

# Thames Crossings near Wallingford from Roman to Early Norman Times

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## SUMMARY

*This article presents evidence for the location of Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and early Norman crossings of the Thames near Wallingford. The likely crossing points to Wallingford from the east bank of the river were between Day's Lock, near Dorchester, and Goring to the south. The two most important fords were at Shillingford and Wallingford, giving access to Wallingford from lands to the north, east, and south-east. Both were subsequently the sites of bridges, Shillingford perhaps as early as the tenth century.*

The purpose of this study is to review evidence for early Thames crossings which gave access to Wallingford (Oxon., formerly Berks.), and to discuss their evolution. The relevant stretch of the river is downstream from Day's Lock, west of Dorchester, to Goring and Streatley, 8 km south of Wallingford.<sup>1</sup> Access to Wallingford from Abingdon further north did not require a Thames crossing, while access from Goring and its hinterland to the east and south-east would have been feasible via the ford at Wallingford and, in low flow conditions, Moulsoford or Goring/Streatley. Here, as elsewhere, river crossings, whether natural or man-made, were crucial in determining road alignments and to a lesser extent the location of settlements close to the river.

Wallingford has been chosen as the focus for two reasons. The first is the fact that at least from the early Middle Ages Wallingford was the lowest point on the Thames with an all-season ford.<sup>2</sup> This was no doubt important to Alfred when he chose this location for a Thames-side *burh*, a siting which reflects the importance given to the defence of the crossing. The ford here also made it possible for William the Conqueror to cross the Thames in December 1066.<sup>3</sup> Other users in post-Roman and early medieval times would have included both local inhabitants and those, such as the landowners listed in Domesday, with manors in south Oxfordshire east of the Thames who held properties in Wallingford.<sup>4</sup> The second reason for focusing on Wallingford is the town's administrative and economic importance from Alfredian times until the fifteenth century, when its pre-eminent position in Berkshire was overtaken by Abingdon (Fig. 1, inset map). This importance stemmed largely from its location at a crucial crossing point. In the Roman period, the Silchester–Dorchester–Alchester road by-passed Wallingford and no connection with any settlement there has been found, despite the fact that Roman finds have been made in the town.<sup>5</sup> However, an early Anglo-Saxon settlement existed at Wallingford in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>6</sup> This Mercian site gave rise to the foundation of St Rumbold's church as well as a substantial pagan cemetery in the south-western quadrant of the subsequent *burh*. By Alfred's time Wallingford

<sup>1</sup> OS Explorer 170 (1:25,000).

<sup>2</sup> G. Phillips, *Thames Crossings: Bridges, Tunnels and Ferries* (Newton Abbott, 1981), p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> R.H.C. Davis and M. Chibnall (eds.), *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers* (Oxford, 1998), p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (Stroud, 1994), especially Figs. 13, 35 (pp. 10, 43); D. Roffe, 'Wallingford in Domesday Book and Beyond' in K.S.B. Keats-Rohan and D. Roffe (eds.), *The Origins of the Borough of Wallingford*, BAR BS, 494 (2009), p. 43, Fig. 5.10.

<sup>5</sup> M. Airs, K. Rodwell, and H. Turner, *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire. A Survey of the New County* (Oxford, 1975), p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> H. Hamerow with S. Westlake, 'The Early Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Wallingford' in Keats-Rohan and Roffe, *Wallingford*, pp. 5–12.

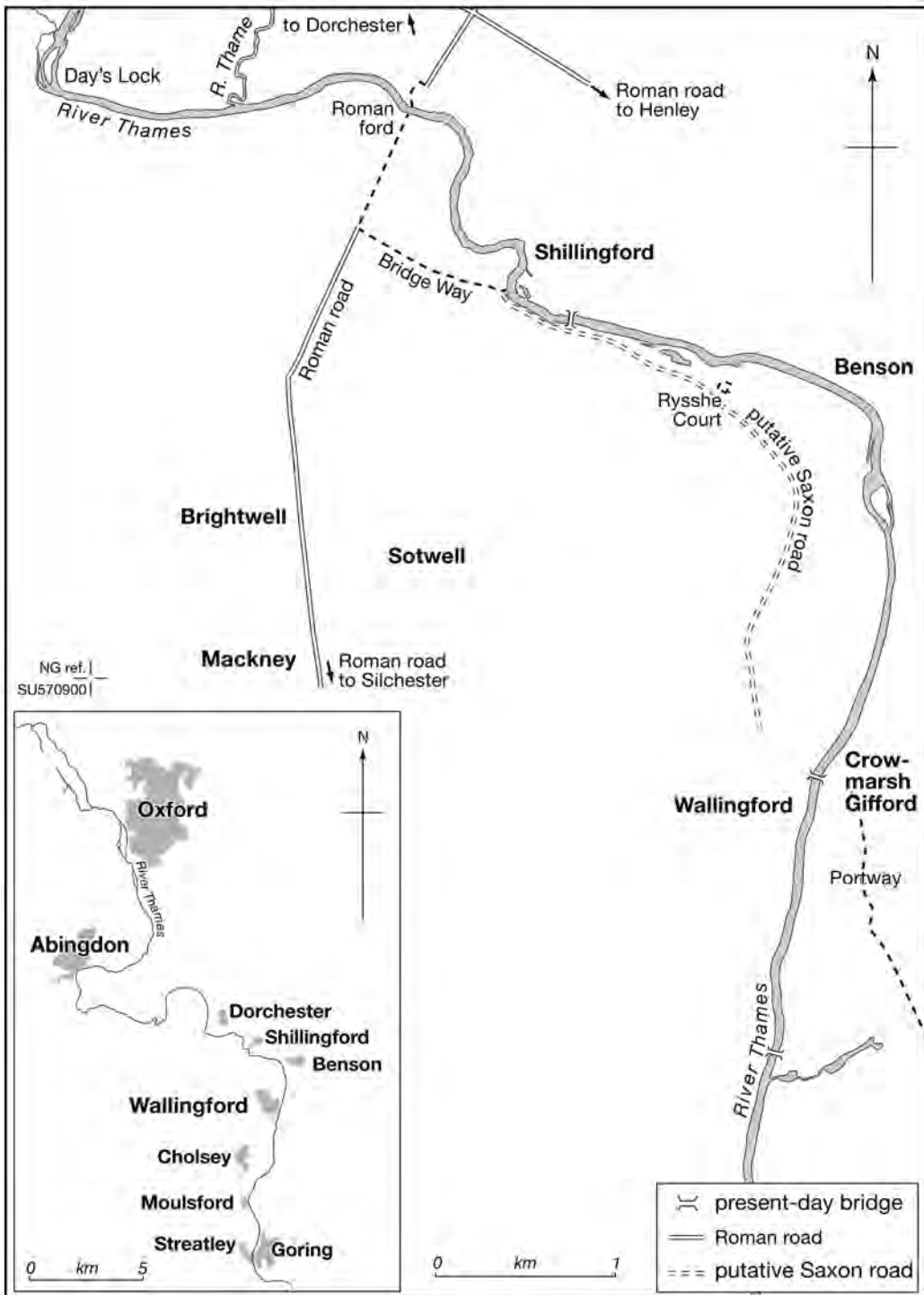


Fig. 1. River, roads, and bridges around Wallingford.

