

The Topography of Medieval Ewell and Cuddington: a Reply

by PHILIP SHEARMAN

The article by the late C. F. Titford in Vol. 69 of the *Collections* calls for some comment.

Much of the article stems from correspondence at the time of the preparation of the edition of the *Fitznells Cartulary*,¹ in which I was responsible for the topographical section, and wherever there was a known conflict of opinion with Titford, such evidence as existed was given in full, and a conclusion drawn from it. On the one point where there was some doubt, the acreage of Underhaghes, the problem was stated fully and the solution left open.

The main argument in Titford's article is that previous attempts at map-making have been mistaken due to failure to appreciate changes which took place between the 15th and 18th centuries, changes which altered the whole layout of the place. According to him, Epsom Road, South Street (now Cheam Road), High Street, the road to Cheam, the road to Walton, Mongers Lane, Ruxley Lane, the Portway and all the lanes have been wrongly identified.

As he says, any map of medieval road systems must be largely conjectural, and little more than diagrammatic. There are, however, certain points that should be kept in mind. The first is this: once the layout of an early settlement was established it rarely changed until modern times. Streets may have altered in importance, but any changes that were made were done for obvious reasons, and are generally well documented. Next, until modern times, streets and roads were not made; they grew up from use, and their line is so for obvious reasons. Again, medieval England was a very highly organised place, and it is extremely unlikely that streets within a vill would be altered by the tearing down of houses without some good reason, the event being well known and probably well documented. Even later on, when turnpike roads were made, they did not normally alter a village layout. A good example of this at Ewell is the Reigate Road, of 1755, going off at right angles at the end of the village. The case of Cuddington, where the whole village was destroyed to make way for Nonsuch Palace, is well known and documented. Hence, we have to be very careful in saying that such and such a road was made, or constructed, to take the place of another.

Titford says that between the 15th century and the end of the 18th the growth of through traffic had altered the character of the village; it was no longer an isolated farming community, but related to a wider world. Certain of the roads grew in importance, while the lanes served no longer as access

EWELL

A.D. 1577

MODERN ROADS IN BROKEN-LINES.

