



The Herepath: source notes.

Herepaths are Saxon army roads. They are associated particularly with King Alfred, who set up a network of military roads and fortified towns or *burhs* to defend against Viking incursions, though some are undoubtedly older. A *here* is an armed host; Ine, king of Wessex from 688 to 726, defined it as a group of more than 35, and the term could be applied to Viking raiders as well as to the Saxons themselves. Some routes followed earlier paths such as the Bronze Age ridgeway over the Brendon Hills. Unlike Roman roads they are not necessarily straight, nor paved; they just needed to allow a war band to move rapidly without becoming bogged down or too strung out. Some (including parts of the one described here) were probably too narrow to be ideal for an army numbering in the hundreds, but they would have provided a ready route for smaller forces to move between *burhs* or head out to repel raiders. Herepaths seem to have been used for farming and transporting goods in addition to their military purpose, though in places the herepath (usually on high ground) is distinct from the road used by livestock and carts (lower down). Of necessity some herepaths included smaller connecting paths between highways.

On Exmoor the spelling 'harepath' is often used, in line with the pronunciation (the short section south of Wheddon Cross is so-named on the Ordnance Survey map). I have kept to *herepath* as it is the more common spelling and reflects the Old English (*herepaþ* or *herepæþ*).

In Somerset there is a tradition of a herepath running from Bristol to Pawlett, then across the River Parrett on a ford at Combwich, over the Quantock and Brendon Hills, on to the top of Exmoor, and to the *burh* at Pilton near Barnstaple, with a branch heading down to the sea near Porlock. The main source for the route as far as Bessom Bridge near Wheddon Cross is William Greswell, vicar of Dodington on the northern edge of the Quantocks, who devoted a chapter of his book *Dumnonia and the valley of the Parret* to the subject. Later writers have proposed routes across Exmoor and to Barnstaple. I have followed the Porlock route here, but may add more on the western one at a later date.

The precise routes of herepaths can be debatable, particularly as they could follow the routes of earlier Bronze Age paths or Roman roads (*stræts*), as well as being confused by later investigators with non-military Saxon tracks (*wegs*) and later trade routes. While herepath or harepath place-names are an obvious clue, other here- derivations need not refer to a road but could be connected to an encampment or the site of a raid. A further complication is that the original meaning of 'herepath' may have been lost by medieval times, and the term ap-

plied to any long- or medium-distance road maintained at public expense. One clue provided by William Greswell and G. B. Grundy is that parish boundaries were often made to coincide with the herepath, but any proposed route needs to be treated with caution in the absence (as here) of archaeological evidence. My purpose is to identify a walking trail that approximates to the route that various historians have conjectured, not to throw any new light on a path for which the evidence is limited and often vague.

A few notes follow about the route that I have adopted as a walking trail. The main sources I have used are William Greswell (1922), G. B. Grundy (1939/41), Charles Whybrow (1970/77), Hazel Eardley-Wilmot (1983/1990), and Peter Pay (2003). There is also an article by Vanessa McMullen (1993) following Eardley-Wilmot's route to the coast, with an additional map. For general information about Saxon roads I have referred to Jennifer Macdonald's 2001 thesis (which incidentally only identifies the 'Harepath' south of Wheddon Cross). Initials are used to identify authors in the text, and full details are given at the end of the paper.

Most of the places referred to in the sources can be found on the modern 1:25000 OS map. Where they are not (as with some of William Greswell's locations) I have attempted to locate them on early 20th-century 6" OS maps.

Route notes

Combwich Causeway This is a former crossing of the River Parrett, where it could be forded at low tide. It is to the north of Combwich Passage, the former ferry route. Although it was already deteriorating in the fifteenth century, evidence of it can still be seen at the lowest tides of the year, though it is no longer passable (HEW c).

Combwich to Cannington Knoll From Combwich the path is noted as passing to the west of Cannington Knoll, where there is a hill fort (WG says the path was easily visible when he was writing). This is one of the sites conjectured as being Arx Cynuit or Cynwit, where in 878 a small army led by the Saxon ealdorman Odda defeated a larger force of Vikings and killed their leader, Ubba. WG puts forward a good argument for the location being Cannington, as does the historic fiction author Bernard Cornwell to support the location chosen in his novels; an alternative that is widely quoted is Wind Hill fort near Countisbury. The route is unlikely to have crossed the waterlogged ground to the north of the fort, so I am assuming it went south from Combwich over what is now Bolham Bridge and then turned right across the southern side of the knoll (old maps show a westwards path immediately to the south of the hill, but there is no right of way there now). My route (of necessity) skirts too far to the south.

Oteley Oak, Swang Gorse and Keenthorne These are mentioned by WG. I have taken the route past Oteley Vineyard and Furze Covert to Keenthorne Farm.

Keenthorne to Over Stowey church No intermediate waypoints are mentioned so I have simply followed the most obvious route on the road, then turned right to join the Stowey road which was part of the herepath (WG). The herepath would have predated the church, but there was a fort at Over Stowey. WG refers to a field called Castle Ground that I can't find on the 6" OS map.

