

WP55

lwb 15/11/96

Window 8

This Window deals mainly with the north fields of medieval West Overton. As such, references to West Overton refer to the old land unit, *not* to the modern parish of West Overton.

It is evident from the location map (Map X, p. XX) that the Ridgeway acts as part of the boundary of several of the parishes on the Marlborough Downs, including West Overton (1), following, as the word suggests, the ridge of the Marlborough Downs. It is clearly derived from *rigte weye* ('straight way') or *hric wege* ('ridge way'). There are, however, many such 'ridge ways', not all of them following ridges, throughout Wessex and to claim this Ridgeway is the most ancient of them (find quote) remains unproven. The Ridgeway is certainly old, though Green Street, or at least its earliest precursor, crossing the downs and entering Avebury as it does from the East, is a much likelier candidate for such a title.

The East Overton charter runs from *coltan beorh oth thaene herpoth an hacan penne*, from Colta's Barrow as far as the herepath on Hackpen. The boundary then follows the herpoth to the ditch (see Window 1). The Saxon *herpoth* is thus reflected in the line of the modern Ridgeway (1). Green Street was mistakenly taken by Grundy to be the *herpoth* of this charter and this explains why the OS maps from the 1920s up until the present call Green Street so.

A charter of 922 or 972 AD (S668) records that the eastern side of the village of Winterbourne continued up to the '*meorce*', or common boundary. This, Grundy believed, referred to 'not merely a boundary, but a breadth of land on the boundary' (Grundy 1920, 24. Smith describes *meorce* as a 'boundary', 1970, ii, 37). If the *meorce* is reflected in the line of the Ridgeway today, then a path may have wavered through this broad strip of land in the tenth century much as the Ridgeway does today between two fences 25? yards apart. It remains to be determined, however, whether the Ridgeway was already in existence and was thus chosen as a 'natural' boundary which the parishes backed up to when they were formed, or whether the Ridgeway is early medieval in origin, keeping to the edges of recently formed estates so as to reduce the necessity of directly crossing land belonging to many owners.

The reference to a *herpoth* and to *ealdan herepathe* (old army-path) in the Alton Priors charter of 825 AD (S272) seemingly following a similar line as the Ridgeway, may indicate that an army had crossed the Downs, at a time already considered 'old' in 825 AD. Brentnall notes (124) that 'herepaths led to the meeting-places of the various hundreds, for it was there that the levies gathered when the army was mobilised. [The Herepoth/Ridgeway] was the nearest way from Overton to the point on the Marlborough-Broad Hinton road called Man's Head (SU140739) [which, G. M. Young suggests,] was probably the meeting-place of the Hundred of Selkley in Saxon times.' At the time the charters were written, however, this path was most likely to have become a 'highway' mainly for non-military use or simply the place, being a major route, where one might encounter a warband (Costen, 105).

The Winterbourne Monkton charter of 869 AD (S341) goes from the *redeslo to the rigte weye*, 'the red slough to the straight way'. The red slough would appear to relate to the red clay covering this high downland area, an area which in the 18th and 19th centuries saw much clay extraction and brick-making (SU 125729). If so, then the 'straight way' may be the herepath, which is reflected in the present line of the Ridgeway along the stretch from the boundary of West Overton and Fyfield parishes (SU 125724) to the Bronze Age ditch (AM466).

It is clear from the late 18th and early 19th century maps of this area that the Ridgeway was not a fixed trackway as today. Moreover, at this period at least, it is not even marked on the maps, whereas other routes clearly are. Three standing stones (16) clearly mark the boundary of East and West Overton with Avebury along the eastern side of the line of the modern Ridgeway, indeed, this line of stones would have stood starkly out across open downland, as was the intention. No track is noted tracing this boundary and, as any track system which crossed the Downs would naturally follow the most direct or appropriate route, the Ridgeway had, it seems, simply ceased, at that time anyway, to serve as a major arterial route. It had been replaced by others deemed then to be a better way. This is why, over time, tracks come and go out of use, and why one finds the remains of such a myriad of earlier routes in this area.

