

The Common Stream - an update



The starting point of the Common Stream near Foxton.
The exact location is shown on the map on the back cover.

by
Ian Sanderson

Rowland Parker's book 'The Common Stream' was published in 1975. Those of you with an interest in the history of Foxton should get a copy and at least browse through it for a while.

The book speculates on the construction of the Common Stream in Foxton sometime in the 'Dark Ages' and describes its impact on the village throughout the intervening period.

This booklet has two purposes. The first is to provide a view of the state of the Common Stream today. The second purpose is to bring together some of the archaeology, and changes in archaeological interpretation, that have taken place in the last 30 years. The locations of all the photographs are given on the back cover.

Some of the detail I've included may be inaccurate or misleading, if it is, it's my fault. If you tell me about the things that are wrong, if I ever do a later version I may change them. If you don't, I won't!

Ian Sanderson, 2004.

Reference:

"The Common Stream" by Rowland Parker
Published by Collins St James's Place, London 1975
ISBN 0 00 216113 3

This leaflet was originally produced for charitable fund raising but the investment didn't justify the return.
If you want a copy, individual ones can be produced.
If you want to get in touch an email sent to webmaster@FoxtonCams.info should get to me.

What is the Common Stream?

The Common Stream has been mentioned in records of Foxton since about 1500 and was the main source of water for the village until Canon Selwyn paid for deep wells and pumps in 1873. In 1630 it was described as ‘a pleasant small rill of sweet water running through the midst of the village’. Mains water first arrived in the village in the late 1920s but only became generally available, complete with water rates charges, in the late 1950s.

The Inclosure map of 1830 gives the first specific name to the water course, ‘Town Drain’, which doesn’t necessarily define its use at this time, as most small water courses were called ‘drains’.



The stream ran south west to north east through Foxton, broadly parallel and to the south of the River Cam (Rhee). Its source, or feeder, stream was the Shepreth (*or Wallington as it is known in Fowlmere, or Foxton as it is known in Shepreth*) Brook. This runs, albeit rarely nowadays, from the ridge of hills around Heydon, through Fowlmere, to the east of Shepreth and joins the Rhee near to an old mill site in Barrington.

The outflow of the Common Stream joins Hoffers Brook close to where it passes under the railway line. Hoffers Brook rises towards Whittlesford, passes through Newton and flows strongly to join the Rhee near Harston Mill. In other words, the Common Stream goes between the two brooks and therefore doesn’t go in the direction any naturally formed stream should.

In the Beginning

In the period after Roman domination, when the Angles and Saxons moved in to fill the void, Foxton probably wasn't where it is now. Hauling water on a daily basis from Shepreth Brook or Hoffers Brook to buildings half a mile away on a daily basis is highly improbable. Nobody knows where the houses of the people were situated but proximity to water is likely to have been as important to the post Romans as it was to the pre Romans who left their traces all along the banks of Shepreth Brook to Fowlmere.

The older Roman sites would have also been avoided, as this seems to have been the common practice at the time. The nearest known Roman villa site to Foxton lies next to the railway line, just outside Shepreth; and during the excavations for a new gas pipeline in 1994, a Roman cemetery was discovered in the field bounded by the railway, the A10 and Shepreth Brook. Another villa was situated near to Hoffers Brook Farm, next to the A10.

