

Update March 2019

A medieval road at Stone Dene, Hopton by Wirksworth, Derbyshire

An examination of a trackway at SK 2567 5357 took place on Friday the 15th of March 2019 with the kind permission of the manager of Hopton Hall, Mr Spencer Tallis.

This examination is part of a strategy of identifying and if possible dating roads within the area, in order to better understand the Roman and medieval landscape and to seek to identify the site of lost Lutudarum. For convenience we will call this road Mill Lane, as it is described in a 1684 map as “the way to the mill”.



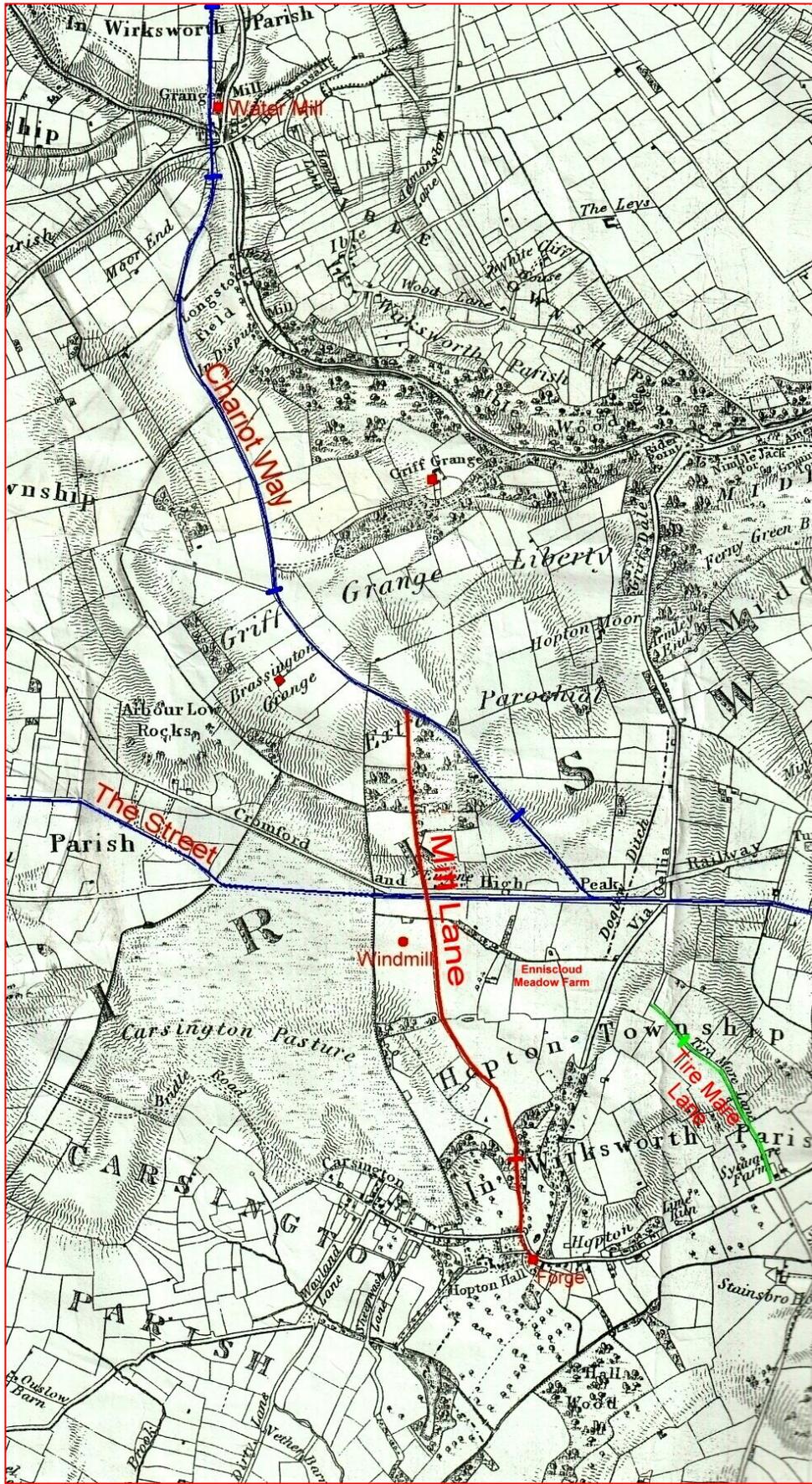
Mill Lane looking north at Stone Dene towards the south side ochre mine.