was well established and the *burh* he created ranked equal to Winchester. A mint existed in the town from Athelstan's reign (925–39) onward.<sup>7</sup> In 1086 Wallingford was by far the largest town in Berkshire, its population estimated at between two and three thousand.<sup>8</sup> The evidence of Domesday points to trade with a number of satellite settlements across the Thames to the north and north-east, as well as to the south-east.<sup>9</sup> From the Conqueror's time, and possibly earlier, to the Commonwealth there was a royal castle at Wallingford,<sup>10</sup> which remained the county town of Berkshire until 1556.

This article describes the features of fords, records the physical nature of the country through which the Thames passes in the area chosen, and discusses the development of fords and bridges from Roman to early Norman times in the vicinity of Wallingford. Finally, it considers the probable routes leading to Wallingford and attempts to establish a broad chronology for the use of the main crossings. In compiling this review, use has been made of maps, field inspection, published works, and river surveys. The principal publications on the subject relating to the Thames are those by Thacker and Phillips.<sup>11</sup> Neither writer provides more than minimal references, but Harrison confirms the accuracy of Thacker on the history of Thames bridges.<sup>12</sup>

#### GENERAL FEATURES OF FORDS AND EARLY BRIDGES

To be of value, a ford has to be usable for most of the year, if not all year-round. For those travelling on foot a maximum depth of 2 feet (60 cm) is required. The approach to the ford should also be on relatively firm ground; otherwise a causeway may be necessary. A ford may have existed at a certain point as long as man lived in the area. Dating the earliest use of such a feature as a recognized crossing place is impracticable even where its existence is marked by archaeological or historical evidence, or its wide use led to the naming of a settlement nearby. The latter is clearly the case with Shillingford, Wallingford, and Moulsoford.

The period when a ford was used and any changes in its location are not easily assessed. These are partly matters of natural physical changes, partly the effect of man's interaction with the river. It might be thought that finds from the river would provide useful pointers to the location of crossing places and their period of use. However, the locations of the many finds now held in Reading Museum are imprecise.<sup>13</sup> In the past, the dredge masters gave the locations of finds no more exactly than the nearest bridge, lock, or inn. Ferries provided important means of carriage across the river and their presence may usually be taken as an indication of the absence of a ford, or at any rate of a perennial ford.<sup>14</sup> A good example is provided by Benson, where the only documented crossings were ferries.<sup>15</sup>

Harrison notes that fords were the normal form of river crossing in early Anglo-Saxon England and that there is no archaeological evidence of an Anglo-Saxon bridge in the country before 700.<sup>16</sup> That the Anglo-Saxons were capable makers of timber structures is clear from the

<sup>7</sup> J. and S. Dewey, *The Book of Wallingford* (Chesham, 1977), p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> J. Hunter, *A History of Berkshire* (Chichester, 1995), p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire*, p. 118, Fig. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Dewey and Dewey, *Book of Wallingford*, pp. 29–32.

<sup>11</sup> F.S. Thacker, *The Thames Highway*, 2 vols. (New York, 1968); Phillips, *Thames Crossings*.

<sup>12</sup> D.F. Harrison, 'Bridges and Economic Development, 1300–1800', *EconHR*, 45 (1992), pp. 240–61.

<sup>13</sup> J. Greenaway, personal communication, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> M. Gardner, 'Hythes, Small Ports, and other Landing Places', in J. Blair (ed.), *Waterways and Canal Building in Medieval England* (Oxford, 2007), p. 97 mentions that ferries may co-exist with bridges, price presumably being the determinant of use.

<sup>15</sup> J. Burt and P. Clarke, *Benson. A Century of Change, 1900–2000* (Wallingford, 2004), p. 30. E.M.R. Ditmas, *A History of Benson* (Wallingford, 2009), p. 8 refers to a ford but provides no evidence for its existence. Benson is discussed further below, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> D. Harrison, *The Bridges of Medieval England* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 33–4.

work of Dodd and others at Oxford.<sup>17</sup> However, documentary evidence of the existence of bridges is very thin.<sup>18</sup> No available charter relating to land in the area of the present study refers to a bridge on this part of the Thames although use of the name *bric weg* provides indirect evidence of a late Anglo-Saxon bridge or causeway at Shillingford.

#### THE PHYSICAL BACKGROUND: THE THAMES VALLEY NEAR WALLINGFORD

For most of its passage in this area the Thames has cut through its alluvium as well as the most recent gravels of the locality. As a result, its bed lies either on gravel; directly on the Gault, a formation of rather uniform grey mudstone; on the Upper Greensand, a thinner formation with a hard sandstone named malmstone towards the top of the succession but otherwise consisting of silty beds; or on the Lower Chalk, a formation which includes soft marly beds at its base.<sup>19</sup>

From Day's Lock (Fig. 1), the northern bound of this study, to Benson, the Thames crosses the Gault, thence downstream to Wallingford the Upper Greensand, and thereafter southward its bed lies on the Glauconitic Marl and Lower Chalk.<sup>20</sup> Although many boreholes have been dug in the Thames valley little evidence is available on the nature of the river bed. It is probable that apart from a stretch close to Wallingford much of the bed is gravel, consisting of re-sorted material derived from the most recently deposited gravels. From Dorchester downstream to Shillingford, the land on the right bank is Gault clay, dominated by the Upper Greensand ridge of the Sinodun Hills. The Upper Greensand forms the ridge between Shillingford and Benson and downstream this formation merges into the Lower Chalk, the lowest beds of which are marked by the Glauconitic Marl composed of marls and silty sands, noted by Strahan as practically impervious.<sup>21</sup> These rocks occur at Wallingford bridge and though thin are present along a stretch of the river marked with many eyots in the past.<sup>22</sup> The left bank of the river is gravel until Lower Chalk is exposed at Crowmarsh Gifford.

