

Stapenhill, Bells Mill and *Oldeforde*: Historical context of two potential development sites near Wollaston, Stourbridge

by

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Bells Mill and Stapenhill are situated on, and abutting, the river Stour in the parish of Kinver in South Staffordshire. They were within the royal Forest of Kinver in 1300¹ and lie close to an ancient route-way which crossed the Stour at a place called *Oldeforde* in 1343. Two nearby sites have been proposed (though at the time of writing, not confirmed) for new housing developments as summarised in Figure 1. The potential development sites abut—although lie on opposite sides of—the county boundary separating South Staffordshire from Dudley Metropolitan Borough in the West Midlands.

1. The county boundary

The modern boundary line follows a similar course to that which divided the historic counties of Staffordshire and Worcestershire until 1974. These counties had been in existence since the late-tenth or early eleventh centuries² 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.

The boundary line probably ante-dates the 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.

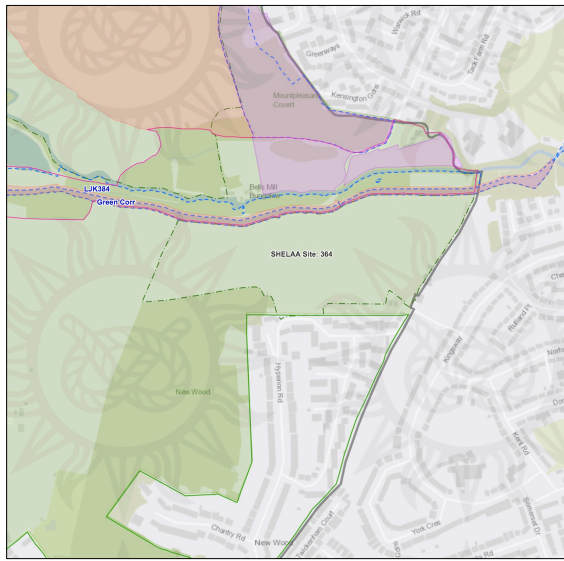
There is more certainty about the boundary line's subsequent history, however. It has served to delineate: the Anglo-Saxon Diocese of Worcester (established in 680 CE); an estate gifted to Burhelm, the King's minister, in c. 955 CE³; an earlier royal estate known as Swinford; the Domesday (1086) Hundred 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. eleventh century); the 'ancient parishes' of Old Swinford and Kinver (c. eleventh to twelfth century); the Civil Parish of Wollaston (1889) and the Borough of Stourbridge (1914–1974).⁴

Today the boundary is marked by an ancient hedgerow. This should be afforded protection by the Hedgerows Regulations, 1997⁵ 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.

2. *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 north of site DUH217. 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 were undoubtedly defined by its course, the path was probably in existence by the tenth century or before.

South Staffs SHELAA 2020, Site 364: Land at New Wood, off Bridgnorth Road, Stourton



Black Country Plan (draft dated June 2021), Site DUH217: Grazing Land at Wollaston Farm

