Some Old Roads of North Berkshire*

By the late GABRIELLE LAMBRICK

THE area of Berkshire of which the old highways are discussed in the following pages is that bounded on the north-west, north and east by the great loop of the Thames from north of Faringdon, through Oxford, to Abingdon, and on the south by the River Ock, with an extension from the middle valley of the Ock (in the Vale of White Horse) to Wantage, at the foot of the Berkshire Downs. Between Faringdon and Cumnor there is a long ridge or plateau running parallel with the right bank of the Thames and falling in a fairly steep escarpment to the river on the north and by a much more gradual slope to the Vale of White Horse and the valley of the Ock on the south. At right angles to this ridge, from its higher end at Cumnor Hurst, there runs the short subsidiary ridge of Boars Hill and Foxcombe Hill, rising above the 500 ft. contour at its north-western extremity and falling steeply on both sides to the valley of the Thames south of Oxford on the one hand and to the valley of the Ock on the other.

There is evidence that this part of the Thames valley was inhabited from prehistoric times onwards, and that there were Romano-British occupation sites at Abingdon and up the valley of the Ock. Anglo-Saxon settlements proliferated not only in the river valleys, but also along the Cumnor–Faringdon ridge and below the slopes of the Downs. Before it finally became the northern extremity of the kingdom of Wessex, North Berkshire had changed hands several times and had been much fought over during the Danish wars. The Thames was not sufficiently wide here to form a defensive line in time of war ; nor, on the other hand, did it constitute a barrier to communications in time of peace, if good safe crossing places could be found. It is true that the nature of the sub-soil and the multiplication of the river channels presented difficulties in the immediate vicinity of Oxford ; but, as we shall see, it was by no means impossible to overcome them, or avoid them, even from the earliest times.

From this part of Berkshire access to the Midlands is—and has been for many centuries—gained through Oxford ; to the West Country, through Faringdon ; and to the South Coast through Abingdon and Newbury. The

direct road route eastwards to London kept well to the north of Reading and the heavily wooded eastern part of the county, leaving North Berkshire more cut off from its eastern counterpart than from Oxfordshire and the neighbouring counties to the west and south. The dominance of Oxford, by far the most important place in the vicinity from before the Norman Conquest, has also contributed to this state of affairs and has naturally played an important part in influencing communications in the North Berks area from at least the 11th century onwards. It is the highways coming from far afield, and crossing the county between Oxford and Faringdon, Oxford and Wantage, and Oxford and Abingdon, which are the chief concern of this article.

The road which nowadays runs westward out of Oxford, through Botley, up Cumnor Hill, by Besselsleigh to Kingston Bagpuize and thence to Faringdon, is comparatively new, both as the main Oxford–Faringdon road and in its general alignment. The ' ancient road ', as it was called in the late 18th century, from Oxford to west Berkshire and beyond, ran for centuries over Hinksey Hill and Foxcombe Hill through Cothill to Tubney and Fyfield and thence either through Kingston Bagpuize or through Longworth and Buckland to Faringdon. It was this road which was probably the recognized line of communication between Oxford and the port of Bristol from Norman times onwards ;[1] later it also provided Oxford with an alternative route to Gloucester, keeping south of the Upper Thames instead of north, and joining the main London–Gloucester road near Fyfield.

Hitherto historical interest has been concentrated on the western exit from Oxford ; from here the traveller to Berkshire and the west inevitably had to cross the river by Hinksey Ferry until Botley Causeway was built in the 16th century. The use made of the southern exit has tended to be overlooked or minimized, and it is worth examining the records to see what evidence they provide for assessing the importance through the centuries of the road which began or ended at Oxford's South Gate and South Bridge. In this it will be convenient to work backwards in time from the late 18th and early 19th century, when the turnpike road from Oxford through Botley and over Cumnor Hill was made, and the approximate line of the modern Oxford–Faringdon and Oxford–Wantage roads came into regular use.

In 1797 the Inclosure Award for the parish of Wootton and Boreshill (Berks.) mentions a road ' beginning at Foxcombe Hill and leading along by the side of Blagrove Farm and crossing the Turnpike Road at a place called White Cross in a Westward Direction to a Lane called Faringdon Lane being

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[1] The 14th-century Gough map shows a branch of the main London road to Gloucester and St. David's leaving Oxford by way of Faringdon for Bristol. *Vide* F. M. Stenton, ' The Road System of Medieval England ', *Econ. Hist. Review*, VII (1936), 8–9.

part of the ancient public road from Oxford to Faringdon '. The description is given in identical terms in the Inclosure Commissioners' Minutes of 22 September 1795.[2]

The fact that in 1795 and 1797 the road was termed the ' ancient ' road from Oxford to Faringdon may indicate that it was already being superseded by the then modern turnpike road on the Cumnor Hill–Besselsleigh alignment ; but that this supersession was then only a recent development seems clear from the reference from *Jackson's Oxford Journal* for 6 December 1755 to repairing of the road on Hinksey Hill ' and from thence to Foxcombe Hill in the said County [Berks] ; being Part of the Road from Oxford to Faringdon '.[3] Additional evidence comes from Rocque's map of the whole of Berks, of 1762,[4] which shows as a highway (assuming that he purposely delineated the more important roads by wider lines) that from Oxford by Hinksey Hill, Foxcombe Hill, Cothill, Tubney and Fyfield to Faringdon ; with a branch from Cothill to Frilford and Wantage. Even if there were no evidence from earlier centuries, Rocque's masterly and accurate map could probably be taken as depicting a road system which had existed since the middle ages, for it was made before the Inclosure period and before the new turnpike roads had been constructed in north Berks.

