

# Historical Notes on two Potential Development Sites in, and Abutting, Wollaston near Stourbridge

by

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This article discusses the historical and archaeological context of two potential development sites near Wollaston, Stourbridge.

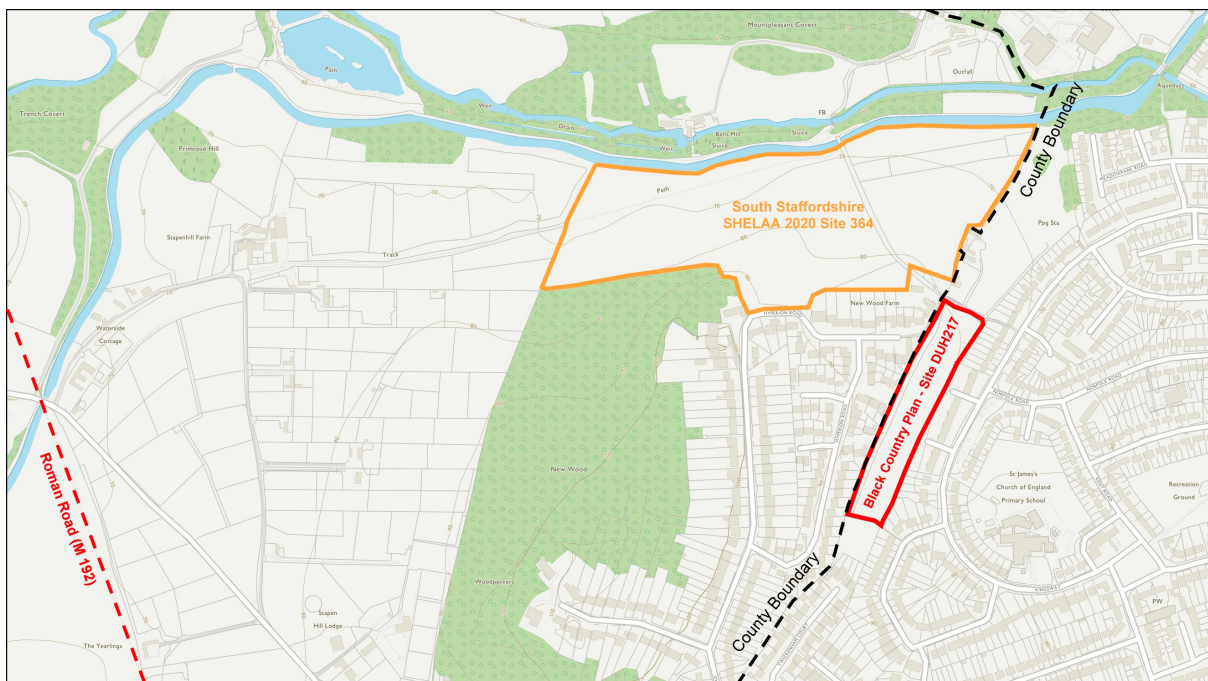
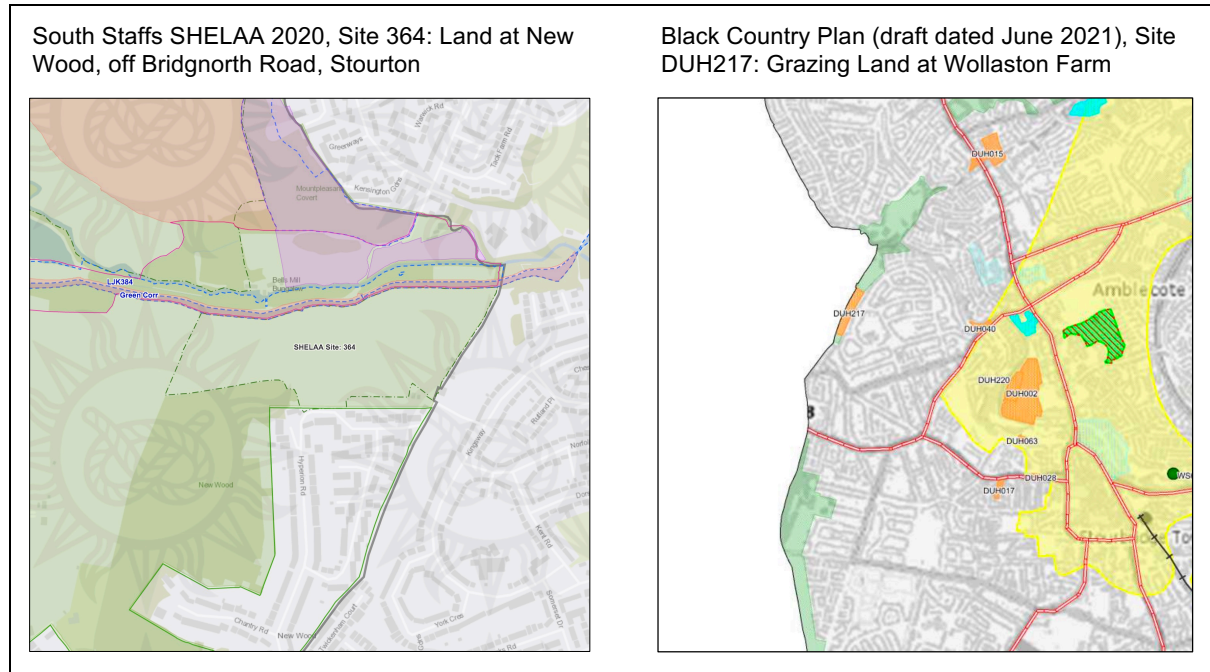


