

AN IMPORTANT EARLY VALLEY ROUTE THROUGH THE CHILTERNNS

J. F. HEAD, F.S.A.

From Bourne End a continuous chain of valleys, fourteen miles long, leads through the hills to Princes Risborough, thereby linking directly those two most important early lines of communication—the Thames and the Upper Icknield Way. No other pass through the Chilterns existed to connect these two great highways of early times.

The purpose of this paper is first to stress the importance of this Bourne End—Princes Risborough valley route and the evidence for its use by early man. Secondly, with the archaeologically destructive nature of modern development in mind, to emphasize the need for a close and constant watch for new archaeological evidence which may come to light along its course.

The line of the route approximates to that of the railway which until recently connected Bourne End with Princes Risborough. From Bourne End and the neighbouring Thames-side areas it passes up the valley of the Wye to the outskirts of West Wycombe, where, curving northwestwards below the Iron Age hillfort, it continues between the hills, past Bradenham and Saunderton Lee, to widen finally to a head on the rising ground and broad open gap in the escarpment at Princes Risborough. There—a focal point for trade and culture—it meets the Upper Icknield on its way from East Anglia to Wessex. Abundant finds, which include large dug-out boats from Wooburn and Marlow, testify to the importance and use of the Thames as a trade and traffic route from the earliest times. Equally, finds along the course of the Upper Icknield Way—a natural trackway yoked to the footslopes of the northern face of the chalk belt, and crossing the Lowland Zone from north-east to south-west—witness to its use as a most important route for early movement. (Even as late as A.D. 871 it served as a “herestraet” for a Danish army: in A.D. 1066, William advanced along its line to receive the submission of the English nobles at Berkhamsted.)

Here we may pause to note the wealth of evidence for early settlement along the course of the Upper Icknield north-east of the Risborough Gap; in the Gap; and in the valley route itself. And then compare it with the scarcity of such evidence after Icknield has passed the Gap on its way to the Ewelme region, and the Goring-Streatley river crossing.¹ For example, between Ivinghoe and the Risborough Gap—a distance of some twelve miles—no less than five Iron Age hillforts cap the heights while two more occur along our valley route itself.²

¹ The Roman building below Hempton Wainhill in Bledlow parish, and the barrows and Iron Age settlement near the Bledlow-Chinnor parish boundary above it, clearly form part of the Risborough Gap complex.

² Ivinghoe, Cholesbury, Halton, the Kimbles (2), West Wycombe and Desborough Castle.

Yet between Risborough and Streatley—an approximately similar distance—not a hillfort appears to exist. Nor do Roman villas³ or other substantial Roman buildings appear along this Oxfordshire stretch of the Upper Icknield⁴—again in marked contrast to the numerous examples that occur between Ivinghoe and Risborough, and in our valley route besides. In Berkshire, on the other side of the Thames, the pattern of hillforts, settlements and villas is resumed.

It would be outside the scope of this paper to discuss and suggests reasons for the comparative absence of settlement along the Oxfordshire section of the Upper Icknield Way, but it is to be hoped that in due course archaeologists will give this interesting problem their attention.

The importance of the valley route to early man is borne out in a striking manner by the archaeological distribution map, Fig. 1. This is a composite map compiled by Mrs. Catherine Hassall from the individual distribution maps Nos. iii-viii which, with the relevant references, accompany the writer's *Early Man in South Buckinghamshire*.⁵ I am deeply indebted to Mrs. Hassall for her constant interest, and the time and trouble she has taken in preparing the map.

With Fig. 1 before us, we shall touch only on general distributions, and a few salient or unusual features in each period such as the round barrow assignable to the early second millennium B.C., situated near the Whiteleaf Cross turf-cutting, immediately above the Upper Icknield Way. An excavation of this barrow—a kidney-shaped affair within a circular ditch—was begun in 1934 by the late Sir Lindsay Scott, and continued by him until the outbreak of war in 1939. Unfortunately Sir Lindsay died in 1952 before he could publish the results of his labours. But in an interim report—which he emphasized was no more than a provisional review of his work—to our Society in 1945, he described the finding of an interior wooden chamber containing a leaf-shaped flint arrowhead, and the left foot of an extremely long-headed male whose remaining bones were scattered outside. Sir Lindsay suggested that the form of timbering and burial linked the barrow with some Western Mediterranean and Atlantic coast tombs, and that the Neolithic A2 type pottery he found included examples with affinities in the Cambridge region.⁶

From the Thames, between Hedsor and Bourne End, came a fine neolithic bowl of Peterborough type, and a large rimmed fragment of another now in the Aylesbury Museum. Near High Wycombe, a flint-mine and much worn deer-antler pick were found while constructing the mainline railway from London. And numerous flint implements including a leaf-shaped arrowhead from West

³ The word *villa* is used here in the traditional sense of a building with existing stone walls, rooms, tessellated floor(s), wall plaster and a hypocaust.