According to Rocque's map, the road in question left Oxford by the South Gate and crossed the river by the bridge and the causeway of Grandpont which still forms the foundation of the modern Abingdon Road ; it turned south-west near Cold Harbour and the modern railway bridge before ascending Hinksey Hill. The use of the South Gate of Oxford and the causeway of Grandpont (which applied to the series of arches over the by-rivers as well as to the bridge over the main stream at what is now called Folly Bridge) is historically an important feature of this route.

In the later 17th century Ogilby gives, in his *Britannia*, a plan and description of his route from Oxford to Faringdon and Bristol, which is consistent for the first stages with the road described above.[5] He remarked that he fell in with the road from London at rather over a mile before Fyfield ; and this would correspond with the junction shown by Rocque on Sheet X of his 1761 Survey, of the Cothill–Tubney section of the Oxford–Faringdon road with the main road from London to Bristol and Gloucester through Abingdon—the latter having become one of the chief lines of communication in the country after 1416, when the stone bridge was built over the Thames at Abingdon.

[2] Bodleian Library, MS. Top. Berks, c. 31.
[3] James Townsend, *News of a Country Town* (1914), 28.
[4] John Rocque, *Map of the whole of Berks reduced from the actual survey* (1761) ; *Survey of the County of Berks in 18 sheets* (1761).
[5] 1698 edn., 37.

Further evidence of the use of the South Gate for exit to and entrance from the west comes from Antony Wood's notes of the movements of troops in the early days of the Civil War—for the 9 December 1642 he remarks that ' the captive parliament soldiers taken at Marlborough were brought into Oxford over Southbridge . . .'[6] and for 4 March 1643, that ' Prince Robert (*sic*) and his brother prince Maurice, with a great company of troopers and dragoners, went out of Oxford over Southbridge . . . and uppone Sundaye night it was saide that he laye at Malmesbury &c. His ayme was to Bristoll (as it seems) . . .'.[7] Forty-five years later he noted that on 7 November 1688, ' 60 horsemen went thro' Oxford to South Gate and so to Faringdon '.[8]

Leland, in the first half of the previous century, had also used the South Gate route—' From Oxford through the Southgate and bridge of sundrie arches over Isis and along causey *in ulter ripa* in Barkshir by a good quarter of a mile or more, and so up to Hinxey hille about a mile from Oxford. From this place the hilly ground was meately wooddy for the space of a mile ; and thens . . . by chaumpain and sum corne, but most pasture, to Faringdon . . .'.[9] However, on a different occasion he used another road, by Hinksey Ferry, which was reached by a causeway from Osney—' the fery selfe is over the principale arm or stream of Isis '. This route took him through Besselsleigh which he described as a little village ' a 3 mile from Hinkesey fery in the highe way from Oxford to Ferendune '.[10]

This suggests that a second route from Oxford to Faringdon was still being used regularly, though it seems probable that in Leland's time, and for at least four and a half centuries previously, the road over the ferry was confined mainly to pedestrian traffic, while wheeled traffic and large bodies of men were likely to choose the longer but much more convenient road over the South Bridge and along the causeway leading to Hinksey Hill. H. E. Salter has shown from references in the Osney Cartulary that the ferry at North Hinksey was operating in the 14th century ;[11] and there are still earlier references to it or its ferryman in the 13th century, in two deeds in the Lyell Cartulary of Abingdon Abbey.[12] In that same cartulary, however, there is copied a final concord of 1248 which gives as a boundary line a section of highway running from Pinnesgrove, which was just beyond the north-west corner of Bagley Wood, to the boundary of Wootton—i.e. near the top of Foxcombe Hill ; this road is there called the

[6] Antony Wood, *Life and Times*, ed. Clark (Oxford Historical Society), I, 73.

[7] Ibid., I, 90.

[8] Ibid., III, 281–2.

[9] John Leland, *Itinerary through England*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith (1906–07), I, 215.

[10] Ibid., V, 72.

[11] H. E. Salter, *Medieval Oxford* (Oxford Historical Society, 1936), 1.

[12] Bodleian Library, MS. Lyell 15, ff. 77, 79.

' via regalis ' from Oxford to Faringdon.[13] It is undoubtedly the route from Oxford to the west through the South Gate and the causeway of Grandpont ; and it is almost equally certain that this road must have been regarded as a highway of some importance for at least 150 years earlier, ever since Robert d'Oilly, in the late 11th century, built the Grandpont bridge and causeway southwards from Oxford.

Salter, no doubt rightly, took the view that until the Botley causeway was built all traffic which left Oxford by the West Gate must cross the river at North Hinksey.[14] A gloss might now be added, that some proportion of traffic destined for the west, as well as that for the south (Abingdon, Newbury, Southampton) took the longer route over the South Bridge, from at least Norman times onwards.

Sir Frank Stenton suggests that the Norman improvements to the English road system were achieved mainly by bridge-building ; the roads themselves already existed, even if in some cases only as local roads, in Anglo-Saxon times. The stress, he maintains was on new bridges rather than on new roads, and quotes Grandpont as an outstanding example of a bridge built not long after the Conquest.[15] Bearing this in mind, it would be reasonable to expect that when Robert d'Oilly built Grandpont he was, in addition to providing a stone bridge over the main stream of the river, strengthening that section of a road already of some importance which was most liable to deterioration and danger from flooding.

