

Ancient Trackways in England



By
Joseph Houghton Spencer

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101

The author’s theory is that ancient engineers laid out straight lines of signal stations across the width of Britain. The stations were connected by trackways, though these (unlike Alfred Watkins’s leys) were not straight. Whatever the merits of this theory, it is interesting as an early example of “landscape geometry” on a large scale. For another early example

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TO the south-east of Barton Grange, Taunton, belonging to Francis Wheat Newton, Esq., J.P., is a broad pathway, about 600 feet long, which is crossed by another of about the same length, the two thus forming a Greek cross; but, as the crossing is not at right angles, it may be more fitly compared to the Greek X. There are also, in addition to the main arms, which run from south-east to north-west, and from south-west to north-east, two minor arms pointing nearly west and south respectively. The whole are enclosed in a wood, the boughs of the lofty trees meeting overhead and so forming green arches of much beauty, in which the effect of light and shade produced by both sun and moon, is most picturesque and varied. The wood probably at one time extended to the various roads bounding the park, as the position of some of the older trees now outside the wood seem to indicate a prolongation of the avenues. As Barton Grange is said to have been the summer residence of the Prior of Taunton, whose Priory was dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul, and as this and other property in the immediate neighbourhood belonged to the Anglican Church prior to the Reformation, there is every reason to think that the "Monks' Walk" is what its present name would lead us to believe.

It is not an avenue of approach or carriage drive, as the principal entrance is, and presumably always has been, on the other side of the house, towards Taunton; but the south-east and north-west limbs serve as a footway to the parish church of Corfe, dedicated to St. Nicholas, which formerly possessed considerable Norman remains, of which, I believe, only the font and two corbels are left.

{95a} The boundary line between the parishes of Pitminster and Corfe runs through the house, but the whole of the Monks' Walk is in the latter parish.

If a line be drawn through the centre of the pathway running from south-east to north-west, and extended to the boundary of the park, it would touch a point where a footway joins the road, near an entrance to Poundisford Park, which formerly belonged to the See of Winchester, on the one side, and the angle, where the new road leading from Corfe to Pitminster joins the old road on the other, passing quite through the more modern portion of the house, which is in the parish of Pitminster, but clearing the older portion, which is chiefly in the parish of Corfe.

The present house, which is, with the exception of a very few features, of a date subsequent to the dissolution of the Priory, quite blocks the view from the centre of the cross, but there are indications in the older portion of the building that openings were left in the walls when the building was first projected upon the line of sight. This line, if extended north-westward, would pass close to, but clear of, the house in Poundisford Park, which is also an old building.

Then if a line be similarly drawn through the other pathway running from north-east to south-west, it would pass through the modern building, Corfe Lodge, at the entrance to the park, on the one side, where two roads meet, and would touch the road leading from Corfe to Pitminster at the spot where Woodram Lane runs into it on the other.

The first line points directly towards the position on the horizon where the sun sets on June 21, and, if extended in both directions from the cross, it will be found to pass immediately through the beacon, or highest point of the strong British fortress of Neroche,* the property, I believe, of Lord Portman, three and a half miles from the cross, and going south-eastward through Ham Gate, between Combe Beacon, near Combe St. Nicholas, and an eminence near Ilminster; then over the high ground of Chard Common, at an elevation of 295 feet, having Knoll St. Giles, 430 feet high, on one {95b} side, and a knoll near Chard, the height of which is not given on the ordnance map, on the other. Then passing almost through Winsham, Hazlewood Hill lies on one side and the apparently high ground of Monkham Down—on which is White Gate, near Ford Abbey—on the other.

* The names are chiefly taken from the six sheets of the Ordnance maps, old series, and do not exactly agree with the local orthography in all cases.

The line then passes through a remarkable group of fortified and other important hills just skirting Blackdown Hill and Pillesdon Pen, which has an elevation of 910 feet, on the one hand, and Lewston Hill and Chartnolle on the other. The following suggestive names occur together at the end of Black-down Hill, viz.: Cold Harbour, Pipe House, Horn Ash, Three Ashes, and Stony Knap.

