Ramscote Lane, Chesham: a report on its antiquity and status 16.3.1989

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SUMMARY

The evidence provided by field survey, and by early maps, leaves no doubt that Ramscote Lane is an ancient public road. Among other functions, it provided medieval farmers in the hamlet of Bellingdon with access to arable holdings in an open-field in White Hawridge Bottom. The width of the lane, the nature of its boundaries, and the degree of erosion which it exhibits at various points along its length are all consistent with a medieval origin. These and other features also indicate that it had the status of a road, rather than a field path. Roads of this length in the medieval landscape were public, rather than private features, and Ramscote Lane continued to function as a public road throughout the post-medieval period. It appears as a road on 18th and 19th century maps, and sporadic attempts made to improve the road surface suggest that it was still being used by wheeled traffic during the 20th century.

The line of the road as shown on the earliest accurate map - the Ordnance Survey 1" of 1822 - appears to be precisely the same as the line followed today.

Unless it has been the subject of a formal Road Closure Order, there seems to be no reason why Ramscote Lane should not still be open to traffic.

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T.M.Williamson MA, PhD.

The study of the English landscape has been my principal activity and interest for the last ten years. I read History Part 1, and Archaeology Part 2, at Jesus College, Cambridge, where I graduated in 1979. Subsequently, I studied the development of the landscape of north Essex for the degree of PhD, which I was awarded in 1984. Since 1984, I have been employed as Lecturer in Landscape History at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. I have written two books, and published a large number of articles in academic journals, relating to various aspects of archaeology and landscape history.

Before studying at Cambridge, I lived at Watford, some ten miles to the west of Chesham. I was born, and lived until the age of 3, in Hemel Hempstead. I know the Chiltern Hills well.

I visited Chesham, in the company of my colleague Anthea Taigel, in February 1989. We walked the length of Ramscote Lane, making a variety of measurements and observations. We also consulted photocopies of the following maps:

Jeffereys' map of Buckinghamshire, 1778

Ordnance Survey First Edition 1", 1822

Chesham Tithe Award Map, 1842

First Edition Ordnance Survey 6" (published 1900, surveyed 1873 - 77).

What follows is the result of this investigation. I begin with a few general observations, in order to place this ancient lane in its wider historical context.

1. Introduction: the local landscape

The Chiltern Hills, which extend through the counties of Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, and Oxfordshire, are an area of 'Ancient Countryside': that is, the majority of roads, lanes and boundaries in this area do not result from the general enclosure of open fields and commons in the 18th and 19th centuries, but have a far more ancient origin. The pattern of settlement in the hills is dispersed, consisting of numerous isolated farms and hamlets, although many sizeable village nucleations also exist. This type of settlement pattern is typical of 'Ancient Countrysides'.

Open fields, or 'common fields' as they were often termed were a common feature of the medieval landscape in many parts of England. An open field may, for convenience, be defined as an arable field which is divided into small unhedged strips, occupied by different farmers. These strips, although individually occupied and farmed, were subject to certain communal controls, and to communal rights of grazing at certain

times of the year. Open-field agriculture took different forms in different parts of medieval England. Open fields were widespread in the Chiltern Hills, but they were not usually like the vast open-fields which tend to feature in history books. Fields of the latter kind were found in Midland areas, north of the Chiltern escarpment: in north Buckinghamshire, for example. Here, each parish usually possessed two or three great open-fields, farmed from a single nucleated village. The holdings of individual farmers were excessively intermingled, their strips being scattered fairly evenly throughout the territory of the village. In areas like the Chilterns, in contrast, most parishes had a much larger number of comparatively small open-fields, a pattern which mirrored the dispersed nature of settlement. Each field usually contained the lands of relatively few farmers. Partly because of this, the majority of such fields disappeared at an early date through the process of piecemeal enclosure. This is the technical term for the process by which individual farmers bought and sold land in order to consolidate groups of strips, which were then enclosed with hedges and taken out of communal cultivation. Because the process was a gradual one, involving the planting of hedges on the line of earlier strip boundaries, present hedge lines in the Chiltern Hills often fossilise, in simpified form, the layout of medieval strips. This kind of enclosure was much less prominent in the Midland areas, north of the Chiltern escarpment. Here the open fields in each village were usually enclosed through a single act of General Enclosure, often in the 18th or 19th centuries. In such areas, the field

boundaries tend to display little continuity with property boundaries in the earlier landscape.

