

The Mere Bank, Croydon: a lost and forgotten earthwork

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Introduction

During the development of Croydon Airport after the First World War, it was necessary to level some of the surrounding land. This entailed the loss of a landscape, which for centuries had seen little change except from the actions of farming. Whilst the area of the airport was relatively flat, there was one particular feature that stood out and had to be removed. This was the Mere Bank, a linear earthwork of some three kilometres in length which crossed the high ground of the airport area.¹ Although most of the earthwork was destroyed in 1917, it has nevertheless continued to engender questions about its origin and purpose (Fig 1).

The straight alignment and route of the Mere Bank across the high ground from Purley to the River Wandle at Waddon, Croydon, has traditionally marked the boundary between the Surrey parishes of Croydon and Beddington.² Beginning its course at Russell Hill, Purley, the bank crossed the present Highfield Road and passed the short length of nearby Overhill Road before reaching Stafford Road (B271) beyond the airport area. Arriving at Merebank Lane, the earthwork continued its northerly alignment and course, crossing the Croydon Road (A232) to meet with the Bridle Path alongside the River Wandle at Aldwick Road, Waddon (Fig 2).

On approaching the River Wandle the earthwork utilised a ridge of ground, locally known as the Ridgeway, which gave the feature added height on reaching the river.³ Here it terminated as a cliff-like feature (Fig 3, Fig 4). However, the parish boundary continued its course across the river, maintaining the alignment of the bank for a point at Mitcham Common, passing Waddon Marsh on the way.⁴ Although modern events have caused

the destruction of the earthwork, a small section, albeit degraded, appears to have survived as a low broad bank at the bottom of Russell Hill (Fig 5). Whether the earthwork continued from here southward towards the Purley Gap and beyond to the high ground of the Riddlesdown area seems unlikely, as the Mere Bank appears to be primarily a feature of the high-level ground of what became Croydon Airport.

The placing of the Mere Bank appears to have some meaning, running as it does over a flat landscape in a topography that offered widespread views of the surrounding countryside (Fig 6). At both ends of the earthwork and in the surrounding areas, archaeology has shown a range of settlement activity from prehistoric to Saxon. Whether this activity has any

association with the earthwork is conjectural but nevertheless, it seems that early people had an interest in this landscape. Before its destruction, the Mere Bank had marked out a long section of parish boundary, but whether this was its original purpose remains uncertain. Moreover, the construction of the bank was an impressive feat and seemingly more than required to mark such a boundary.

Investigating its past

To determine the nature, construction and age of the Mere Bank, a feature which measured some 9m in width and 1.2m in height, a number of investigations took place prior to its final destruction. In 1917, the opportunity arose to study the construction of the bank during the building of the National Aircraft Works



Fig 1: aerial view of Croydon Aerodrome looking south-west c. 1932, showing the flat open landscape which the Mere Bank crossed from Purley to Waddon. The newly opened Purley Way (in front of the aerodrome buildings), which incorporated Coldharbour Lane, heads south. The faint trace of what appears be the line of the Mere Bank can be seen behind the buildings and running parallel with the Purley Way.