On the Lewston, or north-east side of the line, are Shave Lane Hill, Mosterton Knoll, Horn Hill, White Sheet Hill, and Hackthorn Hill, within

a distance of about three miles from the line; and, on the other side, within about four miles, are Castle Hill (Lambert's Castle), Conic Castle, Cooneygore Hill, and Haddon Hill, near Whitchurch Canonicorum. The line, if continued, passes between Corfe and Corfe Hill, in the county of Dorset, having Hincknoll and Walton Hill as flanking positions; then between the apparently strong positions of Shipton Beacon and Eggardon, passing through Chilcombe Hill, 643 feet above the sea, and then near White Cross (Litton Cheney), having Puncknoll, on one hand, and the hill above Litton Cheney, 704 feet high, on the other.

Then passing some barrows, cutting through two of them, one being marked Broom Barrow, and near a cromlech, having Abbotsbury Castle on the one side, and what appears to be an ancient work marked Old Warren on the other. From Broom Barrow it passes through Portisham, between the high points of Blackdown, 790 feet above the sea, and Linton Hill. The names White Hill, Hell Stone, and Mystecombe, occur near Broom Barrow.

From Portisham the line passes through West Tatton, East Chickerel, and Weymouth, into the sea, having a range of hills, with Chalbury and Maiden Castle, at the distance of three and four miles respectively, on the one hand, and the high ground of Crook Hill and Wyke Regis, terminating with the Isle of Portland, on the other.

{96a} Tracing the line north-westward from Neroche, it passes over Buckland Down and Pickeridge Hill, where calamine used to be dug; leaving Staple Hill, 1,035 feet high, on one side, and then passing through the centre of the cross, and between Barton Grange on the one hand and Poundisford Park on the other, as before described, it runs near Canonsgrove, and between Dipford and Chilliswood, being flanked by an important position, not marked on the map, now known as Hillbrook, but formerly Higher Gatchell, on the one hand, and Castle Hill, or Castleman's Hill, on the other. Gatchell, perhaps a corruption of Gatshill, the hill of the gate, just above the *diop*, or deep, ford, which, I find upon inquiry, is a difficult ford after heavy rain.

The relative positions of these two hills with regard to each other and the main north-west line illustrates what I believe occurs very frequently, viz.: that anyone following this line and taking the ford must pass first one and then the other of these hills, as they are not opposite to each other.

The line, after passing Rumwell Hill, which, with the two last named, makes a triangular arrangement of strong posts at this point, crosses the river Tone between Bradford and Heal, and passes through Hillfarrance and Halse, having the British camps of Norton Fitzwarren about one mile and three-quarters on the one side, and Castle near Wiveliscombe at the same distance on the other, being a repetition of the general arrangement of Gatchell and Castle Hill, with more important positions, and at a greater distance from the line. It then crosses a stream between Pitsford Farm and Tolland Mill, having Tolland and Willet Tower on the one hand, and Brompton Ralph and Elworthy Barrows on the other, and passes through Beacon Hill, above Nettlecombe, and between the British camp, near Croydon Hill, and that in Dunster Park, over Grabbist Hill, to the highest point of Selworthy Hill, 1,011 feet above the sea, near the British work of Bury Castle, between the North Hill, Minehead, and Bossington Beacon, and not far from East and West Meyn. It will be observed that Neroche, the cross at Corfe, Beacon Hill, above Nettlecombe, Selworthy Hill, and {96b} Chilcombe Hill, between Shipton Beacon and Eggardon, and some others, are central points on this line from channel to channel, the other, or flanking positions, being natural strongholds, many of which bear evidence of early occupation occurring with greater or less regularity on either side of this central line.

This line, if continued across the Bristol Channel and through Caermarthen Bay, and South-West Wales to Stumble Head, would cross the Irish Channel and Ireland, running into the Atlantic at or near Kilalla Bay.

Returning to the centre of the cross we trace the other, or south-west line, which passes a high point of the Blackdown Hills, nearly in a line with Church Stanton; and then over Betscombe and Bolham Hills and near Gorwell, along the ridge above Dunkeswell, through a barrow near Woolford Lodge to Hembury Fort; then through Blue Ball to Straightway Head, about two miles from Ottery St. Mary and Rockbere Hill.