It should be noted that piecemeal enclosure could be a very protracted affair, extending into the 19th century. Tithe Award and other 19th century maps often show a few open strips still surviving in an otherwise hedged landscape.

Not all field boundaries in the Chiltern region originated through the piecemeal enclosure of open-fields. Some of the farmland in the Chilterns always lay in hedged closes held 'in severalty', that is, occupied by individuals and farmed free from communal regulation. Many, although probably not all, of these fields originated as assarts, that is, reclamations from woodland and waste, during the medieval period.

This, then, is the kind of complex, richly textured, ancient landscape through which Ramscote lane runs.

2. Roads, lanes, and footpaths

Raods appear frequently in medieval documents. They are usually described as 'Via Regiae' or 'King's Ways' - that is, major roads: or else as 'common ways' - that is, minor lanes. All such highways had individual names, and lanes which today bear ancient-sounding names (like Ramscote Lane) are almost invariably of medieval origin. Roads that were private - that is, roads whose use was restricted to individuals or small groups of people

- were rare in the medieval landscape. Where they did exist, they were generally short access-ways to enclosed fields, or farmsteads. Roads of any appreciable length were public ways. They were a part of the common land of the manor, and much of the law and custom which applied to commons also applied to roads. Thus, for example, in some cases the surface of the road might be individually owned, but the public still had a right to take vehicles over it. Most medieval roads were, however, not privately owned - except, of course, in the sense that, like commons, they might in the last analysis be said to belong to the lord of the manor in which they lay.

Such common ways had definite boundaries, made of hedges and ditches, except where they crossed common land or areas of open-field, in which case they were generally unhedged. In this, they differed from mere footpaths, which were not usually so bounded, and which often cut directly across the middle of enclosed fields.

There were a great many more vehicular roads in the medieval period than there are today. Progressive improvement of roads in the post-medieval period, together with land enclosure and the gradual reduction in the number of people owning or working land, led to a slow reduction in the number of public roads which were maintained in a state fit for vehicular traffic. Yet even in the early 19th century, the road network in most areas was much denser than it is today. Comparison of the road pattern shown on

the 1822 Ordnance Survey map of the area around Chesham, with that depicted on a modern Ordnance Survey map, shows this forcibly. The process of reduction accelerated with the advent of the motor car in the 20th century; cars demand much better road surfaces than horse-drawn vehicles. The fact that a road is not maintained as a paved track does not, of course, necessarily effect its legal status.

The gradual reduction in the number of vehicular roads means that the line of a lane shown on an early map is often made up of a number of fragments of early lanes which have partly disappeared: a single continuous line surviving from a denser web.

3. Ramscote Lane: the archaeological and topographic evidence

For purposes of discussion and analysis, it is convenient to divide Ramscote Lane into five sections (see attached map, Figure 1).

Section A is the first section, running westwards from Chesham Vale for a distance of c.700 metres. This is unquestionably a very ancient feature. The evidence for this statement is as follows.

