

THE BOUNDARY HEDGE OF SAXON WHEATHAMPSTEAD

by Ian Freeman

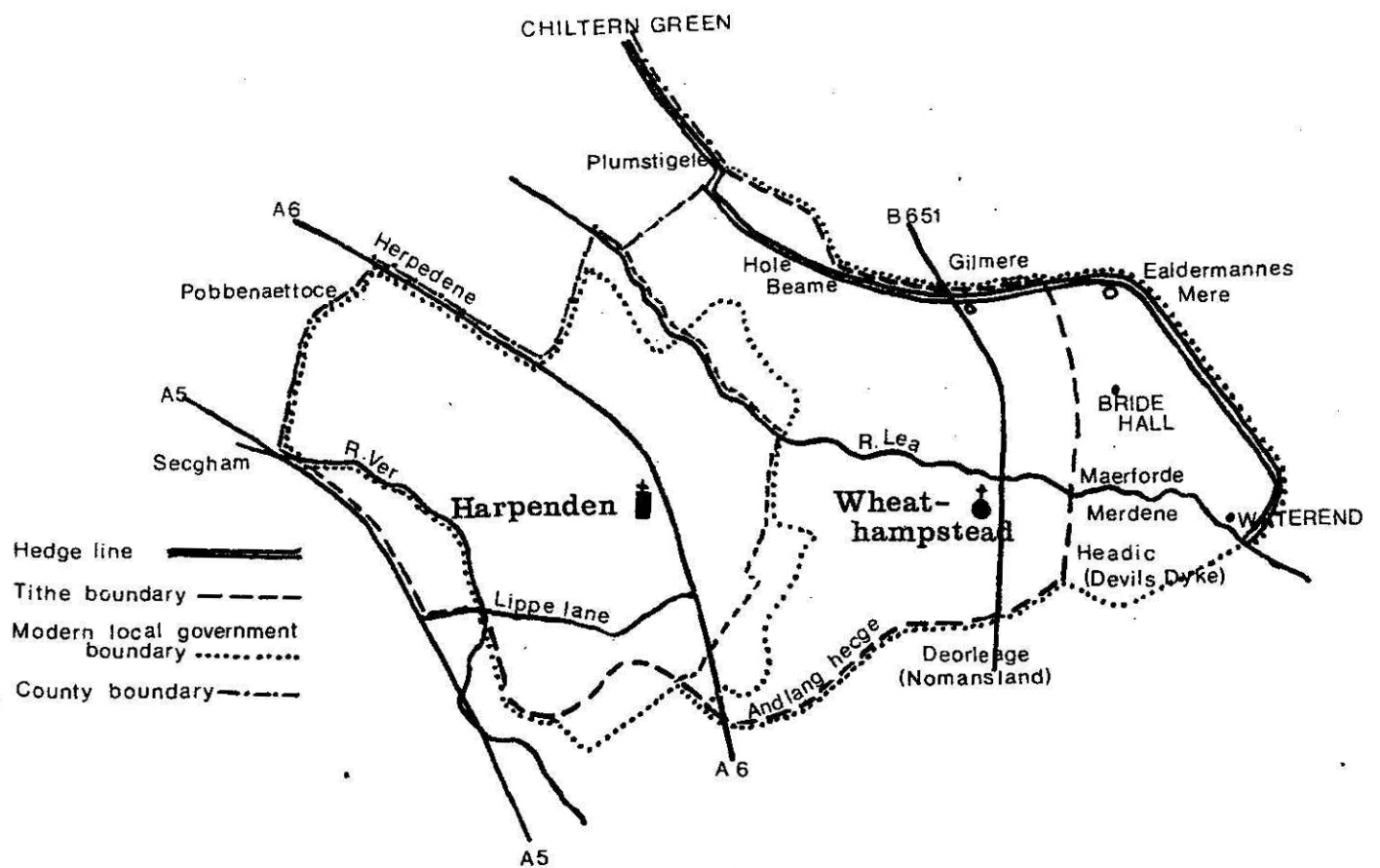
The Saxon boundary of Wheathampstead was defined in the charter by which Edward The Confessor granted the land to Westminster Abbey.¹ The description of the boundary in the charter reads as follows:

This syndon tha land gemaeru into hwaethamstede, fram maerforde to thaere headic, and fram thaere headic aefter daene into deorleage, fram deorleage andlang hecge thaet hit cymth to lippelane, fram lippelane to secgham, and fram secgham to pobbenaettoce, and fram bobbenaettoce to herpedene, fram herpedene to tham aesce to thaecforde, fram tham aesce to plumstigele, fram plumstigele to tham hole beame,

fram than hole beame to gilmere, fram gilmere to thaes ealdermannes mere, fram thaes ealdermannes mere into merdene and swa into maerforde.