The land called *haccan penne* (2) in the charter, Grundy believed, denoted a cattlepen in the area and was reflected in the name 'Hackpin Cow' and 'Sheep Down' on the late 18th century map (Window 2). The 'Pen' is mirrored in the modern name of 'Parson's Penning' and in the two smaller enclosed areas on the Enclosure map called 'Higher Penning' (9) and 'Lower Penning' (11); the former on 'Farm Down' (7), the latter on 'The Cow Down' (8). It would seem certain, therefore, that in the tenth century part of this land was an enclosed area, most probably for cattle and sheep grazing. It probably also served as an area where the animals could counted, marked, sold or made ready for moving, as well as being allowed to graze (see Windows 3&4 for 'Hackpin').

Both Saxon charters mention *colta beorg* (S784) or *coltan beorh* (S449), 'Colta's Barrow' (28), a barrow now referred to as SMR647 (SU 12106937). Although it is now ploughed out, it was marked on the maps of 1783 and 1794, though Smith does not note it in 1885. Apart from the barrows of Seven Barrow Hill and the other near the 'Abury' road (14), another is shown on the late 18th century maps just north, it would appear, of the Roman Road (17). This barrow was also noted by Smith in 1885 and represents what is in fact a group around SU 119683. To the east of Colta's Barrow the boundary was marked by a *crundel* (a quarry), *twegen dunne stanas* (two down/brown? stones) and *scropes pyt*, ('Scrope's' pit - shrub pit?).

The *crundel* is clearly the very evident pit just west of the reservoir (18; SU 124694). This pit can be said to be a Saxon quarry with certainty because the charter moves from *scropes pyt* to *pan Crundel midde werdne*, 'to the middle of the quarry', and the boundary between East and West Overton cuts this pit directly in half. As half this quarry is in East Overton, the other being in West Overton, it would appear that it was shared equally by the two villages. This quarry could well have been to extract chalk which was subsequently burnt and dug into fields as a fertiliser. This activity is reflected in similar shallow pits, of unknown date, across the valley in the north-facing fields (see Window 12).

The West Overton charter, however, notes two down stones, not a quarry, *estan colta beorg*, 'east of Colta's Barrow' before reaching *scropes pytt*. Clearly the stones lay within the vicinity of the quarry, though where precisely is now impossible to know. It is possible that the two standing stones in the hedge south of Down Barn (42 - SU 129695) are these two, having been moved to their present positions from the boundary hedge. No stones in this boundary hedge line are noted on the 1794 map, which does detail many standing stones, though nor are the two stones south of Down Barn noted on the 1819 map, so when they were moved (if at all) is unknown.

Scropes pyt thus lay to the east of this quarry, somewhere between the *crundel* and the west headlands. It may have been around SU 125151 (22) where the hedge coming west takes a right-angled turn south, though I am inclined to think this is where the two stones once stood. A more likely position for *scropes pyt*, as Brentnall noted (131-2), is at the

second 90° turn south at SU 128691 (20), though nothing of it is visible on the ground today. The name of Scrope's Pit is clearly reflected in a reference in 1312 to a *Scrufeleput* in North Field (Hare).

Further south along this eastern boundary of Saxon West Overton was the *furlanges west heafde* (19 & 21). This reference is from the *East Overton* charter, that is why it is the *west* headlands of East Overton. This clearly demonstrates the land east of this boundary was under plough (23). We already know that a thin strip of land above Pickledean, at the eastern edge of East Overton, was *yrmland* (see Window 7, notes 33 & 40), and here we have evidence of cultivation at its western edge. It is therefore possible that the whole of the land to the north of North Farm, as far as Down Barn, was arable land in the tenth century, that is to say a parcel of land bounded in the west by the bridleway up to Down Barn and across to ODXII, in the east by the tithing boundary between Lockeridge and East Overton or further east still, with the reference to lynchets, as far as the parish boundary line, and in the south by the flood plain of the river Kennet. The whole is cut, of course, by the dry valley of Pickledean, used as a sheep drove way, access route for the plough teams and highway to the Downs beyond. The remaining land to the north (24), one assumes, was downland and thus open pasture, with the trackway (25) past ODXII, Down Barn, the two stones and down to the A4 neatly dividing these two parcels of land.