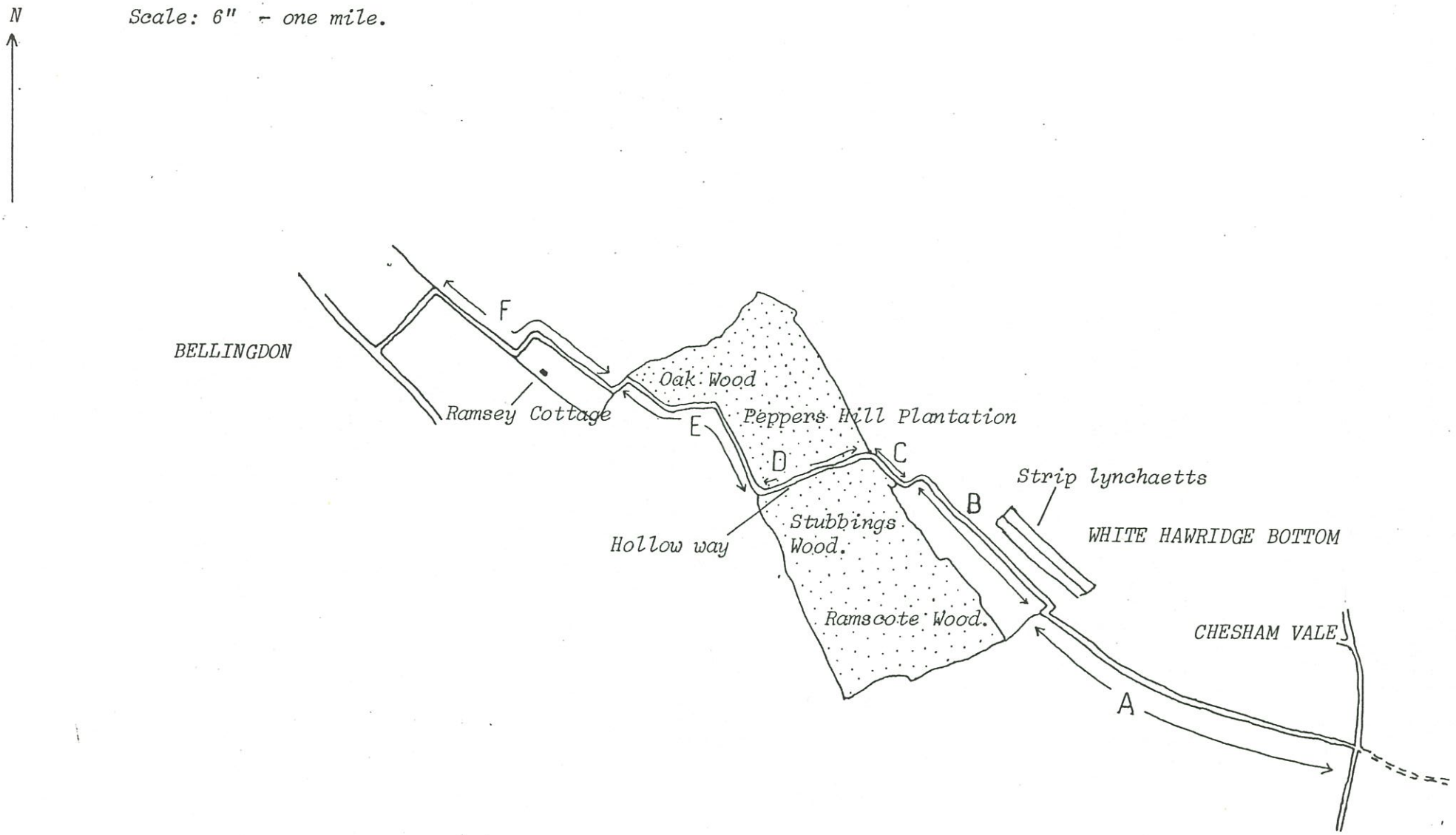
(i) The line of the lane is directly continued to the east, beyond Checham Vale, by a continuous line of track and boundary. This can be traced on early large-scale maps, such as the Tithe

Award surveys, as far as Pressmore Farm (hedge lines shown on the early 19th century Tithe Award maps suggest that at one time it extended even further to the east). This suggests very strongly that the lane originated as a fairly long-distance track linking various medieval settlements and agricultural resources in the area. Judging from the map evidence, the pre-20th century road pattern in this part of the Chiltern Hills was much less 'valley-based' than it became with the advent of the motor car.

(ii) The southern edge of the lane, throughout this first section, takes the form of a marked bank or lynchet, varying from 2 to 2.5 metres in height. Such banks are the result of two processes. Continual use of the unpaved roadway over long periods has caused a measure of soil erosion. At the same time, soil has built up on the uphill side of the hedge (a 'positive lynchet'), due to the effects of downhill soil movement caused by centuries of ploughing. In my opinion, a lynchet of this magnitude strongly suggests that the hedge line, and by implication the lane, is of some considerable antiquity, and almost certainly of medieval origin.