⁴ The recently discovered Romano-British site at Lewknor seems to have centred round a timbered farmstead. P. K. Fasham, *Archaeology and the M40 Motorway* (1973), 28-30.

⁵ It has not been thought necessary for the purpose of this paper, and with claims on space in mind, to repeat references already cited in that book or in its Gazetteer.

⁶ An account of the pottery from the barrow and the gist of Sir Lindsay's notes and plans were published by the late Professor Gordon Childe and Dr. Isobel Smith in *Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, XX (1954), 212-30. In this connexion it may be worth mentioning that the writer visited the site in 1938, and formed the opinion that Sir Lindsay's outer south-westerly excavations had been made in natural solution "pipe" hollows, and this was the interpretation advanced by Professor Childe in the published report.

Wycombe, occur along the valley route, and in its side valleys. A crouched burial—devoid of associations—found on a hillside overlooking the Wycombe Marsh valley, may also relate to this period. The excavators of the High Wycombe Roman villa noted prior use of the site in neolithic times.⁷

From time to time archaeologists have postulated the presence in the Risborough Gap neighbourhood of long barrows or barrows similar to that on Whiteleaf, and it is hoped that eventually these will be investigated.⁸

From Hitcham, some three miles from Bourne End, comes evidence for the presence of the Beaker folk whose characteristic pottery (from which their name is derived) has been found in what may have been a settlement site. At the other end of our valley route, shards of Beaker pottery have been found on Wain Hill above Bledlow, and in the scattered material of two disturbed round barrows on the northern slopes of Lodge Hill. And excavation may prove that the cluster of round barrows on the low ground between Lodge Hill and Slough Hill—some ploughed down or, like the example west of Grange Farm, deliberately levelled and now identifiable only by their ditches—have Beaker associations.

Here we may profitably remind ourselves that recent reappraisals—aided by radiocarbon dating—of the Neolithic, Beaker, Bronze Age and Iron Age material have demonstrated the need for a revision of the old chronological divisions and terminologies, and a new framework to provide for the survivals and overlapping in these cultures and periods that patently occurred.

The name "Slough"⁹, attached to a hill in the centre of the Saunderton Lee sector of the route and to a farm below it, implies marshy ground. It is probable that in natural conditions the water-table was nearer the surface, and that a spring rose in the floor of the valley below Slough Hill and flowed down the now normally dry valley, past Bradenham, into the Wye.¹⁰ In March 1937, when two feet of flood water near Saunderton Station closed the Bledlow Ridge road, a local resident informed the Press that "his grandfather told of an underground river near Saunderton station which went along by Pictonville to the Pedestal at West Wycombe." And the late Mr. Stratfold Read, who died in 1951 at the age of 96, informed the writer that he had seen the roadway from Saunderton to the Pedestal partly hidden beneath a stream of running water. We may think therefore that such a stream in a spread of open chalky downland rare in the western Chilterns, made the area particularly favourable to early settlement; and that we have here a partial explanation for a concentration of tumuli unparalleled elsewhere in Buckinghamshire.

The Bronze Age is well represented along the route and its side valleys by miscellaneous finds of bronze implements, and by the urns and associate pygmy cup from Barrow Croft, above Wycombe Marsh. The round barrows noticed above are conventionally assignable to this period, as are those in the

⁷ R. B. Hartley, "A Romano-British Villa at High Wycombe". *Recs. Bucks.*, XVI (1953-60), 228.

⁸ The site of a possible long barrow on Lodge Hill was examined by the writer, but proved to be a natural formation.

⁹ Saunderton, A.D. 1340 *Slo*; "slough, mire". A. Mawer and F. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire* (1925), 193.

¹⁰ Evidence for a much heavier rainfall at the time of the construction of the Whiteleaf and Bledlow Cop barrows than we know today accompanies the reports of their excavation.