Background information

The physical remains of the road run from Hopton northwards, up through the woods on the west side of the Stone Dene valley. It turns slightly north west after entering the farmland above the woods, passing to the east of the King’s Chair before turning north again to pass between Hopton Windmill, built circa 1770, to its west and Enniscloud Meadow Farm to its east. The alignment crosses The Street (Brassington Lane) at Hopton Top, at the former Hopton Goods Station of the Cromford and High Peak Railway. It continues in a northward direction to join the Chariot Way (The Portway) south of Griffé Grange.

On the 1684 map of Hopton, this road starts on the north west side of Hopton forge, opposite the Hopton fountain and passes on the east side of the “Alsops Farme House”. The historic road layout has been changed at this point since 1684 and the modern road from Wirksworth to Carsington through Hopton makes a turn around the north side of the grounds of Hopton Hall, whereas the 1684 alignment of the road essentially went past the front door of the original Hopton Hall. In consequence the start of Mill Lane now lies at a field gate immediately opposite the east end of the crinkle wall at Hopton Hall, that is the Home Farm end of the grounds.

Hopton Hall was the seat of the Gells, the Lords of the Manor of Wirksworth and Hopton. Ralph Gell had initially bought lands at Griffé Grange in 1546 following the dissolution of Dale Abbey (1539). He also bought the surroundings at Hopton in 1553 a few years later, from the dissolution of Darley Abbey (1538), whose lands these had previously been, granted them by the deFerrers. He bought other lands, from the dissolution of Rocester Abbey (1538), around Hognaston at the same time.



Location of the Mill Lane at Hopton
Abstract of Sanderson's 1835 map: "20 miles around Mansfield"

The Gells appear to have been tenants of some or all of these lands before this, the first known mention of the Gells possibly being Radulphus Gylies apparently about 1380. Prior to that the lands in Hopton appear to have been owned by the de Hoptons, whose records start in 1289 and disappear after 1322, they made the grant of the lands in Hognaston to Rocester Abbey. Hopton was in 1086 a berewick - a home farm - of Wirksworth, but at some time in the early Norman period it became a manor in its own right. The place-name Hopton means homestead or farmstead in a valley, in this case the Stone Dene valley.

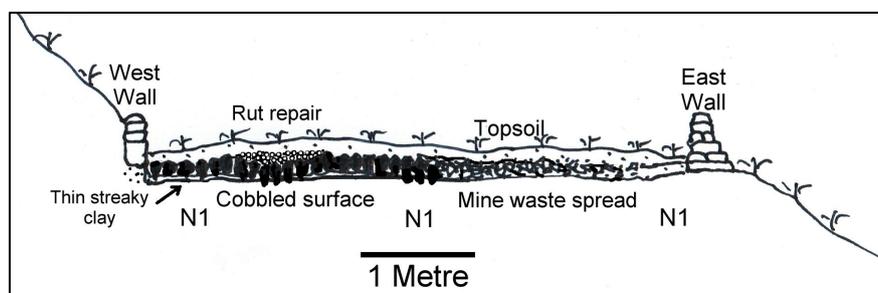
There were several granges about here: a grange is an out-farm of an abbey. Griffie Grange was the property of Dale Abbey and Ivonbrook Grange was the property of Buildwas Abbey, nearby was Brassington Grange (this might or might not be an "original" grange: it may be a Victorian farm name). Ivonbrook Grange had a watermill at Ivonbrook, that is Grange Mill and this mill, "the mill of the monks", is mentioned in a charter dating from about 1247 of the deFerrers. The deFerrers lost control of their manors around Wirksworth in 1269 and those manors passed into Royal hands, which may account for the appearance of the deHoptons in the records in 1289, perhaps as royal stewards. The reason for us rather labouring these points about abbey land holdings in this area is that it may perhaps enlighten us about the origins and uses of Mill Lane. Mill Lane is recorded as an un-named holloway in the Derbyshire Historic Environment Record, feature 8379.

The examination

The examination took place in the lands of Hopton Hall, 14 metres south of the boundary gate separating the lands of Hopton Hall and the lands of Enniscloud Meadow Farm.

