

# THE ANCIENT SALTWAY FROM DROITWICH TO PRINCES RISBOROUGH

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The importance of salt in the mediaeval economy needs no stressing. Domesday Book tells us a great deal about where it was produced and about the rents and renders that were derived from its production but it is virtually silent about its sale and distribution. There was a multitude of salt-pans all round the east and south coasts but it was the brine-springs concentrated in small areas in Cheshire and Worcestershire which yielded salt of high purity and preservative efficacy.

Droitwich, the centre of the Worcestershire industry and its principal market, was already a borough before the Conquest, though it had no military importance and was never fortified. King Edward had taken two-thirds of the render it made and Earl Edwin of Mercia the rest – these were the equity shareholders – but after the Conquest King William took the whole. There were, however, other interests: various manors in Worcestershire and the neighbouring counties owned salt-pans there and others possessed the right to receive an annual quantity of salt. Domesday Book records that 71 manors had the right to salt from Droitwich and the remotest of these was Prince's Risborough which before the Conquest belonged to Harold and after to King William.

Domesday Book is never prodigal of words, and the entry concerning Prince's Risborough reveals no details; it simply says "A salter of Droitwich renders loads of salt". As no quantity is stated nor any space left in the text for its later insertion, it may be deduced that it varied from one year to another and that it was either the entire production of one salt-pan or else a proportion of the salt which the salter brought to this town and traded from there. That Risborough was a trading centre at this time is shown by an adjacent entry which states that a burgess of Oxford had premises there for which he paid rent to the manor.<sup>1</sup> The demand for salt for consumption inside the manor cannot have been large; there is no sign there of a royal residence as yet; the demesne was probably then as later a great stud farm.

References are found in Domesday Book to salt being conveyed in carts drawn by oxen, on pack-horses, and on the backs of men. The roads over which this traffic issued from Droitwich towards the several centres of distribution are mentioned as such in a number of Saxon charters; the villages of Salford in Oxfordshire and Warwickshire were so named from the fords over which the salt passed; salt streets and saltways occur here and there. The disposition of these names shows that the roads used were of great antiquity and that some of them had probably been metalled by the Romans. They did not pass through towns, where various dues might be extracted and often they avoided bridges where tolls were charged. If alternative routes presented themselves it was the one in the drier setting that was chosen. Certain old roads known traditionally as Green Street, Green Road or Green Lane may have been used as saltways

1. For the route through the Risborough Gap, linking the Thames with the Icknield Way, see J.F. Head, "An important Early Valley Route through the Chilterns", in *Records XIX*, p.422

when they lie on the appropriate alignment. Ancient highways were frequently used as parish boundaries so one might expect a route such as a saltway to be used for this purpose at least for some part of its course. Evidence supports the assumptions, firstly, that certain stretches of the suggested saltway were part of a general trade route between the South Midlands and the Thames Valley and, secondly, that some sections were used by cattle-drovers bringing their herds from Wales and the Welsh Marches.

A well established route used by salt-carriers left Droitwich for Stratford-upon-Avon and continued thence by Ettington and Whatcote to Brailes, which possessed salt-rights. It then continued in an easterly direction, leaving Banbury on the north, through Bodicote, King's Sutton and Evenley where it turned southward for Stratton Audley, where a Salt Street was mentioned in 1412.<sup>2</sup> In all probability Buckinghamshire was entered along a road which runs through what is now Stratton Audley Park (SP 635263).

This road strikes across the higher ground toward Poundon (SP 650255) continuing from this point as a bridleway leading to Charndon (SP 672249). Known locally either as Green Lane or Green Street this bridleway also coincides with parish boundaries for the greater part of its length. In Charndon it ends at a crossways near the Roebuck Inn (now de-licensed) and here the saltway route may have turned south for about a quarter of a mile where another bridleway strikes off eastward (SP 672244) to join the Gawcott to Grendon Underwood road (SP 681241). For most of their length both of these bridleways run between parallel hedges, an almost certain indication of abandoned highways.