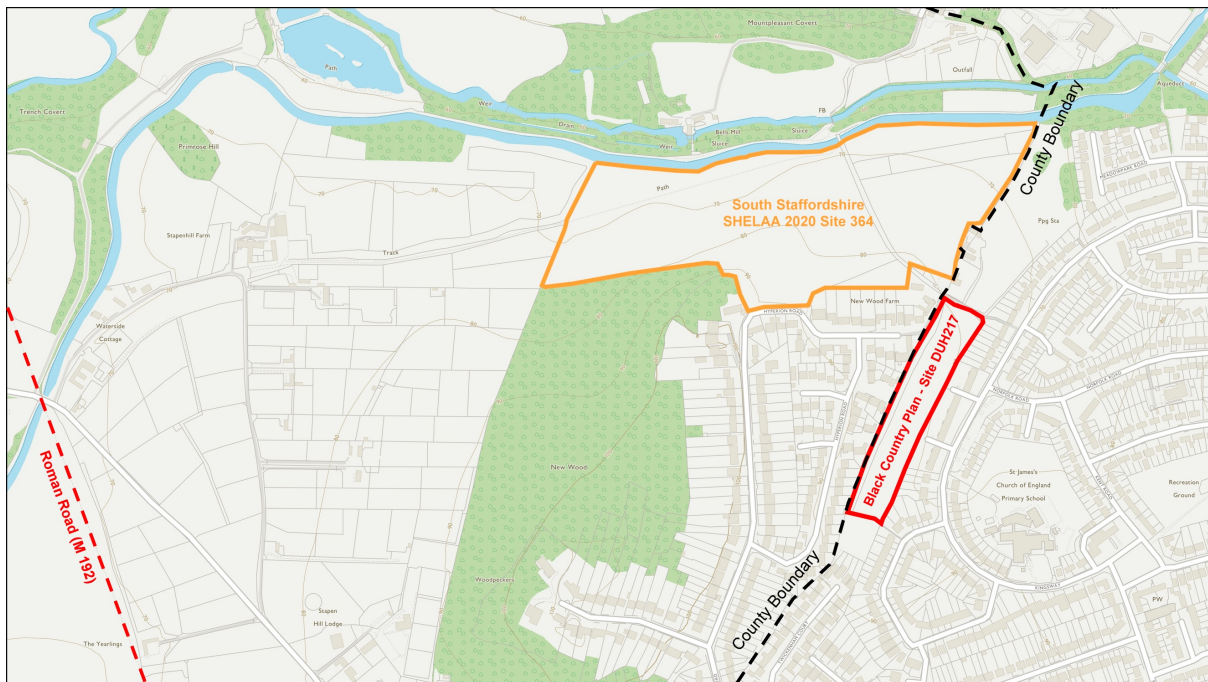
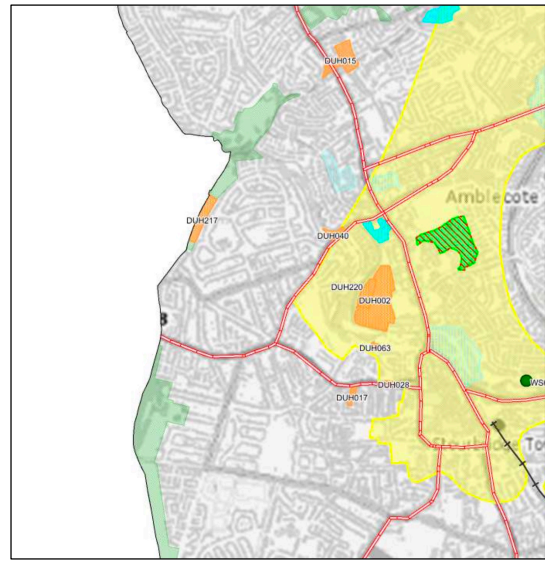


Figure 1. Potential development sites near Wollaston, shown together in relation to the county boundary. Base map: OS Online, July 2021; Crown copyright, 2021.⁶

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*.⁷ 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.

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 the later bridge 150m or so up-stream (east) of Bells Mill.⁸ This is the area tinted green in Figure 2.

To the north of the Stour, the path continued, roughly parallel to the line of Wordsley Brook, to join an Iron Age 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 of the river Stour, *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 a more direct 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 road⁹) just south of Kinver.

3. 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.¹⁰ Trenches were dug in two separate areas (A and B) as shown in Figure 2. (All of the features shown in white on that figure, 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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 finds 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 Group¹³. 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 1km 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 photographs¹⁴; and Roman pottery and metalwork, including six brooches¹⁵ have been found within about 500m of the villa.¹⁶

4. 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 364.¹⁷ 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),¹⁸ 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 maps¹⁹, it is suggested that the depression actually represents an ancient hollow-way (i.e. a route-way worn into the ground by regular use). 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.

5. Stapenhill hamlet: an early settlement focus near 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 lain on the aforementioned hollow-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. William Yates' 1775 map of Staffordshire²⁰ 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 map²¹ nor subsequent larger scale OS maps show the buildings of Stapenhill hamlet, so it is probable 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 it 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 of the farm, some 800m to the west, during the late-eighteenth and/or early-nineteenth century.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that Stapenhill hamlet may formerly have been more extensive than just the small buildings shown on the canal plans. The 25-inch OS map of 1883²² 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.)

Given Stapenhill hamlet's proximity to Bells Mill, it is probable that these two places were related. The mill building currently on the Bells Mill site is of nineteenth century date. However, it was preceded by a much earlier mill-house, probably that mentioned in a deed of 1573 as then being newly built. At that date, the mill-house was held by a John Willets who also owned land on both sides of the river Stour, land which probably included the area occupied by the eighteenth-century Stapenhill hamlet.

