

Where was the original Hook Norton?

The Anglo-Saxons first gave this village its name, but where was it? For generations people assumed that it must be centred on the parish church, much the oldest building in the parish, but was that necessarily the case? The earliest record of the name is in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* at a date variously translated as between 912 and 923 A.D. (with 913 now preferred by scholars), but there is no clue to the village's precise location other than the name itself. The original name was *Hocneratune*, which was authoritatively translated as "the settlement or enclosure of the people at Hocca's hill-slope".¹ Since the 1980s there has been debate over whether this necessarily meant the area around the present church and market place, and the doubts have been compounded by modern changes in the translation of the Anglo-Saxon name.

The modern scholarly debate began with the publication in 1984 of an essay by John Blair in *Oxoniensia*, the leading learned journal on Oxfordshire history. Blair pointed out that, in one version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the account of the battle fought around here in 913 A.D. against Vikings from Northampton and Leicester described Hook Norton as a "royal vill". Blair argued that this term referred not to a single place but "a large block of royal land" – later divided into at least five neighbouring parishes – that had at its centre a royal hall with satellite buildings and possibly an important church. This centre, he suggested, lay not where the present village of Hook Norton stands but in the Iron Age fort on Tadmarton Heath, just outside the boundary of the future Hook Norton parish, near where the ridge road running from Oatley Hill and *The Gate Hangs High* towards Milcombe branches off left to Lower Tadmarton and Banbury. Blair pointed to some archaeological traces that supported this hypothesis but, above all, to the fact that the land allotted to finance the principal church of the vill lay not near the village's present parish church but on the ridge to the west of the hillfort. Thus in his view Hook Norton was at that time the name, not of a village, but of a reasonably extensive royal holding.

¹ Margaret Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire* (Cambridge, 1953-54), *Part 2*, page 353-54. See also "Understanding Local Place Names" and "Invaders of the Dark Ages", on this website.

On this hypothesis, in the early tenth century “the ridge west and east of Tadmarton Camp was an Anglo-Saxon ‘central place’, pre-dating Hook Norton village”. This tends to underline Alfred Beesley’s suggestion that the battle of 913 against the Danes was fought in this area, possibly even within the Iron Age camp, two miles north-east of the modern village. A hundred years later, by the early eleventh century, the western part of this block had broken apart for some reason, divided into smaller parishes (which still survive), and the ‘central place’ (and its name) moved to what became the present village. The site of the church also moved, probably soon after the Norman Conquest, “since the nave of the present church is 11th-century.”²

This suggestion roused controversy among local historians, but within a year Blair had recanted, at least in part. His study of the Anglo-Saxon hoard and Viking burials found in Southrop in 1848 ³ suggested that some settlement had existed near the village stream around 875 A.D., and therefore presumably at the time of the battle. Moreover, an architectural investigation of the exterior of the parish church in January 1987 discovered typical Anglo-Saxon large, well-squared long and short quoins on the eastern angles of the north transept and the chancel. While this could have been built in the early eleventh century, the fact that a substantial building in the Anglo-Saxon style already existed showed that, if the church did migrate from Tadmarton Heath, it did so well before the Norman Conquest. In other words, regardless of where the original Anglo-Saxon settlement had been made, it had moved to the present site and begun to create “a central place” in the valley well before 1000 A.D.⁴

² John Blair, “Hook Norton, *regia villa*”, in *Oxoniensia*, vol. 51 (1986), pp. 63-67. The suggestion that the battle was fought in the Iron Age camp (and then moved on to the nearby British camp) derives from Alfred Beesley, *History of Banbury* (Banbury, 1841).

³ John Blair and Martin Biddle, “The Hook Norton Hoard of 1848: A Viking Burial from Oxfordshire? *Oxoniensia*, vol. 52 (1987).

⁴ More recent work around the church has discovered other evidence of Anglo-Saxon building, mainly at the external angle of the south-east junction of the chancel with the south aisle. However, this discovery does not in itself justify the accompanying claims that there was an even earlier Anglo-Saxon church that had been built in the late-seventh to eighth century; this date almost entirely lacks substantiation. See “Archaeological Watching Brief at Saint Peter’s Church, Hook Norton, Oxfordshire”, *John Moore Heritage Services*, project no. 2563, Oxfordshire County Museums no. 2012.8