Much of the present Gawcott-Grendon road was constructed during the turnpike era but old maps<sup>3</sup> show a highway along the route given above from Stratton Audley Park and continuing southward in the Grendon direction. At Edgcott instead of following the present road the old highway went farther east by way of Edgcott Lawn (SP 684224) then over the eastern shoulders of both Spring and Mill Hills to enter Grendon Underwood opposite the County Combined School along the line of an existing right-of-way (SP 681207). It is interesting to note that the 1969 edition of Bartholomew's half-inch map continues to show this old highway from Edgcott to Grendon Underwood although it has long since ceased to function.

There is some evidence that a track branched off the suggested route to Princes Risborough at Grendon to convey salt and other goods to the royal residence at Brill. In Grendon (SP 685205) footpaths go in a southwesterly direction, crossing Akeman

2. Place-Names of Oxfordshire, English Place-Names Society XXIII (1953-4), p.3  
Old maps have been consulted extensively, and are referred to in subsequent notes as follows:-

- (a) Map of Buckinghamshire ; R. Morden, 1695
- (b) " " " ; T. Kitchen, 1748
- (c) " " " ; E. Bowen, 1762
- (d) " " " ; W. Palmer, 1766
- (e) " " " ; T. Jefferys, 1770
- (f) " " " ; J. Cary, 1794
- (g) " " " ; C. Smith, 1801
- (h) " " " ; Cadell & Davies, 1806
- (i) " " " ; A. Bryant, 1825
- (j) " " " ; T. Moule, 1837
- (k) Maps in Lipscomb, History & Antiquities of the County of Buckingham, 1847.
- (l) Ordnance Survey, 1st edn. 1" scale, Sheet 7 (London, 1822).
- (m) " " " " " " " " 45 (Banbury 1833).
- (n) Late 16th-century map reproduced by C.O. Moreton, History of Waddesdon and Over Winchendon, S.P.C.K. 1929.

3. Maps (e), (f), (g), (i), (j), (k), (m).

Street (SP 680195), to the west of Sharp's Hill and Tetchwick, and on into the north-east corner of Ludgershall village (SP 663177) where Solter's Lane (O.S.) is aligned towards Brill.

Returning to the route to Risborough, going southeast from Grendon (SP 689201) an alignment of rights-of-way, some now extinguished, continues in the same general direction passing near Lawn, Ovinghill and Binwell Lane Farms and ultimately leading to Waddesdon. A number of old maps show this route as the main highway between Grendon and Waddesdon;<sup>4</sup> the Westcott Enclosure Award of 1766 refers to it as an ancient bridle road, and the late 16th-century estate map reproduced by Moreton names it as the "Road to London". Two maps designate the stretch of highway between Grendon and Binwell Lane Farm (SP 712189) as Reney Lane, this word may be derived from a term meaning a boundary and much of this track coincides with parish boundaries.<sup>5</sup>

Southeast from Binwell Lane Farm the old highway passes an area now known as Saltridge (SP 723183) and from here southwards old rights-of-way existed which crossed Akeman Street to enter Westcott by way of Lower Green (SP 721171). No early forms are known for Saltridge and it is tempting to associate the first element of this name with salt, perhaps it was a recognised halting place for salt-carriers. On the other hand the name could equally have arisen from O.E. *salh* (willow) especially as the site leads down to a stream.

Continuing through Westcott village the road leads by Gipsy Bottom to the foot of Ashendon Hill (SP 720154). Here it turns to the southwest and ascends the hill but the route taken was probably the track which continues ahead towards Watbridge (SP 724143) from whence rights-of-way make for Winchendon ridge. Originally one of these rights-of-way passed Marsh Farm and along the farm drive to come out on the crown of the ridge (SP 730129). At this spot a magnificent panoramic view of the Chiltern escarpment is obtained. Opposite the drive to Marsh Farm a footpath goes down to Nether Winchendon and again a number of early maps show this route.<sup>6</sup> To the west of Nether Winchendon House there is a track which continues the alignment across the fields to Cuddington and this track, which is within the private grounds of the House, crosses the River Thames by a bridge (SP 734119).