Bennett End side valley and the cremation urnfield at Stokenchurch above them. It is interesting to see at Cock Marsh, on the Berkshire side of the Thames, a large group of round barrows immediately opposite that end of our route.

The extent of Iron Age occupation along the route is demonstrated not only by the hillforts at West Wycombe and Desborough Castle and a coin-hoard from High Wycombe, but also by the open settlements on Chinnor Plain and Lodge Hill in the neighbourhood of the Risborough Gap. It is to be hoped that excavation of these hillforts, and others along the escarpment, will eventually enable us to place them in their proper perspective. The Lodge Hill and Chinnor open settlements are closely considered in two recent publications¹¹ essential to students of the Iron Age in our area. A particularly interesting suggestion made by both authors is that much of the pottery from these two settlements, together with that from the contemporary Ellesborough site, was the product of a single specialist potter.

Pottery from the lower southern slopes of Lodge Hill led the writer to think that Iron Age occupation in that area continued unbroken into Roman times,¹² and this opinion has been strengthened by recent aerial photographs of the neighbourhood.¹³

In the light of information gained from the recent excavation of the Ivinghoe hillfort, a re-examination of the material from the Bledlow Cop barrow could prove rewarding.

In Roman times, the intensity of occupation along the valley route is not in doubt. Villas, and miscellaneous finds of burials, pottery, roof and flue tiles, indicating habitation and buildings, occur plentifully in the Gap between Hempton and Princes Risborough. And, raising interesting questions of land tenures, they continue down the valley to the important villa at High Wycombe and on to the Romano-British cemetery at Bourne End. A local historian states that a Roman villa stood near the site of the present West Wycombe Park mansion, and that a Roman road ran from West Wycombe past Chorley Farm, up the valley to Radnage,¹⁴ but cites no evidence to support these assertions. Be that as it may, an exceptionally wealthy mid-first century cremation burial—which included a very beautiful blue and white pillar-moulded glass bowl made probably in Alexandria—was found above Radnage at Sprigs Alley, on the county boundary.

The pagan Anglo-Saxon period is represented by a superb gold filigree pendant found with a burial at Castle Hill, High Wycombe. The piece is closely allied to the jewelry from the royal Taplow burial two miles downstream from Bourne End, and its owner may well have been a relative—perhaps by marriage—of the Taplow prince.

¹¹ C. Saunders, "The Pre-Belgic Iron Age in the Central and Western Chilterns", *Arch. J.*, CXXVIII (1972), 1-30. D. W. Harding, *The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin* (1972).

¹² *Op. cit.*, 69-71.

¹³ J. K. St. Joseph, "Air Reconnaissance in Roman Britain, 1969-72", *J. Roman Studies*, LXIII (1973), 246.

¹⁴ H. Harman, *Notes on West Wycombe* (1934), 15. These statements, like more recent references to Roman occupation at Stokenchurch, may originate in an uncritical reading of the mid-eighteenth century writings of the Rev. T. Delafield.

To conclude this review of some of the more important archaeological material from the route, mention should be made of two ambiguous finds which call for further investigation. The first is an Old Stone Age hand-axe found in the disturbed material of the Bledlow Cop barrow, sited on a chalk-hill some 700 ft. above sea-level. Such implements are more usually found in our river gravels, and the high-level provenance of this example—a shiny white-patinated Acheulian ovate—raises questions of archaeological, climatic, and geological importance.¹⁵

The second “find”, at the opposite end of the time scale, relates to our enigmatic Grim’s Ditch—a linear earthwork, which the late O.G.S. Crawford followed on foot, and discussed in the June 1931 number of his journal *Antiquity*. Subsequently, Dr. Crawford pointed out to the writer some two hundred yards of a similar bank and ditch running up the eastern slopes of a short ridge of higher ground, which here occupies the centre of the valley. Its course is approximately 90° to the final known length of Grim’s Ditch in Park Wood, above Bradenham. The bank and ditch (N.G.R. SU 818974) which Dr. Crawford observed, seems to begin above the railway, and opposite the junction of a foot-path from Park Wood with the A.4010 highway. It then travels up the hillside to the edge of Hearnton Wood where, from a superficial inspection, it disappears. This earthwork deserves closer examination.

So much for the archaeological material from the route. We shall now take a general look at the Chiltern hinterland, and see what little attraction it had to early travellers along the route to turn aside and settle.