Straight reaches of a river normally produce regular river cross-sections where the bed level is fairly constant from one side of the river to the other.<sup>23</sup> Where there are significant bends, secondary spiral flows occur and the water is significantly deeper towards the outside of the bend. The river is therefore shallower in straight reaches or at the cross-over position between adjacent bends.

The gradient of the existing river bed and its relatively uniform minimum depth reflect the history of dredging and blasting as well as erosion, but the river appears to be a 'well-behaved'

<sup>17</sup> A. Dodd (ed.), *Oxford Before the University: the Late Saxon and Norman Archaeology of the Thames Crossing* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 15, 32, 123.

<sup>18</sup> Harrison, *Bridges of Medieval England*, pp. 102–4.

<sup>19</sup> M.A. Robinson and G.H. Lambrick, 'Holocene Alluviation and Hydrology in the Upper Thames Basin', *Nature*, 308 (1984), pp. 809–14 and M.A. Robinson, 'Environment, Archaeology and Alluviation on the River Gravels of the South Midlands', in S. Needham and M.G. Macklin (eds.), *Alluvial Archaeology in Britain*, Oxbow Monograph, 47 (1992), pp. 197–208 show that the major periods of alluviation were Roman and late Anglo-Saxon. In the latter paper, Robinson has calculated that average rates of accumulation amounted to 0.5 mm per year between AD 1 and 400, generating a thickness of 0.20 m, declining to 0.2 mm between 400 and 800, implying 0.08 m, and rising again to 0.5 mm between 800 and 1100, equivalent to 0.15 m. Locally, rates may have been higher or lower. Gravels of the area vary considerably in thickness: boreholes show 5.2 m 450 m north of North Farm, Wallingford (SU 586 929), but only 2 m on the left bank opposite St Leonard's, Wallingford (SU 610 891). See *Sand and Gravel Resources*, Institute of Geological Sciences (London, 1981): sheets SU 59, 68, part of 58.

<sup>20</sup> *Outline of Geology, Sheet 254 (Henley-on-Thames)*, 1:50,000 (British Geological Survey, 1980).

<sup>21</sup> A. Strahan, *The Geology of the Thames Valley near Goring*, Mem. Geol. Surv. (London, 1924), p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> J.S. Hardman, *Wallingford: a History of an English Market Town* (privately published, 1994), p. 129 refers to the blasting away of an eyot south of Wallingford bridge when the Chalmore weir and flash lock was built in 1837–8. Several eyots are mapped in plan and cross-section in a Thames Conservancy map dated October 1870 held in archives of The Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society (TWHAS).

<sup>23</sup> W.R. White, personal communication, 2008.

one, with no rapids and a substantially uniform gradient in the stretch considered here. Evidence of river depth is available for limited lengths of the Thames from surveys of 1870, c.1909, 1937, and an Environment Agency survey of 2004.<sup>24</sup> Such data have to be treated with great care. In the first place, leaving to one side natural evolution of the river's course and bed, weirs have a major effect on depths. When, as at the time of the 2004 survey, the river is low, and thus not overlapping a weir, depths of the bed generally decrease with increasing distance upstream of the particular weir. Secondly, weirs, dredging, the blasting of eyots, and drainage have altered the form of the river, but it is impossible to say by how much. Erosion and aggradation locally, as well as changes in the hydrology of the flood plain, alter the profile of the river bed. Much dredging was carried out from the 1950s to the 1980s following the floods of 1947.<sup>25</sup>

Despite these problems, the surveys are useful in showing points with relatively shallow water which may have persisted over several centuries. It seems likely that harder rocks such as the malmstone of the Upper Greensand and harder beds of the Chalk have remained as features over long periods. An undated document of c.1909, showing a longitudinal section of the river from Benson Lock to Cleeve Lock, supports this theory.<sup>26</sup> The stretch from Benson (Upper Greensand) to Chalmore Lock south of Wallingford is marked by shallow water compared with that further downstream. Again, at Moulsoford the 2004 survey provides no evidence of shallows, but the slightly undulating marshland to the north of the road on the left bank leading to the former ferry indicates earlier eyots and suggests that the ford here may have been founded on a gravel bank which has subsequently been eroded naturally. In addition, the earlier, undated section shows that the river deepened immediately to the south of the line joining roads on either bank.

The river level at Whitecross Farm, Winterbrook, Wallingford (SU 607 882) is clearly higher than in the Bronze Age, indicating aggradation of approximately 1 m over 3,000 years, most having occurred in the Roman and late Anglo-Saxon periods.<sup>27</sup> Until determined efforts were made to render the river navigable, much of the land lying alongside the present stream would have been swampy, covered in rushes, alder, and willow carr. In places the Thames wandered through a network of channels, the remains of which occur to the north and west of Shillingford, at the eastern end of Wallingford bridge, and to the north of the road leading from South Stoke to the site of the former Moulsoford ferry. The braided pattern found at these sites has been described as anastomosing, implying a stable multi-channelled system flowing through fine-grained sediments.<sup>28</sup>

As Strahan observes, 'the adoption of new channels and the undermining of one bank accompanied by silting up of the other have led to discrepancies between the county boundary and the existing main channel. The boundary originally followed the centre of the river, but parts of Oxfordshire now appear on the Berkshire side of the main river'.<sup>29</sup> It has, however, been suggested that locally the Thames had become effectively canalised by Roman times.<sup>30</sup>

Land close to the two banks of the river is substantially the same, for the most part being of alluvium or gravel. But on the stretch of river from Dorchester to Benson the right bank is

<sup>24</sup> 1870 map, TWHAS archive; 1937 Thames Conservancy survey and 2004 survey kindly made available by the Environment Agency, Howbery Park, Wallingford.

<sup>25</sup> S. Capel-Davies, personal communication, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Graph labelled '3896 JH', supplied by the Environment Agency. Cleeve Lock lies 1 km upstream of Goring.

<sup>27</sup> As indicated by measurements at the site of the Bronze-Age eyot at Whitecross Farm, Wallingford: see A.M. Cromarty et al., *Late Bronze Age Ritual and Habitation on a Thames Eyot at Whitecross Farm, Wallingford* (Oxford, 2006), p. 18, Fig. 2.4.

<sup>28</sup> E. Rhodes, 'Identifying Human Modifications of River Channels', in Blair (ed.), *Waterways and Canal Building*, pp. 134–6.

<sup>29</sup> Strahan, *Geology of the Thames Valley*, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> P. Smith proposed this based on excavation of substantial Roman drainage works leading to the river west of Benson. These findings are reported in *Chalgrove–East Ilsley Pipeline, Final Report*, Network Archaeology (Buckingham, 2006). The drainage ditches concerned may, however, have been confined to the vicinity of the settlement.

characterized by a bluff consisting of Upper Greensand, in places capped with Chalk and rising to 70 m above river level south of Day's Lock at Castle Hill, Little Wittenham. Secondly, and of no less importance, land to the west of Wallingford was low lying alluvial ground with marshes and, no doubt, included open water. This is relevant to access to Wallingford from its landward, western, side.