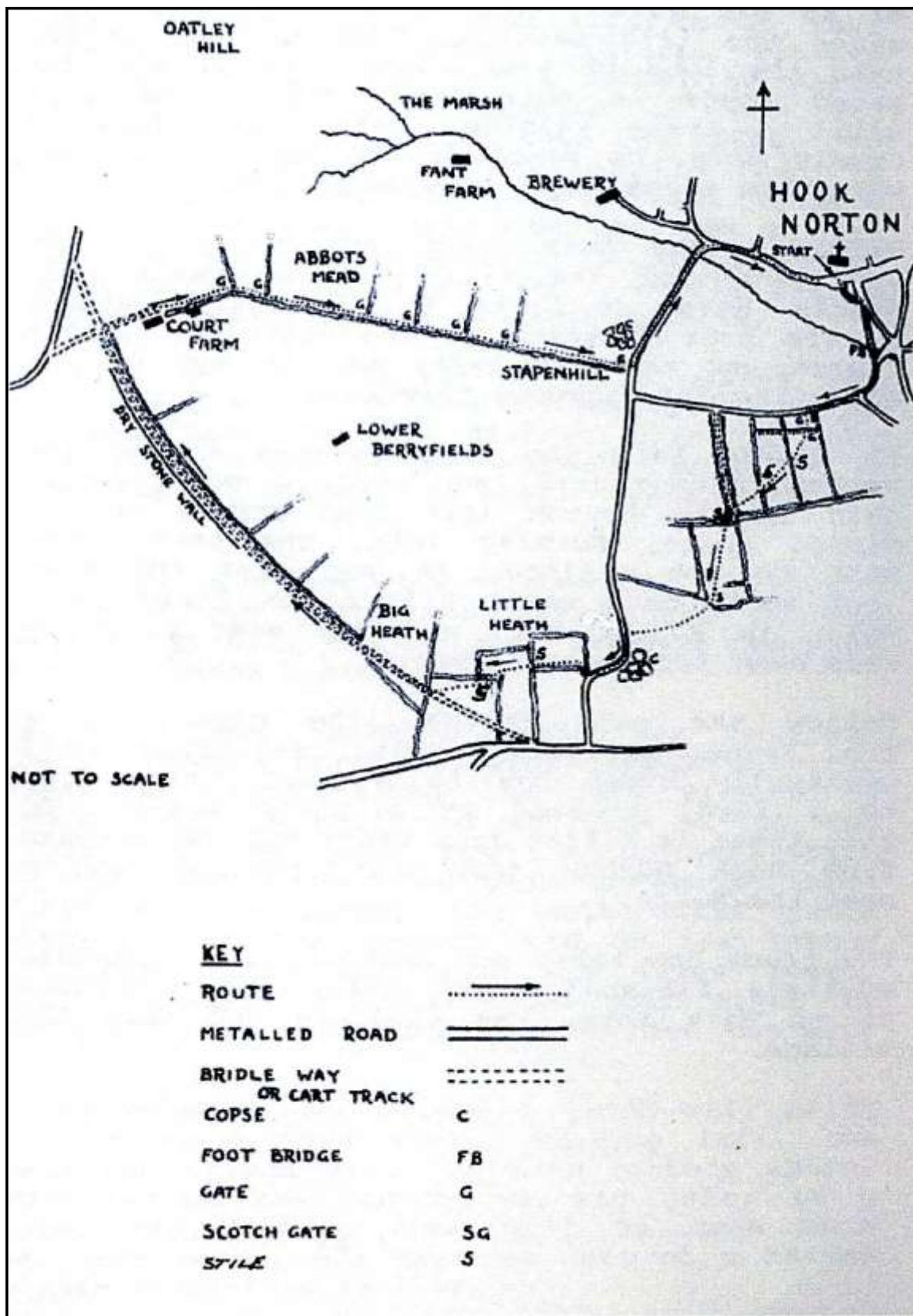
By 2019, when VCH assistant editor Stephen Miles on began his research into Hook Norton's past, the question of original location had changed in one critical respect: Anglo-Saxon scholars had developed a more sophisticated understanding of our place name. The critical element of the name had always been the "or" bit, which derived from the word *ora*. In the past this had always been translated as "on the hill side" (or even "on the river bank"), but by the 1990s scholars had examined the actual sites to which *ora* had been applied and discovered that an *ora* was, in Miles on's words, "a flat-topped ridge with a rounded shoulder, associated in many cases with a routeway".⁵

In the case of Hook Norton, that would cover Blair's original emphasis on Tadmarton Heath, where the shoulders of a long level ridge begin to descend steeply to Milcombe and more gradually to Lower Tadmarton. Miles on, however, thought that the ridge in question was more likely to be found to the west rather than the north-east, and he pointed to the ridge that runs from Great Rollright past Court Farm to Oatley Hill. Miles on emphasised the significance of the ridge-top road, which marks the eleventh-century county boundary with Warwickshire and was apparently already well known as a through route, which the invading Danes may have used in 913.⁶

However, since reading Miles on's draft, I have chanced upon another, older (and, to my mind, especially persuasive) suggestion made originally by Percy Hackling in 1978. Hackling was a local man who, after his retirement as a Co-op manager in Chipping Norton, made himself into an expert on local geology, early history and changing field patterns. He did not write very much but his invaluable notes survive in the village museum, and he discussed knotty points in local history with an eager incomer, the young Rob Woolley, who taught in the village school. When Woolley produced his booklet *Hooky* on key points in Hooky history in 1978, he quoted Hackling's views at length – and they may now be found in the version

⁵ The quotation is from Stephen Miles on, VCH draft chapter on Hook Norton, "Landscape, Settlement," page 4, available at <https://www.history.ac.uk/research/victoria-county-history/county-histories-progress/oxfordshire//oxfordshire-vol-xxi-chipping-norton-and-environs>. For the topographical research, see Margaret Gelling, "Place-Names and Landscape", in Simon Taylor, ed., *The Uses of Place-Names* (Edinburgh, 1998)

⁶ Miles on, VCH draft chapter, "Landscape, Settlement", pp. 4-5.