(iii) Other features suggest that the hedge is of some antiquity. The field-work on which this report is based was carried out in the winter, so detailed botanical analysis of the shrub content of the hedge was not attempted. Nevertheless, superficial examination suggests that it is species-rich and therefore probably several centuries old. Moreover, examination of the

FIGURE 1: RAMSCOTE LANE, SHOWING THE MAIN FEATURES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT.



ground flora revealed an abundance of Dogs Mercury (Mercurialis perennis), a plant which is a very slow coloniser, and which is usually considered indicative of an old, normally medieval, hedge. Once again, this in turn suggests that the lane itself is an old, probably medieval feature. The other side of the lane is marked, not by a hedge, but by a modern barbed wire fence. There is no indication that this stands on the line of an ancient boundary, and it seems probable - judging from the width of the lane elsewhere - that this represents a relatively recent narrowing of the lane.

(iv) The Tithe Award Map of 1842 shows that this first section of the lane, running along White Hawridge Bottom, once led along the south side of a small open-field. By the time that the Tithe Award map was surveyed, this field had been largely enclosed, producing the pattern of thin, strip-like fields shown on the map. Several strips, however, remained unenclosed. This is indicated by the convention used on the Tithe Award: their boundaries are shown, not as a hard continuous line, but by a dashed line. This is the normal convention used on Tithe Award maps for boundaries which are not marked by an upstanding feature, such as a hedge or fence. The field-names given in the Tithe Schedule for these areas of land support this suggestion: they include: 'In Common Field' (Tithe Schedule reference number 1492); 'Common Piece' (1485); and 'Two Acres' (1462). Some of these strips can still be identified on the ground today. On the opposite side of the valley from the lane, lines of scrub grow on

marked scarps, which run down the side of the valley like a flight of steps. These are a familiar kind of medieval earthwork known as strip-lynchets. They are associated with the regular ploughing of open-field strips on steep hill-sides.

This section of the lane thus once led along the southern side of a small open-field, and this is strong evidence for both its antiquity, and its status. The farmers who held land in this field would not have each possessed separate private access to their tiny strips: this would have been impossible. They would have needed some common access way, to bring in carts and ploughs, and to take out crops after harvest. They would, in short, have needed a public vehicular highway, and this, of course, is what Ramscote Lane provided.

Taken together, all these features strongly suggest that the length of lane marked A on the attached map originated in the medieval period.

Section B is rather different. Here the Tithe Award map shows the line of the lane kinking slightly, and running along the edges of former strips. The lane, that is, now runs through the middle of the former open-field. By the time the Tithe Award map was surveyed, some of the strips here had been enclosed, and thus the lane is hedged on one side throughout its length. In earlier centuries, before enclosure was completed, the lane would have been unhedged on both sides, for reasons already given in section

2. Here again we can see that one function of the lane in the medieval period must have been to allow access to the arable strips in the open-field. The lane is not now marked by any physical features, although the principal 'kink' shown on the maps seems to coiincide with a low earthwork, probably a 'headland' marking the junction of adjacent strips.

Section C is a short (c.90 metre) stretch of the lane which runs from TL95550470 to TL95490481, along the eastern side of Stubbing Wood. Topographic evidence would seem to suggest that originally, the real continuation of this section of the lane may have been straight ahead after 95490481, along the line of the wood and. subsequently, the old parish boundary: but this is only a possibility. Certainly, from the time of the earliest maps, as today, Ramscote Lane turned abruptly to the left at this point and runs straight uphill. Section C has all the appearance of an ancient lane, with a well-marked hedge bank, in particular, on the eastern side. Its width here is not what might be expected for a mere field path.

Section D, running up the steep hill through the wood, is certainly old. The first 100 metres of this section is bounded on either side by the broken-down remnants of hedge banks, some with Hornbeam coppices still growing on them - probably the remnants of the original hedges. Definite boundaries like this make it clear that the lane was originally a common way, rather than a mere footpath. Although it now runs through the middle of a wood,

the Tithe Award map shows that in the mid 19th century this section of the lane was not bounded for its entire length by woods. Instead, it was mainly bounded by hedged fields. The lane, it should be noted, formed the boundary of these fields.It did not cut obliquely across them as a field path might. Most of the woodland here is thus of relatively recent origin. Only thin strips of woodland, which now form the outer periphery of the area described on the Ordnance Survey 6" map as Stubbings Wood, existed here in 1842.