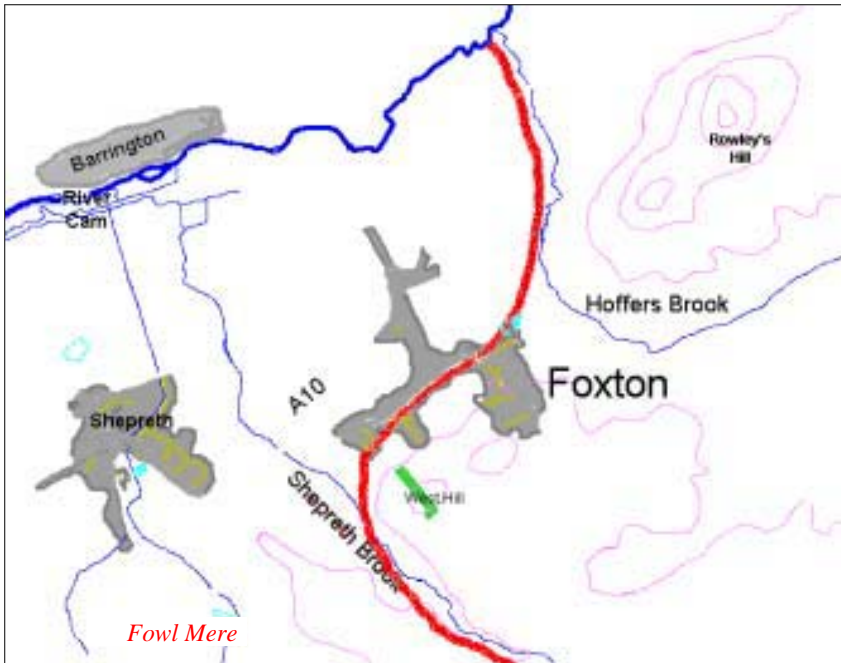
Post Roman or Saxon burials recorded as dating, somewhat vaguely, from AD400 to AD1065 have been found near to the station and off Station Road, with a small group behind Barrington Road. This doesn't leave us any the wiser as to where the people had set up home, the likeliest places being either somewhere near Foxton Bottom or south of Hoffers Brook Farm, due to the proximity of the water supply. Unfortunately the Angles and Saxons did not leave an abundance of easily detectable evidence behind them. It will be purely fortuitous for an excavation to come across some remains that enable us to say exactly where they lived. We do know that larger units of governance existed at the time, particularly one which organised the building of a series of massive ditches across Cambridgeshire between the wooded hills to the south and the marshy Fens.

Nobody really knows why, these ditches were built. The main theories are that they were built to defend the eastern side from attack from the west, or, and perhaps more likely, to prevent the easy movement of animals. The latter would have reduced rustling and enabled tolls to be collected. It could be that the ditches were the boundary barriers of the Wuffing clan of Eastern Angles who dominated East Anglia and are best known now for the ship burial at Sutton Hoo.

The seven mile long Devil's Dyke, the most eastern ditch in Cambridgeshire, is still an impressive monument today. Further west and presumably earlier in time, we can still see Fleam Dyke, passing near Fulbourn, then Brent Ditch near Pampisford and finally Bran or Heydon Ditch. There are some short ditches still further west near Royston but these are thought to be pre-Roman. There are also some ditches further east such as the Black Ditches in Suffolk. The finds from Fleam Dyke show that it was started in the fifth century and maintained into the seventh century.

The ditch that is nearest to Foxton is the Heydon or Bran Ditch, which is still visible as a footpath running down the hill from Heydon to about 250 yards east of Flint Cross and then on to the mere near Fowlmere. This would have been an effective barrier across the Icknield Way, but what about the strip of land between the mere and the River Cam at Barrington? (See map on page 6). We know there was a Roman villa and cemetery near to Shepreth Brook so presumably the land was not excessively liable to flooding. Further down the Cam where Hoffers Brook joins it, the land is lower, and with a higher water table, it might be presumed to be marshy. This marsh, combined with a much stronger flow than Shepreth Brook, would have made Hoffers Brook difficult to cross. That would have left one route for invaders heading east; pass to the north of the mere at Fowlmere (i.e.

through Shepreth) then go due east to cross Hoffers Brook at a shallower point further upstream.



The Common Stream as a barrier

One possible reason for the construction of the Common Stream might therefore have been to complete a barrier from Heydon to the River Cam. That it contained flowing water could have only made it a more effective barrier.

But why not just deepen Shepreth Brook rather than go to the trouble of digging a new water course? The answer lies in the small but significant (2 m) difference in height of the land where Hoffers and Shepreth Brooks join the main river, and in the slight terracing of that difference. The area just below Hoffers Brook is noted as being liable to flooding, making it a

barrier by virtue of both the stream's flow and the marshy area. Below Shepreth Brook, the bankside terrace is higher and drier, so the only barrier is the flow of the stream. Making a new course around the base of West Hill would have the benefit of increased flow (because it would then join the river Rhee at a lower level), and the barrier of the hill itself.