It was Salter's belief that in pre-Norman times ' the only serviceable way from Oxford to Berkshire was by Hinksey '. He based this belief on the assumption that ' the road called Grandpont traverses a mile of clay soil ', that it was extremely difficult to cross the valley of the Isis opposite South Hinksey, and that the gravelly soil at North Hinksey made this a far superior, and in fact the only natural, crossing place.[16] There is a misconception here, for there is in fact a long, nearly continuous gravel spit running southwards from the city between the main river and the channels of the by-rivers and tributaries flowing down past Hinkseys ; it continues beyond Cold Harbour and at the present time forms the foundation for that section of the Sandford Link by-pass which connects with the Abingdon Road at the Farrier's Arms. There is another patch of gravel around and to the south-east of South Hinksey. These stretches of gravel form the foundation of the modern Abingdon Road along the floor of the valley and of its turn near Cold Harbour before it climbs Hinksey Hill.

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[13] Ibid., f. 135.

[14] H. E. Salter, *Medieval Oxford*, 1.

[15] F. M. Stenton, ' The Road System of Medieval England ', *Econ. Hist. Review*, VII (1936), 6.

[16] H. E. Salter, *Medieval Oxford*, 2.

There was undoubtedly some sort of a road here in pre-Norman times. Local access was needed to East Wyke and West Wyke farms, and to the mill at Langford (at the west end of modern Oxford's Donnington Bridge) all of which may well have dated from before the Conquest.[17]   It must, however, have been a road of more than local importance : for in the early 10th century a fortified borough was created at Oxford round an important cross-roads—later known as Carfax—and it cannot be supposed that the southern arm at that time stopped short where Folly Bridge stands today, and where there was already an Anglo-Saxon settlement which became the southern suburb of the borough of Oxford.   Either the southern arm of the road must have crossed the main river by a ford or wooden bridge, or else the river there was a subsidiary channel of the main stream, as H. E. Peake believed was the case until the mid-10th century.[18]   Peake maintains that not only was there a continuation of the ancient highway from the north through Oxford and along the gravel spit, but that it continued south beyond Cold Harbour and on by way of Iffley and Sandford-on-Thames to Dorchester, with the main stream of the Isis taking a more westerly course past both the Hinkseys.   He thought it must be pre-historic because the alignment he worked out did not seem straight enough, to him, for it to be a Roman road.[19]   At the very least his theory lends support to the contention that given a suitable foundation soil, ancient roads and track-ways could and would be made over terrain which at first sight might appear difficult and even impracticable.

It seems very likely that even before Robert d'Oilly's time the southern arm of the Carfax cross-road, after running along the gravel spit, turned across the South Hinksey gravel patch at a spot known to the Anglo-Saxons as the Stone Ford, or ' stanford '.[20]   Thus it was linked with a road which from its name was evidently of importance.   There are two stretches of road mentioned in charter boundaries of the middle or late 10th century, lying on the eastern end of Boars Hill ; one is called ' port straete ' and the other ' port weg '.   It is difficult from the internal evidence of the charter boundaries alone to determine exactly where these lay, in which direction they pointed, and whether they were continuous.   The identification which Grundy made for ' port straete ' as a road running parallel to the western boundary of Bagley Wood must be discounted, for he altered the wording of the charter boundaries to make it point towards the town of Abingdon—and Mrs. Gelling has already shown that

[17] ' Langford ' was the Anglo-Saxon ' long ford ' where two branches of the river had to be crossed to reach the eastern side of the valley of the Isis : *vide* H. E. Salter, *Medieval Oxford*, 15–16.

[18] Dr. K. E. Sandford is of the opinion that any change was likely to have been one of emphasis rather than a definite change of course.

[19] Harold Peake, *County Archaeologies : Berkshire* (1931), 81.

[20] W. de G. Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum* (1885–93), no. 906 : *vide* P. S. Spokes, ' Silva de Baggeleia ', *Journal of the Oxford University Forest Society* (1936).

' Abendun ' in this context must mean not the town but an upland area on the eastern end of Boars Hill.[21]

More can be learnt about the direction of this road, however, if one considers what the people of the 10th century must have meant when they referred to ' port ' or market towns in this area. It is obvious that Oxford must have been the aim in one direction ; and in the other, Wantage seems much more likely than Abingdon or even Faringdon. This is not the place to discuss the origins of the town of Abingdon. It must suffice to say that in the late 10th century the abbey had only recently been re-founded and re-vitalized by its great abbot Aethelwold, and that it can have been in no condition to attract appreciable trade to the place at the time the charter boundaries concerned were written down. Faringdon should also be ruled out as the other *terminus ad quem* for this Anglo-Saxon road, not because it lacked status as a market town, but because there was at that time a shorter, and probably easier, route, by the Oxen-ford and Hinksey Ferry and then by the pre-historic ridgeway lying above the right bank of the Thames, from Cumnor and Appleton to Faringdon, which was certainly used as a highway in Anglo-Saxon times ; and this also has its stretches of ' straete ' and ' port weg ' in the charter boundaries. Salter has described the importance of this ancient highway and how the ford near Hinksey originally gave Oxford its name.[22]