#### FORDS, FERRIES, AND BRIDGES NEAR WALLINGFORD

##### *Day's Lock: Likely Site of an Early Crossing*

Day's Lock is taken as the starting point since it marks a crossing place which could theoretically have been used to give access to Wallingford. A lock was staked out here in 1786, fell into ruin by 1865 and was rebuilt in 1871, but as with many sites along the river earlier flash locks may have existed.<sup>31</sup> The area is heavily influenced by the weir and lock, to such an extent that it is impossible to judge from present river survey data whether there were shallows in the area to the east of Little Wittenham church. Two eyots remain and these suggest that there has long been a series of stepping stones making crossing by a ford practicable. The presence of a track on the right bank and a bridleway from Dorchester on the left bank points to an old crossing. Dorchester was an important regional centre from the fifth century and this route would have joined Dorchester to country to the west, perhaps including the oppidum at Abingdon on the right bank of the Thames.<sup>32</sup> The course of any route to Wallingford would, however, have been circuitous.

##### *Dorchester Ford and Ferry*

Leland, writing in c.1540, records a ferry by Dorchester:

Tame [Thame] and Ise [Isis, or Thames] meteth about half a mile beneath Dorchestre bridge in the meadows. From Dorchester to the ferry over the Tamiss about half a mile. Here the hither ripe [bank] by north is low and meadow grounds. The south ripe ye high at alonge like the long bak of an hille.<sup>33</sup>

It is clear from this description that Leland refers to the site of the crossing by the Silchester–Dorchester Roman road (5870).<sup>34</sup> Certainly a ferry could have been needed, as Leland writes, 'at high waters over Tames': Thacker infers it is likely that at low water the ancient ford at the site of the Roman crossing was used. However, a millennium separated Roman from Tudor times, during which period one or more major flood events might well have made the ford unusable even at times of low flow. Grundy notes that a Saxon charter of 945 (Sawyer 517) refers to the old ford of the 'straet' thus implying a made road.<sup>35</sup> It seems unlikely that there was ever a bridge here. If there were, a ford at Shillingford less than 1 km downstream would hardly have been found useful.

<sup>31</sup> *VCH Oxon.* 8, p. 40.

<sup>32</sup> G. Astill, 'The Towns of Berkshire' in J. Haslam (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Towns in Southern England* (Chichester, 1984), pp. 56–7; Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire, passim*; J. Cook and T. Rowley (eds.), *Dorchester through the Ages*, Oxford University Department for External Studies (Oxford, 1985), pp. 29–37; T. Hassall, 'Dorchester in Decline, the Late Saxon Period', in K. Tiller (ed.), *Dorchester Abbey: Church and People 635–2005* (Witney, 2005), pp. 38–9; J. Bond and K. Tiller, 'Cathedral and Abbey, 635–1536', in *ibid.* pp. 24–31.

<sup>33</sup> L. Toulmin Smith (ed.), *Leland's Itinerary in England and Wales in or about the Years 1535–1543*, 5 vols. (London, 1964), vol. 1, p. 118.

<sup>34</sup> It is convenient to refer to points on the river in terms of eastings where it flows eastward, that is down to Benson, and northings where the course is north-south.

<sup>35</sup> G.B. Grundy, 'Saxon Oxfordshire Charters and Ancient Highways', *Berks., Bucks. and Oxon. Arch. Jnl* (1933), p. 108. The line south of the river was confirmed in 2005 by excavation at SU 5823 9205: T. Wilson, *A Narrow View across the Upper Thames Valley in Late Prehistoric and Roman Times: Archaeological Excavations along the Chalgrove to East Ilsley Gas Pipe line*, BAR BS, 467 (2008), p. 288. The numeration is that of P.H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography* (London, 1968).

### *Shillingford Ford, Ferry, and Bridge*

Shillingford holds an interesting position among river crossings near Wallingford in that there appears to have been a systematic downstream migration of crossings over time. The settlement takes its name from a ford for which there is no documentary evidence until as late as 1156, though the ford must have existed long before this date.<sup>36</sup> Place-name evidence suggests that there may have been a bridge or stone causeway at Shillingford by the tenth century.<sup>37</sup> This putative improved crossing had presumably fallen into decay by 1203, when a new bridge was planned. This (replacement) bridge was mentioned in 1240 but fell into disuse after 1370.<sup>38</sup> A ferry was in operation by 1354,<sup>39</sup> but was superseded by a bridge built in 1767 (itself replaced by the existing stone bridge in 1826–7).

So far as the ford is concerned, the 2004 river survey shows no shallows between the Roman road crossing and Shillingford. At the end of Wharf Road (SU 594 925), at the apex of a marked meander, the river widens from a typical 45–50 m above this point to 70 m, and the depth is greater than at any point between the island at Day's Lock and the lower side of Shillingford bridge, thus illustrating the point made above concerning bends in the river's course. There are, however, shallows at (eastings) 5945. If the ford was near here, or above it (since a sandbank might well have migrated downstream), access from the left bank would have been via a riverside track shown on two eighteenth-century maps and confirmed in the OS first edition map as connecting the end of Wharf Road with the north end of the present Shillingford bridge.<sup>40</sup>

It may be that the site of the present bridge is the same as that of the medieval one. Thacker refers to timbers being found in the river bed here. The road to the present bridge from the left bank is, however, the 1764 turnpike and not medieval as suggested by Edgeworth.<sup>41</sup> The medieval road to the bridge may have been the track shown on the early maps. The fact that it had a less sharp bend than the modern bridleway track in a similar position indicates progressive erosion of the bank.

As Robinson observes, a feature of the present flood plain of the upper Thames is that alluviation was a relatively gradual process and flood waters need never have been very deep.<sup>42</sup> The present flood plain in the section of the river considered here overlies the Gault and is generally remarkably flat except where man-made structures exist. At the next meander downstream between Wharf Road and Shillingford bridge, the topography of the north bank is marked by obvious ridges. Some of these are in line with the routes of overflow channels carrying the river in flood, but the form, height, and disposition of others nevertheless appear anomalous, suggesting that these features may mark one or more former tracks leading from the old road to a ford.

