road or track, often with a parish boundary following it, along the crest of the Downs, or sometimes a little to the north of the crest. For mile upon mile the two tracks run practically parallel, looking absurdly close to each other on the maps yet in reality occupying such very different positions. The reason for the duplication is probably to be found in the existence of Clay-with-flints capping the Chalk along some parts of the Downs, for this formation is wet and

¹ *The Old Road*, p. 156.

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sticky in winter and makes heavy going on the crest, which is avoided by a trackway on the clean Chalk near the foot of the escarpment, where the Pilgrims' Way, or "lower terraceway" runs. Moreover, although primitive man would doubtless here, as always, prefer the wide look-out afforded by the ridge, later travellers would have been attracted to the lower way by its constant proximity to villages. In this respect the two tracks live in worlds apart; the lower terraceway borders highly cultivated land with busy farmsteads and villages at frequent intervals, on the other hand the ridgeway runs for the most part through wild and lonely country, even in these days, with farms and small hamlets scattered amongst extensive woodlands, often far off from the ridgeway down narrow hilly lanes descending the deep combs that run towards the north, a bleak and rather unfriendly land for the passing traveller. It is probably this pronounced difference that has caused the ridgeway to become a derelict trackway for long stretches in Kent.

Between Tatsfield on the Kent border and Polhill the ridgeway is clearly marked by lanes, usually with a parish boundary. The Darent appears to have been crossed at Filston Hall, a mile north of Otford, from which a very distinctive line of parish boundary ascends the hillside eastward, continuing right along through Cotman's Ash to near Wrotham Hill. Much of this is derelict but is quite obviously the course of an old trackway. East of Wrotham the drive-making activities at Trosley Towers have somewhat obscured the older track, but no doubt this followed the line of parish boundaries adjacent to the modern drives all along the crest there. Where the main ridge approaches the Medway gorge, above Snodland and Halling, the ridgeway can be very clearly seen descending the eastern shoulder of the Downs as a fine sunken track full of old yews, just below Crookhorn Wood, joining the lower terraceway half-a-mile east of Birling Hill, and just at the point where a lower ridge and trackway lead eastward past a large tumulus towards the river at Holborough.¹

East of the Medway a similar ridgeway, with a northern branch from Borstal, just outside Rochester, all the way along Burham Hill and across Bluebell Hill to Westfield Wood, runs on from there by Harp Farm and above Boxley Warren. It is continued by lanes or tracks, on or near the crest, by Civiley Wood, Coldharbour, Hollingbourne House, Dean's Hill, Tophill Farm (Woodside Green), Warren Street, Charing Hill top, and through Longbeech Wood to the end of the escarpment where it descends, adhering rigidly to the crest, till it joins the lower terraceway at Dunn Street, Westwell, on the very tip of the ridge.

¹ See *Arch. Cant.*, LVIII, p. 68, for amusing description of the excavation of this tumulus in 1843 by methods characteristic of the period.

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The course of the lower terraceway (Pilgrims' Way) is so well known all along the escarpment from the Kent-Surrey border to this point (save only for the problems of the Medway crossing to be considered below) that it calls for no comment here. At Dunn Street the main ridge of the Chalk dies away, but a subdued ridge continues through Eastwell Park and Boughton Lees to the Stour opposite Wye, and again through Wye to the shoulder of Wye Downs beyond the valley. On this ridge the old trackway continues through the park, being very clearly marked right up to the grounds of the mansion of Eastwell. Beyond these it is evidently continued again by the road from Boughton Lees to Wye, crossing the Stour a little to the south of the present bridge.

At Boughton Lees the Pilgrims' Way, as such, leaves the main trackway, to go north-east through Boughton Aluph to Canterbury, but with that we are not now concerned. Just before Boughton Lees is reached, the Ordnance Survey is, I think, at fault in marking the route of the track as a decided loop in Eastwell Park round the west side of the grounds. Admittedly, there are traces of lynchets on this course, but it involves abandoning the main ridge, with a crossing of low ground near the Lodge to regain it, which is an entirely unnecessary diversion. Moreover, traces of the old trackway can be seen right up to the point where the grounds of the mansion intersect it, and there can really be little doubt that the original trackway went straight on along the ridge to the green at Boughton Lees.

Beyond Wye, where the track reaches the escarpment again at Coldharbour Farm, the duplication recommences, in precisely similar form, with the lower terraceway at the foot and an upper road climbing to the crest which it follows right on to Brabourne. Here the escarpment sweeps back to the north around a wide semi-circular combe in which lies Stowting; the ridgeway therefore descends the shoulder of Brabourne Downs to rejoin the lower terraceway, proceeding straight across the combe to Monk's Horton. The two tracks then separate again, the lower terraceway following its usual route through Postling and under Tolsford Hill to Frogholt and Pean. The upper track climbs steeply to the ridge above Monk's Horton, just where the Roman road Stone Street approaches it from Canterbury, and then takes a direct course, well away from the escarpment, through Etchinghill and Paddlesworth, in order to cross the Elham Valley more easily. It approaches the escarpment again just behind Round Hill, Folkestone, and is joined there by the other track from Pean, for the escarpment is too steep and indented here for a lower terraceway to find a convenient course, and consequently, after Pean, it climbs to the crest for the rest of its course. The track continues along the crest, under the name Crete Way, until it falls into the Dover road at the top of

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Dover Hill, Folkestone, where it comes to the cliff edge. The exact continuance thereafter must be uncertain owing to the effects of coast erosion, but a course along the coastal ridge to Dover would have been more likely than the present valley route.

In the whole course of this important trackway there is but one really serious obstacle, the crossing of the Medway, and this must have been quite a different problem from that of the other rivers encountered which are, after all, relatively small and easy streams. Mr. Belloc¹ gives an interesting discussion of the factors involved in choosing the best crossing, but his argument was, perhaps, somewhat weighted in favour of a crossing best suited to the *pilgrims* rather than earlier travellers, with considerable importance given to the positions of churches along the route. He does not, I think, give sufficient weight to certain difficulties that would have confronted early Man there.

From the evident direction of the main trackway we can rule out any crossing above Snodland (such as Aylesford). From Snodland down to Cuxton the wide meanders of the river usually ensure that, although hard ground comes right down to one bank, the other shall be a marsh for quite a considerable distance from the bank, and this would have been difficult to cross before the making of causeways was possible. From Cuxton to Rochester the river, although wider and deeper, appears at high tide to have firm ground on both banks right to the water's edge. It may well have been easier to make a landing here than in the marshy areas upstream, assuming the use of some sort of raft or boat, which would have been necessary at any point.

Now it is quite clear that the lower terraceway is continued along both sides of the valley right down to Rochester, and crossings could have been made from it at any convenient point. The crossing of the main trackway at Rochester, the predecessor of Watling Street, was no doubt one such. Another may well have been from Cuxton Brickworks to Borstal, where the lower terraceway comes near the river. Farther upstream there is the line of ridgeway, mentioned earlier, that leads to the river at Holborough, and which may have been connected by a crossing to Wouldham Hall and so by a similar spur to Scarborough on the eastern hill-side. Much evidence hereabouts has been obliterated by the huge workings of "Cement-land." Moreover, the meanders of the river must have changed their positions during the centuries and no certainty as to the crossings is possible. No doubt they changed from time to time, as local conditions rendered one route or another more convenient, or as the making of causeways became possible. Thus it is not, I think, practicable or desirable to attempt to select one point as "the crossing-point" of the Medway for the old trackway, for there were probably several such crossings.

¹ *The Old Road*, p. 235 ff.