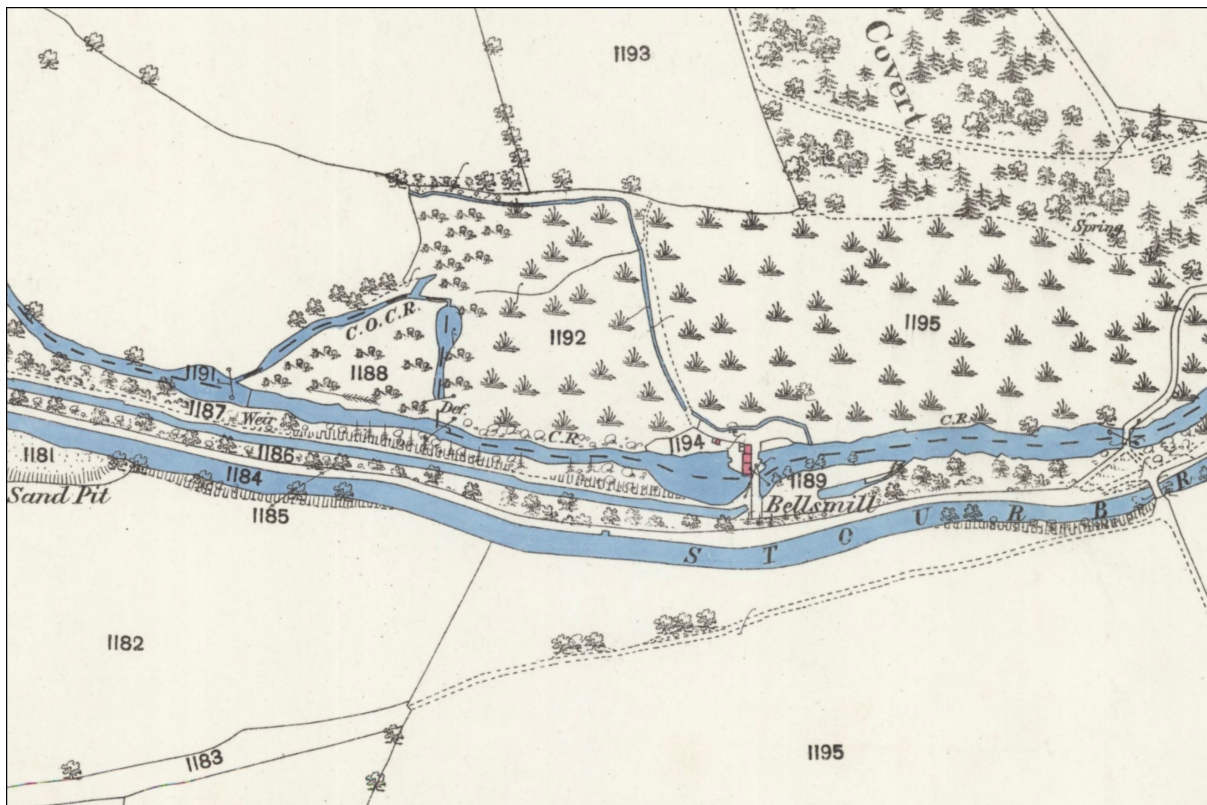


Figure 3. Extract from 1883 Ordnance Survey County Series Worcs. 25-inch Sheet IV.5, showing two elongated tree-covered mounds south-west of 'Bellsmill' abutting a track which leads west from the site of the deserted hamlet of Stapenhill towards Stapenhill Farm and the Roman road (M192).

The building had become known as Willetts Mills by 1617, at which date there was an adjoining house. The mill building itself appears to have contained two or more mill stones and, presumably, mill wheels by 1629. At least two changes of ownership occurred later that century; and, in 1701, Thomas Foley's son, Philip, leased three mills called 'Stapenhill Mills' to Margaret Willett (presumably a relative of the original owner, notwithstanding the missing terminal 's' in the name).²³

It is not known whether the three Stapenhill Mills were all housed in the same building or whether an additional mill building (and perhaps leat) had been constructed nearby in the intervening period. Some of the infrastructure associated with the three Stapenhill Mills seems to have been demolished and removed to Halfcot, in order to construct a new mill there, in the early eighteenth century. Corn milling may have ceased, or reduced in scale, at Stapenhill by 1733 when Willam Foley leased 'a mill house in which lately were corn mills called Willetts Mills'.²⁴ The mill house had become known as Bells Mill by 1766.²⁵ Clearly, there was a close association between these mills and the settlement of Stapenhill during the post-medieval period.