In Anglo-Saxon times, when the ford is presumed to have acquired its name, it must be assumed that the Dorchester ford was becoming increasingly unusable. It is also possible that the manor of Clapcot, lying between Shillingford and Wallingford, gained from the more direct access to it from the Oxfordshire side offered by a ford, the alternative route being via Wallingford.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>36</sup> M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1953–4), vol. 1, p. 139 notes that the name 'Sillingforda' was first recorded at this date.

<sup>37</sup> See 'The *Bric weg*', below.

<sup>38</sup> D.M. Stenton (ed.), *Pipe Roll 5 John*, Pipe Roll Society, ns 16 (London, 1938), pp. 45–6 (referring to Clapcot, on the Berkshire side); H.E. Salter (ed.), *Cartulary of Osney Abbey*, OHS, 6 vols. (1929–36), vol. 4, p. 436; *VCH Berks.* 3, p. 532.

<sup>39</sup> A.E. Stamp (ed.), *The Black Prince's Register*, 4 vols. (1930–3), vol. 4, pp. 119, 124.

<sup>40</sup> Rocque, *Berks. Map* (1761), reproduced in J. Dewey, 'The Origins of Wallingford: Topography, Boundary and Parishes', in Keats-Rohan and Roffe, *Wallingford*, p. 19; Davis, *Oxon. Map* (1797), copy in Oxfordshire Studies; OS Map, 1:63,360 (1831), copy at [www.visionofbritain.org.uk](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk) (accessed 20 June 2010). John Steane drew attention to this road in 'Shillingford, Former Site of Village Street', *CBA Group 9 Newsletter*, 9 (1979), pp. 92–3.

<sup>41</sup> M. Edgeworth, 'Comparing *Burhs*: a Wallingford-Bedford Case Study', in Keats-Rohan and Roffe, *Wallingford*, p. 83, Fig. 8.4.

<sup>42</sup> Robinson, 'Environment, Archaeology and Alluviation'.

<sup>43</sup> Clapcot is referred to in Domesday: J. Morris, (ed.), *Domesday Book, Berkshire* (Chichester, 1979), 33,3,4.

*The Bric weg (Bridge Way) and the Putative Anglo-Saxon Bridge at Shillingford*

The 'bridge way' is referred to in Sawyer S 517, dated 945, and S 641 of 957. The authenticity of S 517 remains doubtful but this charter describing the bounds of Brightwell and Sotwell is important for its reference to a track named *bric weg* near Shillingford. It should be read in conjunction with S 641 which covers the same stretch of boundary but contains some valuable differences. Gelling's interpretation of the bounds is based on the 6" to 1 mile map but incorporates the unfortunate placing of the words '? *bric weg*' on a track on the hill top leading south towards Wallingford.<sup>44</sup> This part of the bounds actually identifies the 'ærnincg weg' of S 517.

Sawyer 517 gives a clear guide to the position of the 'bridge way'. The boundary runs from a spring beside the Thames at (eastings) 591, then south on the hollow way (Brightwell 42 on the current Definitive Map of Rights of Way, *holan weg* in S 517, simply *dic* in S 641). This path then meets the 'bridge way' (Brightwell Path 11, *bric wege* in S 517, *Brycgwege* in S 641). S 641 is more detailed here, showing the line following 'bridge way' for a furlong (*andlang Brycgweges an furlang*). (In fact this section of the raised track runs for 1/10th of a mile, not 1/8th.) It is interesting to note that in 1831 the boundary between Sotwell parish and the liberty of Clapcot followed the line of the 'bridge way'. Thus the *bric weg* was a road linking the riverside north-west of the present Shillingford Hotel situated at the southern end of today's bridge with points to the west.

Thacker devotes much space to arguments for and against the bridge being referred to as one at Shillingford.<sup>45</sup> He notes that J.E. Field, vicar of Benson in the 1900s, also traced the road in S 641, but favoured the theory that this was a Roman road leading through Wittenham wood to 'some forgotten Roman bridge near the tail of Day's weir stream'. However, there is no physical evidence of a road leading over the Gault clay of Wittenham wood, that is from SU 578 929 westward. Rocque's map of 1761 shows a route running west of North Farm, and indicates that the Roman road to the Dorchester ford did not run further north than the intersection with this route at SU 585 926.<sup>46</sup> This suggests that the 'bridge way' linked the Roman road from Silchester with the 'new' crossing of the Thames at Shillingford, and thus that a bridge existed here before the mid tenth century. Continuation of the line of the 'bridge way' to the east along Brightwell Path 43 leads to the bank of the present-day river bank in 50 m. Here the bank is subject to erosion as the river changes direction counter-clockwise, reducing the chance that any structures connected with a Saxon bridge or causeway remain to be seen in the bank. This point lies opposite the area with an irregular surface noted earlier.

From the putative bridge (or causeway) at Shillingford it is reasonable to assume that a track to Wallingford (Fig. 1) would continue on the line of the *Brycgweg* from the bridge eastwards past the site of the present-day hotel along the base of the cliff or hill close to the Thames, thus avoiding the steep and slippery route taken by the eighteenth-century turnpike road. The riverside route would then rise to the outcrop of Upper Greensand above the river gravel.

Today the first part of this route could not be regarded as an all-weather one owing to flooding. However, talus from the cliff-like right bank, combined with some aggradation, has no doubt altered the form of the bank.<sup>47</sup> Such a route would pass the site of the former Rysshe Court known in the thirteenth century. A track connecting Rush Court Farm, that is the moated Rush Court, at SU 605 917, with Copse Cottages and Wallingford Castle meadows is shown in an 1824 map.<sup>48</sup> This route to Wallingford may well have entered the town via the stretch of road of medieval date revealed in the *Wallingford Burh to Borough* excavation of summer 2009 at SU 607 900.

<sup>44</sup> M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Berkshire*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1973–6), vol. 3, p. 757. I am grateful to C. Eke for the 1932 revision of the 1:10,560 map Berks. XVI NW (no doubt the edn used by Gelling).

<sup>45</sup> Thacker, *Thames Highway*, vol. 2, pp. 181–3.

<sup>46</sup> Reproduced in Dewey 'The Origins of Wallingford', Figure 4.1 (p. 19).

<sup>47</sup> The 1:50,000 geological map (Henley, Sheet 254) shows landslips west of the hotel.

<sup>48</sup> C. and J. Greenwood, 'Map of the County of Berkshire' (1824): Bodl. MS c. 17.13 d. 1.



### Benson

There is no evidence of a ford at Benson.<sup>49</sup> Davis's large-scale map of 1788 shows the weir and mill but provides no evidence of a ford.<sup>50</sup> Locating any possible crossing at Benson is complicated by the fact that the left bank consists of made ground at the bend of the river closest to the main road. This is the natural point, given the settlement and the Saxon royal hall assumed to lie at SU 6145 9160, for the point of departure of a ford from the east. However, if such a ford once existed its presence would be difficult to detect today owing to the depth of water at this point 350 m above a weir with a substantial fall of some 1.8 m.