To return to the road over Boars Hill, an interesting little piece of local history is bound up with the stretch which runs from the Thames valley up Hinksey Hill. That section is known, in four different sets of Anglo-Saxon charter boundaries, as the hay-way (' hig weg '). The origin of this lay in the fact that part of the island of ' berige ', an eyot lying between two channels of the river near Cold Harbour, was at some date allotted to the hamlet of Wootton as a water-meadow, and the hay had to be carted from the riverside right over Boars Hill to the three-mile distant settlement. Its value to that community may be judged from the fact that ' berige ' under its later name of Berry Mead was parcelled out among the landowners of Wootton under the Inclosure Award of 1797, and was still being farmed from there at the beginning of this century.[23]

Beyond Boars Hill there are other indications of the existence of an Anglo-Saxon highway. Just short of the hamlet of Cothill there was, according to the Anglo-Saxon charter boundaries, a sandy ford—the ford from which (Dry) Sandford received its name, and after which Sandford Mill, the old mill close to the ford, was called. From calculations regarding the water levels of the

[21] G. B. Grundy, ' Berkshire Charters ', *Berks, Bucks and Oxon Archaeological Journal*, xxvii (1922), 98-9 ; M. Gelling, ' The Hill of Abingdon ', *Oxoniensia*, xxii (1957), 54-62.
[22] H. E. Salter, *Medieval Oxford*, 1-2.
[23] Mary Rix, *Boars Hill, Oxford* (1944), p. 7.

now disused mill-leat and mill-pond, it is clear that the original ford must have taken the traveller across the stream to the south of the mill, the road continuing on in a direct line, south also of where the Fleur de Lys Inn stands today, to join the modern road immediately after it has twisted its way through Cothill village.[24]

In Henry I's time, Abingdon Abbey was said to hold the hundred court of Hormer Hundred ' in ' (Dry) Sandford ;[25] it can be assumed that the Anglo-Saxon meeting place of the hundred was in the same spot, and that the meeting was held somewhere within the boundaries of the ' vill ' of Dry Sandford, near to a marsh, pool or mere, from which Hormer Hundred received part of its name. Immediately to the north of Sandford Mill and Cothill village there is a little valley fed by four streams which originally ran into the Sandford Brook near to where the modern road passes the mill today. The stratification of the ground thereabouts and the analyses made in studying it[26] show that by nature this area must have been, at the driest, a peat bog ; under wetter conditions (depending, for instance, on climate, the amount of cultivation in the surrounding countryside and the rate at which peat accumulated there) the valley might well, in Anglo-Saxon times, have been filled or partially filled with surface water, to form a lake or pool. This peaty, fen-like area could be the ' *mere* ' of Hormer Hundred. There are additional reasons for thinking that the meeting place of the hundred was close to this area, for there is good hard ground immediately to the east and north of it ; many old tracks converged (and still do) near to the mill ; it is in a sort of no-man's land, a characteristic of such meeting places, on the extreme western edge of Hormer Hundred and amid a confusion of three sets of parish boundaries ; and the proximity to the ford— the sand-ford—is significant too. Neither the importance, in Anglo-Saxon times, of the road close to Dry Sandford Mill, nor the suggested site of the original meeting place of the Hundred, can be proved beyond doubt. But the evidence for the one certainly supports the evidence for the other.

For the line of the Anglo-Saxon road after it had crossed the Sandford Brook by the ' sandy ford ', Rocque's map may provide a clue, on the assumption that the road was making for the market town of Wantage. Rocque shows a network of roads and tracks south of Dry Sandford and Cothill, among them one which leads south-west direct to Frilford and the ' Noah's Ark ' Inn (where an Anglo-Saxon cemetery has been excavated). Part of this road no longer exists, except as a field boundary, nor was it shown on the Marcham Inclosure map of 1818 ; it may have been no more than a by-road in Rocque's

[24] From information kindly supplied by the Nature Conservancy (Miss Laptain).
[25] *Chronicon Monasterii de Abendon* (Rolls Series), ii, 114.
[26] A. R. Clapham and B. R. Clapham, ' The Valley Fen at Cothill, Berkshire ', *New Phytologist* (1963), 167–74.

time, but possibly one based on a very old stretch of road serving Frilford.[27] From there to Wantage the line is obvious.

Evidence from Anglo-Saxon times can thus be accumulated for a highway from Oxford, over Boars Hill, to Wantage ; but although the Anglo-Saxons made numerous local tracks and by-roads to serve their rural settlements, they were not by nature great makers and builders of through-ways ; so that in this case, as in many others, it would not be surprising to find that they had turned a long stretch of road, already old, to their own uses. For two sections of our road there is evidence that this had happened.

The Ordnance Survey Map of Roman Britain shows as a definite piece of Roman road that between Frilford and Grove—taking the Anglo-Saxons, when they came to use it, almost to Wantage.[28] This road may well have continued in a direct line, originally, to meet the Icknield Way (also used by the Romans) a little to the west of Wantage. In considering communications in this area in Romano-British times it must be remembered that Frilford, or its environs, was a place which people of all kinds would wish to visit ; for on the ' Noah's Ark ' site close to Frilford there has been excavated a Roman shrine or group of shrines, which had been built over a still earlier Iron Age shrine.[29] In describing this site Professor Richmond writes, ' As a group, of which other members perhaps remain to be discovered, it resembles the forest sanctuaries of Roman Gaul, where numerous godlings attracted to a single holy spot their several groups or categories of worshippers '; and he considers that ' there can be no doubt either of the antiquity or the popularity of this country shrine or group of shrines '.[30] There must, then, have been numerous roads and tracks from all directions leading to the ' holy place ' at Frilford. We have already seen how it was connected with the great east-and-west route, the Icknield Way. There would have been other tracks from the extreme north of Berkshire and the Oxford region. Another route may have led from minor settlements in the Thames valley near Kennington and South Hinksey over the eastern end of Boars Hill. Here it would pass very close to an extensive Roman pottery works on the slopes of Foxcombe Hill above Sunningwell and Bayworth.[31] It is in this very area, on the eastern end of Boars Hill, that the ' port straete ' of the Anglo-Saxon charter boundaries occurs ; but whether the proximity of the well-made road to the pottery works was more than a coincidence is open to question. It does seem likely, however, that in Romano-British times a road which was paved in at least one place connected the Thames valley south of Oxford with