It then passes between Aylsbere and Farringdon, and soon afterwards is midway between St. Mary's Clist and Woodbury Castle, and crossing the Exe at Powderham, and going through Hill Head, leaving Mamhead and the Obelisk about a mile distant, it runs between Great and Little Haldon at Old Camp, and, crossing the Teign, passes Ford between Newton Abbot and Milber Down, going through Abbots Kerswell, and, leaving

Denbury Down about two miles distant, passes through the Castle at Totness, to or near Thurlestone, on the coast beyond Kingsbridge.

Again returning to the centre of the cross and tracing the north-east line, it will be found to pass near Duddlestone and between Orchard Portman and Shoreditch, and, just clearing the high ground at Henlade, through Ruishton, Creech Heathteld, Durston, and St. Michael near Newton, Ford Gate near Petherton Park, and Cock Hill near Chilton; then near Edington Station to Westfield Mill, and Cocklake near Wedmore, and then near Chedder passing over the Mendips at or near Beacon Batch, 1,067 feet above the sea, crossing the line of the Roman road to Old Sarum; then through Blagdon to Dundry Hill, near a point 768 feet high, to {97a} the Avon at Bristol. This line I have not traced in detail any further, but will merely remark that, if extended on Black's "Atlas," it passes near Stroud, Warwick, and Leicester, to the mouth of the Humber near Great Grimsby, nearly in a line with Spurn Head.

If a line is drawn through Neroche, parallel with the last named line, it passes south-west over Colly Moor, Buckland Common, Brown Down, to Travellers' Rest and Stout Mill, between Luxen Hill and Birch Hill, down the Valley of the Otter between the British work of Dumpdon, which is within sight of the English Channel, and Monkton, and then close to Honiton, and between that town and Ottery St. Mary. It then runs between Barrow Hill and Burrow Wood, crossing the Otter between Fen Ottery and Harpford, within two miles of Beacon Hill and Sidbury Castle, and through Kingstone at a distance of about one mile and a half from Woodbury Castle. It then runs between Black Hill and Knoll Hill and into the sea at the mouth of the Exe, and, being continued, just clears the mouth of the Teign; and, cutting the land again to the north of Torquay, runs between Cockington and Beacon Hill, and passing Windmill Hill, where Berry Pomeroy is about midway between the two south-west lines, and crossing the Dart near Stoke Gabriel, it runs near Alstone, Marlborough and Boltbury, parallel with the other line to the sea, between Bolt Head and Bolt Tail.

If this line is continued to the north-east it passes near Curland and Bickenhall, through Hatch Beauchamp, Crimson Hill, Stoke St. Gregory, and near Burrowbridge to some high ground near Middlezoy, crossing the Fosse near Greinton, through a barrow at Pamborough and Windmill

Hill near Westbury, and over the Mendips between Westbury Beacon and Priddy Hill; then crossing the line of the Roman road to Old Sarum, and passing between Compton Martin and West Harptree to Knoll Hill; then running near Stanton Drew, where there is an interesting stone circle or observatory; and it is remarkable that near the south-west line from the cross Church Stanton is situated, which name would justify a search for a circle connected with the cross centre, in the same way that {97b} Stanton Drew circle is connected with Neroche. The line then passes Guy's Hill, between Maes Knowl and Park Tumps Castley Wood, above Compton Dando; leaving these two positions about a mile and a quarter north-west and south-east respectively of the centre line, it proceeds between Bumbush Hill and Keynsham to the Avon.

Besides the four main lines drawn from the centre of the cross, and the line parallel with two of them running through Neroche which have been traced, there are yet two minor lines, indicated by lesser pathways, running nearly southward and westward.

By drawing a line through the centre of each pathway, and extending it, the south one will pass between Feltham and an Elizabethan hunting-box at Hayne, near Hawkmoor and Priors Park, over Staple Hill, the highest point of which is 1,035 feet above the sea, near Fyfet (Fivehide), through the barrows known as Robin Hood's Butts, and will cut the south-west line, drawn from Neroche, at a point between Traveller's Rest and Stout Mill, being flanked by North Common (Hill) on one side, and Luxen Hill on the other. It then passes near Yarcombe and through Stockland, down the valley of the Yart, having the British position of Membury on one hand and the ancient intrenchment of Bordhays on the other, equidistant about one mile and a half from the line, which then passes through Dalwood, not far from Danes Hill, and over Shute Hill, and near Mounthill Farm near Musbury, having the British work of Musbury Castle about one and a half miles away. Then passing near Colyton it goes through Axmouth, under Hawksdown Hill, a British work, to the mouth of the Axe.