Presumably, land to the west of the hamlet had been cultivated by its residents for some time: crop-marks of field boundaries there are reminiscent, in form, of medieval open-field selions, and may ante-date the establishment of the separate Stapenhill Farm. A 'Stapenhill Farm' is known to have been in existence by the 1630s²⁶. However, the focus of the farm (i.e. the site of its farm-house and farm-yard) at that date is not known. The present farm-house dates only from c. 1840.²⁷ It is not shown as such on the 1766 and 1774 canal plans, but a house labelled *Mrs Tilley's* appears in roughly that location. The apparent shift of habitation toward the present farm site during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may have been related, at least in part, to agricultural changes brought about by post-medieval enclosures (a common reason for desertion of medieval villages and hamlets). Additionally, the presence of the new canal wharf near Newtown bridge, which is only 200m from the present site of the farm-yard, may have motivated the re-location of grain storage buildings and other infrastructure there in the late eighteenth century.

The notion that the hamlet south of Bells Mill represents the earlier of the two Stapenhill sites is also supported by the historical reference to *Oldeforde* mentioned in section 2 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, as a named place, was in existence by 1343, it also suggests that its focus was then close to *Oldeforde*. The Stapenhill hamlet depicted on eighteenth century canal plans lay less than 500m from *Oldeforde*, while Stapenhill Farm was (and still is) more than twice that distance away, further even than Wollaston or Wordsley. If the site of the present Stapenhill Farm was meant in the 1343 reference, one has to ask why did this document not refer to 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 is probable that the focus of Stapenhill in 1343 was at or near the hamlet identified on the eighteenth-century canal plans.

We should bear in mind, however, that there is no conclusive evidence that a settlement of any kind existed at Stapenhill prior to the eighteenth century. The place-name may have belonged simply to the nearby hill (on which New Wood now stands). Indeed, an historical source refers to Stapenhill as an area of pasture in 1293,²⁸ although this does not necessarily mean that there was no settlement there at this date.

The place-name Stapenhill is considered to derive from the Old English *stēapan hylle* 'steep hill'.²⁹ The word *hylle* or *hyll* is not known to occur in place-names before c. 730CE³⁰ but, as a purely topographical (rather than habitative) term, Stapenhill does appear to be a relatively early Anglo-Saxon name. Since the majority of such place-names which survive to the present day tend to have been perpetuated as settlement names, it would seem more likely than not that it represents a medieval settlement in the vicinity. Indeed, it is clear that some of the land near Stapenhill was being cultivated in the late medieval period; a reference of 1423 to 'a selion near Stapenhill' is mentioned in the *Victoria County History (VCH) of Staffordshire*, for example (cf. the crop marks mentioned above and highlighted in Figure 2).³¹

While it bears repeating that the age of the supposed Stapenhill hamlet is not clear, nor is it known whether there was a settlement there in the post-Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods, the aforementioned archaeological investigations do suggest the presence of a Romano-British farmstead nearby. 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.

6. Concluding summary

The county and Kinver-Oldswinford-parish boundary line in this vicinity was almost certainly 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 probably dates from the eleventh century or before. A historical reference to an *Oldeforde* which existed where this track crossed the river Stour suggests the route-way had been in use for some considerable time prior to the mid-fourteenth century.

SHELAA 2020 Site 364 appears to contain the deserted hamlet of Stapenhill. The hamlet may be of medieval origin; cultivation of land in the vicinity was clearly underway by 1423, and there are at least two earlier historical references to Stapenhill by name. Indeed, there is archaeological evidence for Romano-British (and indeed prehistoric) occupation in the vicinity, although continuity of settlement has not been established. The trackway connecting the hamlet to the present farm site may formerly have served as a link between the putative Romano-British farmstead and the Roman road (M192) near Newtown Bridge.

During the post-medieval period at least, there was a strong connection between Stapenhill hamlet and one or more mill sites on the river Stour, which were collectively known as Willets Mills or Stapenhill Mills. Amongst three mills in total, at least two of them were housed in a single building which was, in the eighteenth century, to become known as Bells Mill. One mill was decommissioned in 1716, and Stapenhill hamlet thereafter declined, eventually being abandoned in favour of habitation at the Stapenhill Farm site some time during the late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth century.

8. Notes and references

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27. Greenslade *op. cit.* in note 26.
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