Rowland Parker suggested that the digging of the new ditch with its consequent scouring of Hoffers Brook may have caused the drainage of another mere (Dreymere) towards Newton, which was a part of the barrier. This might have prompted the subsequent building of another barrier essentially linking the eastern margin of 'fowl mere' with the higher reaches of Hoffers Brook at Newton. This barrier could be the 'Thriplow Bank' which is still visible as the rise in the road just south of Orchard Farm on the Fowlmere road. It is also visible straight ahead as the road from Newton to Fowlmere bends to the south before the cross-roads at Little Thriplow. There are also possible traces of a ditch on the north side of that road from this point all the way to Newton. This embankment defined part of the boundary of the parish until this was adjusted to follow the line of the Newton-Fowlmere road about 20 years ago.

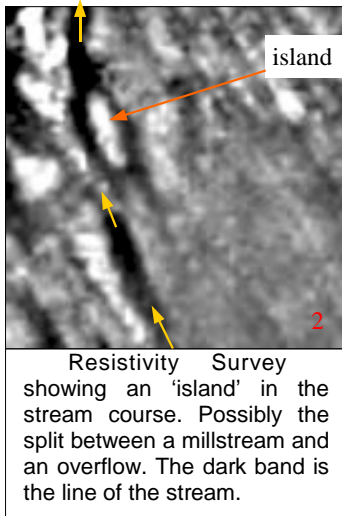
The only tangible evidence that supports the theory that Thriplow Bank is contemporary with the other Cambridgeshire ditches is a collection of late 4th and early 5th century pottery recovered when the gas pipeline was cut through this bank in 1994. As far as I'm aware nobody has even looked for additional evidence.

It may be that this particular embankment predates rather than postdates the Foxton ditch and represents an earlier ineffective part of the barrier. Until both ditch and bank are accurately dated we can only guess.

Whatever the reason for digging the ditch, the people living nearby recognised its value as a source of water and gradually moved to the higher land away from Shepreth or Hoffers Brooks to the present site of the village of Foxton.

The stream's part in village life over the subsequent centuries is detailed in 'The Common Stream' by Rowland Parker.

Recent work using geophysics has suggested that there might once have been a water mill in West Hill field. Domesday cites 2½ mills at Barrington and 1 at Foxton, the latter split between the Abbess of Chatteris and Sigur the King's Steward. In 1292 Foxton Manor Court Rolls mention Alan the miller at Barrington and in 1324 Johannes the



Sketch of the 1830 Enclosure Map of Foxton

miller at Shepreth. It has been assumed from these records that Foxton's grain was milled at Barrington, but the Domesday record suggests that before the move to milling in Barrington or Shepreth, the parish may have had its own mill.

The earliest accurate map of the stream is the Inclosure map of 1830. The plan on page 8 is a tracing taken from this map. There is an earlier map of Foxton of 1810 but the detail and accuracy are questionable as it was prepared as a draft. Both of these maps are available in the County Records Office.

There are still places where the course of the Common Stream is visible, but between the field boundary near its starting point at Flag Pightle up to Mortimer's Farm moat, almost all traces have been obliterated from the landscape.



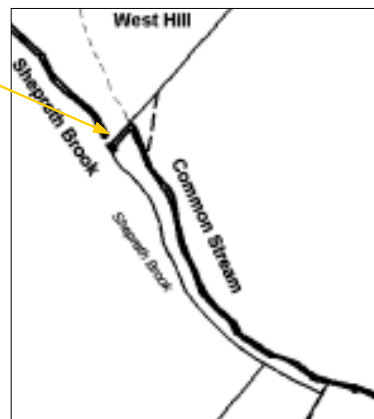
This picture shows the starting point (looking north) where the stream and Shepreth Brook begin to diverge. The line of Shepreth Brook is filled in but is given by the tree line to the

left, with the course of the Common Stream following the ditch line on the right.

After a short distance the present water course is diverted 20 yards back to the Shepreth Brook by the channel shown.



Cut back channel looking to the south west. The distant tree line is beside the Shepreth to Fowlmere Road



The cut back channel rather than the Common Stream channel was recorded by the Ordnance Survey as the main course in 1883. This suggests that this cut back was dug between 1873 and 1883, after Canon Selwyn provided alternative water sources for the village.



In the field to the south of the village below West Hill, the course was filled in around 1960 although it may still be clearly seen as a crop mark. This happens where the crop grows more strongly due to the retention of water, or to a concentration of nutrients. The crop mark also shows clearly on an aerial photograph, (page 18), which incidentally shows some ring ditch cropmarks.





West Hill Road

A housing development (West Hill Road) built in 1965 had the stream as one boundary, but within a few years (1987) additional land was incorporated leaving the stream course across the middle of several back gardens.