The west line from the centre of the cross passes near Gore Hill, Angers Leigh, and through Ash Woods and Wellington Park, some little distance below Wellington's Monument, to Burlescombe; then between West Leigh and Rocky Park, down the valley of the Loman, a little to the north

of Tiverton. It then passes near Cruys Morchard, and between Puddington and Washfordpyne, and if it is continued it would appear to cut into the sea on the Cornish coast near St. Gennys, south of Bude Haven, between Dazard Point and Cambeak.

{98a} It is probable that, in addition to the six foregoing pathways, there were two others, now overgrown with wood, being continuations of the southern line towards the north, and the western one towards the east.

The southern line would, if extended northward from the centre of the cross, pass between Foss Grove and Kibbear Farms—the former, I believe, the estate of Mr. A. W. Kinglake, the historian of the Crimean War—to Cotlake Hill—an important position not marked on the plan—Sherford and Wilton, close to Cherry Tree Lane, where a bronze spearhead and celts were found in 1879; and near Haines Hill and Taunton Castle, showing clearly how, at a later date, Ine's low-lying castle on the banks of the Tone could have been warned, from the cross, of an approaching danger from the south, through Cotlake and Haines Hills (up to the latter of which led a Roman road, which was probably at first a British trackway, which road in *Britannia Depicta; or, Ogilby Improved*, dated 1731, is shown as the main road from Taunton to Exeter), in the same way that the barrow (Creech Barrow) at Bath-pool would transmit to the castle a signal received from the east.

Passing to the east of Staplegrove, it would be about equidistant from and between the British camp at Norton and the barrow at Bath-pool; then passing west of Kingston and Broomfield, between Ruborough—a British work—and Cothelstone Beacon, to Great Holwell and North Holwell, it runs between the British works at Cannington Park and Danesborough to Stoke Courcey, near the castle, and touches the Bristol Channel near Benhole Farm at a point outside the estuary of the Brue and the Parret; and, if continued across the Bristol Channel through Wales, near Llandaff and Caerphilly, would afterwards pass near Abergele, and, crossing the Irish Sea to Castle Douglas, near Kirkcudbright, would then run near Glasgow to the extreme north of Scotland, to the Kyle of Durness near Cape Wrath, thus commanding the numerous estuaries on the western coast.

Similarly the western line, if continued eastwards, would pass from the centre of the cross between West Hatch and Hatch Beauchamp, and soon

after between Five-^{98b}head and Isle Brewers, and, crossing the river Ile to the south-west of Muchelney, would touch Knowle, and cross the Fossway at Popple Bridge. It then runs between South Barrow and North Cadbury, about one mile and a half from Cadbury Castle; and passing a little to the north of Wincanton, and then between Salisbury and Stonehenge, would seem, if continued, to touch Sheppy Isle at the mouths of the Thames and the Medway.

Having recorded these observations, I venture to suggest the following explanation:

The general design of the works seems to be a central line of long distance signals, with more frequent posts to the right and left connecting the natural harbours at the mouths of the Wey, Axe, Otter, Exe, Teign, Parret, Brue, Avon, Medway, Thames, and Humber; also St. Gennys, near Bude Haven, an important position on the Cornish coast, and Minehead.