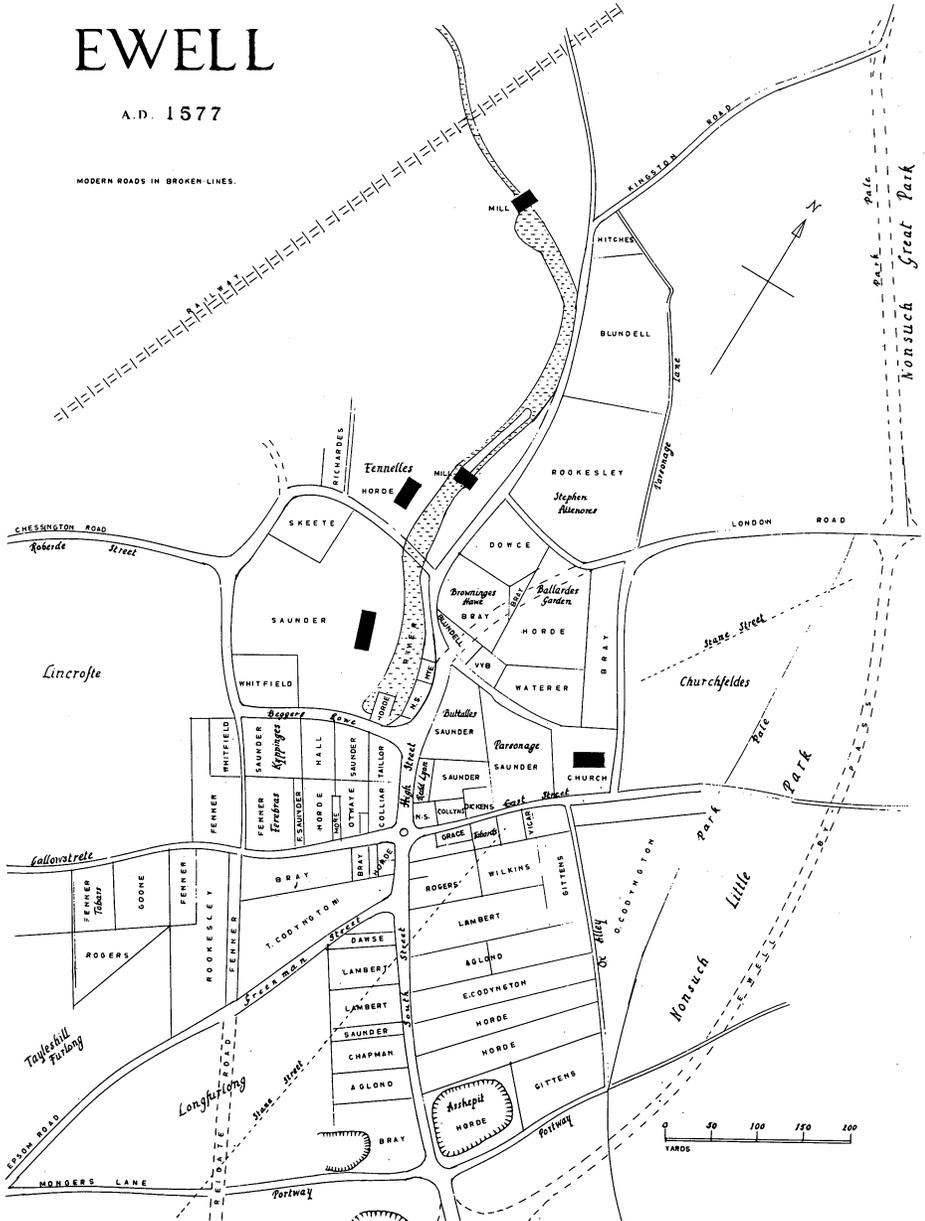


Fig. 1 Ewell in 1577

to the fields, but as links to the roads. Much of this is undoubtedly true. It is not true, however, to say that by 1802 the character of the area had changed radically. Ewell was still a small country village largely dependent on farming. It was not until later that such changes took place, and this is why the enclosure map of 1802 is so valuable, giving as it does the picture of the area before these changes.

Again, the picture of Ewell as subjected to a great amount of through traffic needs some modification. Before the turnpike era of the second half of the 18th century the only general increase of traffic was due to the rise of Epsom as a popular spa. This, however, was comparatively short-lived, from about 1670 to 1720. It is probable that the greatest increase in traffic occurred later on, in the great coaching era of the early 19th century.

Far from it being impossible to identify the medieval streets and lanes, the remarkable fact is the ease with which the documents of 1408² and 1577³ fit the present layout, and also that of 1802. All that is needed is an open mind and a willingness to accept the evidence of one's own eyes.

I would like to examine some of the detailed points raised by Titford. First, that part of the High Street sometime known as Greenman Street, the road to Epsom, was, he says, constructed in the latter part of the 17th century to serve the new town of Epsom; and South Street, that part of the present Cheam Road in the village, was moved to its present line some time between the 16th and 18th centuries. Now both of these are in the centre of the village, only some fifty yards from what was then the central cross-roads. It would appear, then, that during this period the village centre was twice torn apart for no apparent reason and without anyone considering the event worthy of mention. Such large-scale bulldozing operations, involving the pulling down of houses and the obliterating of their curtilages, must have involved a great deal of litigation, of which there seems to be no record; nor do we know who might conceivably have organised and carried out such an undertaking.