Writing around 710 A.D., Eddius Stephanus, the biographer of St. Wilfrid, refers to *deserta Ciltine*, the deserts or wastes of Chiltern. And the physical obstacles to medieval settlement in the Desborough Hundred (through which our valley route runs), with “echoes of vast wastelands” in the place-names, have been admirably described by L. J. Ashford in the opening chapter of his book, *The History of the Borough of High Wycombe*.¹⁶ Only the scarp-face, exposed to the strong north-westerly winds, and the well-watered scarp-foot belt with the exceptional stretch of chalky downland around Saunderton Lee, were comparatively open and free from vegetation.

Neither was the constant presence of bands of malefactors an encouragement to settlement. We know that in medieval times, and even later,¹⁷ the Chiltern hinterland with its scrubland and hilltop forests was a notorious haunt of robbers, and those in rebellion against authority. Harking back to Eddius, we learn that Caedwalla—a descendant of the royal house of Wessex, described

¹⁵ Palaeolith-like implements have been found at Gerrards Cross and Seer Green in high-level gravels from what may be an old surface unaffected by later glacial action. Head, *op. cit.*, 52. Two important publications which include references to high-level palaeoliths are: J. Wymer, *Lower Palaeolithic Archaeology in Britain as represented by the Thames Valley* (1968); and A. D. Lacaille, “Some Wiltshire Palaeoliths”, in *Prehistoric and Roman Studies*, British Museum (1971).

¹⁶ Other important publications dealing with the physical aspects of Chilterns are: H. C. Darby (ed.), *A Historical Geography of England before A.D. 1800* (1936); S. Wooldridge and D. Linton, *Geography*, XX (1935), 161-75; B. W. Avery, *The Soils and Land Use of the District around Aylesbury and Hemel Hempstead*. Mem. Soil Survey (H.M.S.O., 1964).

¹⁷ The last man to be robbed by a professional highwayman in the Chilterns was Edward Copleston, bishop of Llandaff, who was attacked between Beaconsfield and Uxbridge in 1799. D.N.B. I am indebted to Mr. H. E. Wortham for this reference.