The road here runs north-south on a terrace through some woods. On the west side of the road are the remains of a revetment wall holding back the hillside as it rises towards King's Chair and on the east side of the road are the remains of a boundary wall which run along the edge of the road and beyond which the ground falls steeply away to a small tributary of the Stone Dene brook. Approx 25 metres south of the examination site is a large delf which is the result of ochre mining.

A section was taken east-west across the road between the two walls.



Section across Mill Lane, Hopton

The width between the walls is 5.1 metres, the width of the road stoning from edge to edge is 4.7 metres. There are two phases and one repair. The first phase is worn stoning 2.5 metres wide on the west side of the structure which is composed of large compacted cobbles (up to 25cm) of uneven pale grey fine-grained limestone. These overlay a thin 2cm layer of streaky clay which overlays the natural substrate (N1) a mid brown clay. The second phase butted up to and slightly over the first, is a layer of granular dolomite mine waste (up to 10cm and in a gritty orange fill) spread a further 2.3 metres from the joint and fading out towards the east side, with its final edge 40cm from the east boundary wall, this layer overlies the natural substrate directly. Both phases appear to be tipped though the first phase has indications of some stones being placed (on end). It does not underlie either wall. There is a single repair to a 40 cm wide rut, the edge of which is 1.2 metres from the west wall. This repair consists of black rather rounded almost pebbly 4cm stone. The cobbling is very compacted and rounded and weathering degradation is more severe than, for example, the stones of the boundary walls, implying greater age. The compaction appears to be the result of heavy vehicles, with some of the cobbles being pushed through the thin streaky layer directly into the natural substrate. There was no

obvious evidence of second rut but this might be disguised by the joint of the two stoned sections. There were no finds of any kind.



Photograph of section after first removal of topsoil looking north.
The centre of the rod is at the stoning joint.

1. The construction of the road does not match known Roman road sections, such as The Street at Minninglow. We therefore do not regard it as Roman.
2. Although there are two phases and the mine waste is later than the cobbling, neither can be dated from the construction except to note the relatively simplistic, but not wholly inadequate, nature of the first phase construction method.
3. The road appears to aim for medieval locations of activity. At the Chariot Way end there are at least two medieval sites, Griffie Grange and the watermill at Grange Mill (Ivonbrook Grange). At the Hopton end it terminated at Hopton forge. In so far as it was called the Way to the Mill in 1684, this could only realistically refer to the watermill at Grange Mill, as the windmill was later.

Conclusions

We take the view that the balance of probability is that this road is medieval. Indeed it is possible, given the notes about the activities and land ownership of the abbeys and granges in this area that the road might have monastic origins and if so it might reasonably represent a route from Hopton to the watermill at Grangemill for the grinding of Hopton's grain, and in the other direction a route from Ivonbrook Grange and Griffie Grange to a convenient forge at Hopton. The earliest possible reference to the water mill is 1247 and the earliest record of Ivonbrook Grange is 1189. Conceptually the road should not be before the mill if indeed the two were related.

The later phase of mine waste as a road surface might or might not be linked to the road boundary walling and to possible road reconstruction by the Gells. If this latter were so, the only obvious stimulus to such repairs would be the construction of the Hopton Windmill which is thought to have been built in the 1770s.

It is difficult to say when Mill Lane fell out of use. It appears in the 1824 plans of the Cromford and High Peak Railway and the construction of railway in 1830 did not sever it, moreover, the place at which this road crosses the High Peak

Railway at Hopton Top may imply that the location of the Hopton Goods Station there might have been a function of it being a convenient crossroads. Indeed it is not until after 1922 when two ochre mines were active immediately to the north and south of the examination site, do we get any clue that the road might become impassable, in this case with the expansion of the ochre mine on the south side eventually resulting in the course of the road becoming too narrow to be safely used. By that time the Hopton windmill must also have been out of use, otherwise there would have been a reason to keep the road open. There is no known date for the end of the Hopton windmill but it was disused on the 1880 Ordnance Survey map and no millers are recorded in any Hopton census report from 1841 onwards.

All these things being so, it may be that we have the case of a medieval road built to give access for ox-drawn waggons of grain toiling uphill from Hopton to the watermill at Grange Mill and for the shoeing of horses and mules from the abbey granges in the area at Hopton forge in the opposite direction. This is quite an interesting outcome, but it may account for why the road appears to be better built in its first phase than some of its medieval counterparts in the area: for both Tiremare Lane and Stunstead Lane are poor efforts by comparison.

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Wirksworth Archaeological Society
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