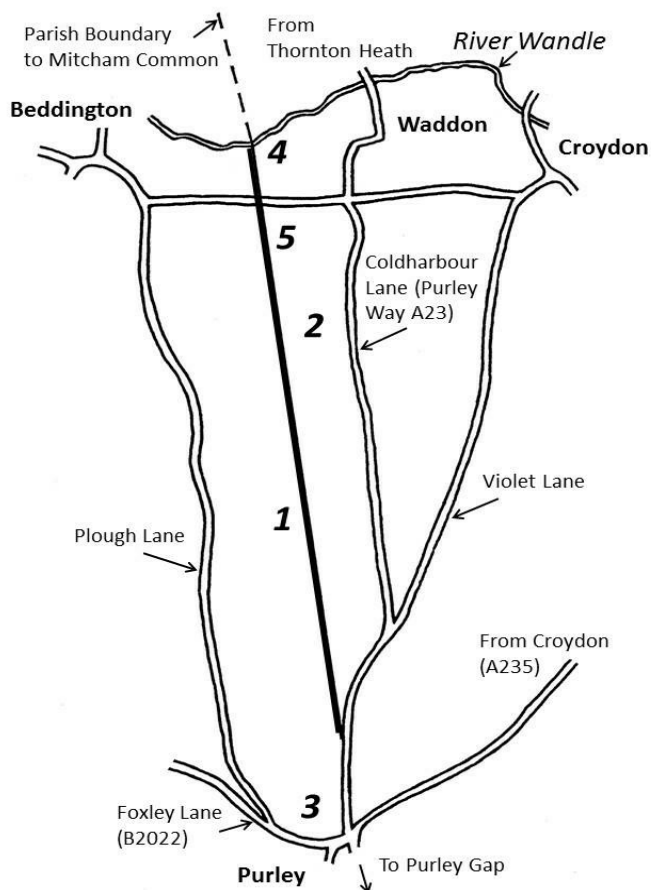


Fig 2: schematic location map showing the historical road pattern on approach to the Purley Gap and the position of the Mere Bank, based on the OS map of Surrey, Sheet VIII (1819); (1) Mere Bank; (2) Area of Croydon Airport; (3) Russell Hill; (4) Aldwick Road; (5) Merebank Lane.

at Stafford Road, Croydon.⁵ Other than deposits indicating repairs to the bank, little else was found, although it was noted that the earthwork was without foundations. There was also no indication of the bank being a road as previously thought.

Later, in 1925, further studies were made of the earthwork during additional ground-levelling work at the airport. Sections cut through the bank revealed a top level of earth and gravel sitting upon a layer of rammed chalk. Below this, and lying on the local clay, was a bed of flints some 15cm to 20cm thick, which in one place reached a width of 4.3m.

From these results and observations came the opinion that the bank was the *agger* of a Roman road, a supposition supported by I D Margary.⁶ This was not unexpected, as a number of ancient routes crossed the flat open space of the airport area, now marked by various housing and commercial developments

bank to see if it was indeed a road.

These revealed the existence of a raised feature with accompanying side ditches, but there was no evidence indicating a metalled road surface and no dating materials were forthcoming, except for modern finds. At the same time, the opportunity was taken to confirm the route of the nearby London–Portslade Roman road which crossed the playing fields. A trench was therefore cut across the line of Violet Lane, but evidence for this particular Roman road was absent.⁸

Historical references

Even after these investigations, the Mere Bank still presented a problem regarding its origin and purpose, a situation compounded by the dearth of early references to the earthwork. Even the name ‘Mere Bank’ is a relatively modern name, with the earliest known reference appearing in 1858.⁹ As we can see in the name there is the use of

and the open spaces of Roundshaw and Purley Way Playing Fields.⁷ One of these routes in particular has attracted interest. This was Violet Lane, a trackway thought to follow the projected line of the London–Portslade Roman road from Broad Green, North Croydon to the gap in the North Downs at Purley. This uncertainty about the nature of the Mere Bank saw a further investigation take place in 1978, when an excavation took place at Overhill Road, close to Russell Hill. This entailed the opening of three trenches across the line of the

the Old English word *mere*, taken either from *gemære/mære* for boundary, or from *mere*, a lake. This apparently contrived name not only alludes to the boundary, but also to the watery nature of the Waddon area, noted historically for its marshland and ponds. But whether the name is of great age is doubtful and it appears to be a fanciful Victorian invention.

Fortunately, we do have earlier references to the boundary, found in 1503 and in 1526, when it is referred to as the Waddon Mark.¹⁰ Here the use of the Old English word *mearc* for boundary is made and linked to the place-name Waddon, a hamlet and manor of Croydon parish. This association probably derived from some form of manorial or parochial obligations to maintain the bank by local inhabitants. On the other hand, it could simply be that Waddon was the closest settlement to the boundary. However, as the two early dates show, the name was in use during the medieval period and was to survive as a name until at least 1812, when shown on the Beddington estate map.¹¹

By the middle of the 19th century the name had gone, and the more appealing name Mere Bank appeared, probably along with the gentrification of the local countryside.