Figure 1. Potential development sites near Wollaston, shown together in relation to the county boundary. Base map: OS Online, July 2021; Crown copyright, 2021.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Both of the sites referenced in Figure 1 were situated within Kinver Forest in 1300CE<sup>2</sup> and, today, lie in close proximity to a number of historical and archaeological features which may be destroyed or degraded by development. They abut—although lie on opposite sides of—the county boundary separating South Staffordshire from Dudley Metropolitan Borough in the West Midlands.

## 2. The county boundary

The modern boundary line follows much the same course as that which divided the historic (pre-1974) counties of Staffordshire and Worcestershire. These counties had been in existence since the late-tenth or early eleventh centuries<sup>3</sup> and their boundaries in this vicinity appear to have remained much the same since then. Even after the 1972 *Local Government Act* carved out the West Midlands from parts of Worcestershire and Staffordshire in 1974, the same boundary line was employed to separate Staffordshire from the new county.

This historic boundary probably ante-dates the 10–11<sup>th</sup> century formation of the Mercian shires by several centuries, at least. Although it may have started out as a more diffuse prehistoric tribal frontier (perhaps that of the Iron Age Dobunni tribe), it seems to have become a well-defined line in the post-Roman period, and there is circumstantial evidence (though this is not universally accepted) that it developed into the north-east boundary of the sixth-century Hwiccan kingdom, which was later to become a province of Mercia.

There is more certainty about the boundary line's subsequent history, however. It has served to delineate: the Anglo-Saxon Diocese of Worcester (established in 680 CE); an estate gifted to Burhelm, the King's minister, in c. 955 CE<sup>4</sup>; an earlier royal estate known as Swinford; the Domesday (1086 CE) Hundred of Clent; the medieval *Dimidii Comitatus de Wych* (later known as Halfshire hundred); the medieval Kidderminster Rural Deanery; the manors of Oldswinford and Kinver (c. 11<sup>th</sup> century); the 'ancient parishes' of Old Swinford and Kinver (c. 11<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> century); the Civil Parish of Wollaston (1889 CE) and the Borough of Stourbridge (1914–1974 CE).<sup>5</sup>

Today the boundary is marked by an ancient hedgerow. This should be afforded protection by the Hedgerows Regulations, 1997<sup>6</sup> although sections of it have been gradually degraded over the last few decades, seemingly by residents of Hyperion Road whose houses and gardens abut the hedge. Further incremental damage to this ancient hedgerow can be expected if the proposed new development at Wollaston Farm (site DUH217) goes ahead.

## 3. *Oldeforde*, the Green Path and the ancient Kinver-to-Wordsley route

A remnant of an ancient route which connected Kinver to Wordsley, still runs along the Staffordshire side of the boundary. This was called *The Green Path* in a perambulation of Old Swinford parish surviving from 1733, but the path is much older than this. As the county, manor and parish boundaries seem to have been defined by its course, the path was probably in existence by the tenth century (or before).

