

# Westbury Causeway

HISTORIC LANDSCAPE REPORT / February 2012

**Buckinghamshire  
Archaeological  
Society**



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AND  
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Survey, Report and Photographs by Nigel Wilson. This is report number BAS/2012-08.



**FIGURE 1:** *The old causeway crossing the fields south-west of the former Westbury Mill.*

## **1 THE SITE**

### **1.1 Location**

This former causeway, or raised footpath, crosses low-lying fields on the north bank of the River Great Ouse about half a mile south-west of the Buckinghamshire village of Westbury. The village is six miles west of Buckingham on the main A422 road to Brackley.

The footpath of which the former causeway was part leads from Westbury south to Mixbury, crossing the river on a modern concrete bridge. Today the footpath runs alongside the causeway because its ruinous state renders it largely unusable, though the footpath itself is still in use.

The Ordnance Survey national grid reference for the causeway is SP 354617.

### **1.2 Topography**

The footpath of which the causeway was part passes Westbury Mill and its millpond, and crosses two former leats (man-made water channels or mill races) which once fed the mill's waterwheels.

The fields through which the causeway passes are part of the flood-plain of the River Great Ouse and may once have been watermeadows. The ground rises to the north-west.

## **2: HISTORIC CONTEXT**

What remains of the causeway, originally of stone but much repaired, is essentially undateable except by reference to other local structures. The main part of the Westbury Mill building, now converted into apartments, dates from 1860,<sup>1</sup> but an earlier mill is recorded on the site in 1608.<sup>2</sup>

There are signs of medieval ridge-and-furrow and hollow-ways in nearby fields. The causeway is not a scheduled historic monument.

### 3: THE REVIEW OF FEBRUARY 2012

The site was visited on Sunday 26th February around midday. The sky was overcast but conditions were dry.

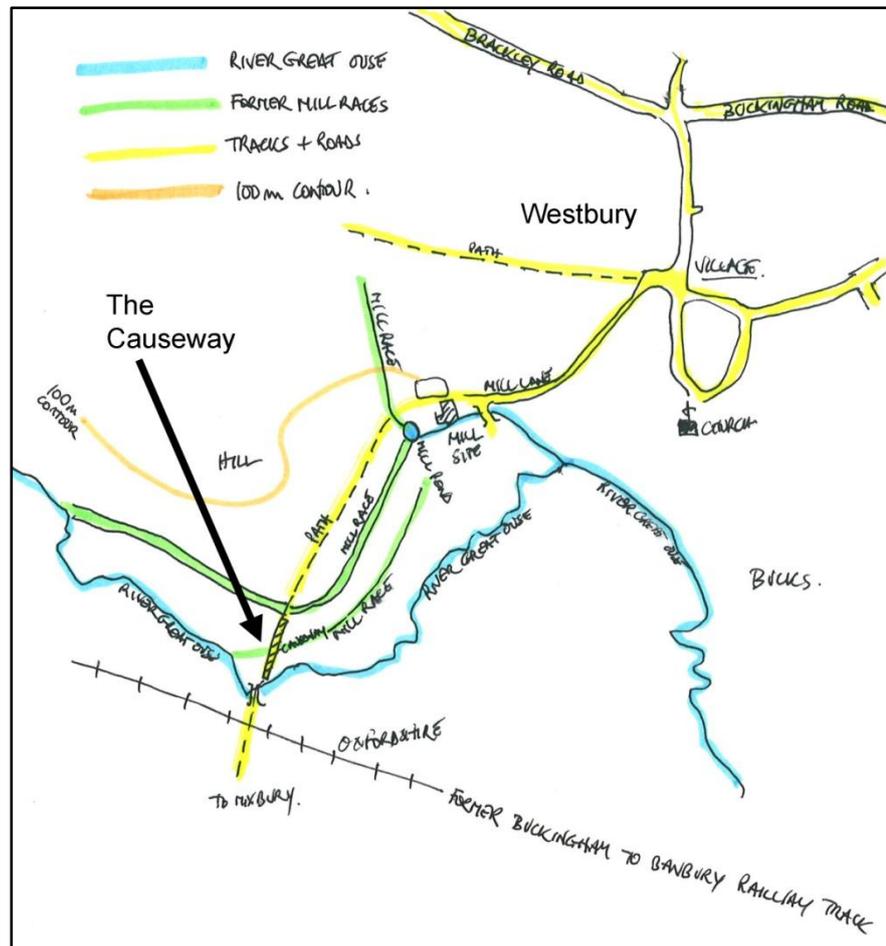
#### 3.1 The Causeway

The causeway is part of a landscape whose shape has been determined by two major influences: the nearby River Great Ouse and the need for a reliable water supply to drive the water wheel (or wheels) at Westbury Mill.

When in use, the causeway provided a route across this landscape from the Mill on the outskirts of Westbury, past the millpond, across two leats, and to the bridge over the river (see Figure 2).

Between the Mill and the causeway is a large field that comprises a hill, pasture and water-meadows. The causeway is aligned with the retaining wall of the mill-pond but, given that these are about half a mile apart, this suggests a coincidence brought about by the lie of the land.