Beyond Cuddington a road now known as Dadbrook comes out at a crossroads called King's Cross and continues southwards, to the east of Haddenham, to an ancient river-crossing known as Stanbridge (SP 752077). Again this section of the route is shown on old maps.<sup>7</sup> Immediately after crossing Stanbridge there appear to be remains of a route leading westward to the royal palace at Ewelme and to the castle at Wallingford. This track probably went through Kingsey, Towersey, Sydenham and Postcombe. At Postcombe a lane known as Salt Lane (SU 709994) leads to South Weston from whence old rights-of-way threaded through to Pyrton and so, west of Watlington, to Britwell eventually arriving at Ewelme and Wallingford.

So far as the route to Prince's Risborough is concerned the continuation of the align-

4. Maps (a), (b), (c), (d), (n)

5. Maps (i), (k).

6. Maps (e), (f), (g), (h), (j), (k), and (m) which also shows the route from Nether Winchendon to Cuddington.

7. Maps (d) - (k) and (m).

ment, Cuddington, King's Cross, Stanbridge, in a southerly direction goes into a very marshy area with very little evidence of old tracks. Modern land-drainage methods and the general lowering of the water table have greatly improved conditions in recent years, yet less than fifty years ago fields lying to the west of Ilmer carried the sobriquet of "Ilmer Treacle Mines" because of their wet and sticky nature. It is suggested that the route taken turned off to the east from Stanbridge and followed the road to a point where a boundary stone is indicated on large scale O.S. maps (SP 764074) and here it bears into the required southeasterly direction. The boundary stone was removed during the Second World War and its present whereabouts is not known.

Old maps<sup>8</sup> and aerial photographs<sup>9</sup> show that the existing road going southeast from the site of the boundary stone originally continued over the present Risborough–Thame road, passing just east of Ilmer, to Horsenden and to the Three Horseshoes Inn, Saunderton (SP 795021). Shadows of roads and building platforms revealed on aerial photographs<sup>10</sup> indicate that Aston Sandford was once a much larger village extending almost from Stanbridge to the site of the boundary stone, thus acting as a connecting link between the ends of the two alignments. For a distance of more than 1½ miles, from Stanbridge to a point south of the Risborough–Thame road, the route coincides with parish boundaries and then follows two short lengths of parallel hedges separated by an elongated field which may have been a resting area for salt-carriers perhaps to be used later as a grazing area by cattle drovers. The second length of parallel hedges reached to Ilmer Lane (SP 772057) and O.S. maps continue to show them although they were removed some years ago.

The suggested route between Ilmer and Horsenden was shown as a private carriage road on the 1823 Enclosure Award map for Prince's Risborough and although the first few yards are now diverted by the railway a bridleway remains to show the alignment from Ilmer Lane to Walnut Tree Lane, Longwick (SP 782044). The first ¼ mile of the bridleway runs coincident with an old parish boundary and the last ¼ mile passes between parallel hedges to meet Walnut Tree Lane. At this point the Enclosure Award map shows a field to the west of the road called Near Stert (SP 781045) and another to the east called Green Stert (SP 782047). The term *stert* was applied to a projecting piece of land and Near Stert was a projection of Prince's Risborough parish into that of Horsenden whereas Green Stert had no such peculiarity of situation. It is possible the old road running between these two fields was originally known as Green Street but later the name was transferred to the adjacent field and modified by metathesis into Green Stert thus harmonising with the name of its neighbour, Near Stert. Such modifications were frequently found in Buckinghamshire dialects.

The line of the route is continued from Walnut Tree Lane to the Lower Icknield Way accompanied by an old parish boundary along with about ½ mile of parallel hedges. Just before the Lower Icknield Way is reached Little Horsenden Farm appears to have been built right on the line of the old road. A right-of-way continues from opposite Little Horsenden Farm southeastward across the Lower Icknield Way to Horsenden whence a parish boundary takes up the alignment along Nut Walk to Roundabout Wood where another right-of-way goes ahead to the Three Horseshoes Inn, Saunderton

8. Maps (d) – (k) and (l) which shows Aston Sandford – Ilmer, and Longwick – Horsenden.

9. Hunting Surveys Ltd. *Sortie* HSL/UK/63/128, print nos. 3078 - 3103.

10. *Hunting, Sortie* as cited, print nos. 3090 - 3092.

