

OXHEY VILLAGE ENVIRONMENT GROUP

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SOUTH WEST HERTFORDSHIRE

by Michael Hodgetts

As a small boy Oxhey was my world, my home. Watford and this part of the county became my larger environment as I grew up. In the boy scouts I cycled and camped all over Hertfordshire. During the war we made fortnightly visits to St. Albans, changing buses first in Watford. St. Albans was my mother's home. Crossing the Ver (or was it the Lea?), we were nearly at Grandfather Finch's. One more change of bus and we were there. Sometimes we went into St. Albans city and down to Verulamium where we saw the newly uncovered Roman Mosaic Pavement.

My mother took me for walks along the single lane sealed road across the Oxhey Golf Course to Blackwells Farm. The memory of thick mud and strong smells of animals remains with me. Up we walked through the majestic Oxhey Woods, thick remnant of ancient forest. Northwood and Eastbury were my boundary. Pinner Farm, a busy working farm like Blackwells, was to the south over the county border into foreign Middlesex.

One day I would go to the B!g School at Sandy Lodge, if I passed the exams which were very hard. Then I would explore the great lake formed out of gravel pits, study ducks and waders in the Field Club. And I could join, so grandfather told me, the Officers Training Corps. Each Friday morning platoons of young soldiers and squadrons of junior airmen cycled past his house, returning late on Friday evening. How exciting.

My grandfather Hodgetts lived opposite and above the ancient complex of buildings known as Hampermill. Sometimes he took me over the quaking footbridge that crossed the River Colne, a very dangerous place. People had been drowned all round here and I was on no account ever to cross that bridge on my own. Hampermill was recorded in the Domesday Book, he told me, whatever that was. Grandfather had worked for the Colne Valley Water Company and we always wondered at the white gusher of water that spouted out of the ground in Hampermill Lane, the walls and roofs painted green and brown to deceive enemy bombers. This was my world from 1936 to 1954. We were an Oxhey, Watford and Bushey family going way back. Great great grandfather had been the station master at Euston Station. There were photographs of him standing tall with his big top hat. Everyone appeared to have been terrified of him.

There is no substitute for knowing the country. Professor Gelling has said after a while you start to think like an Anglo-Saxon as you study the topography. For example why was the Hampermill road bend such a bad corner? There were many crashes as fast drivers in unsafe cars failed to take the hairpin corner and went in to the fence or worse. Once we looked down over the cliff and saw a car halfway down, not quite in the river. What a way to die. The road would have been far safer if it had continued along the general direction of the river, across the water meadows and through the school grounds. Ah there's the clue. The school land had once been a large farm. The road had gone through there on the shortest route to Rickmansworth, passing the doors of Moor Hall and Moor Farm. Moor Hall had been the country home of many Royal visitors including the residence of Cardinal Wolsey. It was inconceivable he would not have had a direct road to both Rickmansworth and Watford since his home was between the two. So the road was closed, diminishing into a farmyard track that ran past the mill on private property. And so Oxhey inherited its most dangerous road hazard.

Thinking about the location of this pivotal farm which marks the Oxhey boundary, I am certain it predates Hampermill. There are several stiles across the fields here marking longstanding footpaths and rights of way. This ancient farm is a strong candidate for the west boundary of the parish. Archival photographs evidence a Roman road through the farm buildings presumably part of a line of road from Watford to Rickmansworth or up Eastbury Hill on a lesser known way south to London. If Hampermill is not the site of old farmer Cudhelling's barn the other candidates are Eastbury (too far south) or Oxhey Hall (too far east).