In two of these the stream is preserved as an isolated segment. In the remainder only minor ground subsidence marks its position, but on aerial photographs you can still pick out



the course of the stream from the tree line across these gardens.

The only current, easily visible manifestation of the Stream is in front of the cottages on The Green where a ditch runs for about 50 yards from the old water pump. These cottages still have small bridges crossing the landscaped ditch.

New houses built in 1998 just off The Green at Stocks Farm have the stream line as their north western boundary in common with two bungalows on the High Street.

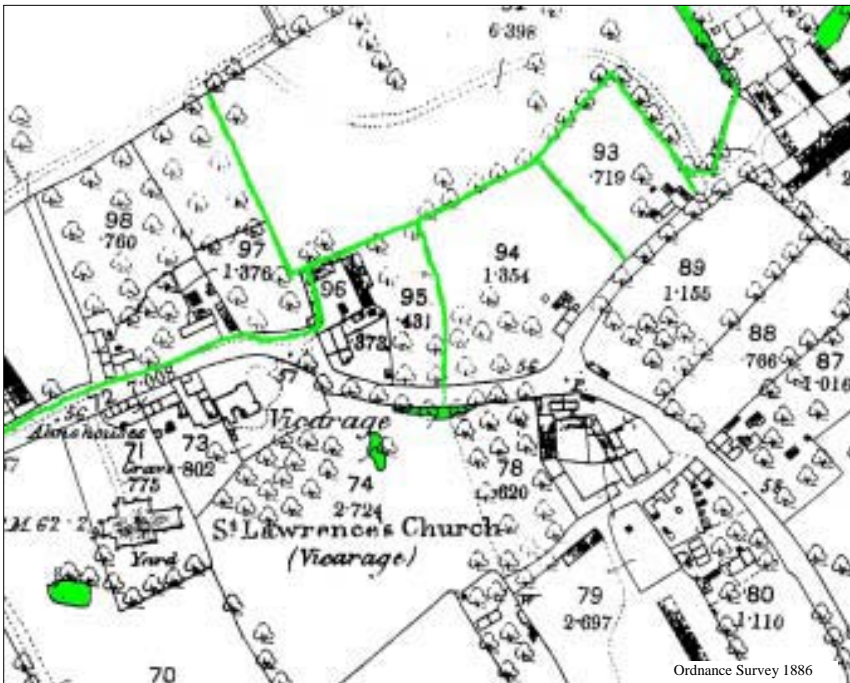
Until a small electricity substation for the Stocks Farm houses was built directly over the stream line, water was still occasionally visible in the ditch by the side of The Green.



The Stream passes along the south side of the High Street under the pavement in pipes, adjacent to the cable network installed in 2000. You can still see rectangular drain covers like this one, beside the path.



It is shown on the 1830 map as crossing to the north side of the High Street at the start of the Bury boundary wall nearest to the White Horse. Round drain covers like this one, still mark the place.



The Stream course continues on the north side of the High Street up to the first bend in the road, opposite the old Vicarage.

The route becomes confused at this point, with a branch to the north which eventually intersects with the field ditch, but the main course turns east after a few yards. There are then two spurs joining from the south, the first acting as a drain from the pond which used to be where St. Laurence Road joins the High Street and from the old pond to the south of the electricity substation there. The second spur joins from about half way down Mortimers Lane. The main course turns south to almost meet the western end of Mortimers Lane before it turns sharply north east into the south western corner of the moat around Mortimer's manor house.



Mortimer's Moat from the far side looking towards and along Mortimers Lane

This confusion is perhaps not surprising, as the moat at Mortimer's manor is unlikely to be contemporary with the construction of the Common Stream. It wasn't until the 12th century that moats became almost a fashion accessory of the upper classes. The course of the stream was most probably adjusted to accommodate the moat and then subverted to become the adjacent field boundary ditches.

The stream flows from the north east corner of the moat and becomes visible for the remainder of its course. As the stream leaves the moat it follows a straight line before winding around a copse, then down to join Hoffers Brook just before it passes under the railway.

It varies here in depth from about 2 to 4 feet, and only very close to the confluence with Hoffers

Brook did it contain water, or even become damp, when the following photographs were taken in November 2003.



From the moat outflow, looking north east.



