

THE ROADS THROUGH THE WOODS; HISTORIC ROUTES IN SUTTON PARK

By Mike Hodder

Throughout Sutton Park's history there were, as now, many paths running across its open land and through its woods. Their relative importance varied over time and some were periodically or permanently abandoned, or replaced on different alignments, and became overgrown. The LiDAR images of the Park show the many paths and tracks, current and former, very clearly¹. Routes represented by roads and tracks, let alone those followed by paths, are notoriously difficult to date, although the date of establishment of a few of the routes through the Park is known, such as the road from Town Gate across Meadow Platt which was constructed in 1829². The dates of other tracks and paths can be suggested by their relationship to other features, and they seem in some cases to have determined the location and alignments of these features. Using relative dating, this article expands the discussion in my book *The Archaeology of Sutton Park*³ and speculates that some long-distance paths through the Park's woods follow long-established routes, which may relate to the medieval deer park or may even have been in use before it was created. These routes influenced the locations of pools and their dams.

The earliest maps to show routes through Sutton Park are Henry Beighton's map of 1725, which was included in the second edition of William Dugdale's *History and Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1730)⁴, and an anonymous map of 1779⁵. Beighton's map (fig 1) shows a track which continues the line of the present Wyndley Lane and runs north-west across the park to *Strutley* [Streetly] *Gate*. The south-eastern end of this track can be identified on the ground as a well-marked hollow way just outside Holly Hurst, and the route can be followed as a now rather winding path through Holly Hurst to emerge west of Keepers Pool. It then continued along the line of the present tarmac road past the Jamboree Stone to Streetly Gate. Beighton's map is not very detailed and is drawn at a small scale but the identification of the line of the route is given support by the hollow way, the existing path, and the continuation to Streetly Gate. This route presumably ran through the medieval deer park from the manor house.

Strangely, the 1779 map, which is of Sutton Park alone and is relatively detailed, does not show this route at all, nor do nineteenth-century maps such as the Corn Rent map of 1824-25⁶ or the Valuation Map of 1857⁷ (although neither of these needed to show Sutton Park in detail and may have derived their information on the Park directly from the 1779 map or from a copy of it – the path traceable through Holly Hurst now and the road to Streetly Gate are marked on the First Edition of the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map). The 1779 map may have been drawn in relation to surveys and valuation of timber and therefore concentrates on the woods, but it does include various details beyond them. Few paths are shown on the 1779 map, so the fact that it does not show the route depicted on the 1725 map does not mean that it was not there, but that it was not regarded, either generally or specifically by the map maker or his clients, as a significant route at this time, in the context in which the map was drawn. Beighton's map may have drawn on earlier sources which did not reflect the main paths in use at his time, or perhaps more likely was based on his knowledge, information given to him, or supposition that there was a route across the Park. The depiction of the path through Holly Hurst, on the line of this route, on the Ordnance Survey maps reflects both the greater detail of these maps and the use of the park for public recreation by this time, which may have led to greater use of hitherto little-used paths.



Figure 1: Detail of Henry Beighton's map of Hemlingford Hundred (1725)

The only paths shown on the 1779 map (fig 2), which were presumably distinct from the myriad of other paths that must have existed then as now, are all labelled “Glade”: a north-south path which runs through Holly Hurst from its southern tip to its northern side (fig 2, Route A1); the continuation of this line over the dam of Keepers Pool and through Lower Nut Hurst towards Blackroot Pool, but stopping at the boundary of Lower Nut Hurst (Fig 2, Route A2) ; a glade between Upper and Lower Nut Hursts which is named Blackroot Glade on later maps, such as that in Midgley’s *History*⁸; and a glade (Windley Glade on later maps) running east-north-east to west-south-west across the southern part of Holly Hurst. All of these can still be followed on the ground.