A little to the south of Headlands, two barrows are noted in both charters (S449, *betweox tha twegen beorgas*; S784, *be tweo ii beorgas*). The three, almost right-angled bends in the modern hedge line today north of the A4, some 400m west of North Farm (22; SU 129685), is due to the boundary between the two Overtons going between these two barrows.

The area shaded green was given the generic title of 'The Farm' on the late 18th century maps, though this area north of the settlement was simply named North field in 1631 and contained 62 acres. This land had been subdivided by 1783, in the east, into 'Upper Field' (4), 'Middle Field' (5) and, *quelle surprise*, 'Lower Field' (6). In the west, stood 'Farm Down' (7) and to the south, 'The Cow Down' or, as the earlier, rougher version of the map calls it, 'Common Cow Down' (8). 'The Farm', the draft map of 1783 notes, 'has 6 cow leases as r(eceived), and the whole Down from Old Martinmas 22nd Nov. to Old Lady Day'. This shows the arable belonging to West Overton, on the eastern side, covered a slightly larger area than the pasture to the west. Farm Down was separated from Cow Down by an open boundary which contained two standing stones (13) and a barrow (14) near the Ridgeway. The fields were divided by open boundaries, as were Upper and Middle Field from Farm Down (3). The lower half of this central boundary, however, was demarcated by 'pales'.

Just left of centre in the North Field stood two pennings in the late 1700s, surrounded by hedges. Smith simply refers to 'The Pennings' on his 1885 map, though in 1783 'Higher Penning' (9) was situated just north of 'Lower Penning' (11), the two divided by a 'Drove' (10). In the NE corner of Lower Penning, a 'Sheep House' stood in the late 18th century (12). Clearly, this land, being the only downland available to the inhabitants of West Overton, was under immense strain to satisfy the grazing needs of the livestock and to remain productive with such large groups of animals crossing it, along major routes, from three directions (Avebury, Bath and East Kennet and beyond). This strain is apparent on the 1783 draft map which notes that the Farm Down has been 'Injured by great quantities of sheep been drove over it to the Washing Pool'. Whether this Washing Pool is the Sheep House at the mouth of the drove (12) or further south nearer the Kennet, is unclear.

These pennings are reflected to a large extent in the remnant field boundaries on the 25" maps. It is unlikely that a building on the 1922 map within what was Lower Penning is the former Sheep House, as it was situated further south than the 1783 one, though, of course, this does not exclude the possibility that this later building was also a sheep

house. This building was situated next to a well, according to the 1922 and 1961 maps. The present 1:25 000 map refers to the small area on which this later building stood as a 'Chalk Pit'. The well may add credence to the idea above that this was in fact a washing area for sheep.

The southern edge of The Cow Down reaches down to the edge of the Kennet, that is to say the Bath road which crosses it did not have, according to the late 18th century maps, a fence demarcating its line. Indeed, three routes are marked on this map, none of which are bounded by hedges or fences. One, the 'road from Abury' (15), crossed The Cow Down by the barrow (14; SU 118687), to meet the 'road from Bath'. Another is 'the road from Bath' itself, mirrored in the present A4, and thirdly, the 'road from Kennet', coming up from the Kennet bridge. All meet at SU 130683, a high point marked on the current 1:25 000 map as 144m above sea level, some 300m west of The Bell Inn. It is here, and only here where the road becomes one, that the road is hedged north and south. This would mean livestock had virtually free reign across this area. An '80 Mile' stone on the A4 (24; SU 122681) is noted on the 1773 A&D, though one hundred years later Smith notes it as the 79 mile mark. It also appears, distance unknown on the 1783 and 1794 maps.

The other route through this landscape was the Roman Road (27) which forms the southern edge of this Window. Its first appearance of any of the maps available is on the OS 25" map of 1883 and on Smith's 1885 map.