The Kinver-to-Wordsley route, of which *The Green Path* formed part, extended north-north-east to cross the Stour where the county boundary intersects the river today. This crossing point was originally a ford, rather than a bridge. It was old in 1343, when it was first recorded in documentary sources; and, at that time, it was actually called *Oldeforde*.<sup>7</sup> This may simply mean that, by 1343, it had been in use for a long time, or it may indicate that it had become disused and replaced by a newer river crossing nearby (possibly near Bells Mill and Stapenhill, the early focus of which seems to have lain immediately south of Bells Mill; see section 6 below).<sup>8</sup>

In 1733, *Oldeforde* was recorded as *Old-Ford* in the aforementioned perambulation of Old Swinford parish. By then the name seems to have become used for a wider area than just the ford itself, i.e. the area of land bounded in the north by the Stour, in the east by the county boundary, and in the south-west by the path leading to a later bridge 100m or so up-stream of Bells Mill. This is the area tinted green in Figure 2.

To the north of the Stour, the path continued north-north-east, near the line of Wordsley Brook, to join an ancient salt-way (now the A491) at Wordsley. This route-way's ancient connection to Kinver is preserved today in the street-name Kinver Street. To the south, *The Green Path* extended to what is now Vicarage Road. It could have led on to Kinver via the Stewponey and the former Checkhill Common, but an earlier route may have run southwards below Wollaston Ridge and across Whittington Common to eventually cross the Stour again via either Whittington Horse Bridge or, more likely, via a ford on Windsor Holloway (another extremely old route<sup>9</sup>) just south of Kinver.

#### 4. Archaeological investigations

SHELAA 2020 Site 364 encloses an area which was investigated by the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in 1991, prior to the laying of a new pipeline.<sup>10</sup> Trenches were dug in two separate areas (A and B) as shown in Figure 2. (All of the features shown in white, except for the county boundary, are transcribed from Figure 1c of the archaeological field report). A large concentration of heat-shattered quartz pebbles was noted in the hill-wash near the middle of Area A, with only a relatively small scatter elsewhere. These pebbles were interpreted as the remains of a Bronze-Age (2500–700BCE) 'burnt mound' located outside the excavation area, probably a little further up the hill-side to the south. Recent research indicates that burnt mounds and spreads of heat-shattered stones are considerably more common than was thought in 1991 and may have been used throughout the prehistoric and later periods rather than just during the Bronze Age.<sup>11</sup> Such features are believed to have been used to heat water, by the immersion of hot stones from a nearby hearth. This practice may have been adopted for cooking, brewing, or to produce steam for some industrial process such as straightening of wooden arrow or spear shafts.<sup>12</sup>

Three sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from areas A and B. They were heavily abraded, suggesting that their original deposition site lay some distance outside the excavated area, probably on higher ground. These sherds may have derived from the same source as a surface scatter of Romano-British pot-sherds (see Figure 2) discovered in 1973 by field-walkers from the Stour and Smestow Archaeological Group<sup>13</sup>. That find-spread was considered suggestive of a Romano-British farmstead nearby.

A 33m-long ditch discovered within Area B appeared to bound a (seemingly man-made) platform terraced into the hill-side to the south. The ditch may have been used for drainage or to delineate a field or property boundary. Together the ditch and platform were interpreted as being potentially related to the putative Romano-British farmstead, the location of which would lie about 1200m east of a first-century Roman road (Margary 192).

It is probably relevant that the wider locale shows definite signs of Roman-British occupation. A farmstead or small villa has been identified near Barratts Coppice, 1.5km to the south-west, on the opposite side of the Roman road. Its remnants can be seen as a quadrilateral crop-mark in aerial photographs<sup>14</sup>; and Roman pottery and metalwork, including six brooches<sup>15</sup> have been found within about 500m of the villa.<sup>16</sup>

#### 5. Track to Stapenhill Farm and the Roman road M192

The archaeological field report notes a linear depression in the ground near the north-west corner of SHELAA 2020 Site 364.<sup>17</sup> It tentatively identifies this feature as the course of an old stream, perhaps formerly supplying water for processes associated with the prehistoric burnt mound. There is, however, a farm track leading westwards from Site 364 along the hedge-line to Stapenhill Farm (500m away);<sup>18</sup> and, as this appears to align with both the linear depression and with a track south of Bells Mill shown on eighteenth century canal plans and nineteenth century Ordnance Survey maps<sup>19</sup>, it is suggested that the depression actually represents an ancient and well-used route-way. It is conceivable that the same route-way served the putative Romano-British farmstead, linking it to the Roman road near Newtown Bridge.



Figure 2. Aerial view of the landscape around SHELAA 2020 Site 364 and Black Country Plan Site DUH217 illustrating historic and archaeological features which would be impacted or destroyed by development within these sites. See text for full description. Background: Apple Maps App, version 2.0 (1983.24.9.30.35), 'Satellite' View generated 22nd July 2021; copyright © 2012–16 Apple Inc.