The map of walk 2 in Hook Norton Footpaths.

The more direct modern path to Great Rollright runs from just south of the entry to the Stapenhill route up to the second field west of Big Heath, passing through Fanville Farm on its way.

N.B. The Big Heath is the field immediately west of the one marked as such on this map.

of the pamphlet available on this site as Appendix 1.⁷

Hackling was writing before Anglo-Saxon scholars had begun to question the translation of the original Anglo-Saxon name, and he focused on the nature of the terrain around the old centre of modern Hook Norton. As he wrote to Woolley,

Taking the area as a whole there is only one place where there is a 'hill slope' of any significance to be given a name at so early a date. This is Stapenhill where David Golby farms. It is my opinion that the settlement on Hocca's Hill Slope was in existence before the tenth century. It would have made a good defensive place for early settlers and could only be approached uphill on three sides and along a narrow spur of land on the fourth. The remains of two barrows long since ploughed out, might indicate there had been a settlement on the hill at an even earlier time in history.

As it juts out from the western ridge, this location also fitted especially well the alternative name for the settlement of *Hokernes*, meaning "Hocca's headland, or promontory", which must have been an old name by the time of its recorded use about 1260 A.D.⁸

This site is about 500 metres from the later parish church and stands above the modern Ale Wood. Traditionally it was accessed along the bridle way which runs westward from the bottom of South Hill (about 100 metres further up the hill from the lower entrance to Ale Wood), and continues along just below the summit of Stapenhill in a straight line up to Court Farm. In a booklet of local walks chosen by Hackling published about 1985, this footpath was described (in words that probably derived from Hackling) as descending along the ridge from Court Farm, which lies on the main ridge due west of the village:

The path now drops away and around here there are several springs which all feed the main stream through the village. (It must be noted that after a lot of rain can be quite difficult to cross through some of the fields). Further on the path rises up a small

⁷ Rob Woolley, *Hooky* (Sutton Coldfield, 1978), available here as Appendix 1.

⁸ Letter from Percy Hackling to Rob Woolley, June 28, 1977, reprinted in Appendix 1, p. 6; Gelling, *Place-Names*, Part Two, p. 354; VCH draft, "Landscape, Settlement", p. 4.

hill called Stapenhill (another name used for over 700 years) and continues with the hedge to the right as far as the road.

The way you have just come down was known as The Great Pool Road in the 17th century which for years was one of the major routes to and from the village. The pool itself was somewhere in the flat area, which in the years before modern drainage would have been more liable to flooding. On reaching the road turn left to the village.

A plentiful supply of water was, of course, no disadvantage to a new settlement.⁹

More intriguing is Hackling's point that this path remained a major route to Great Rollright for centuries to come. For this is not the obvious way to Great Rollright, as any present-day walker knows, because it involves a sharp left turn a little distance beyond Court Farm and south along the main ridge road. The modern D'Arcy Dalton Way from the village, going through Fanville Farm and up over Hook Norton Heath, is the more direct route, and easy to follow in good visibility once towers were erected at the parish churches in the two villages. The best reason for following an old-established route – especially one which started up such a steep hill, or *Stapenhulle*, as it was called about 1270 in Old English¹⁰ – is that it has become clearly marked by frequent past use. Was this long-lasting route-way not sufficient to meet the requirements of the new definition of an Anglo-Saxon *ora*?

The Stapenhill suggestion is quite compatible with Milesen's preference for the western ridge, and it is quite possible that the settlement may have moved over time. After all, we have no idea *when* that first settlement was made, except that it was between 450 and 865 A.D. Blair's suggestion also still stands: his main concern, after all, was to explore the implications of the Anglo-Saxon chronicler's description of Hook Norton in the early tenth century as a "royal vill", and to explain why later a major source of funding for the Hook Norton parish church (until 1129, when it was granted to Oseney Abbey) came from fields partly outside the bounds of the parish established in the early eleventh century. All three suggestions are

⁹ *Hook Norton Footpaths: Four Walks around the Village* (HNLHG, c. 1985), reprinted on this website in its revised 2003 form as Appendix 4: see page 9. The name of the author was not given but the routes were chosen by Hackling.

¹⁰ Gelling, *Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, Part 2, p. 467.

reasonable, but remain purely speculative until firm archaeological evidence is found. Anyone for a dig? If only we knew where to start!

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References

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