

THE NORTH DOWNS' MAIN TRACKWAYS

BY

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THE importance of the main trackway connecting the principal habitation sites of early man in Wiltshire with the Channel coast in Kent is a matter of general agreement. West of Farnham the route bears the ancient name "Harrow Way," but eastwards from that point it has generally been associated with the term "Pilgrims' Way," from its supposed use by pilgrims travelling from Winchester to Canterbury. In recent years much doubt has been cast upon the authenticity of the pilgrim tradition, but this does not, of course, in any way affect the undoubted importance of the route to prehistoric and later traffic generally.

One curious result of the preoccupation with the pilgrim tradition, however, has been obliviousness to the existence of the main ridgeway along the Downs, although it can be traced almost continuously along their entire length, generally still in use as a road or track. Much has been written about the Pilgrims' Way, which usually follows the foot of the main escarpment as a terraceway, though it occasionally joins the ridgeway where more convenient; but I am not aware that any writer has even so much as hinted at the existence of an accompanying ridgeway, excepting for a brief reference by Mr. Belloc¹ to a "flanking road" along the Hog's Back.

In my book *Roman Ways in the Weald* there is a short section dealing in general terms with this dual trackway, which would have been in contemporary use although not an engineered Roman road; but recently, thanks to the co-operation of the Archæology Branch of the Ordnance Survey, I have had the opportunity of examining the entire route of the ridgeway in order to plot its course upon the maps. It is unnecessary to describe the route in detail throughout, since it is the ridgeway, and in Surrey is practically always still in use, but there are a few points on which some notes may usefully be added here.

First of all, why is the trackway thus duplicated? It is probably because the Downs are often capped with clay-with-flints, a deposit which becomes wet and sticky in winter and makes progress along the crest more difficult than it would be on the clean chalk near the foot of the escarpment, where the lower terraceway (Pilgrims' Way) was consequently formed by early travellers. But in dry weather the ridge would have been preferred, and so both tracks have survived.

¹ *The Old Road*, p. 156.

A similar duplication has been noted on Hampshire trackways by Prof. Hawkes,¹ who regards the lower course as a "summer-way," but it is more likely in this case that our lower terraceway was most used in winter for the special reasons just mentioned.

In West Surrey a further duplication occurs, for west of Shere there is a convenient ridge of the greensand that forms ideal dry ground for a track. Here, therefore, runs a second ridgeway which forms the well-known course of the Pilgrims' Way by St. Martha's, Shalford, Compton and Seale. This ridge dies out at Shere, but before it does so there is at Weston Wood a very short north-south ridge connecting it to the chalk, which provides an ideal link to the lower terraceway, just at the point where this terraceway (so well marked there with its line of old yews) is crossed by the modern road up to Newlands Corner. The terraceway continues westward over Albury Downs and joins up with the main ridgeway above it at White Lane, Guildford, and from Guildford westwards there is no "lower terraceway," only the main ridgeway (Hog's Back) and the sand ridgeway above-mentioned. The short linking track (only 300 yards long) at Weston Wood, between the sand ridgeway and the lower terraceway, has apparently remained unnoticed by writers on these trackways, although it must have been of considerable importance to primitive traffic. Even our dear old friend Dr. Edwin Hart, who traced the lower terraceway here,² seems to have overlooked its significance, for he wanted a connection to the sand ridgeway and could suggest only a very vague diagonal route across the low wet ground below St. Martha's towards Shalford, which, I must confess, seemed very unconvincing.

The lower terraceway is very clear all along past Shere and Gomshall (as Dr. Hart has so well shown), but the route of the Pilgrims' Way as marked on the Ordnance Survey maps is a most confusing muddle if considered as a part of the prehistoric trackway (as here it ought not to be). A desire to include in the pilgrim route visits to Chantry Bridge in Shere, and the now ruined church at West Humble, led to the designation of a zig-zag series of lanes as "Pilgrims' Way" which have none of the characteristics of the main ancient trackway. No doubt such visits were paid at many shrines along the route by pilgrims, but no attempt has been made elsewhere to name all the side lanes so used "Pilgrims' Way," and it would seem best to drop the title from these deviations also, reserving it for the main trackway only. In any case, it must be understood that these local diversions have no relation to the main ancient trackways that we are considering.

The main ridgeway is perfectly clear all along these downs, and bears the name Drove Road between Newlands Corner and Ranmore Common. Passing north of Denbies, it descends direct to the crossing of the Mole at the Stepping Stones below Box Hill, a separate

¹ Hants Field Club, *Proc.*, Vol. IX, p. 324.

² *Sy.A.C.*, Vol. XLI, p. 30.

crossing-place from that at Pixholme Firs used by the lower terrace-way. As ancient trackways often do, it went straight up the shoulder of Box Hill, a very steep climb, but quite practicable for foot traffic, and then continued eastward along the ridge. At the top of Pebble Hill a short length of it has been obliterated by the enclosures of the Hermitage, but beyond these it forms parts of the traditional route of the Pilgrims' Way to Reigate Hill and beyond, as described by Dr. Hart.¹ Ridgeway and terraceway remain combined upon the ridge, owing to the form of the escarpment, right on from Merstham to Marden Park above Godstone, and from where they divide again, at Ganger's Hill, the ridgeway remains in use as a road right on to Tatsfield, becoming a derelict trackway just before reaching the church, which stands on the south side of the original track, now just a faint hollow across a field from Clark's Lane Farm. Beyond the church it continues as a field track till the Kent border is reached at Betsom's Hill.

Thus the main ridgeway is just as clearly marked as the better-known lower terraceway, and it is intended that both should be named "Ancient Trackway" on future editions of the maps, with the addition of "(Pilgrims' Way)" where appropriate.

¹ *Sy.A.C.*, Vol. XLI, p. 24.