The causeway itself is no more than three feet wide. Its construction was originally of limestone slabs and cornbrash, a local form of coarse limestone (see Figure 3). This is a long-established local



**FIGURE 2: A sketch plan showing the position of the causeway in the fields to the south- west of Westbury Mill and village.**



**FIGURE 3: A section of the causeway showing its original construction of limestone blocks topped with limestone slabs.**

building method which is also noted in early stone structures such as parish churches. In itself it is not dateable.

Some parts of the causeway are old, suggestive of dry-stone walling, but other parts are relatively modern because they have been repaired in concrete. It includes

paving slabs of the 1930s and, in places, vitreous drainage pipes which may also be from the first half of the 20th century (see Figure 4).

The structure is very decrepit, having suffered badly from the elements, recent neglect and possibly abuse (see Figure 5). A blown elder hedge runs along beside it suggesting a former Inclosure boundary.



**FIGURE 4 (above): A 20th-century repair with concrete slabs and vitreous pipes.**



**FIGURE 5: A derelict section showing neglect or, at worst, vandalism.**

The causeway extends along the side of the present bridle-path to Mixbury. A new concrete bridge takes the bridle path over the River Great Ouse. Visual evidence on the Mixbury bank suggests that a related structure, possibly a narrow stone foot-bridge comprised of limestone slabs, once straddled the river at this point. The Mixbury bank slopes strongly upward.



**FIGURE 6: The infilled leat and rubble deposit.**

The causeway also crosses the smaller of the two former leats mentioned above which may account in part for the drainage pipes inserted at intervals in its base. The larger leat has been filled in just before it meets the causeway by a large deposit of rubble which has given breadth and substance to the bridleway (see Figure 6).

The existence of this stone structure suggests an attempt to create an elevated pedestrian way across a water-meadow that flooded from time to time. Its narrow width suggests more a broad low wall than a causeway but it must have served that purpose.

### **3.2 The river and watercourses**

The course of the River Great Ouse has not been subject to any great alteration. It can be seen that at least one point a watercourse has been cut to draw water from the river. An outflow channel was also cut from the mill-wheel back into the river alongside what are now school playing-fields.

However the original mill was supplied with water from a source other than the River Great Ouse. This came from a spring situated on the hill above the mill, along which the Brackley Road now runs. The fall from this spring is quite sharp but the stream may have flowed only intermittently (see Figure 7). It was largely dry when examined.

It was apparent that two other water channels had also been dug at different times to draw water to the millpond from other sources, possibly from the river. Two channels have been cut in large curves around the contour of the hill to the south-west of the mill, bringing water from the west.

The larger and presumably later of these leats, that to the south, now resembles a hollow-way. The structure of this larger watercourse suggests that it was built using canal technology. The source of this channel was not investigated due to field boundaries but may have tapped into another spring rather than the river. The other much smaller channel appears as a dry stream bed.

Both of these channels are now filled in. The mill outflow now caters only for the original stream which, from the evidence of standing water, must still run intermittently downhill.



**FIGURE 7: A section of the earliest mill stream.**



**FIGURE 8: Remains of the millpond.**

### **3.3 The Millpond**

The retaining wall of the millpond was in part built up by layers of limestone slabs in the local manner but in later years it has been strengthened by brick and concrete casings. Some of these casings have fallen away and some breeze block has been recently inserted. The pond and its retaining wall now look like an abandoned site.

### **3.4 The Mill**

The remaining 19th-century mill building has been converted into modern apartments. Around it there has been much recent housing development and this seems ongoing. There were many new gates and signs, with declarations that this was 'private property'. There was no sign of livestock.

The mill's original waterwheel must have been some way from the remaining mill building. Its site is now under modern demolition rubble. A brief inspection of this work platform showed sequences of demolition followed by re-concreting over many years.

### 3.4.1 Stanley Freese's account of Westbury Mill

Stanley Freese surveyed both windmills and watermills in Buckinghamshire, both working and defunct, when he and his brother toured the county by bicycle during the 1930s from their base in Great Missenden.<sup>3</sup> This included Westbury Mill.

Freese recorded the mill as 'large, four-storeyed, chiefly of stone with some brick facings, situate at the bottom of Mill Lane, a little steep track leading from the village.

... The stream, approaching almost from the south, passes beneath the main

wing, where it turned an all-iron closed breast-wheel'. Originally, however, 'the stream, embanked to form a long mill race, drove an old wooden wheel'.<sup>4</sup>



**FIGURE 9: The mill in 1936, with the millrace arch visible.**<sup>8</sup>

The *Victoria County History* records a mill on this site in 1608,<sup>5</sup> but at the time of Freese's survey: 'The older parts of the present structure were erected about 1860 by Mr Chapman, uncle of the last miller, to replace an ancient little grist mill which John Treadwell father or grandfather of the Radcliffe miller had in 1798; and the latest portion dates from 1890'.<sup>6</sup>

The mill was no longer entirely water-driven after 1890, when a condensing steam engine had been added. When Freese visited in the 1940s the mill had been 'entirely cleared out' in September 1939, and was 'used as a factory'.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4: When was the causeway built?**

The age of the causeway is unclear. Its original stone work of limestone slabs cornbrash being essentially undateable. However the construction of the causeway may relate to one stage or other of the development of the mill merely because it has been erected at some cost, perhaps by a landowner or the parish.