Looking north as the course winds round a copse

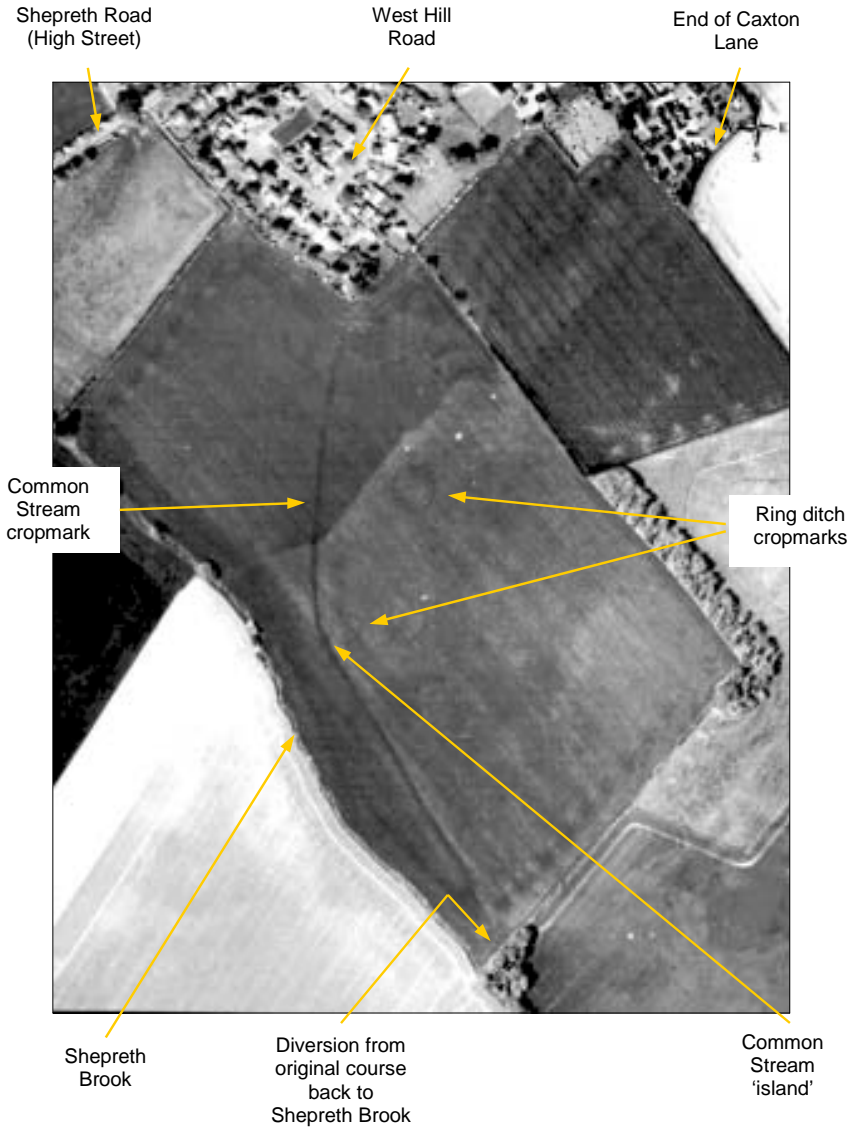
The course of the stream is not easy to follow towards its end. It appears to follow the field edge in a straight line for about 50 yards before joining Hoffers Brook on a sharp bend. However, closer scrutiny just before this last straight reveals the older course vanishing into dense scrub. The

actual point at which it enters Hoffers Brook is also easy to miss in the encroaching vegetation.



In a thicket where the 'Common Stream' meet Hoffers Brook

The 'Common Stream' visible as a crop mark.