The present tow path down-river to Wallingford lies on the right bank from Benson. It is conceivable that a track running from a ford or over a weir took this path to Wallingford long before its use as a tow path, but no record of such a route exists and the path would have lain on the flood plain throughout, in medieval times and earlier a long eyot. An alternative route from a ford up to hard ground at the outcrop of the top of the Upper Greensand is possible, but inspection of the ground, maps, and aerial photographs provides no indication of such a track. It is possible that fording was impracticable at Benson and that those settling the site originally chose it because it had a perennial water supply via the stream running from Ewelme, and because the river was relatively deep here and the settlement thus the more readily defensible. Benson appears to be distinguished by its semi-detached position relative to Wallingford.

### Wallingford Ford

The river here is no longer fordable. The 2004 survey shows no shallows in the reach downstream from Benson towards Wallingford until (northing) 9050 and progressively south to 9020. Some shallowing is observed by the site of Pollington's weir at 8980, downstream to 8968.<sup>51</sup> From 8953, 90 m north of Wallingford bridge, to 8930 (Castle Priory) the river is shallower than at any point in the whole of the stretch under review. Relatively shallow water then continues to a point below the entry of Bradford's Brook (8605). This reach of some 350 m covers the water which led to the building of Chalmore weir and lock in 1837–8 when there was too little water in summer to allow passage of the larger 150 ton barges then in use.<sup>52</sup> The outcrop of the impervious Glauconitic Marl occurs here; the formation being soft compared with beds above and below. Much of the river from Wallingford bridge southward for 1 km is marked in the 1870 and 1937 surveys as having a series of eyots.

The location of the Wallingford ford or fords is unknown. It is tempting to suggest that the alignment of the existing road from Crowmarsh to the site of the East Gate marks the path of the original ford. However, the present-day Crowmarsh Street bends slightly north at Crowmarsh church (SU 6150 8930) to join the bridge. An alternative route to the river from the east is marked by a path on the north side of allotments lying south of the roadside houses.<sup>53</sup> This leads to a point slightly to the north of a salient in the gravel west of Watery Lane or Portway at SU 6115 8940. Phillips notes, though without any reference, a ford and a bridge 'slightly downstream (of

<sup>49</sup> Despite Ditmas's reference noted in footnote 15 above.

<sup>50</sup> R. Davis, 'Survey of the Open Fields and Old Enclosures in the Village of Benson' (1788): Bodl. MS c. 17:49 (141).

<sup>51</sup> Pollington's weir was built in the mid sixteenth century to power a fulling and corn mill: TNA: PRO, E112/2, no. 9. See also map in Thacker, *Thames Highway*, vol. 2, p. 189. S. Capel-Davies notes that a navigation buoy marked an obstruction at this point and dredging in the late 1980s brought up stone: personal communication, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> The function of the weir was clear, namely to raise the water level in this stretch up to Lower Wharf beside St Leonard's church (6090 8905) and Upper Wharf north of the bridge. Contrast the view of Revd Andrew Clark that mills and their dams were usually built above shallows, and water gushed down when the weir was opened: see R.B. Peberdy, 'Navigation on the River Thames between London and Oxford in the Late Middle Ages', *Oxoniensia*, 61 (1996), p. 258.

<sup>53</sup> I am indebted to J. Bell for this observation.

the present bridge) at a point known as Port Royal.<sup>54</sup> The 25 inch to the mile OS map of 1877 marks this line as a ford. However, archaeological evidence that this was the line of any causeway leading to a ford, or a ford itself, is lacking. The link with the medieval, and possibly earlier, Portway is, nonetheless, obvious. This way, also known as the Tuddingway, connected Crowmarsh with settlements further south.<sup>55</sup>

No documentary evidence has been found to support Gelling's notion that, 'if *Welingaforda* in the bounds of Cholsey and Moulford in BCS 565 (S 354, dated 878–899) refers to the actual ford this was where Bradford's Brook flows into the Thames.'<sup>56</sup> It seems likely that Gelling simply repeated the view expressed by Grundy that 'the Old Dike is the Mill Brook which goes on to join the Thames at Bradford Brook.'<sup>57</sup> If the ford were at this point, the approaches to it would be long, marshy ones. On the west side of the river Chalmore meadow is between 75 and 100 m wide while on the east side alluvium stretches 150 m from river bank to the firm ground of gravel. In addition the meaning to be attached to 'the old ditch' in the charter is unclear. There is no evidence of such an early date for Bradford's Brook which the present writer has argued would not have existed until after the establishment of defences of the *burh* and probably not until early Norman times.<sup>58</sup> Rather, the ditch in question may be the Mill Brook. This flowed round the southern side of what was, or was to become, the *burh*, entering the Thames by St Leonard's church (8910). Again, on the east side there is no evidence of any route from the riverside to the Portway.<sup>59</sup> This route lies above the alluvium on the gravel edge.

Close to Wallingford the Thames has changed course over time. Thus a Prehistoric paleo-channel of the river at least the width of the present river but to the west was discovered in the excavation of the Bronze-Age site at Whitecross Farm.<sup>60</sup> Further north in the reach between St Leonard's church and the bridge the river runs close to the older, higher gravel mass on which the town was founded. The absence of marshland on the right bank and the presence of eyots made crossing here easy. This is a distinctive feature of the right bank between the bridge and St Leonard's. Dewey and Roffe have argued that a pre-burghal settlement lay to the south-west of the Alfredian town, and that it would have been served by a ford to the south of the medieval bridge close to St Leonard's.<sup>61</sup> However, the need to invoke such a location for a ford derives from the interpretation of charter S 517. Roffe, while advancing the theory of a pre-burghal settlement south of the *burh*, notes that alternative interpretations are possible of the crucial Old English memorandum attached to it. Gelling also states that the descriptions of locations of properties are ambiguous.<sup>62</sup>

Bately proposes that Wallingford had two fords.<sup>63</sup> She apparently derives this notion from Alfred's *Orosius* of c.895. This contains the wonderful story that Julius Caesar came up to Wallingford. Alfred's collaborator writes that 'this third battle was near the river, which is called Thames, near the ford called Wallingford'.<sup>64</sup> This statement appears unequivocal in identifying a

<sup>54</sup> Phillips, *Thames Crossings*, p. 69. D. Pedgley notes that this lies on the right bank next to the south wall of the bridge: personal communication, 2008.