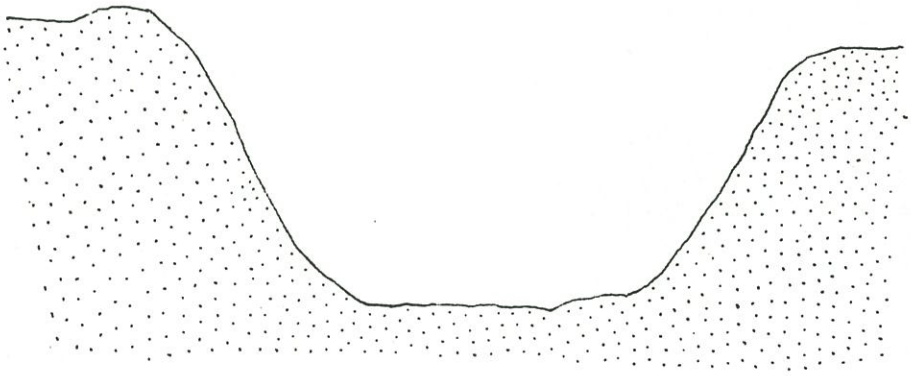
As the track proceeds uphill, it becomes a hollow way; that is, it lies in a deep hollow. Figure 2 shows some typical cross sections of this substantial feature. Hollow ways on this scale are sometimes said to be the result of deliberate excavation, to facilitate the negotiation of steep slopes. In some cases this is true. Indeed it might just conceiveably be true in the case of Ramscote Lane, but I personally doubt it. Deliberate cuttings are usually only a feature of major, long-distance roads - medieval 'King's Highways', or (more usually) post-medieval Turnpike roads. Most hollow ways, including this one, are the result of centuries of erosion on unpaved roads. Traffic loosens the surface and prevents vegetation from holding it; rain washes the debris downhill. A well-developed hollow way like this is unlikely to be less than 300 years old, and may be older. Hollow ways are not usually a feature of footpaths: large-scale erosion demands the regular passage of wheeled vehicles.

FIGURE 2: DETAILS OF THE HOLLOW WAY, RAMSCOTE LANE SECTION 'D'.

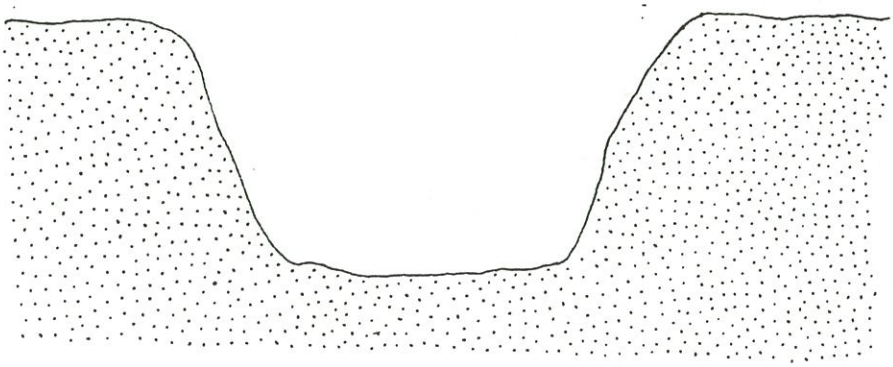
2 metres.

Diagram to illustrate two typical cross-sections of Ramscote Lane as it runs uphill through the wood.

1.



2.



There are indications that attempts have been made to surface this section of the lane in a number of places. Some of these attempts look relatively recent, some seem rather older. In particular, there are areas where flints appear to have been pushed into the surface: something more likely to have occurred in the 19th century, or earlier, than in this century. The later attempts, by contrast, take the form of brick and other rubble. Most do not look particularly recent, although I would not like to be too definite about this. I find it hard to believe that anyone would go to such lengths to improve the surface of what was only a footpath or bridleway: in my experience, this kind of thing is usually only done when lanes are being used for traffic. The track is here, and indeed throughout its length, extremely muddy.

Section E

Beyond the wood the lane continues to have all the signs of being an ancient feature. It is fairly wide - generally around 7 metres from hedge-bank to hedge-bank; it is (or was) hedged on each side; and it forms the boundary for the adjacent fields, rather than cutting across them. All these are features which mark it out as a common way, rather than a mere field path. Only as it passes close to Ramsey Cottage does it narrow perceptibly, to around 3.5 metres. This would still be wide enough for a cart, or indeed a car; but anyway, the present width appears to be the result of progressive encroachment by hedges, mainly from the south-western side (i.e., the Ramsey Cottage side).