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[27] The line is perfectly clear on the O.S. 6 in. map (SU 49NE) where the garden and field boundaries are shown east of Oakley House and petering out due west of Sheepstead House.
[28] O.S. *Map of Roman Britain*, 3rd edn. (1953).
[29] O.S. *Map of Southern Britain in the Iron Age* (1962), Introduction, 16.
[30] I. A. Richmond, *Roman Britain* (1955), 142–3.
[31] *Oxoniensia*, XIII (1943), 32–8.

Frilford and the Icknield Way beyond ; and that a well-made stretch of it lay on the eastern end of Boars Hill.

Let us now, in the mind's eye, superimpose this road on the map of Roman Britain, bearing in mind that various indications lead the experts to believe that there was probably a Roman road from Mildenhall, Wilts, to Alchester. It begins to look as though the road over Boars Hill could provide a possible alignment for such a road. True, no new archaeological facts have come to light to support this theory for the stretch of road we have considered so far ; and there is a long section, between Frilford and Boars Hill, for which there is no definite evidence at all. North eastwards, too, the evidence is tantalizingly vague. The natural continuation of our alignment would be a route crossing the Thames valley somewhere south of Oxford, through the Cowley district (which in Romano-British times was a pottery works area much more extensive than the Foxcombe Hill site), and so to join the Dorchester–Alchester road somewhere below Shotover.

It is possible that there may in Roman times have been a double river crossing at the place which centuries ago was known as Langford, and today is called Donnington Bridge. There used to be a causeway running east–west between the two branches of the river here. Its age is not known and it has recently been demolished. At the time of its demolition it was found to be 60 ft. wide and had been built up about 2 ft. above the level of the surrounding land. The area is by nature suitable for an early crossing place of the river valley ; it avoids having to cross the whole width of the river at once (as lower down at Sandford-on-Thames) or a great expanse of alluvium (such as may at times have rendered the North Hinksey crossing hazardous), and it makes for the gravelly areas on either side of the valley where the distance between them is narrowest ; it is also the most southerly spot at which crossing from gravel to gravel is possible hereabouts. It is difficult to see what incentive there could have been for Anglo-Saxon people to create a crossing place here ; it has no obvious Anglo-Saxon use, except as giving access from both sides of the river valley to the water-meadow of ' berige '. Yet it must have existed as a complete crossing-place in those times, for the Anglo-Saxons named it Langford— the ' long ford '. This suggests that it was a survival from some earlier age, when it might well have served a most useful purpose as a Thames valley crossing for some long-distance route—a feature, in fact, much more characteristic of Roman than of Anglo-Saxon times.[32]

[32] I am indebted to Mr. David Sturdy for all the information regarding the old causeway by Donnington Bridge and the general nature of the soil in the neighbourhood. As regards archaeological finds, which may or may not be significant, he tells me that Romano-British remains were excavated near the western end of Donnington Bridge, Bronze Age remains dredged up from the western branch of the river there, and there was a Bronze Age burial in the gravel patch between the bridge and the Iffley Road.

This suggested alignment for the Mildenhall–Alchester road does, however, conflict with the ideas on the subject which at present hold the field, even if only in a tentative way. On the O.S. Map of Roman Britain there is shown a possible road from Frilford making east of north, direct to North Hinksey, and across the river there to North Oxford. Mr. Margary describes this route,[33] basing his evidence for the section north of Frilford on H. E. Salter's suggestions and on the account given in the report of the Noah's Ark site excavations, which in its turn was based on a statement in the *Victoria County History of Berkshire*, and on the evidence and theories put forward at the time by Salter and Sir Arthur Evans.

Mr. Margary, working from the northern end southwards, writes as follows : ' The most obvious part of this route is the long alignment from Bessels Leigh to Grove near Wantage and the northern end is less certain '. He refers to the ford of Oxford near North Hinksey and continues, ' From this crossing a remarkably straight line of tracks leads up through a convenient hollow in the little range of Hinksey hills to Henwood Farm, pointing directly towards Bessels Leigh, though there is a gap of a mile before this is reached, the track ending at the Cumnor–Abingdon road. Some evidence of metalling has been noted on this track at a point a little to the east of Hurst Hill '. It was Sir Arthur Evans who noticed this evidence of metalling at a point where Rocque shows the road or track from North Hinksey forking right for ' Charley ' (i.e. Chawley, near Cumnor) and left for Wootton over the northern end of Boars Hill ; the track along the dip to Henwood does not appear on Rocque's map. As well as traces of metalling, Sir Arthur Evans found remains of Romano-British pottery at the same point ;[34] and it is possible that both may be related to a *via vicinalis* from the Foxcombe pottery works along the Boars Hill ridgeway which joins the Wootton–North Hinksey track at the northern end of Boars Hill. But this only serves to increase uncertainty where no claims to certainty have been made. It is a more serious matter to cast doubt on the alignment of the road south of Besselsleigh on which Mr. Margary felt more confident.