<sup>55</sup> P. Preece, 'The Tuddingway', *SOAG Bulletin*, 56 (2001), pp. 29–32.

<sup>56</sup> Gelling, *Place-Names of Berkshire*, vol. 3, p. 535.

<sup>57</sup> C.B. Grundy, 'Berkshire Charters', *Berks, Bucks and Oxon. Archaeol. Jnl*, 28 (1924), p. 68.

<sup>58</sup> A.J. Grayson, 'Bradford's Brook, Wallingford', *Oxoniensia*, 59 (2004), pp. 29–44.

<sup>59</sup> B. Pedgley, *Crowmarsh: A History of Crowmarsh Gifford, Newnham Murren, Mongewell and North Stoke* (Crowmarsh, 1990), p. 61 maps routes in Crowmarsh but shows none leading to the Thames in the area concerned.

<sup>60</sup> Cromarty, *Late Bronze Age Ritual*, p. 18, Fig. 2.4.

<sup>61</sup> Dewey, 'The Origins of Wallingford', pp. 18, 21; Roffe, 'Wallingford in Domesday Book', p. 42.

<sup>62</sup> M. Gelling, *The Early Charters of the Thames Valley* (Leicester, 1979), pp. 37–8.

<sup>63</sup> J. Bately (ed.), *The Old English Orosius* (Oxford, 1980), Book V, Chap. XII, p. 126.

<sup>64</sup> It is generally considered that this work was not by Alfred himself, a view supported by stylometric analysis: [www.stat.sfu.ca/~tim/papers/alfred.pdf](http://www.stat.sfu.ca/~tim/papers/alfred.pdf) (accessed 20 June 2010).

single ford, but Bately (p. 312) observes that it is ‘interesting that Bede in quoting from *Orosius* omits the reference to only one crossing point’.

### *Wallingford Bridge*

In 1013, Swein Forkbeard, king of the Danes, ravaged a great part of England. After taking Winchester he turned east to London. Here the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that ‘a great part of his people were drowned in the Thames, because they did not look out for any bridge.’<sup>65</sup> He succeeded in crossing, but failed to take the town, and we learn that the following year, knowing of the crossing from his previous assault on the town in 1006, ‘King Swein turned from there (London) to Wallingford, and so over the Thames to Bath.’<sup>66</sup> The record may be interpreted to mean crossing by either a ford or bridge.

According to William of Poitiers, chaplain to William the Conqueror, fifty-three years later ‘the duke advancing wherever he wished, then crossed the Thames by both a ford and a bridge and came to the town of Wallingford’.<sup>67</sup> This statement only makes sense if William had already crossed to the left bank opposite Wallingford. However, the fact that a bridge is mentioned is significant.

Whether there was a bridge before 1066 or not, the position of Wallingford is clearly significant. Swein had to march to Wallingford before he could swing south-west towards Bath. William had to march north as far as Wallingford before he could lead his troops east towards Berkhamsted. Any traffic to or from the west would have used a track diverging from the Roman road south-east of Cholsey and running close to the river to enter Wallingford by the south gate. The marshy land which forms such an impediment to access from due west is here confined to a mere 200 m at a point 2.7 km south of Wallingford’s ford at SU 605 868. This route was presumably that taken by those aiming to reach the all-weather ford and the trading point built up around it. For those approaching from the north the road from Shillingford shown in Fig. 1 would be the obvious route.

Firm documentary evidence of a bridge does not appear, however, until 1141.<sup>68</sup> The great length of the present day bridge arises from the long stretch of flood plain stretching east nearly 300 m from the riverside. This feature may arise from the development of the street plan of Wallingford which dictated a line leading along what is now High Street.

### *Little Stoke*

The next point downstream at which roads exist on both side of the river is Ferry Lane, Cholsey at 8546 (mid-point). On the left bank lies Ferry Cottage, an eighteenth-century building. The 1695 map of the Cholsey estate shows the ferry at this point (855) but the absence of a settlement on either bank suggests that no ford existed here.<sup>69</sup>

### *Moulsford*

The location of the original ford here (837) is hardly in doubt. Land on the left bank to the north of the track leading to this ford was no doubt multi-channelled until the meadow was drained.

### *Slottisford: the Unidentified Ford*

Slottisford is the name of the hundred shown in Domesday covering the Berkshire manors bordering the Thames from Brightwell in the north to Basildon, south of Streatley, in the

<sup>65</sup> H. O’Brien, *Queen Emma and the Vikings* (London, 2006), pp. 77, 80 suggests that an attempt was made to ford the river when the defence by Aethelred’s men of the bridge at Southwark proved too strong.

<sup>66</sup> M. Swanton (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London, 2000), p. 144.

<sup>67</sup> Davis and Chibnall (eds.), *Gesta Guillelmi*, p. 147.

<sup>68</sup> K.R. Potter (ed.), *Gesta Stephani* (Oxford, 1976), p. 227. For description and analysis of the medieval bridge see *CBA Group 9 Newsletter*, 12 (1982), pp. 110–13.

<sup>69</sup> Bodl. MS (E) c. 17 13 (35), reproduced in J. and S. Dewey, *Change at Cholsey Again!* (Cholsey, 2001), p. 113, Fig. 3.13.

south.<sup>70</sup> Gelling translates the name Slottisford as ‘ford with a bar or bars.’<sup>71</sup> The location of this ford has never been resolved. No site from Brightwell downstream to north of Goring, apart from those already listed, has been observed which has the features required of a ford. South of Goring, however, there are two candidates for the name. One is the ford below Brunel’s railway bridge (SU 606 795) at Gatehampton, between the Roman villa at Gatehampton Farm on the left bank and another almost directly opposite it at Lower Basildon.<sup>72</sup> While the Basildon villa lies close to the Silchester–Dorchester road, there is no geological evidence for bars in the river bed, nor is there evidence of any significant occupation in Anglo-Saxon times.

The second candidate is the point at which the Icknield Way crossed the Thames between Goring and Streatley. The first edition 1:2,500 OS map marks the site of a Roman ford as well as the route of an old ferry.<sup>73</sup> Strahan notes that the river bed was harder and more gravelly 200 yards south of Streatley bridge than above it: ‘it appears to be just where this harder part begins that the Icknield Way and Romans made a ford.’<sup>74</sup> The greater age of this crossing and the existence of settlements on either bank together with the absence of unnamed fords elsewhere in the stretch of river in the hundred point to this being the Slottisford. The site of this old ford, later a ferry, is at SU 5959 8055.