The interpretation of the boundary in geographical terms has been discussed in *The settlement of Wheathampstead and Harpenden*.² In that discussion there is a reference to a long chain of hedgerows which seems to follow the northern boundary of the territory for a considerable distance and forming a sinuous but continuous line from the Bedfordshire/Hertfordshire boundary near Chiltern Green to the River Lea just below Waterend. For much of its length this line consists of two parallel hedges on

Dr. Freeman is a food chemist working at the Unilever Research Laboratory at Sharnbrook, Beds. He recently moved to Bedford after living for thirteen years in Harpenden.



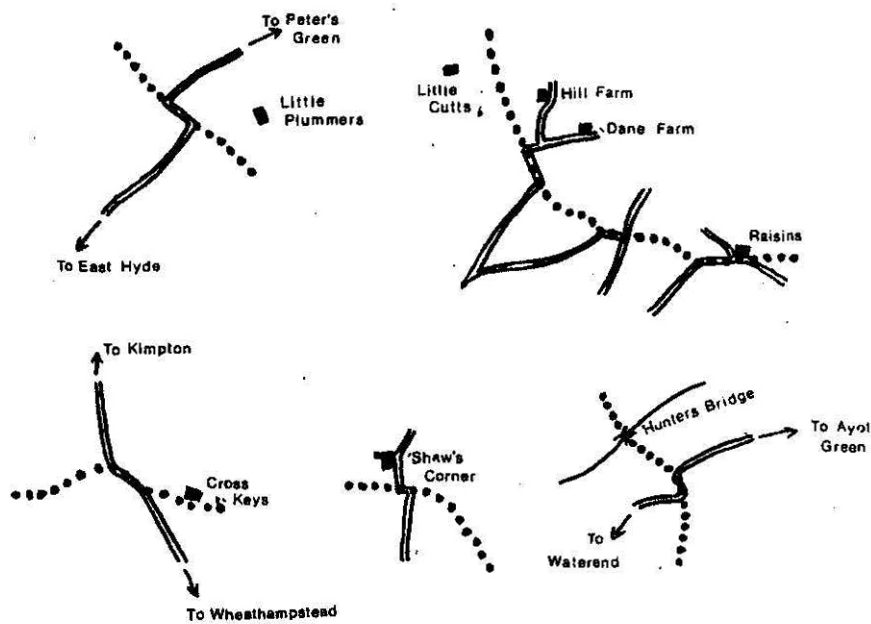
The boundary hedge of Saxon Wheathampstead

well defined banks with a broad ditch or trackway running between. In some parts the hedge line has been covered by lanes, or one bank has been ploughed out leaving only a single hedge and bank, but sufficient remains to indicate that the double hedge form originally extended along the whole length.

Species counts in the hedge at various points along the line have yielded averages of nine to ten species per fifty yard length, which in Hooper's hypothesis would make the hedge about a thousand years old. An independent indication of a considerable antiquity is provided by the way that every road or lane that crosses the hedge-line is deflected from its own line to follow the line of the hedge for at least a few yards.

Just south east of Chiltern Green the lane from Peters Green to East

Hyde intersects the hedge line at right angles but turns along the line of the hedge for 200 yards before continuing in its original direction. The hedge line then proceeds in a south easterly direction in the form of a bridle path between two well defined hedge banks. This path eventually widens out to become a lane at a point north east of Little Cutts Farm. Five hundred yards further on, it is joined by the lane from Peters Green to Bower Heath, which also bends to follow the hedge line before turning off again to the south west. The hedge row continues on its own line but curving smoothly to the east along a field hedgerow which stands on a well defined bank and ditch. On the far side of the field, it emerges onto the lane running north east out of Bower Heath and at this point also the lane takes a sharp bend to bring it into line with the hedge.



Points at which the hedge is intersected by lanes

After 100 yards, the lane ends at a T-junction but the hedge line continues straight ahead along a footpath towards what was Whitepightle Wood. This is now occupied by a nursery and the line of the hedge is lost for about 100 yards but the line is taken up again by the lane from Holcroft Spring to Raisins Farm. Again, at this point, the lane shows a sharp change in direction to bring it into line with the hedge.

The hedge line is now running due east past Raisins Farm and, although it is lost for a few yards in the field to the east of the farm house, the line is soon taken up again by the old hollow way which once ran to Blackmore End. The B651, from Wheathampstead to Kimpton, shows a slight inflection where the hedge line crosses it. The hedge line then continues along the northern edge of Gustard Wood Common. A derelict bank and ditch, just in front of The Cross Keys, probably marks its position at that point.