A prehistoric origin?

Often with such earthworks, we tend to attribute them to the work of prehistoric people, whose activities are well known in the Croydon and Sutton area. Hence, when looking at the Mere Bank, we are inclined to see such an origin, particularly when looking at its position in the landscape, and its size and length.

The possibility that the Mere Bank does have a prehistoric origin came in 2007, when archaeological investigations took place at 57 Croydon Road, Beddington, previously the site of a chocolate factory.¹² From these excavations came evidence showing early settlement activity, beginning in the Mesolithic and extending into the Late Bronze Age and early Saxon periods. Interest comes with the finding of nine Saxon graves, dated from the 5th to 7th centuries, and the discovery of a substantial ditch. This was a linear ditch, measuring 24.3m x 2.7m wide x



Fig 3: view looking south with Aldwick Road and the Bridle Path to Mill Lane, Waddon behind the trees. The terminus of the Mere Bank/Ridgeway (left) can be seen above the River Wandle at Waddon. The bank does not continue beyond this point.

1.25m and U-shaped in profile. It was dated to the Late Bronze Age. Most importantly, the ditch was found close to, and roughly parallel with, the projected line of the Mere Bank, as it progressed across the factory site to its terminus at the River Wandle. If indeed the ditch is associated with the Mere Bank, which its size and position suggests, we may well be looking at a linear earthwork originating in the Bronze Age.

If we were to assume a Bronze Age date for the bank's origin, we need to find some context for its existence. For this, we can suggest the nearby Late Bronze Age circular enclosure sited at Carshalton, located 3.3 km away to the west.¹³ This settlement is one of the largest of its kind in south-east England, and as such, would have the command to construct such an earthwork. The bank's purpose may have been an outer boundary to the settlement, or a defensive feature, linking the natural elements of the River Wandle and associated marshlands and waters with the edge of the high ground at Russell Hill, Purley.

We may even speculate further

and seek a ritual origin for the feature, knowing the religious predilection of prehistoric people for watery places and open landscapes. The River Wandle would have had that attraction as it flowed across the flat countryside

associated with this part of south London, where springs, ponds and marshes were part of the natural environment.¹⁴ More so, we can appreciate the significance in the siting of the bank, which delineates the flat open landscape that marks the chalk topography to the west of Croydon. There is little doubt that the bank would have been an obvious feature in the landscape, viewable from a distance especially from the surrounding high ground and particularly if built of chalk upon which much of it lay.

Or Saxon is possible?

Having postulated a prehistoric origin for the Mere Bank we should not, however, neglect a later origin. A Saxon boundary marking out new or established land holdings as Saxon settlement unfolded across the area is a possibility. Another would be the marking out of a parish boundary. This particular use ensured the survival of the Mere Bank as a landmark into modern times, visually securing part of the parish boundary between Croydon and Beddington, and probably the limits of local manorial estates. As commonly known, parish boundaries can be of great age, incorporating in their configurations the bounds of earlier land holdings. Perhaps the



Fig 4: the high ground of the bank above the River Wandle (left), with the flat area of Richmond Green, Waddon (right)

Mere Bank, a noticeable feature in the landscape, found a new use when parishes and their boundaries were being formed.¹⁵

As the archaeological record testifies, early Saxon activity in the area is known from the burials found at Mitcham, Beddington and Croydon, as well as in the vicinity of the Mere Bank at its northern end. Furthermore, activity also occurred close to the southern terminus of the bank at Russell Hill, a designated archaeological zone. Here, in the vicinity of the hill, numerous Saxon burials with grave goods and weapons were unearthed in 1854 and later. In addition, at nearby Overhill and Highfield Roads, excavations revealed Bronze Age activity with the finding of burials and pottery, further illustrating the association of early people with the locality of the bank.¹⁶

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the Mere Bank has a tinge of mystery. As we can appreciate, there is no certainty as to its age, context, or who built it and why. It was a pronounced feature in the landscape, presumably extant for centuries, and almost totally ignored in the historic record. Only on the eve of

its destruction was interest aroused, manifesting more in curiosity than in serious study. Even when standing the earthwork drew scant attention, save for acquiring its modern title.