#### ACCESS TO WALLINGFORD AND ITS THAMES CROSSING

##### *The Western Approaches*

Henig and Booth consider the Roman road from Silchester to Dorchester to be first century.<sup>75</sup> With the insurgency of the Iceni in the east, this route, connecting with Chichester harbour, would have been of strategic importance. One must assume that if a reliable ford existed lower downstream in Roman times, at Shillingford or, *a fortiori*, at Wallingford, this could not have been such an attractive route as would have justified a substantial diversion from the straight north-south line from Streatley to the ridge above Brightwell. Clearly the Dorchester crossing was a valuable one.

The Dorchester ford over the Thames was supplanted at some stage by that at Shillingford. Since no instance has been found of the use of the word *brycg* before 730, the ‘bridge way’ is hardly likely to have been recognized as such before mid eighth century.<sup>76</sup> However, the ford at Shillingford could have been in use for several centuries before this. Shillingford’s utility as a crossing point was well established by 945, the year in which the first record exists of the name ‘bridge way’ and by inference a bridge or causeway existed or had existed here. For those travelling from Dorchester, Oxford, and points north-east of Shillingford, this would have been the natural route leading across the river to destinations to the south. It is suggested that the ‘bridge way’ would have been the favoured route joining the old Roman road to the west and thence via Brightwell to Cholsey, Streatley and beyond, a route which implies by-passing a nascent Wallingford. However, the establishment of a crossing at Shillingford meant that a route to Wallingford became available from the right bank and Wallingford subsequently led Shillingford in development: topography favoured settlement on Wallingford’s gravel, as well as opposite at Crowmarsh Gifford, whereas the right bank at Shillingford is confined by the abrupt slope above the crossing.

<sup>70</sup> J. Morris (ed.), *Domesday Book* (Chichester, 1979), map and keys.

<sup>71</sup> Gelling, *Place-Names of Berkshire*, vol. 2, p. 507.

<sup>72</sup> T.G. Allen, *Lithics and Landscape: Archaeological Discoveries on the Thames Water Pipeline at Gatehampton Farm, Goring, Oxfordshire 1985–92*, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph, 7 (Oxford, 1995); OS Explorer 171.

<sup>73</sup> OS 1:2,500, 1872–85, noted in West Berks. HER, mon. no. MWB3681.

<sup>74</sup> A. Strahan, TS note of 1926 held in archives of Goring Historical Society. I am indebted to J. Emerton for this reference.

<sup>75</sup> M. Henig and P. Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire* (Stroud, 2000), p. 39.

<sup>76</sup> B. Cox, ‘The Place-Names of the Earliest English Records’, *EPNS Journal*, 8 (1975–6), pp. 12, 66.

Geophysics and excavation in 2009 in Wallingford School's playing field at SU 607 900 revealed a medieval road running north-south. Dating evidence for the upper surface suggested thirteenth-century usage, but an underlying (but undated) road could well relate to the pre-Norman route from Shillingford into Wallingford, as shown in Fig. 1.<sup>77</sup> The Shillingford ford and subsequent bridge would have been relevant to Wallingford when a settlement existed at Wallingford which offered opportunity for trade, settlement, or conquest, as by Mercian invaders.

Considering access to Wallingford from due west, it is noticeable that no Roman villa has been found close to the Silchester road between the Thames at Dorchester and Streatley. By contrast, villas are known to have existed on the east side at Benson and Gatehampton, south of Goring. The 1971 Agricultural Land Classification records a marked difference between land on the west and east sides of the Thames; that on the west shows a lower proportion of versatile and fertile land, much of it requiring drainage for productive agriculture.<sup>78</sup> The geological map clearly shows the basis for this difference. One is the large spreads of alluvium arising from the Thames' earlier course west of the Sinodun Hills, the second the substantial area of Upper Greensand, implying, respectively, poorly or less readily drained soils than those derived from the gravels and Chalk of the east bank. For this reason alone the apparent absence of any Roman settlements or villas close to the road is not surprising, nor is the absence of links eastward from the road to Wallingford unexpected. The *-ey* endings of Mackney and Cholsey indicate the watery nature of land west of the town: this would have inhibited movement and road building as it did farming.

To the south of Wallingford it is clear that access was possible via a route close to the west bank. This would have been used to connect Wallingford with settlements to the south. It was no doubt the route taken by the branch of the Icknield Way using Wallingford as its crossing point in place of the Slottisford.<sup>79</sup> In times of war it was of clear importance to kings of Wessex approaching Wallingford, as it was of advantage to raiders such as Swein and later to William leading the Norman army.

### *Eastern Approaches*

On the left bank of the Thames, the Portway and other routes approaching Wallingford from the east are well described but dating is obscure.<sup>80</sup> Roman roads on the left bank have been mapped by Malpas and by Sharpe and Carter.<sup>81</sup> Despite the existence of the Benson and Gatehampton villas on the east side of the river no link westward from the Carter/Sharpe road to these or the river has yet been found. Nor has any Roman road leading to Crowmarsh Gifford, and hence Wallingford, been discovered from this line, although one obvious route would have followed the dry valley through Crowmarsh Gifford along the main road named The Street through the village. A further possibility is that a villa existed close to the Romano-British cemetery at SU 624 894 and this was connected to the Thames by a route entering Crowmarsh from the north-east.<sup>82</sup>

### FURTHER RESEARCH

In the absence of documentary evidence, further study of the crossing points at Shillingford and Wallingford must rely on archaeological work. The particular points of interest concern the riverside end of the 'bridge way' which may hold remains of a Saxon bridge, and at Crowmarsh the location of a causeway or early bridge in the alluvium lying to the south of Wallingford bridge. Because of

<sup>77</sup> Personal communication from Neil Christie, 2010; below, p. 40.

<sup>78</sup> *Agricultural Land Classification of England and Wales*, Sheet 158 (London, 1971).

<sup>79</sup> C.F.W.R. Gullick, 'Communications', in A.F. Martin and R.W. Steel (eds.), *The Oxford Region: a Scientific and Historical Survey* (Oxford, 1954), p. 147.

<sup>80</sup> Pedgley, *Crowmarsh*, p. 61.

<sup>81</sup> F.J. Malpas, 'Roman Roads South and East of Dorchester-on-Thames', *Oxoniensia*, 52 (1987), pp. 23–33; J. Sharpe and P. Carter, 'A "New" Roman Road East of the Thames from Benson to Pangbourne', *SOAG Bulletin*, 62 (2008), pp. 7–12.

<sup>82</sup> C. Clark, 'Excavations at Coldharbour Farm, Crowmarsh', *SMIdA*, 26 (1996), pp. 71–6.

the nature of fording sites, routes to them are likely to be the source of dating information and former tracks now often obscured by roads remain as potential sites for investigation.

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