Once again, as in section D, there are sporadic signs that attempts have been made to improve the lane's surface at various times in the past.

It is not clear whether this stretch of Ramscote Lane was originally part of the same lane as section D. There are some grounds for believing that it is the remains of a separate route, which ran south-eastwards beyond TL95300479, along the edge of the present wood (itself an old field boundary). This makes little difference to the argument over the status of the road, however, for the whole of section E is evidently an old road, probably of medieval origin, and not a field path.

Section F has features in common with section B. This area, like White Hawridge Bottom, was clearly once a small area of open-field arable. Here too the Tithe Award Map shows the familiar pattern of fossilised strips, and once again a few strips still remained unenclosed at the time the map was surveyed. Once again, the familiar 'indicator' names appear: 'Long Common Field', 'Rood Piece', etc. Here, too, the lane is shown on the First Edition Ordnance Survey 6" as still partially unfenced. And here, too, the same argument applies: a lane leading through the middle of an open-field must have been used by the tenants and freeholders for moving carts and ploughing equipment on to their strips. It can hardly have been other than a public road.

There is one further, and vital, piece of evidence which shows beyond reasonable doubt that sections C, D, E and F must all have originated as medieval common ways. The areas of former open field in White Hawridge Bottom, through which sections A and B run, were associated not with Chesham but with the hamlet of Bellingdon. The inhabitants of this hamlet would have needed some direct access to their arable land, and if this was not provided by the route now represented by Ramscote Lane, then it is difficult to see how else it was supplied. It follows that the entire length of the lane must, therefore, have been a public vehicular highway.

It might be possible to argue that in some subsequent period, perhaps in the 19th or 20th centuries, the road fell out of use, as patterns of land ownership changed and farmers no longer needed to go from Bellingdon to White Hawridge Bottom. Yet there are no indications that public vehicular use of the lane lapsed. On the contrary, there are suggestions that vehicles were still using the lane in the 19th and 20th centuries. The key feature here is the presence of several large areas of woodland beside the lane - i.e., Oak Wood, Pepper Hill Plantation, Stubbings Wood, and Ramscote Wood. If the road was not open for traffic, how would timber have been removed from these woods? It might be argued that these woods are old woods, and that their exploitation and management - and hence the use of the road - may have lapsed at some time during the last two centuries. But in

fact the areas of woodland in question are not all ancient. At the time the Tithe Award Map was made, i.e., in the early 1840s, only Oak Wood and a small part of Stubbings Wood were in existence. The areas now occupied by Peppers Hill Plantation, Ramscote Wood, and Garrets Wood, as well as much of Stubbings Wood, were at this stage fields. By the time the First Edition Ordnance Survey 6" was surveyed, in the 1870s, Stubbings Wood had been expanded to its present boundaries but the other areas of woodland had still not come into existence. These are, therefore, late 19th or 20th century plantations, something which explains the relative youth of the standing timber within them. I find it hard to believe that woodland would have been planted here on this scale if there had been no suitable access road at the time. The sporadic signs of repairs and surfacing noted in sections D and E would support the suggestion that lorries or carts have used the lane in relatively recent times to reach these woods.

It will thus be apparent that the track described today, and in the 19th century, as 'Ramscote Lane' may be made up of a number of originally discrete sections with separate origins. If so, the date at which the constituent parts came to be regarded as a single entity is unknown, and - given the nature of the evidence - perhaps unknowable. But it is, in any case, not relevant to the present issue. The pertinent points are these:

(i) All the constituent elements appear to be early, probably medieval, routeways.

(ii) All appear to have been used, and considered, as lanes fit for vehicular traffic, from the medieval period onwards.

(iii) There is some evidence that the lane continued to be used for carts, lorries or tractors in the 19th and 20th centuries.

4. Ramscote Lane: the Cartographic Evidence

(i) The earliest map which shows Ramscote Lane is that published by Thomas Jeffereys in 1778. The map is drawn at a small scale, but it appears to show Ramscote Lane following the same line as later maps. Like similar county maps published in the last three decades of the 18th century, this map does not show field paths, and this clearly indicates that in the 1770s the lane was regarded as a normal public road.