His description continues, ' At Bessels Leigh the main alignment begins, seen first in the park as a low ridge planted with old fir trees and running from the manor house to the fork in the modern roads.[35] Then the present road from Frilford to Grove follows it, generally very straight but slightly distorted in places, which indicates that it is not just a modern line '.[36] The *Victoria*

[33] I. D. Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain* (1957), ii, 270 (Addenda to vol. i, Route no. 164).

[34] Sir Arthur Evans, *Jarn Mound* (1933), 23 ; J. S. P. Bradford and R. G. Goodchild, ' Excavations at Frilford, Berks ', *Oxoniensia*, IV (1939), 26–7.

[35] This could simply be the boundary bank between Tubney and Besselsleigh ; but again, the boundary may itself have followed a stretch of ancient road.

[36] Margary, *Roman Roads in Britain*, ii, 270.

County History of Berkshire is still more definite—' The road line from Bessels Leigh through Frilford to Wantage is certainly Roman ...'.[37] No-one hitherto seems to have doubted that the straight road from the road-fork at the edge of Tubney Wood to Frilford was a Roman road ; but Rocque's map does not support this belief. He shows a through-way of a kind, from Besselsleigh to Frilford, curving first this way, then that ; most significant is the fact that he shows it passing by the side of the Dog House Inn, which is 300 yards from the modern road. Rocque's standard of accuracy is generally very high ; that he should show a road-side inn as standing at a cross-roads when it was not so, is unthinkable. The only surviving piece of Rocque's road seems to be the Blackgate Lane shown as a footpath on the O.S. 6 in. map.[38] Thus one is forced to the conclusion that the road from Tubney Wood fork to Frilford is not on an old Roman alignment, but on a line newly adopted, after Rocque's time, by the turnpike makers of the late 18th century.

Yet after all is said and done, there must have been many Romano-British roads and tracks in North Berks leading to and from Frilford on the one hand, the Boars Hill pottery works on the other, and connecting them with known Romano-British settlement sites. The puzzle is to know which, if any, constituted through-ways, linking major settlements to the south and west of the Berkshire Downs, far beyond Frilford, with similar places north and east of the Thames valley beyond Oxford and its vicinity.

There is reason to think that the road which Peake mentions making northwards from Oxford, and nowadays leading to Banbury—A423, in fact—has a continuous history going back to prehistoric times.[39] It is believed to have been a prehistoric ridgeway ;[40] and there is evidence in the Anglo-Saxon charter boundaries of Cutslowe and Shipton-on-Cherwell (where it is called ' port straete ' and ' strate ' respectively) that it had been a well-made road in Roman times.[41] Superimposing this on the Ordnance Survey Map of Roman Britain, the inference in this case must be that it linked up with a road which led from the Droitwich saltworks and is well-attested as far as Lower Lea, to the south-west of Banbury. It would then have served, among other purposes, as a salt route for North Oxford.

But what happened south of the Romano-British settlement on the North Oxford site ? Were there two important crossings of the Thames valley within a mile or two of the settlement—one, near North Hinksey, serving as a link with the westward road along the ridgeway lying above the right bank of

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[37] *Victoria County History of Berkshire*, i, 207–08.
[38] O.S. 6 in. map SU 49NE 4599.
[39] W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955), 182–3.
[40] G. B. Grundy, *Saxon Oxfordshire*, Oxfordshire Record Society, vol. 15 (1933), 95.
[41] M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, ii (EPNS XXIV), 485, 487.

the Upper Thames ; and the other at ' Langford ' forming part of a long-distance road from the south-west, itself by-passing North Oxford, but having a junction with the continuation southwards along the valley of the road from the north ?   The latter would require still another crossing of the main stream at or about the point where the South Bridge of Oxford was later to be built—unless Peake's theory, that before the 10th century the main stream ran in a more westerly bed, is correct.   These questions, though unanswered, do at least demonstrate how fruitful a field for speculation and investigation lies in the valley of the Isis immediately to the south of Oxford.

There is one road of North Berkshire, of great importance in modern times, which has not yet been touched upon ; that is the route which connects the midland industrial areas with Southampton.   It now by-passes Oxford, but until recently the first section of this road south of Oxford lay along Grandpont and, so far identical with the medieval Oxford–Faringdon road, turned near Cold Harbour to climb Hinksey Hill.   At the top of that hill it forks for Abingdon, hence its name, from Folly Bridge southwards, the Abingdon Road.   It seems to have run through Bagley Wood for a surprisingly long time ; surprisingly, because Bagley was a favourite haunt for highwaymen and robbers certainly as late as the 18th and early 19th centuries, and probably for long before that ; moreover the road has to cross some hollows whose gradients used to be much steeper than they are today, and were no doubt extremely muddy in the days before road surfaces were improved.   But the road ran pretty well on its present line at the end of the 16th century, as is shown on John Blagrave's *Plan of Bagley Wood*, of 1599, where it is called the Queen's Highway leading from Oxford to Abingdon.[42]   It divided Bagley East Wood from the West Wood then, as now, and it seems probable that it cut through the wood in the same way in medieval times.   The whole Wood had belonged to Abingdon Abbey from before the Conquest.   Twenty years after the dissolution of the Abbey, in 1557, St. John's College acquired most of the East Wood, with the highway as its western boundary, as shown on Blagrave's plan.   The West Wood was disposed of differently at the Dissolution and did not come into the hands of St. John's until over fifty years later than the East Wood.[43]   The highway must therefore, surely, have run between the two sections of the wood in 1538, and it is fair to assume that it had done so for very many years previously.   Various events connected with the history of the abbey took place in Bagley, implying that a road ran through it.   One notable occasion was that on which the Prior was taken to Bagley Wood and surrender terms forced from