Regarding the Epsom Road, there is little reason to doubt that it is on its original line. The matter is dealt with in detail in *Fitznells Cartulary*, but may be summarized here. Titford's theory is that the original road, to the old village of Epsom, round the parish church, led from South Street (now Cheam Road), somewhat to the south of the present road, the latter having been made in the late 17th century as a result of the development of the new town of Epsom round the spa. This idea was enunciated by Miss Margaret Glyn in the *Register or Memorial of Ewell*,² with no evidence, and, so far as is known, by no one else. But the facts do not support this theory; the present road leaves the village not in the direction of the new Epsom, but the old; and the old road, as drawn by Miss Glyn on her map, and repeated by Titford on his, points towards the new town. She says: 'It is curious that the new Epsom road should have cut the former one almost at right angles. . . .'. Curious indeed. The present road turns off its line towards the new Epsom where one would expect it to, beyond the village, at the top of the hill, whence both the old and the new parts of Epsom were visible.

South Street, now part of the modern Cheam Road, also comes under Titford's demolition hammer. He says: '... the original line of [South Street] had lain on the higher ground four or five yards to the east of the present road', with a note to the effect that 'This has recently been confirmed when the wine store in Cheam Road was demolished. Although the modern frontage abutted on the modern road, its original frontage was found to have been on the opposite, eastern, side.' The discovery that the building had a jetty on the other side is not proof that the road ran on that side. Moreover, if the road was where Titford says it was, it was a good deal more than four or five yards away; nearer fifteen, in fact. And this, as we have seen, a mere fifty yards from the main cross-roads of the village, still surrounded by buildings of the early 17th century and probably earlier. If true, as we have said above, this must have caused a major upheaval in the very heart of the village.

Again, he says that the High Street, northward from the cross-roads to the Spring Hotel, some 200 yards, has been substantially altered. The springs rise in the northern part, where there was a water-splash, but wherever the road originally ran, it must have been somewhere under the present road, now substantially wider than it probably was in earlier times. As to the remaining 100 yards, this part is flanked by buildings of the 15th, 17th and 18th centuries, so it is difficult to understand Titford's assertion.

The original road to Cheam, as Titford correctly says, ran straight from the cross-roads, via the present Church Street, to Cuddington and on to Cheam, but was closed when Nonsuch Park was created in the 16th century. Consequently, anyone wishing to go to Cheam had to skirt the park pale. The present road to Cheam diverges from the original line of South Street at the end of the village, and was turnpiked in 1755, and there is no reason to believe that it is on any other than its original line. According to Titford, a new way was made by an extension of Ox Alley from the Portway. There is no evidence whatever that such was the case. It is probable, of course, that a footpath was established along the park pale, but it must be remembered that the Portway appears to have gone out of use as a highway by the 16th century, and by the time Nonsuch Park was made, the obvious way to Cheam was by East Street, now Church Street. It is possible that when this way was closed traffic might use Ox Alley, but there is nothing to show that this has ever been more than an alley. On the other hand, the obvious way to go round the park was from the end of South Street. It is possible that at first the way lay along the Portway and then sharp right along the park pale, but, human nature being what it is, there can be little doubt that very soon a short cut grew up across the 300 yards to the pale, as the road runs now. This possibility Titford ignores.

Because of Titford's known views of the line of the Portway, this was dealt with in some detail in *Fitznells Cartulary*, his views, as they were then known, being included. He firmly believed that an admittedly old path skirting the Glyn Grammar School grounds, and probably a boundary path, was in fact the Portway. As was pointed out in *Fitznells*, this would have in-

volved climbing over the ridge of the hill, down to the slough at the bottom of the other side, then back up the hill again, for no apparent reason; a quite impossible idea, only feasible if the further course of the Portway lay more to the northward, which is Titford's view, but is not generally accepted.

Further eastwards, he dismisses the notion of the Portway running between the pits, on the ground that only one survived to 1577. But when a pit ceases to be worked it does not cease to exist; it remains, however inconveniently for historians. Titford's ideas concerning Mongers Lane, too, deserve comment. He would have us believe that this was made as a result of the 1755 Turnpike Act, to join South Street with Reigate Road and Epsom Road. Titford is possibly correct here, and one might reasonably assume that such a road would follow the line of an existing track, if it existed. One such did exist, the Portway, and if Mongers Lane is, as Titford insists, not on the line of this, then why is it not on his supposed line, a few yards away?