(ii) The 1822 Ordnance Survey Map shows the line of the road more clearly: this is generally considered to be an accurate map. It is hardly surprising, given all the evidence outlined above, to discover that it shows the entire length of the lane as a proper road, no different to any others in the area, such as - for example,- the modern A416. There is not the slightest indication that at this time the lane was considered as a footpath. Indeed, this map - like that of Jeffereys - does not show mere footpaths.

Also worthy of note in the present context is the fact that the 1822 Ordnance Survey Map shows the line of the road to be

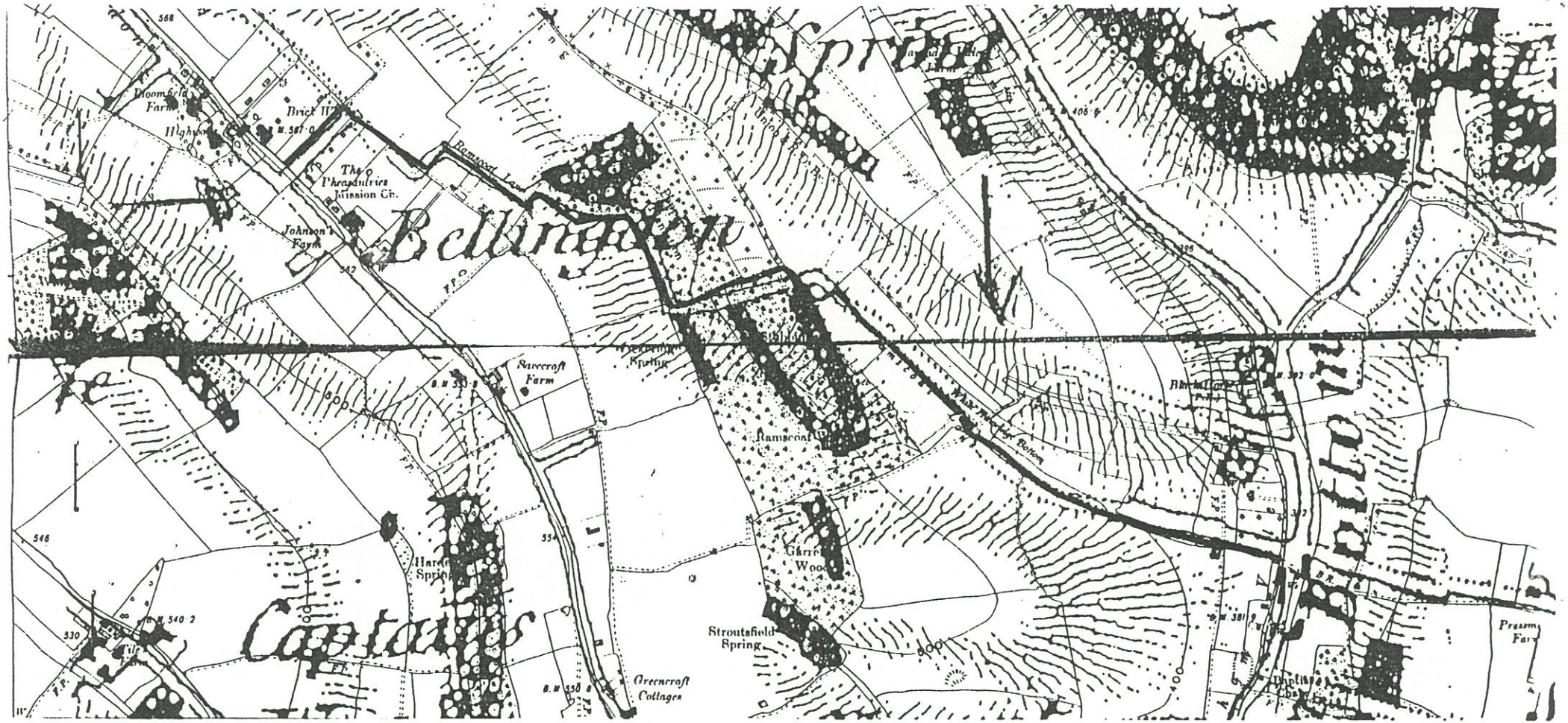


FIGURE 3: RAMSCOTE LANE, 1822. On this diagram, the 1822 Ordnance Survey 1" map has been photographically enlarged to the same scale as the more recent Ordnance Survey 6". Note how the 1822 map shows the lane following precisely the same route as today - especially in the area around Ramsey Cottage.