[42] Archives of St. John's College, Oxford.
[43] President and Principal Bursar of St. John's College, Oxford, ' Early History of Bagley Wood ' (1949), privately printed.

him, at the time of the riots of 1327 when the men of Oxford aided and abetted the men of Abingdon in their attacks on the monastery ;[44] the rioters no doubt marched along the road through the wood on their way to Abingdon.

There must have been constant movement between Oxford and Abingdon in medieval times. Even if goods were sent mainly by river, the Abbey officials, for instance probably went by road ; there were various rents to collect in Oxford, and the Abbot held his court for the Abbey's Oxford tenants there. To go by river would have taken much longer and would not necessarily have been safer ; for the Isis, especially in flood time, could be treacherous and dangerous, as Abbot Richard de Clive found to his cost when he and his companions tried to cross by boat on their return from a visit to Chislehampton, and were all drowned in the reach of the river below Nuneham.[45]

Even in medieval times, however, this road must have been more than a mere link between Oxford and Abingdon ; and in this connection it is worth examining Robert d'Oilly's probable motives for building Grandpont in the late 11th century, for there can be no doubt that they were closely bound up with the Abingdon branch of the road which left Oxford by the South Gate— as far as he was concerned, the fact that it became the main Oxford–Faringdon road must have been quite fortuitous. His aim was probably two-fold ; to act as a pious benefactor of Abingdon Abbey (and so he was regarded) by improv- ing their over-land communications with Oxford ; and at the same time to strengthen a route which held promise of future importance, leading from market towns in the Midlands, the d'Oilly estates in Oxfordshire and Oxford itself, through Abingdon, Newbury and Winchester, to those western channel ports whose significance had so greatly increased since, and because of, the Norman Conquest.[46] Abingdon of course reaped due benefit, too, from the development of this through-route. Trade increased, the town became a centre of the wool trade and cloth manufacture, and Abingdon Fair was famous throughout the country and abroad, as one of the greatest of English medieval fairs. There was no ancient city here, and the abbey saw to it that the town never became a borough—never even achieved any form of self-government— until after that great institution had been destroyed. Nevertheless when London became once more the focal centre for all lines of communication, and the relative importance of the road from the Midlands to the channel ports was dwindling, the townspeople were shrewd enough, and sufficiently prosperous, to build for themselves another bridge and causeway, this time at Abingdon

[44] H. E. Salter, ' A Chronicle Roll of the Abbey of Abingdon ', *English Historical Review*, xxvi (1911), 733.
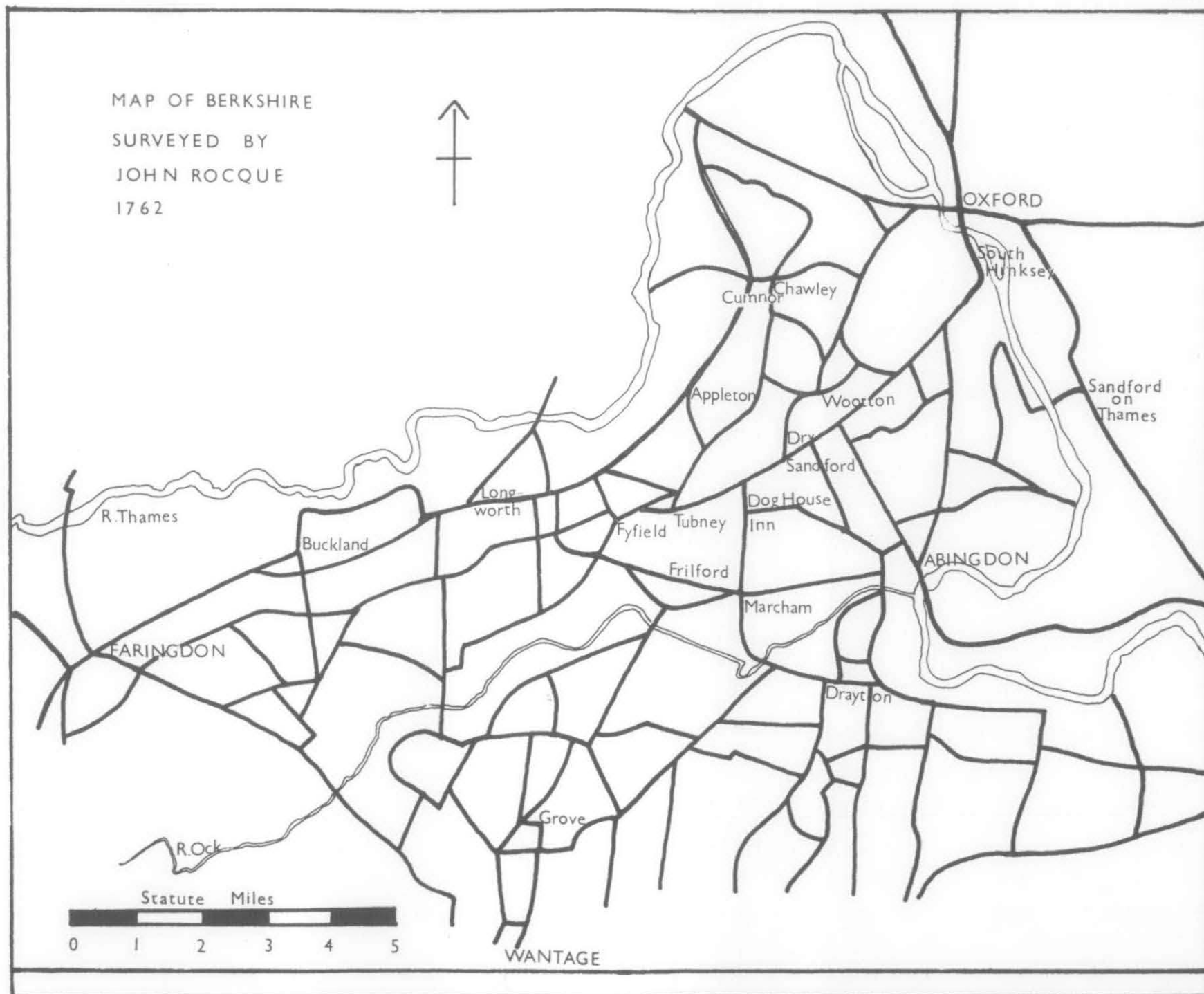[45] Ibid., 730 ; A. E. Preston's notes Berks Record Office, D/EP 7/5, File 6.
[46] For a post-Conquest road from the Midlands to Southampton, see F. M. Stenton, *Econ. H.R.*, vii (1936), 4.