The causeway's narrow width is consistent with enclosure tracks which were much discouraged by the landowners of Inclosure period. Being on the direct route from Mixbury it could have been put in place to assist members of the mill workforce from there in getting to work during wet weather.

The causeway may have been built towards the end of the 18th century, probably concurrently with one of the developments of the mill. It may originally have been a more elaborate structure but has come down in the world. For a long time now it has been no more than a property boundary.

#### **5: Possible further research**

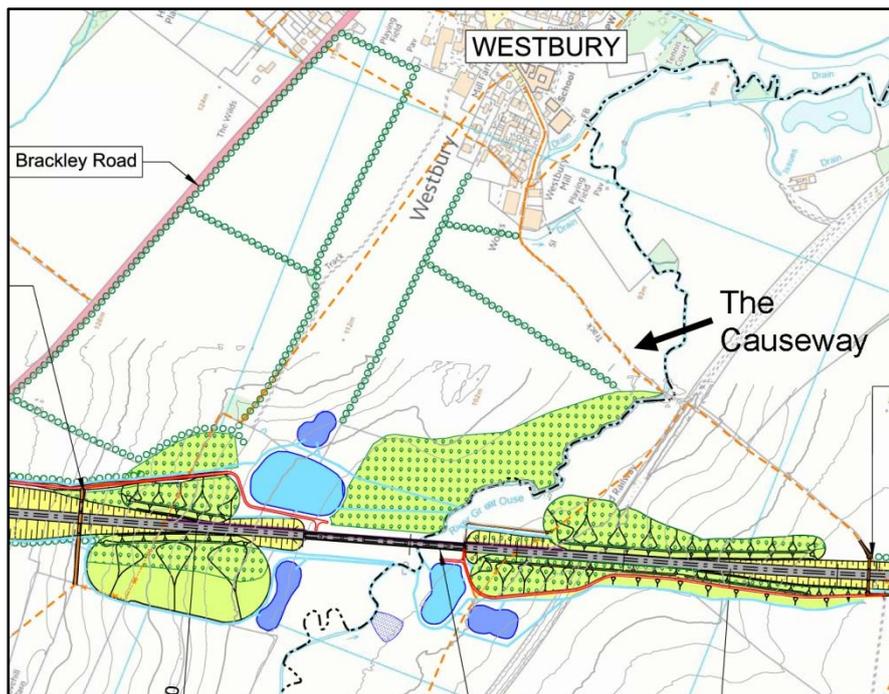
More light may be shed on the original construction of the causeway, and its relation to the development of Westbury Mill and its watercourses, by research in the Westbury Inclosure record, any tithe maps for the parish, and any record of the mill before abolition of the Corn Laws.

## **POSTSCRIPT 2014:**

### **The effect of the HS2 high-speed rail line on Westbury Causeway**

The planned route of the HS2 high-speed rail line between London and Birmingham crosses the River Great Ouse about 300 metres to the west of the point where the causeway reaches the bridge over the river.

The projected effect on the local landscape, according to HS2 Limited, the line's planners, is shown on the plan (Figure 10). The line, running right-to-left in the lower half of the plan, crosses the river valley on a 350-metre viaduct. This is supported on both sides of the river by huge embankments.



**FIGURE 10: The Projected line of HS2 south of Westbury.**<sup>9</sup>

If this plan is followed, the causeway itself will escape damage. The green stippled areas are to be planted woodland or scrub, intended to screen the lines from nearby Westbury and Mixbury. As the plan shows, these will stop short of the causeway itself, which follows the orange broken line indicated.

What the plan omits to show is the access areas required for construction and engineering plant and equipment during the building of the line. This may yet affect the causeway.

Peter Marsden / 11 September 2014

## **REFERENCES**

1. Stanley Freese, *The Watermills of Buckinghamshire: A 1930s account*, edited by Michael Farley, Edward Legg and James Venn (Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society, Aylesbury 2007) page 9.
2. 'Parishes: Westbury', in *A History of the County of Buckinghamshire*, volume 4 (1927), known as the *Victoria County History* (VCH). URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=62581> (date accessed 7 September 2014).
3. James Venn, 'Stanley Freese 1902-1972', in Freese, page vi.
4. Freese, page 9.
5. VCH Buckinghamshire, volume 4. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=62581>
6. Freese, page 9.
7. Freese, page 9.
8. Westbury Mill in 1936, from the Buckinghamshire Photographs Collection at the Centre for Bucks Studies, Aylesbury (photograph number wes0003).
9. Section of HS2 Drawing number C222-ATK-CV-DPP-020-000011 (HS2 Limited, December 2013).