precisely the same as today. We can show this by redrawing the map to the same scale as the Ordnance Survey 6" map. Particularly noteworthy is the way in which all the bends and kinks in the final section, towards Bellingdon, are in precisely the same position on both maps (Figure 3). Thus, for example, the line of the lane past Ramsey Cottage is clearly the same as the line taken by the lane today.

It will be noted that the 1822 map uses different conventions for different sections of the lane. In some places, the edges of the lane are shown as hard, continuous lines; in others, by fainter, dotted lines. This variation does not imply anything about the use or status of the road. It merely shows which sections were bounded by hedges, and which sections were not. The dotted sections were the unfenced parts, and it will be immediately apparent that these correspond precisely with the two areas of open-field already described: i.e., in White Hawridge Bottom and near the hamlet of Bellingdon. As noted above, although these fields would have been largely enclosed by this time, the process had not been entirely completed even in the 1840s. In consequence, the sides of the road remained - in whole or part - unhedged. This, as noted in section 2, is a normal feature where early lanes run across commons or open-fields.

Thus: the 1822 Ordnance Survey Map, the earliest really accurate map of the area, shows Ramscote Lane as a road, rather than as a footpath; and shows that at this time it ran along precisely the

same line as it does today.

(iii) The Tithe Award Map has little to add. As already noted, this map shows that the areas of open field in White Hawridge Bottom, and to the east of Bellingdon, were by this time largely although not entirely enclosed. Although this map does not specifically state that the road was open to vehicular traffic (it was no part of the Surveyors' job to pronounce on the status of local highways) it shows one or two interesting details which indicate that it must have been. In particular, it suggests that the principal entrance track to Ramsey Cottage ran eastwards out on to Ramscote Lane, rather than - as today - westwards. It is very hard to see why this should have been the case if the entire length of Ramscote Lane leading eastwards, down to Chesham Vale, had not been considered a public road.

It is important to note that the Tithe Award Map shows Ramscote Lane following the same course as that depicted on the 1822 map. The only point of ambiguity lies in the area to the north of Ramsey Cottage, where the line of the road is not clearly shown. This is probably because this section of the lane was not at this time fenced or hedged. This was an area of Bellingdon's open-field land which still remained unenclosed at the time. As already noted, this section of the lane was also shown as unfenced on the 1822 map. It was still partly unfenced when the First Edition OS 6" was surveyed in the 1870s. Even today it is only bounded by modern barbed wire fencing on the north side.

But the ommission of the lane from the map at this point is mainly due to another cause. The surface area of this section of the lane must have been included in the Tithe Assessment of the adjacent field. The probable reason for this must again be sought in the recent history of the area in question, which was still - in the words of the Tithe Schedule - 'Common Field'. The fact that the road surface was owned by the proprietor of the common field strip over which it ran at this point does not, of course, have any bearing on whether the lane at this point was, or was not, considered a public vehicular highway. The precise status of local lanes was not a matter of concern to the Tithe Commissioners.

(iv) Subsequent Maps, from the First Edition Ordnance Survey of 1873 - 77 onwards, continue to show the line of Ramscote Lane as it is depicted on the earlier maps. Examination of the area in February 1989 shows that the course of the road still remains as it is shown on the 1822 Ordnance Survey.

5. Conclusion

All the evidence - cartographic, topographic, and archaeological - suggests beyond reasonable doubt that Ramscote lane was considered as highway in the 18th century, no different from Vale Road or Bellingdon Road. It may have originated through the combination of sections of a number of different medieval lanes, themselves vehicular routes rather than field paths. In the

medieval period and after, it functioned as an access way to open-fields in White Hawridge Bottom and near Bellingdon. All maps after the 18th century show Ramscote lane as a continuous road, and the evidence oulined above suggests that it continued to be used as a road well into this century. Unless it has been subject to a formal road closure order - and I have been informed that this is not the case - then I can see no reason why it should not still be considered as open to vehicular traffic.