Surprisingly, it even escaped the attention of 19th-century antiquarians in their explorations of Surrey's prehistory. Seemingly, the Mere Bank was overlooked or simply ignored. Maybe it was considered to be of no great age, raised in recent centuries to emphasise the parish boundary. Yet its near absence from the records is indeed strange. Perhaps this was due to its low and flattish profile, which gave the bank the appearance of a raised roadway, and nothing more.¹⁷

This comes as no surprise. As mentioned, crossing the airport area were a number of old roadways. These headed south to Russell Hill and then down towards the Godstone Road (A22), to make for the gap in the North Downs a short distance on. Other than Violet Lane taking this direction, there was also Coldharbour Lane, a cross-country route which came from the direction of Thornton Heath via Waddon. Plough Lane was another route, which came from Mitcham and Beddington.

As these routes approached Russell

Hill, they met with the Mere Bank, and also with Foxley Lane. This was another route which focused on Russell Hill, and came in from the west. As these old roads tell us, the hill was a marker in the landscape, attracting people as they created their routes south through the North Downs and beyond to the Weald of Surrey and Sussex in early times.¹⁸

Whatever the case, the Mere Bank escaped the usual study given to an earthwork purporting to be of some age. Its disappearance from the landscape saw it fade from memory, drawing only a comment or two in the histories and archaeological literature of the area.¹⁹ When mentioned it is usually passed as being a Roman road or a Saxon boundary bank. Equally, it could have been built for defence or ritual, stock herding or status, or simply as a gentleman's folly.

Without the test of archaeology, discovering the origins and purpose of the Mere Bank will, for the time being, be an exercise in possibilities. Nevertheless, continued exploration of the origin and purpose of the Mere Bank may well widen our knowledge of early people, and how they interacted with the environment in this part of South London – if indeed the bank can claim such antiquity.

But if we are to seek an answer for the origin and purpose of the bank, we may well find it in the Late Bronze Age with the discovery of that U-shaped ditch found close to the line of the bank. This find, and the nearby location of the hill enclosure at Carshalton, strongly suggests some association. A defensive line possibly, an outer boundary maybe, but whatever it was, the earthwork made a statement in the landscape. It divided the landscape by linking two well-defined physical features, Russell Hill at Purley and the River Wandle and marshlands at Waddon; places selected for the advantage of maximising the purpose of the bank. Its prominence in the landscape and use as a parish boundary assured its survival over time. But what was left of the bank for those early 20th-century observers was probably the vestige of a once substantial earthwork. Although no more, the earthwork is



Fig 5: view of what seems to be a degraded section of the Mere Bank as it traverses down Russell Hill to terminate at the junction of Purley Way with Foxley Lane. The footpath on the left is Coldharbour Lane with Russell Hill Road on the right side of the bank.



Fig 6: view looking north towards Waddon showing the wide, flat and open landscape which the Mere Bank crossed. The high-rise buildings of Croydon (far right), the open space that was once part of the airport area (foreground) and the Norwood heights culminating in the Crystal Place ridge (distance) can be seen.

remembered locally, with the naming of Mere Bank Lane and with what appears to be a remaining length of the bank on the southern slope of Russell Hill. With the origin and purpose of the Mere Bank debatable, it will be incumbent upon further study, aided by the discipline of archaeology, to obtain

a clearer picture of this tantalising relic of the ancient Surrey landscape.

Acknowledgement

The map was produced by the author and all photographs were either taken by the author or came from his collection of old images.