Within Holly Hurst, Route A1 first runs on a level, and crosses (or is crossed by) Windley Glade near its highest point, then runs downhill to Keepers Valley, emerging from Holly Hurst along a slight natural gully. The alignment then continues (as Route A2) on the other side of the valley, crossing the valley along the dam of Keepers Pool, as clearly shown on Marian Baxter’s photograph⁹, but the line of the dam is slightly misaligned to that of the route on each side of it, suggesting that the location of the dam was determined by an existing crossing point of the stream by routes A1 and A2. Route A2 continues north, first uphill then along the contour, turning to the west in its northern part and running along the edge of boggy ground to reach the western end of the dam of Blackroot Pool. At the north end of route A2, Blackroot Glade, which runs downhill along a natural gully, could have continued east to cross the Ebrook close to, but north of, the line of the dam of Blackroot Pool, then east to a gate shown on the 1779 map near to Midland Lodge. Windley Glade is aligned on the tower of Holy Trinity church, which provides some evidence for its date: the existing tower is fifteenth-century in date but could have replaced an earlier, but still medieval, tower therefore Windley Glade is medieval or later in date, but no later than the 1779 map on which it is marked.

Route A1 does not continue to the south of Holly Hurst on the 1779 map, but projection of its alignment would take it at or near the present Boldmere Gate and across Longmoor Brook on the line of the dam of Powells Pool. A gate is shown on the 1779 map, but it is north of Boldmere Gate because the pool and the land to its north were then outside the park. The alignment of Route A1 would then continue south along the line of the present Stonehouse Road and Boldmere Road, which is marked as a track on the 1824-25 Corn Rent map, to Chester Road. However, no path or track between the end of A1 and Boldmere Gate is shown on the Corn Rent or any other maps and the comments of Francis Parkes, the owner of the then spade mill at Powells Pool in 1855 about the potential benefits of a road through the Park imply that there was then no route to or from it through the Park and it had to be approached from the south¹⁰.

Stony Glade, between Lower Nut Hurst and Darnel Hurst, is not labelled on the 1779 map but may be considered part of the same route system. It runs down a natural gully to the Ebrook and is continued on the other side of the valley by a hollow way running up the slope. This route may have continued north-east, across the valley of Gum Slade to the present Four Oaks Gate, which was already an entrance to the Park with a keeper’s house in 1779. Route A1 might have extended north to Four Oaks Gate as well, but would have had to cross the Ebrook valley to do so.

All of these routes were in existence by 1779 because they are depicted on the map of that date, and therefore predate the public recreational use of the Park and the inclusion (or re-inclusion, if the medieval deer park extended further east¹¹) of Meadow Platt in the Park, but



Figure 2: Detail of the 1779 map with features referred to in text

just how old are they? As stated above, the dates of these routes can be suggested on the basis of their relationship to other features whose dates, or probable dates, are known. Routes A1 and A2 in particular seem to predate everything else they are related to. As noted above, A1 does not seem to have provided access to the Park from the south. Only Windley Glade certainly postdates another feature, the tower of Holy Trinity church, and is therefore medieval or later in date. The relationship of routes A1 and A2 to the dam of Keepers Pool, which originated as a medieval fishpond, suggests that they are medieval or earlier in date. Although they appear to cut across the boundaries of Holly Hurst and Lower Nut Hurst, both of which were enclosed and managed as coppice in the sixteenth century, the straight routes through the woods could only have been created when the woods were absent altogether or more open than they are now, because of the lines of sight that would be needed to establish the alignments. This might have followed extensive felling, or perhaps more likely it took place when the woods were managed as wood pasture as part of the medieval deer park or earlier, rather than coppice. The gaps between the coppice enclosures (Blackroot Glade and Stony Glade) probably respect routes along natural hollows which were already in use when the coppices were enclosed.

The southern end of Route A1 on the 1779 map coincides with the boundary of a subdivision of the medieval deer park (Park I and Park II)¹² and Route A2 is crossed by (or crosses) one of the boundaries (Park I) and ends before another (Park II). If A1 did originally extend further south and A2 extended further north to join Blackroot Glade and possibly further to Four Oaks Gate, the full length of A1 and A2 could therefore only have been in use before the subdivisions were created (and before Keepers Pool was constructed). They were therefore created in the original deer park, before the subdivisions were constructed, or may already have been in use when the park was created in the twelfth century. The fact that the routes are not related to the main entrance into the medieval deer park along the dam of Wyndley Pool may suggest that they were unrelated to it and therefore predated it, but equally they could have provided a separate entrance to the Park. The constriction of the long route A1 and A2 by the subdivisions of the deer park may have resulted in the creation or extension of Windley Glade (which postdates the church tower), and possibly also the use of Blackroot Glade and its exit from the Park, outside of the subdivisions Park I and Park II, and Stony Glade and its continuation, also outside these subdivisions. However, since Windley Glade, Blackroot Glade and Stony Glade all lie within the third subdivision of the medieval deer park, Park III¹³, all of the routes could have been created as part of the deer park.