(SP 795021). The salt-carriers may have turned east off this highway at Horsenden (SP 791030) where an old road, now diverted by the railway, once went across Salt Marshes and The Park to Prince's Risborough passing The Mount.

Besides leading to Prince's Risborough it is suggested that the route given above continued through the Risborough Gap, and on to Hedsor Wharf (SU 904860). From the Three Horseshoes Inn at Saunderton a road veers to the southwest to avoid a marshy area and then sweeping round the head of a deep-set stream and its spring climbs to the Upper Ickneild Way (SP 794013). At this point the route approaches the northern end of the Risborough Gap which on closer examination, will be found to consist of two parallel valleys separated by Lodge Hill, Slough Hill and the ridge terminating in Church Hill, West Wycombe (SP 794001 to SU 828950). The main valley is used by the railway and the main road but before the introduction of modern drainage it contained very extensive marshes and springs, making it liable to frequent and widespread flooding,<sup>11</sup> on the other hand the secondary valley, to the west of the main one, is much drier.

From the Upper Ickneild Way a road goes ahead in a southeasterly direction to Saunderton Lee and into the main valley but almost due south traces of another track are still visible on aerial photographs<sup>12</sup> although it is almost obliterated on the ground by deep ploughing. This track leads toward the eastern shoulder of Lodge Hill and joins up with a bridleway which goes into the secondary valley (SU 795996). The northern part of this valley has long been known as Bledlow Bottom; it was in Bledlow parish and bottom is a Chiltern term signifying a valley especially a dry one. Continuing southward along this valley the bridleway becomes a lane passing near Lodge Hill, Dean and Bottom Farms, also it is known locally as Green Street. Soon the lane becomes a road going straight ahead to meet the Oxford road at West Wycombe (SU 828946) almost opposite the drive into West Wycombe Park. Ogilby's road map of 1675 indicates that a road on the Oxford side of West Wycombe went to Wendover and undoubtedly it used the route through the secondary valley.

There is some evidence that an alternative route was used between Little Horsenden and Lodge Hill, it is suggested that at Little Horsenden (SP 786037) the route merged with the Lower Ickneild Way which it followed in a southwesterly direction for about  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile. At this point (SP 783034) an old highway curves away from the Ickneild Way toward the south going as far as Oddley Lane (SP 788017) but if the alignment is projected southwards it passes west of Lodge Hill to join up with the track in the secondary valley of Risborough Gap. Recently the road which follows along the route of the Lower Ickneild Way in the Little Horsenden area has been drastically modified thus entirely destroying the previous character of the junction with the old highway referred to above, however the original configuration is recorded on the 6" scale O.S. map, 1960 edition. A number of early maps<sup>13</sup> together with the Enclosure Award map of 1812 for Bledlow show this old highway going from the Lower Ickneild Way as far as Oddley Lane but four maps<sup>14</sup> indicate that the track continued across the Upper Ickneild Way

11. J. F. Head, *Early Man in South Buckinghamshire*, (1955), p.13, and Records XIX (op. cit.), p.424

12. *Hunting, Sortie* as cited, print nos. 3104 - 3106.

13. Maps (d) - (k).

14. Maps (d) - (g).

picking up the line of an existing right-of-way west of Lodge Hill and joining up with the route going along the secondary valley to West Wycombe near Lodge Hill Farm (SU 795996).

Prior to the middle of the 18th century when the present West Wycombe Road leading into High Wycombe was built the old road went along the south side of the valley close under Desborough Castle (SU 847933) then along another Green Street (SU 854934) in High Wycombe itself and so to the foot of Keep Hill (SU 878922). There is some evidence that a zig-zag track ascended Keep Hill and from here a route, following rights-of-way and parish boundaries, climbed over the Sheepridge (SU 884895) where Sheepridge Lane leads down to Bourne End and Hedsor Wharf (SU 904860). An alternative route may have been taken from High Wycombe along old highways going down the river valley to Cores End and so to Hedsor Wharf.