## 6. Stapenhill hamlet: the early settlement focus south of Bells Mill

The eighteenth-century canal plans referenced above depict a cluster of buildings, or a small hamlet, just south of the canal near Bells Mill. This hamlet, which appears to have been serviced by the aforementioned route-way, is labelled *Stapenal* on James Brindley's 1766 plan and *Stapenall* on Robert Whitworth's 1774 plan (see Figure 2). Both forms are clearly earlier spellings of the place-name Stapenhill. Yates' 1775 map of Staffordshire<sup>20</sup> also shows a building in this location but places the label *Stepnall* (yet another spelling of Stapenhill) a little further west, where Stapenhill Farm lies today. Neither the 1834 1-inch OS map<sup>21</sup> nor subsequent larger scale OS maps show the buildings of Stapenhill hamlet, so it seems likely they had fallen into severe disrepair or had been demolished by that date. Conversely, Stapenhill Farm is not shown as such on the eighteenth century canal plans, but begins to be depicted and labelled either 'Stapenhill' or 'Stapenhill Farm' on OS maps from 1834 onwards. This may be indicative of a shift in the relative importance and/or habitation from the hamlet site in favour the farm, some 1km to the west, during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century.

Presumably, land to the west of the hamlet had been cultivated by its residents during the medieval period. Crop-marks of field boundaries there appear be medieval, perhaps ante-dating the establishment of a separate Stapenhill Farm. The apparent move to the farm site may have been motivated, at least in part, by agricultural changes brought about by post-medieval enclosures (a common reason for desertion of medieval villages and hamlets).

The notion that the hamlet south of Bells Mill represents the earliest of the two Stapenhill sites is supported by the historical reference to *Oldeforde* mentioned in section 3 above. This document, dated 1343, actually refers to the ford as *Oldeforde juxta Stapenhull* (*juxta* means 'close to'). Not only does this tell us that Stapenhill was in existence by 1343, it also suggests that its focus was then close to *Oldeforde*. Stapenhill hamlet lies less than 500m from *Oldeforde*, while Stapenhill Farm is more than twice that distance away, further even than Wollaston or Wordsley. If the site of Stapenhill Farm was meant in the 1343 reference, one has to ask why did this document not refer a closer place instead, i.e. why did it not say *Oldeforde juxta Wollaston* or *Oldeforde juxta Wordsley*? In the absence of a satisfactory answer to this question, it would seem likely that the focus of Stapenhill in 1343 was at or near the hamlet identified on the eighteenth-century canal plans.

Given Stapenhill hamlet's proximity to Bells Mill, it is possible that the two places were related in some way, although the precise nature of any such relationship is not known.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that the hamlet may have formerly been more extensive than just the small buildings shown on the canal plans. The 25-inch OS map of 1883<sup>22</sup> depicts two elongated, tree covered mounds about 80m south-west of Bells Mill, abutting the trackway to Stapenhill Farm and the Roman road (Figure 3). These mounds might represent remnants of additional buildings which had belonged to the hamlet of Stapenhill; and it is possible that sub-surface traces still persist in the vicinity today. Any such archaeology would, of course, be destroyed or severely impacted by any new development here.

The place-name Stapenhill is considered to derive from the Old English *stēapan hylle* 'steep hill'.<sup>23</sup> The word *hylle* or *hyll* seems to have been used in place-names only after c. 730CE<sup>22</sup> so it is likely that the settlement acquired its current name (presumably by transference from the hill on which New Wood now stands) after that date. It is not known whether Stapenhill previously possessed a pre-English name, or indeed, whether there was a settlement here at all in the post-Roman and early Anglo-Saxon periods, but the aforementioned archaeological investigations do suggest the presence of a Romano-British farmstead. Continuity of occupation remains an interesting possibility; indeed, a possibility deserving of thorough archaeological investigation, particularly given the locale's proximity to a demonstrably ancient route-way and fording point.

## 7. Concluding summary

The county and parish boundary line in this vicinity seems to have been defined by the course of an ancient track-way which connected Kinver to Wordsley. The age of the track is not known but, given its association with the boundary line, it is likely to date from the eleventh century or before. A historical reference to an *Oldeforde* suggests the route-way had been in use for some considerable time prior to the mid-fourteenth century.