So what were the paths used for? Although level in some places, they also run up hill and down dale, so although they are in woodland, it is difficult to see them being used to transport cut timber. The sawpits of medieval or later date in the Park's woodland often lie near existing paths which may well have been there when the sawpits were in use, and generally provide downhill routes out of the woods. Alternatively the paths may have been used for movement of livestock, like the gaps retained on the routes of pre-existing paths between the coppices when they were enclosed in the sixteenth century. As suggested above, they could have formed part of the deer park and might be related to hunting by "bow and stable" within it, joining valleys along which deer were funnelled and providing access between the valleys for beaters or archers. The relationship of the routes to the subdivisions of the deer park would support this interpretation. If A1 and A2 were in use before the park was subdivided they might have determined the extent of the subdivisions; if they were created as a result of the subdivisions represented by Parks I and II then route A1 may never have extended further south than shown on the 1779 map, nor A2 further north. On this basis, Windley Glade, Blackroot Glade and Stony Glade could have been added when Park III was created. However, this does not solve

the issue of the relationship of routes A1 and A2 to the diagonal south-east to north-west route shown on the 1725 map- was it in use before the paths, or did it follow them? It could have been the formal route through the park, used by the lord of the manor and his guests, as opposed to the paths used by those assisting in hunting.

Boggy ground around the Park's streams is difficult to negotiate now, and it would have presented a real barrier to the movement of people and animals in the past, so routes would have followed higher ground rather than stream valleys even though it involved going up and down quite steep slopes in places. However, streams still had to be crossed, and once a crossing point had been established it would tend to continue in use, with a ford being replaced by a bridge or even by a causeway which could then become the line of a pool dam. The location of the pools was therefore determined not only by water supply – a single stream near its source would be enough to fill a fishpond such as Keepers Pool but millpools such as Blackroot Pool tended to be at the confluence of two or more streams or further down the stream course, so that there was sufficient water to drive the mill – but also by existing crossing points of streams on the routes described here.

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Notes

1. LiDAR is an acronym for Light Detection and Ranging- using airborne laser to record topography in great detail. The procedure is described at: <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/research/landscapes-and-areas/aerial-survey/archaeology/lidar/> Images of Sutton Park derived from LiDAR data are at: http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/suttonpark_eh_2010/downloads.cfm?archive=lidar&CFID=76660&CFTOKEN=2984063D-A685-4A0F-A1857134008EA164
2. Norman Evans, "Exploring the Park in search of its history: Observations on the area between the Main Entrance and Blackroot", in Roger Lea ed, *Scenes from Sutton's Past* (Westwood Press, 1989), pp41-53
3. Michael Hodder, *The Archaeology of Sutton Park* (The History Press, 2013)
4. William Dugdale, *History and Antiquities of Warwickshire* (2nd edition, 1730)
5. *A Plan and Admeasurement of Sutton Park in the Parish of Sutton Coldfield in the Counties of Warwick and Stafford taken in the year 1779*. Roger Lea suggests that it may have been commissioned by Josiah Boulton who was paid by the Warden and Society to "value the timber in the Park"
6. Sutton Coldfield Library
7. Sutton Coldfield Library
8. William Midgley, *A Short History of the Town and Chase of Sutton Coldfield* (1904)
9. Marian Baxter, *Images of England: Sutton Park* (Tempus 2004), p35
10. *Report on the Proceedings on an Enquiry...in August 1855 upon Certain Petitions presented for and against the grant of a Municipal Corporation to the Royal Town, Manor and Lordship of Sutton Coldfield* (Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield, 1856), p26
11. Hodder, *The Archaeology of Sutton Park*, p93
12. Hodder, *The Archaeology of Sutton Park*, pp77-81
13. Hodder, *The Archaeology of Sutton Park*, pp81-87