Other events affecting the Common Stream

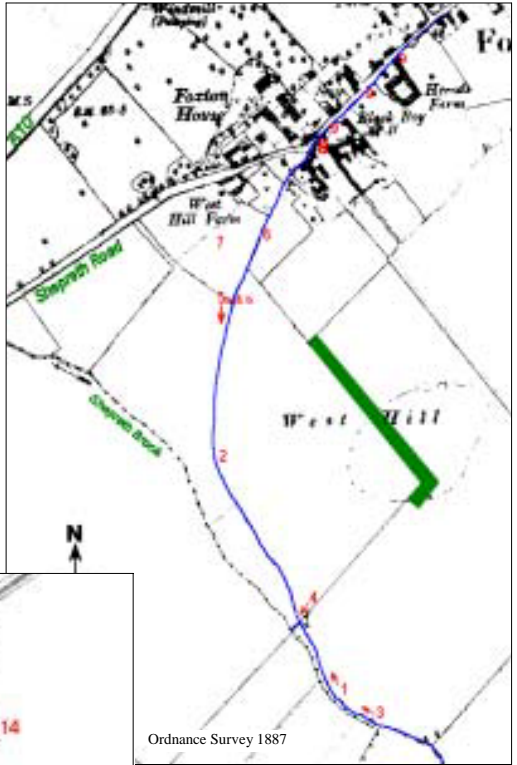
Over the years West Hill field has been a magnet for metal detectorists in the village. Finds are so infrequent now that it is rare to see them, but the cause of their attraction was an aeroplane crash on Christmas Eve 1944 when a fully loaded Flying Fortress piloted by Lt Bowlan of the 324th section of the 91st Bomber Group from Bassingbourn failed to clear West Hill in thick fog. The tale is perhaps best told by the radio operator on that flight, Cliff M. Schultz.

Telling you this story just helps to keep the 'Memory Alive'. The whole story would fill a book. I have the whole story from my memory and that of my crew members and official records copied from micro film. The following is a small portion of my records and memory. On Christmas Eve 24 December 1944 the bitterly coldest day in 54 years with dense fog less than 100 yards visibility and ice crystals covering every tree and bush the 91st BG prepared to attack the air field at Kirch-Gons to support the troops in the Battle of the Bulge. We took off at 1038 hours from runway 07 and crashed just east of the town of Foxtan which was 5 miles from the end of runway 07. The crash was on West Hill Farm on the newly ploughed field of Mr. B. Dobbin. The AC 43-38946 (No Name) DF-H was a total wreck. After exiting the AC all members of the crew except the Navigator, Elmer Gettis (broken leg) and Harold Burts, Bombardier (ear cut off) OK except for minor cuts and bruises. Mr. Dobbin and another man (unknown) were seen approaching the crash with shotgun in hand; he thought we were a German crew shot down by a Spitfire. The Bombardier's ear was retrieved by the Ball Turret gunner and later replaced by surgeons at hospital. A Mr. Lowe was the driver of the Foxtan Village ambulance that transported the Navigator and Bombardier to hospital. The rest of the crew taken by military truck to base hospital. After the crash the pilot J C Bowlan went to the village to phone the base that he had crashed, a young man (name unknown) directed him to a phone box and lit a cigarette for him.

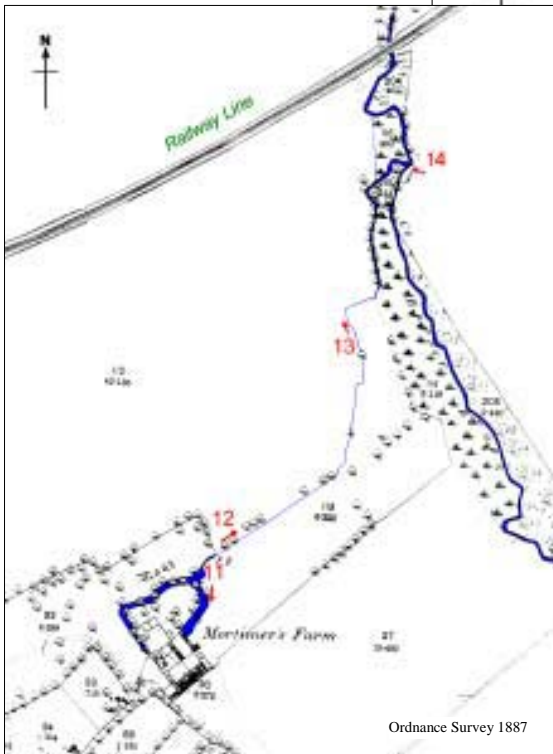
Cliff M Schultz

Photo Locations

Photo	Page No
1	cover
2	8
3	9
4	10
5a	11
5b	11
6	12
7	12



Ordnance Survey 1887



Ordnance Survey 1887

Photo	Page No
8	13
9	14
10*	14
11	15
12	16
13	17
14	17

* photo 10 (round drain cover) is not shown on the location maps. Examples may be seen between the White Horse and Mortimers Lane. Some other in filled ditches in the village also have this type of cover.