These direct signal-line stations, though no doubt connected with each other by trackways, would not always afford the best lines for the principal roadways; and we find that the early ridgeways, so far as they have been traced, connected nearly all the foregoing points; but, owing to physical and other difficulties, not in straight lines. There seem to be indications of other parallel arrangements of fortified posts and beacons, and it is probable that, upon further research, it will be found that these north-west and north-east lines are preserved as guiding ones throughout the entire district, which was under the control of these early, perhaps Phœnician, far-seeing engineers. It is noteworthy that similar names at long intervals are connected with each other by these radiating lines. Phelps, in his *History of Somerset*, describes a Belgic-British roadway from the Avon, which passed through Somerset and Devon and by Hartland into Cornwall, thus actually connecting two of the points, Bristol and St. Gennys, indicated by the lines radiating from the cross. He also describes one which after crossing the Midlands, from the mouth of the Humber in Lincolnshire, passed through Somersetshire to Axmouth in Dorset on the English Channel, an important ancient^{99a} harbour—both these extreme points being indicated by the radiating lines—and mentions that this road at Ilchester had a branch from Dorchester. By a branch this road doubtless communicated with Weymouth, another ex-

tremity of a radiating line from the cross, as there are traces of a ridgeway on the map between these two towns.

There was also the great trackway, afterwards called Ikeneld Street, which connected the Southern trackways with Exeter; Exmouth, at Powderham, being another point indicated by the cross. Also a trackway from the Bristol Channel, near Minehead, to Taunton, passed through Neroche and proceeded to Axmouth. Other roadways of this date are noted as passing through Neroche, and it is remarkable that Phelps mentions nearly all the harbours indicated by the cross as being connected by ridgeways with Neroche.

The main or north-west line, commencing at Weymouth and ending at Selworthy Hill, has the significant names of Melcombe Regis at one end and East and West Meyn at the other. The former may be derived from the Saxon *mel*, a portion of the heavens which the sun rules off, or *mell*, a marking; hence a line or boundary, so that the line or boundary combe may be the meaning of the name, which contains the line of the setting summer sun as seen from Weymouth on the English Channel, passing near Meyn, or the stone, not far from Minehead, on the Bristol Channel.

The allied name of Melbury occurs about eight miles north-east of this line, near Evershot, where there is a remarkable group of roadways or drives in Melbury Park, the seat of the Earl of Ilchester.

These drives, eight in number (one the "Grand Vista"), radiate from an open field of several acres, named "the circle," the whole being enclosed in "Great High Wood" and "Rag Copse." A wood bearing the name of the "Monks' Wood" adjoins the latter. The field is higher than the adjoining ground, and gradually slopes from a central position, 460 feet above the sea level, towards the wood. It is an elevated and commanding spot, and seems admirably adapted for astronomical observations, and the direction of the lines would seem to be determined by the north-east one, that of the rising summer sun, while at Corfe the north-west one, the line of the setting sun on June 21, appears to be the guiding one. The complete system of eight pathways found here suggested the idea that two of those at Corfe might be overgrown, as the design and arrangement of the two works is similar in many respects. There is, however, this important difference between them, the centre of the cross at Corfe being only 40 or 50 feet in diameter, while that at Melcombe contains an area of some

acres. The centre at Corfe seems designed for the receiving and transmission of signals, the arched-shaped avenues guiding the eye of an observer stationed at the centre, like huge natural telescopes, to the nearest signal hills, while that at Melcombe, though doubtless connected with the perfect signal system by means of its radiating lines, is more adapted for the observations and calculations connected with the movements of the heavenly bodies at the measuring or record town—which may possibly be the meaning of the word—of this great and far-reaching system.

It may be remarked that the form of the cross, in its complete shape, is a combination of the generally accepted figures of the Hebrew Aleph and



Tau, corresponding to the Greek Alpha and Omega, being the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and would further generally correspond with eight main divisions into which the circle is divided on the mariner's compass. Whether the work was originally laid down by Pagans or not, it seems reasonable to suppose that, as Hecateus, five



centuries before Christ, describes Britain as an island in the ocean over against Gaul, fully as large as Sicily, famous for a magnificent sacred enclosure dedicated to Apollo, and a temple renowned for its riches and circular form, it was at one time a centre of Pagan worship; and anyone who has seen the sun setting over the distant

north-west hills, or the moon rising over Pickeridge, a portion of the cofa-like enclosure, can hardly conceive a more suitable place than the "Monks' Wood" for the development of such scenic effect as would be involved in the worship of Baal and Astarte. Later, when Christianity supplanted Paganism, this property must have fallen into the hands of the Anglican Church, who no doubt understood the original design, and carefully preserved it until the dissolution of religious houses by Henry VIII.