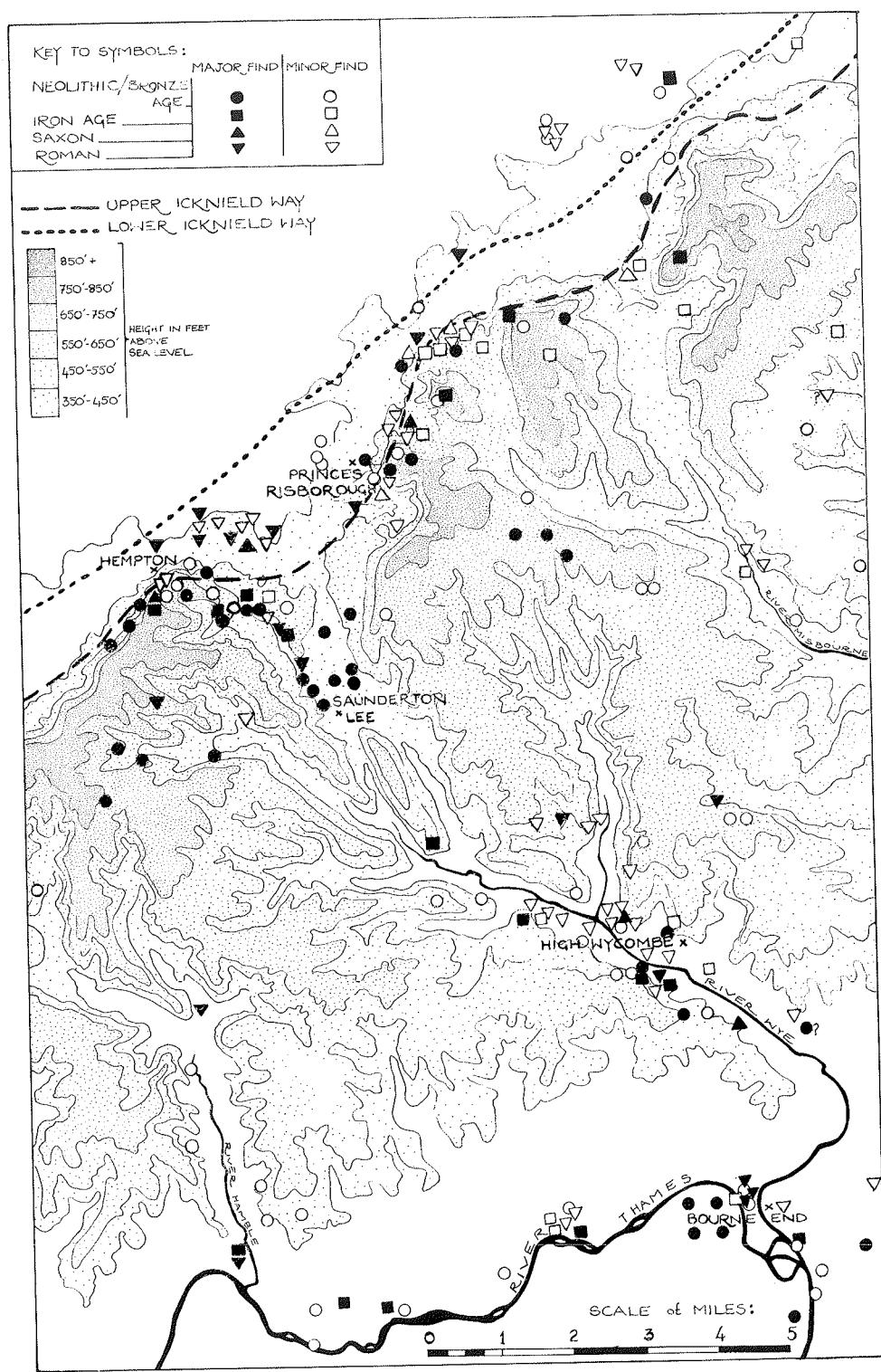


Fig. 1. Map. An important valley route through the Chilterns.

attempting to explain the facts of habitation in the Chiltern hinterland at these very early times might perhaps do well to regard the area as a potential mine-field.

It remains only to stress the need for a continual watch on disturbances in the soil of this all-important valley route—this unique short-cut through the Chilterns linking two great highways of prehistoric times.

We know that the past hundred years have seen disturbances in the soils of Buckinghamshire surpassing anything previously experienced in the region since it was first occupied by man. New housing estates, motorways, pipe-laying, deep ploughing, chalk and gravel extractions, and—perhaps most pertinent of all where Buckinghamshire is concerned—the complete destruction and removal of history-bearing levels in the hearts of our old towns and villages for the deep foundations of new buildings. Yet, despite all these activities, a mere handful of archaeologically important finds have been recovered, or even observed. Why then this dearth of new evidence for the presence and activities of the former inhabitants of our Buckinghamshire countryside and towns? Certainly such inhabitants there were. In High Wycombe, flourishing Roman-British settlements were followed by unbroken and expanding occupation up to the present day. The battle for Aylesbury in A.D. 571 implies that even at that early date there was a town there worth fighting for.

The explanation lies of course in the use of modern excavatory machinery, and an absence of informed and responsible watchers. In the past, light ploughing with horses and relatively small areas trenched and dug by hand, enabled workmen and others to see and recover, not only small objects such as coins or flint arrowheads, but early burials and urns often intact with their contents. But now soil is grabbed and dumped on waiting lorries in one rapid operation, and the chances of detecting small finds are obviously few. Nevertheless, watchers, armed perhaps with foreknowledge of a likely site, may be able to see and recover some object at the site itself; or at the dump where, with the accompanying soil, it is eventually deposited. Or, more likely, they may be able to recognise some occupation level or other archaeological strata at risk, and inform an appropriate authority for their necessary action. Such authorities include the County Field Archaeology Officer at the County Museum, Aylesbury, or the Buckinghamshire representative of the Department of the Environment (at present the Curator of the County Museum); and, if directly involved, the appropriate Civic Authority.

Undoubtedly, there is much archaeological material in our valley route awaiting discovery. It is therefore earnestly to be hoped that our members and others wishing to assist in the elucidation of Buckinghamshire's past, will make it their business to obtain prior knowledge of projects which could result in disturbances in the soils of these valleys.²² And, should such plans be implemented, then do their best to ensure that the excavations are watched, and one or more of the aforesaid authorities advised of any discovery.

²² Such as the proposal by the Buckinghamshire C.C. to realign part of the A4010 road on the valley floor at Bradenham.