

# The Roman Road through Lower Assendon

An extract from "Gone Rustic" by Cecil Roberts

'At that time I was employing an old gardener. He was so old, he was counting up the eighties, that he could not go up a ladder because of dizziness, kneel because of rheumatism or dig because of lumbago. He had been born in the village, as had his forebears. He had spent his pennies, he told me, in my drawing room, when it was a sweet shop, and had seen my tall poplars arrive on a handbarrow. One day I asked him what he had done with the grass from the lawn mower.

" I've put it on the Roman road," he said.

" The what? " I cried, jumping out of my skin " The Roman road, sir."

" Where is the Roman road? "

" Why, this lane, sir. It was the Oxford road when I was a boy, but we always called it the Roman road."

" Whose we? "

" Oh, everybody. My dad and my granddad always called it the Roman road. It was the way them Romans walked to Dorchester. They came over by the ford at Henley and up Friday Street and down the Mile, and along 'ere and up the hill where this lane runs into the new Oxford road again. I've 'eard my gran say as 'is granddad said that Mr. Chaucer, the King's poet, used to walk this way. And King Charles, when he was skeered out of Oxford, came down 'ere, and went up into them woods to avoid Henley, where they was waiting for him. An' 'e 'ad a friend up at Fawley Court, who was now against 'im, but 'e winked and let King Charles go by. Ev course, I've only 'eard this and none of us was scholars."

'I let the old man go on, though my head was reeling and a hundred questions came to my lips. When he had finished, and started clipping again, I went straight into the house to keep calm. There were certain headlines to this astonishing information. My lane was a Roman road before it was the old Oxford road. " Mr." Chaucer had walked along it. King Charles had fled down it.



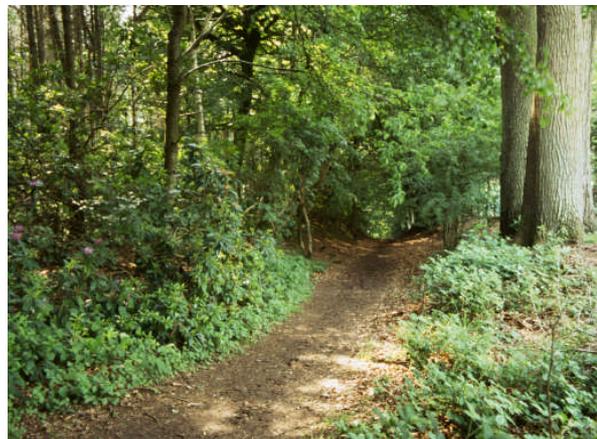
The old Roman Road outside Pilgrim Cottage



The 'start' of the old Roman Road in Lower Assendon

'I have heard that local tradition is often more trustworthy than the written word. My gardener was eighty-five. The recollections of his grandfather, allowing three generations of eighty years each, would take us back to around 1740. The grandfather's grandfather, therefore, might well have been living in the village on the day King Charles fled through it. It should not be difficult to find whether the King had come this way. That he had been at Henley and Oxford, I knew. It seemed probable he might have journeyed this way, by the hedge of my garden.

'In the matter of King Charles the First I was soon able to confirm the legend by the strict historical fact. King Charles fled from Oxford on the 27th April, 1646 Disguised as a groom, accompanied by John Ashburnham and Dr. Hudson, he rode towards Henley to avoid the town, then in the hands of the Parliamentarians. He turned aside at the end of the Fairmile, and went by a bridle path through Henley Park, and slept that night at Hambledon Manor. The friend who 'winked,' according to my gardener, and let him go by, was Sir Bulstrode Whitelock, living at Fawley Court.



The bridle path towards Henley Park

'It seems beyond doubt, therefore, that Charles the First passed the end of my garden on the 27th April 1646 and saw the chimney stack and the red-tiled roof exactly as I see them now. There is another link in the cottage itself. On a wall there hangs a portrait, by Van Dyck, of Henrietta of France, his Bourbon Queen, whose obdurate nature sustained the King in his fatal course. Now, in a room not twenty yards from her royal husband's track, the Queen looks down the centuries.'

Extract from "Gone Rustic" by Cecil Roberts published 1934 by Hodder and Stoughton