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itself from west to east over the Thames and across the low lying land to the east of the river and the town.   And so from the early 15th century until the end of the 18th century the main London to Gloucester road ran through Abingdon and across North Berkshire, to leave the county beyond Faringdon.   It is duly shown on Rocque's map ; it takes its course north-west from Abingdon to Shippon, and after passing the Dog House Inn runs on direct to Fyfield, by which time the road from Oxford, by way of Boars Hill and Cothill, has joined it ; and from there it is the road to Faringdon which was described at the beginning of this paper.

In general it seems that the North Berkshire roads which present the most interesting histories are the long-distance ones whose course lies roughly north and south.   This is partly because in the periods when London has been the focus for all major lines of communication, these roads have run counter to the general pattern in this part of the country, and for that reason there may be found some particular significance attached to their destination and use.   In addition, roads entering the county from the north anywhere in the vicinity of Oxford have to cross the valley of the Thames in a district where the river itself and the soils of its valley often make this difficult ; and again, it is interesting to discover where and how these difficulties have been overcome—and even why.

FIG. 14

MAP OF BERKSHIRE

SURVEYED BY

JOHN ROCQUE

1762

OXFORD

South
Hinksey

Cumnor   Chawley

Sandford
on
Thames

Appleton   Wootton

Dry
Sandford

Long-
worth   Dog House

R.Thames   Fyfield   Tubney   Inn

Buckland   ABINGDON

Frilford

Marcham

FARINGDON

Drayton

R.Ock

Grove

Statute   Miles

0   1   2   3   4   5

WANTAGE

SOME OLD ROADS OF NORTH BERKSHIRE

ADDENDUM

   Mr. C. W. Phillips, formerly Archaeology Officer of the Ordnance Survey, saw this article in typescript ; with reference to the question of the line of a Roman road from the Noah's Ark inn to the Thames, somewhere in the Oxford area, he writes as follows :

'It is not certain whence this road comes from the south-west, but it can hardly be anywhere other than Cunetio (Mildenhall). Equally it must be making its way towards a junction with Akeman Street, whether independently, which I very much doubt, or at or south of Alchester. A second-class officially constructed road of the type suggested by the undisputed stretch between Grove and Frilford will always go as straight as it can between its two ends. The line suggested in Mrs. Lambrick's article is very straight and far from atypical, but I do not think it is the right one.

'There is a straight piece of the parish boundary between Marcham and Frilford which has always seemed suggestive to me. This goes from 447980 to 448987—not much of a stretch, but it is dead in line with the stretch further south-west and when produced comes nearly up to the Henwood Farm–North Hinksey line at 470026. This avoids all difficulties with the Sandford Brook and the 'Horne-mere' by passing round to the west and north. The present Frilford–Besselsleigh road has never commended itself to me and I do not think Margary is right here.

'If this road did in fact go down to the crossing at North Hinksey, where we may be pretty sure it used bridges and not fords (Roman roads were normally for vehicles), it may well be concerned with a Roman settlement in North Oxford. No precise nucleation has ever been reported, but the general density of rural life in the Oxford district is in no doubt. If the line is continued to the north-east it will pass close to the Wood Eaton temple site and join the Dorchester–Alchester road near Beckley before the crossing to Otmoor. A new Roman villa of some pretensions has also recently been observed from the air near this line. No search for ground evidence has yet been made.

'Judging from the amount of information I receive, I get a strong impression that the estimates which have been made to date of the size of the Romano-British population have been too small. In view of this, it is even possible that both road-lines over Boars Hill were in use ; but I should judge that the more northerly one would have been the more official of the two.'

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