Ram's Combe, Crowcombe Gate and on to the Quantocks ridgeway The route along the Stowey road past the head of Ram's Combe, Crowcombe Gate and on to the ridge seems straightforward. WG's 'wide drove between beech hedges surmounted by gorse' is not difficult to find today. WG suggests that Great Bear Path, joining from Dowsborough, is probably a corruption of 'herepath'. The route of the Ridgeway is described by GBG(a); it is the obvious route along the spine of the Quantocks today.

The ridge to Red Post WG indicates that the path passed close to Triscombe Stone and the Blue Ball before heading to Red Post. I have simply followed the modern track and road down to Red Post.

Red Post to Elworthy Cross WG describes the route in detail as far as Cats Castle, starting with the wide road to the railway and then narrower Binford's Lane and Dean's Lane to Coleford Water, followed by Cutborough Copse and Cats Castle. The next point referred to is Elworthy Barrows (actually a hill fort), so there is a possibility that my route via Elworthy Cross is incorrect, though it joins the B3224 which soon afterwards becomes the parish boundary. GBG(a) describes the route of the Brendons Ridgeway as being slightly further south, heading from Deans Cross or thereabouts to just south of Willett, then back up to Hartrow House (Manor). This is partly off rights of way and partly on the B-road, so regardless of historic accuracy WG's version is the better walking route.

Along the B3224 There isn't a straightforward walking route parallel with the B3224, and the road itself is too busy to make for comfortable walking. There is little reference to the actual route but it seems to diverge slightly from the road in some places. At Brendon Hill it is noted as passing Naked Boy's Stone (CW), which is on the parish boundary; presumably it then follows the boundary back to the road. The boundary also diverges from the road by about 150m at Withiel Hill. There is a possible anomaly at Kennisham Forest, where the Exmoor Historic Environment Record suggests that the Herepath passes SS 9648 3642, where there was a dig. This seems an unnecessary diversion (over 500m) from the road and the boundary, so it could be part of another path.

Summerway Cross A viable walking route begins again at Summerway Cross (CW). This can be reached off-road from Wheddon Cross by heading to Cutcombe Cross, then south along the Coleridge Way.

The Hare Path and Bushel Bridge The Hare Path from Summerway Cross is straightforward; it crosses the A396 at Hare Path Cross (CW) and continues to Bushel Bridge over the River Quarne (WG). This is the only modern reference to a Herepath or Harepath along the east-west route, other than possibly the *here*-related placenames mentioned for the western extension. VMM suggests that there may have also been a winter route along the Summerway via Dunkery Gate.

Thorne Lane and Stone Lane WG is vague as to the route after Bushel Bridge; for following the route to Worthy, HEW becomes the authority (and see also VMM). It seems fairly clear that the path continues along Thorne Lane (HEW c); she then says 'across Stone Down', but guided by the parish boundary and the better-defined lane I have taken this to mean via Stone Cross and along Stone Lane. CW's westward route, which is supported (though not in detail) by WG, would seem to break off to the left somewhere around Rocks Cottage and join the path via Higher Combe to North Court. GBG(a) describes the ridge-way as heading towards the Rowbarrows and roughly to Larkbarrow Cross, which agrees with VMM's proposed winter route.

To Hawkcombe Head and Pittcombe Head HEW's next waypoint is Hillhead Cross, but her directions past Bendel's Barrows and Porlock stone circle suggest taking the most obvious route from the top of Stone Lane on to the Porlock road, about 300m north of Hillhead Cross. The route now follows the modern road almost to Hawkcombe Head, forking left on the rough lane to Pittcombe Head. Pittcombe

Head used to be called Harepath Head, and HEW(c) cites other examples of former 'Harepath' names in the area that led her to investigate the route down to Worthy.

To Worthy and the coast HEW describes the route as continuing past Pitt Farm and Yearnor Mill Bridge, then down Worthy Combe to the hamlet of Worthy. The walking route is to the right of the toll road on the designated footpath. How the path reached the coast is unclear, but the obvious finish for modern walkers is to take the path to the right into Porlock Weir, where there are refreshments, a car park and a bus stop.

The western route CW sets out a western route to Barnstaple. He suggests it splits in two at Simonsbath, with one branch heading to Mole's Chamber and Bratton Fleming, and the other along the road to the Poltimore Arms and Brayford, meeting again east of Barnstaple Long Bridge (in Saxon times a ford). HEW is sceptical about a continuation in this direction, but there is at least some circumstantial evidence that the path ran east of Exford; Hereliving and Hearlake may refer to the herepath, and there is a tradition of a herepath at Birch Cleave near Simonsbath and between Hearlake and Mole's Chamber. It would also seem contrary to King Alfred's plans not to continue the path to Pilton, on the River Yeo in Barnstaple, assuming it was one of his fortified *burhs*. There is evidence on the ground for an old path of some sort between Simonsbath, Mole's Chamber, Shoulsbury Castle, Leworthy and on to Bratton Fleming, but in the Hereliving area it is less clear. By contrast, GBG's(a/b) ridgeway route continues north, roughly along the line of the modern Macmillan Way past Pinkery Pond, Chapman Barrow, south of Parracombe and north of Kentisbury.

Sources in date order

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