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1. Croydon airport opened in 1920 and closed in 1959. It was the amalgamation of Beddington and Waddon aerodromes, opened in 1915 and 1918 respectively.
2. It remains the present boundary for the London Boroughs of Croydon and Sutton.
3. The name Ridgeway may be alluding to the Mere Bank and was perhaps an alternative name for the earthwork.
4. Meeting with Mitcham Common close to Wingate Crescent.
5. *Proc and Trans of the Croydon Natural Hist and Scientific Soc (CNHSS)* 8 (1918) cxxx.
6. Major Dunning 'a small but consequential discovery of a Roman road on Croydon Aerodrome' in a report in the *Daily Telegraph*, 28th Nov 1925, quoted in I D Margary 'The London, Croydon, Portslade Roman Road' *Surrey Archaeol Coll (SAC)* 45 (1937) 116–139; A F Major found no evidence of the bank being a road 'On Surrey, London, and the Saxon Conquest'. *CNHSS* 9 (1920) 24.
7. This flat open area has been variously known as Waddon Fields, Waddon Down and Croydon Down.
8. R W Savage 'Excavations on Croydon Downs, 1978' *CNHSS* XVI (9) (1980) 304–312; Compass Archaeology *Surrey Street Well Replacement Scheme, Purley Way Playing Fields Section* LB Croydon (2006). The stretch of Violet Lane which crossed the playing

fields went out of use following the opening of Purley Way in 1925.

9. C W Johnson. 'Mere Bank, or ancient raised ridge' *Notices of Cold Harbour, Croydon SAC I* (1858).

10. H M Gowans 'Courts and Manors of Bandon and Beddington. 1498–1552' LB Sutton Local Studies & Archives Centre (1983) 15, 53.

11. Indenture. Robert Carew to Daniel Richard of Waddon. 1812. Ref. I/3426; Beddington Estate Map. 1812. Ref. VI/257. LB Lambeth Archives Department.

12. Archaeology South-East *Archaeological Investigation at Payne's Poppets (Former Chocolate Factory)* 57 Croydon Road, Beddington (2008).

13. Wessex Archaeology *Former Queen Mary's Hospital, Carshalton, London*. Archaeological Evaluation Report (2008). Scheduled Monument (SM163).

14. The River Wandle would have been a substantial feature in the prehistoric landscape, as opposed to what we see today. The Wandle Group *The River Wandle: Guide and Handbook* LB Sutton Public Libraries (1974).

For a geological background of the River Wandle see D S Peake 'The Ground upon which Croydon was built. A reappraisal of the Pleistocene history of the River Wandle and its basin' *CNHSS* 17 (1982).

15. A certain Aelfie was the priest of Croydon in AD 960 and presumably a parish church had been established. Victoria County History 'Croydon:

Borough, manors, churches and charities' in *A History of the County of Surrey* 4 (1912) 217–228. See British History Online: www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/surrey/vol4/pp217-228 (accessed Feb 2016)

16. Russell Hill, previously called Beggar's Bush, designated Archaeological Priority Zone 28. *Croydon Local Plan* LB Croydon (2013); Dr Shorthouse reported on the finds of skeletons at Beggar's Bush *Surrey Archaeol. Coll.* 7 (1880) xxxvi–xxxvii; J Morris 'A Gazetteer of Anglo-Saxon Surrey' *Surrey Archaeol. Coll.* 56 (1959) 132–158; Wessex Archaeology 66 Highfield Road, Purley Archaeological Desk Based Assessment (2007).

17. A photograph of the Mere Bank, captioned: 'Mere Bank. Boundary between Croydon & Beddington. Taken from Stafford Road' (1908), can be seen in *A Photo Survey of Surrey Croydon* Local Studies Library. Ref. PH/97/10520.

18. Coldharbour Lane became part of the Purley Way in 1925. This route joined Violet Lane just before meeting with the Mere Bank on approaching Russell Hill. Part of the southern section of Plough Lane was closed for the development of the airport. See OS Surrey, Sheet VIII (1819) for the pattern of roads heading for the Purley Gap prior to modern times.

19. Mere Bank has been recognised as an Archaeological Priority Area (APA9). Local Development Framework, Borough Heritage Study. LB Sutton (2009).