Regarding West Street, there seems to be little justification for Titford's statement that 'in 1408 it ended some 200 yards from the Epsom boundary to which it was extended by Calowe-Strete running in a north-western direction'.

Titford also says that the medieval lanes cannot be identified. This is nonsense. They are still there for anyone to see who will use the *Register*, Taylor,³ and his own eyes. It is true that one or two are not easy to identify with certainty, but it is not clear on what grounds he disputes the identifications that have been made, nor where he thinks they should be.

He refers to 'the track now in part Ruxley Lane', which he says 'has been mistaken for 'the common way from Horton to Merton', which . . . cannot now be traced but must have crossed the river further south, probably by the packhorse bridge, and then followed the bank of the tributary from Cuddington to the 'highway to Merton' (London Road)'. He gives no grounds for stating that the identification of Ruxley Lane has been mistaken, nor is it clear why he should think so; Ruxley Lane is where one would suppose the road to be, and agrees with the known evidence. The road is stated to have crossed the Shawford fields, as did Ruxley Lane, while Titford's route crosses the Ewell demesnes. The packhorse bridge he mentions is an 18th century structure, connected with the powder-mills complex along the river.

Titford says that the northern boundary was moved northward between 1408 and 1577. There is no justification for so sweeping an assertion, based as it is solely on the mention in two Fitznell deeds of a Shawford mill as being in Long Ditton. The matter is discussed in the *Fitznells* introduction. There is no indication that the mill at Shawford (Ruxley), which was apparently to the south of the road, and not as Titford states, to the north, was ever in Long Ditton; moreover, there were considerable Shawford lands further north, with no mention of Long Ditton. It seems that there is some confusion here between the mill at Ruxley and a series of Long Ditton mills further north.

As to the southern boundary, considerably more research is needed to trace this. Most of Taylor's marks are not now identifiable, and we do not know how far the common fields extended towards the downs. Titford may be right, but he cannot be justified in saying that 'no such doubt arises with the southern boundary'. Titford's attempts to reconstruct the fields of medieval Cuddington must be treated with reserve, based as they are on very scanty evidence. Because of this, all the available evidence was listed in the *Fitznells* introduction, and the conclusions that could be firmly drawn from it. This did not amount to much. All else is mere conjecture, which, of course, is by no means to be condemned, and can probably contain a great deal of truth. Nevertheless, in our present state of knowledge it cannot be regarded as other than conjecture.

EWELL VILLAGE IN 1577

The map drawn to accompany my edition of Taylor's description of Ewell village in 1577 published in Vol. 54 of the *Collections*⁴ is unsatisfactory in a number of ways, not least in the acceptance, as mentioned above, of Miss Glyn's theory concerning the line of the Epsom Road and I have taken the opportunity to re-draw it (see Fig. 1).

Although, as already explained, the main outlines of the village can be correlated with its present plan, the plotting of the various tenements can be little more than conjecture. Taylor gives their relationship with one another, and their approximate acreage, but in very few cases is it possible to define their boundaries. We have to remember that medieval man lived close to nature; consequently he abhorred a straight line. Moreover, his knowledge of direction was limited to the four cardinal points of the compass. All this leads to some difficulty when trying to understand the written description of, say, a roughly triangular field running more or less NE-SW, and its relationship with equally oddly placed neighbours. Inevitably, interpretations are bound to differ to some degree, but until further evidence is forthcoming this must be accepted.

REFERENCES

- 1 *Fitznells Cartulary*. Edited by C. A. F. Meekings and P. Shearman. (SyRS, 26) 1968
- 2 *The Register or Memorial of Ewell*. Ed. C. Deedes, 1913
- 3 GMR 10/158, Survey of Ewell by Thomas Taylor, 1577
- 4 Shearman, P. 'Ewell in 1577'. *SyAc*, 54, 102-23