The line is temporarily lost again in the field north of Bleak House, but it becomes very apparent, in the form of a wide ditch between well defined banks along the northern edge of Lamer Wood, Lamer Park, Harepark Spring and across the bottom of the garden of Shaw's Corner. Here it crosses the lane running south from Ayot St Lawrence to Wheathampstead and again the lane makes a double right angled bend to accommodate the hedge line. On the other side of the lane, the hedge line is continued by the bridle path leading down through Stocking Spring, curving smoothly to a more southerly direction. Where it runs through the Spring the line of the double hedgerow can be picked out by the parallel banks and the occasional plashed trees. It crosses the Wheathampstead to Codicote road at the end of Stocking Spring and

again the road shows a sharp bend at the crossing point. The hedge line can be traced through the woods to the south of the road along a line of banks and plashed trees running roughly parallel to, but a few yards inside, the edge of the woods.

Having emerged from the woods along the footpath which passes under the old railway at Hunter's Bridge, the hedge line reaches the lane from Waterend to Ayot Green. This lane also shows an abrupt double bend where the hedge line crosses it.

Beyond the lane, the hedge line follows a broad double hedge, with well defined banks, which brings it to the bank of the River Lea just below Waterend.

What was the original function of this hedge line? The 'Viatores'³ have claimed the stretch from Raisins to Blackmore End as part of their Roman Road No. 211. Whether or not there was such a road is open to question, but in any case, the continuity of the hedge line beyond this stretch indicates an origin independent of the Roman road.

The relationship with local government boundaries is more interesting. The modern local government boundary of Wheathampstead follows the hedges from a point just east of Raisins through Waterend, but that is a relatively recent development. The old parish boundary of Wheathampstead, as shown on the tithe map, joined the hedge line near Raisins but left it at the north eastern edge of the Lamar estate, (map ref. 186168), to drop almost due south to Marford. The remainder of the hedge line then formed the north eastern boundary of the old parish of Sandridge.

However, the Saxon boundary of Wheathampstead, seems to follow the hedge line all the way from the County

boundary through to Waterend. The stretch relevant to the present discussion begins at "plumstigele" then proceeds to "hole beame", "gilmere", "thaes ealdermannes mere", and finally along "merdene" back to "maerford". "Plumstigele", "the steep climb to the plum trees", can be identified as the rising ground leading up to Great and Little Plummrs farms, near where the hedge line enters the county. "Hole beame", "the hollow tree", can be associated with Holcroft which originally occupied the four fields to the north of Holcroft Spring and whose northern boundary was formed by the hedge line.⁴ "Gilmere", the yellow(?) pond, was almost certainly one of the two ponds, now dry, which stood on the north eastern corner of Gustard Wood. The name of the adjacent public house, The Cross Keys, is an indication that this was a reference point on the boundary of Westminster's territory.

It was about a third of a mile east of this point that the tithe boundary of Wheathampstead left the hedge line but there is a strong indication that the Saxon boundary continued along it. The next reference point to "gilmere" is "thaes ealdermannes mere", the Elderman's pool. There is no evidence of a pool along the divergent stretch of the tithe boundary, but there is a pond on the hedge line, at map reference 189166, just before the hedge line turns south towards Stocking Spring. Near this point the boundaries of three separate hundreds came together so this would account for the name, Elderman's Mere. On this interpretation, the "merdene", the boundary valley, would be the valley of the River Lea itself.

This interpretation requires that a large area of the old parish of Sandridge was originally part of Wheathampstead. Geographically, this is quite feasible

as, while the territory involved forms a compact unit when included in Wheathampstead, it is attached to Sandridge only by a narrow neck of land at Coleman's Green. Historically, however, there is a problem. The territory in question comprises for the most part the old manor of Bride Hall. According to Matthew Paris⁵ this manor together with Shenley, was given to St Albans Abbey by "a certain pious matron" called Thurfleda. The name of this lady suggests a pre-Conquest date for the gift so it is difficult to see how Edward could have included the manor in his grant to Westminster if it had already been given to St Albans.

One way or another though the hedge line was used by the Saxons as a boundary marker, but even this does not account for the origin of the hedge line because it appears to continue outside the county north west of Chiltern Green. It is not possible to trace this continuation on the ground as the area is now occupied by Luton Airport and the expanding suburbs of Luton, but there are two probable lines which can be traced on earlier maps. One is the lane running from Chiltern Green past Copt Hall and Sommeries, while the other is the lane running further to the north past Dane Street Farm across the airport site towards Wigmore Hall and Stopsley. Both of these eventually found their way through to the Icknield Way so it is tempting to think that the hedge line represents a link between that ancient thoroughfare and an early settlement at Wheathampstead.

References

1. Herts County Record Office D/ELw Z22/4.
2. Vol. I in the series "Wheathamp-

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stead and Harpenden" published by Harpenden and St Albans W.E.A. 1973, p.3.

(See also A.R. Rumble, J. Eng. Place Names Soc. 9 (1975-6) p.6 for a more precise linguistic translation.)

3. Roman Roads in the South east Midlands (Gollancz 1964). p.102.

4. Wheathampstead Tithe fields nos 202, 204, 304, 305.

5. Gesta Abbatum. (Rolls Series), 1, p.507.