Then the idea was lost, and, consequently, no regard was paid in building, from the seventeenth century downwards, to the far-reaching lines of the cross. Still, in the hands of laymen it has been carefully preserved for more than three centuries, and by no one more conservatively than the present owner, whose courtesy in permitting me to examine both the cross and the surrounding buildings I here gratefully acknowledge, and

to whom I would venture to suggest that a careful excavation at the cross-centre would probably be attended with interesting results.

It is true that many of the old trees have disappeared—some, I believe, early in the present century. Still there are quite enough ancestral oaks in the wood and park to show very clearly what was the general character of the neighbourhood many centuries ago.

The lines would seem to be the work of either the Belgæ coming from the south-east, or of an earlier immigration, guided by the setting summer sun in laying down the direction of signal communication to protect their harbours on both channels; and the crossing of the two main signal lines is arranged in the form of X in a masterly way, so as to take place in a secluded spot equally distant from either channel.

This cruciform centre of, perhaps, both civil and religious government was in touch with all these harbours, and naturally admirably adapted for such a purpose; and it can be readily realized how rapidly a signal-flash by day or a beacon-flame by night could be passed from Axmouth in the south to the estuary of the Parret in the north, or from the Thames in the east to Bude Haven in the west, through the centre of the cross.

It may be asked whether this important position was not safe-guarded by earthworks; but I am not aware that any remains of such exist, nor do I think that it would be a post that could be readily held against an opposing force. I conceive, rather, that its security consisted partly in its remote situation, far removed from the dangers of either channel, and partly from its proximity to the almost impregnable stronghold of Neroche, where the observers at the cross could retire at the {100b} approach of any passing danger and still be in communication, as has been pointed out, though not so perfectly as at the station at the cross-centre, with the main signal lines.

The name of the village, Corfe, the same root as Corton, which is sometimes written Corfetown, which latter is derived, according to Phelps, from *Cor*, “the curvature of the hill”; *Gor*, or *Cor*, is also said to be a British word for a religious circle. The Greek *Kopos*, equivalent to the Hebrew *Cor*, is a measure; and circular measures are in use in Palestine to the present day.

The Saxon *Cofa* means “bay” or “cove,” so that all these words seem to point to the shape of the surrounding hills; and one has only to stand on

the southern line from the cross-centre, where it cuts the new road to Pitminster, and look southward, when the complete cofa-like form of the hills is very striking.

There is a tradition in the village that its name means “hidden”; and, as in Saxon, *breost* is “the breast,” and *breost-Cofa* “the spirit,” the name may also allude to the mysterious and hidden union of the soul with the body.

With regard to the idea of pagan occupation, it may be noted that Brown Down, adjoining Staple Hill, the highest point near Corfe, is on the southern line from the cross, so that the worshippers, purified by fire on that height—Brown being a possible contraction of the Saxon *Browen*, “to prepare by fire”—would pass the stream at Higher and Lower Whitford (White Ford), and entering by Park Gate (Saxon, *Gat*), which is in a line with the southern way to the cross, would proceed by a ridge, crossing the highest part of the new Pitminster road, to the hidden mysteries of the grove of which the cross formed the centre.

This south road has the significant names of “No *Place*” and “*Moorlitch*” near it, from which Neroche is about three miles distant.

Could it have been when the glory of the Briton was departing that he, lamenting near the line clearly defined by the setting sun, while burying his slain in Moorlitch (*litch*, Saxon for “dead”), and looking upon the ruins of the slightly built mansion-house (*plas* or *plais*), and seeing the hills where he {101a} dug calamine close at hand, and copper not far off, and the great south road leading to the important harbour at the mouth of the Axe, lined by the barrows covering his illustrious dead, in the hands of the Roman conqueror; could it have been that he then sorrowfully exclaimed, “Ne plas” (*no place*), in reference to his chief’s house, and “Ne roche” in relation to that marvellously contrived central position where so many ridge-ways met, and which for him, at least, had ceased to be a stronghold; and then with a melancholy degree of satisfaction looked down upon Corfe, where the secret of the “rouge croix” was hidden from the foe in its cofa?

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