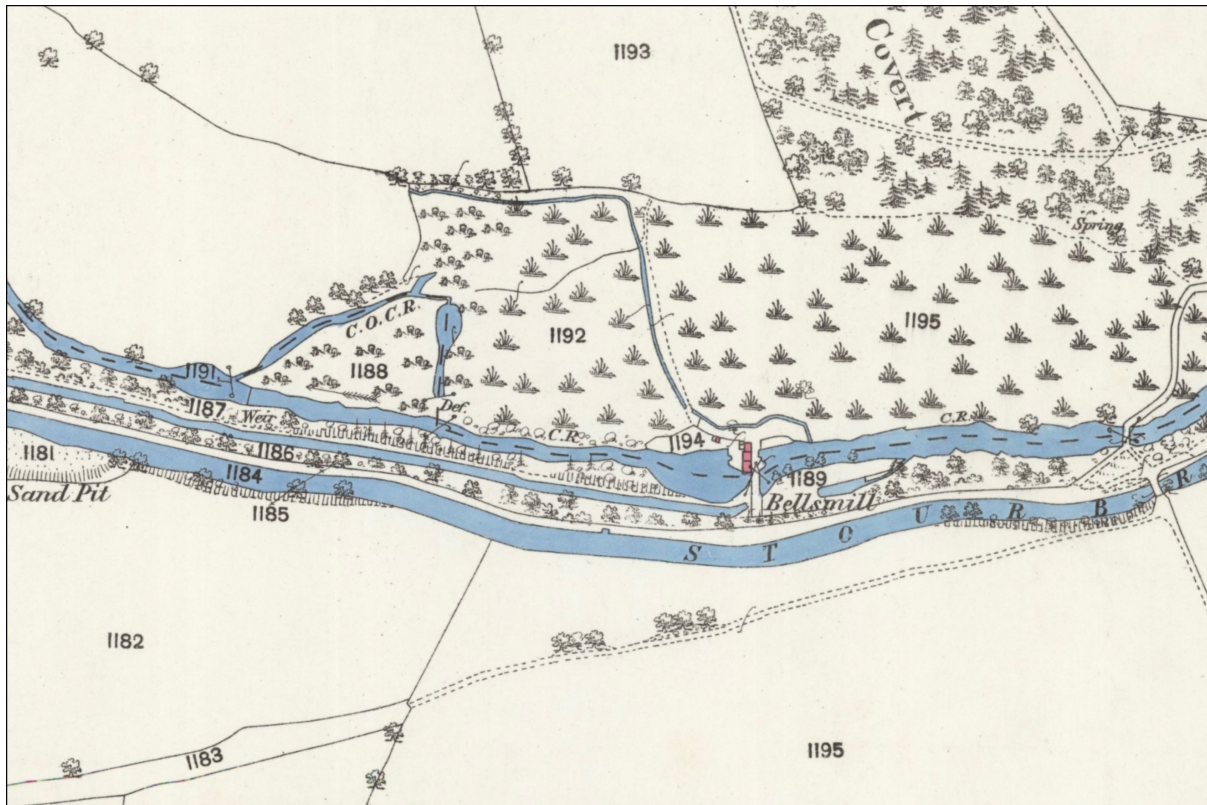


Figure 3. Extract from 1883 Ordnance Survey County Series Worcs. 25-inch Sheet IV.5, showing two elongated tree-covered mounds south-west of 'Bellsmill' abutting a track which leads west from the site of the deserted hamlet of Stapenhill towards Stapenhill Farm and the Roman road (M192).

SHELAA 2020 Site 364 appears to contain the deserted medieval hamlet of Stapenhill. This was in existence by 1348. It may be somewhat older, perhaps even dating to the Anglo-Saxon period, although its name was probably not coined before c. 730CE. Stapenhill hamlet's extreme proximity to Bells Mill suggests there may have been some connection between the two sites. The hamlet appears to have been abandoned in favour of habitation at the Stapenhill Farm site, 600m to the west, some time during the late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth century.

The trackway connecting the two sites appears to have formerly served to as a link between the Roman road (M192) at Newtown Bridge and a Romano-British farmstead which, archaeological evidence suggests, lay a short distance south of Stapenhill hamlet (probably also within Site 364). There is, presently, no evidence to indicate continuity of occupation between the Roman and medieval sites, but this cannot be ruled out without further investigation.

There is, however, evidence of prehistoric settlement in the vicinity. This takes the form of numerous heat-shattered quartz pebbles found during excavations of the hill-wash in the areas A and B shown in Figure 2. These may represent the remains of a burnt mound, many examples of which, in the wider west midlands, have been dated to the Bronze Age.

## 8. Notes and references

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12. Cole, M. (2020) *pers. comm.* Additionally, Hodder, *op. cit.* in note 11, 32 suggests that burnt mounds were used for 'steam bathing'.
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