

The field names of Cowley

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Cowley and its common fields

When I refer to 'Cowley' I usually mean the area defined by the Enclosure Commissioners in 1853, encompassing all those detached areas of other parishes.¹

The common fields of Cowley stretched from the banks of the Cherwell, south-eastwards to the old Roman Road and the borders with Horspath, Littlemore and Iffley, with a small detached portion on the slopes of Shotover Hill, known as Elder Stumps. A brook, now known as Boundary Brook, runs east to west across this area. Originally it meandered across the fields slightly south of its present course, but it was straightened, and probably deepened, at the time of the Enclosure.

Our knowledge of the field names, and where they are in the landscape, mostly comes from maps made for Corpus Christi College, Christ Church, and Pembroke College, and then later in a series of Tithe maps and Enclosure maps. Field boundaries, parish boundaries, and roads are not necessarily coincident, and the boundaries of the open fields are not always shown on the maps. The earliest map that shows the borders of the fields was made for Christ Church by William Chapman in 1777 and names the larger fields as Millam, Long Mead, Compass Field, Ridge Field, Bartholomew Field, The Lakes, Cowley Marsh, and Lye Hill all north of the brook, and Wood Field, Fur Field, Broad Field, and Church Field to the south.² Other names appear in the documents, sometimes as alternative names for the same pieces of ground, and sometimes seeming more important than the names on the Chapman map.

"The Lower Fields, consisting of Bartholomew, Lake and Ridge Fields, are cultivated in three crops and one fallow. The Upper Fields, consisting of Wood, Far, Broad and Church Fields, are generally cropped yearly".³

1. Cowley Inclosure Award, 1853, OSD/A Vol. E, Oxfordshire History Centre.
2. Benjn Badcock, Plan of Cowley Open Fields and Commonable Lands in the Parishes of Cowley, Iffley, & St. Clement, in the County of Oxford Copied from a Plan made by Wm Chapman 1777, 1840. MPC 768, Oxfordshire History Centre.
3. Quoted in H. Simmons, "Cowley" in *The Landscape of Oxford's green belt* (Oxford: University of Oxford, Department for External Studies, c1981), 27. 22-38.

The Meadows

Millam is the island where the choirboys now play cricket. The name comes from the two elements Mil- and -ham. 'Mill' refers to the two mills, Boy Mill and Temple Mill that were here, although at least one was probably on the Cowley bank, rather than on the island. Our understanding of place names deriving from the Old English term *ham* has been changing recently, but here the meaning 'land hemmed in by water or marsh' is clearly appropriate.¹

There was a ford here, where the Cherwell could be crossed. A school which opened nearby in the 1890s took the name Milham Ford School, and when it moved to new buildings along the Marston Road, the name moved with it.

Two bridges were built across the river by the fords in the 16th century, so that stone and timber for the building of Cardinal College (now Christ Church) did not have to be taken through the narrow city streets. The two bridges are shown on the Agas (1578) map of the city and the Langdon map of Cowley (1605).² They were damaged by flooding soon after, and were deliberately destroyed in the Civil War.

New, temporary bridges were built on the same sites, in the 1770s, when part of Magdalen Bridge collapsed, and the whole structure had to be rebuilt. A Taunt photograph from 1860 shows the ford onto the island, and the remains of the temporary bridge a few yards upstream.³ These were destroyed in 1884 when the river was cleared of obstructions and deepened to reduce flooding.

Long Meadow and Sydenham

By 1777, the meadows had been subdivided. The largest piece was still known as Long Mead, but there were parts known as The Hayward's Ham, Dr. Wally's Ham, Frogmore, Farm Ham, Siddenham Lotts, and arable strips known as The Acres.⁴ A hayward was the parish official in charge of hedges and fences.

The edge of the meadow is shown as a hedge by Langdon (1605) and a ditch on the Enclosure map (1853). It was probably the common combination of a ditch and bank, with a hedge planted on the bank, the remains of which still exist behind the University sports grounds. On the Enclosure map (1853) all of the meadow land had been converted to arable strip farming.⁵

An aerial photograph taken of Oxford in 1947, shows the flooded meadows clearly. Angel and Greyhound Meadows are in the foreground, with Magdalen Bridge and the Plain easy to see. The trees along the banks of the Cherwell make its course easy to pick out. The smaller, unbroken patch of water above the bridge is Milham, and the much larger patch to its right is Christ Church Meadow. Up from Milham, and to the left of the river, is Long meadow, the hedge along its eastern side showing up nicely. Past the running track, the straight line of Jackdaw Lane (built in 1853) can be seen. The little water course that shows above Jackdaw Lane and winding across the dry land is part of the Shire Lake Ditch, where it merges with the larger flooded area is roughly where Cowley meadows meet Iffley meadows. Donnington Bridge had not been built when this photograph was taken.⁶

1. Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The landscape of place-names* (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, c2000), 46.
2. Thomas Langdon, Map of the estates of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, Map No. 19, November, 1605, reproduction, Oxfordshire History Centre.
3. Henry W Taunt, Magdalen College, Oxford, Oxfordshire. Milham Ford on the river Cherwell, 1860, photo, Reference HT83, Oxfordshire History Centre.
4. Benjn Badcock, Plan of Cowley Open Fields and Commonable Lands in the Parishes of Cowley, Iffley, & St. Clement, in the County of Oxford Copied from a Plan made by Wm Chapman 1777, 1840. MPC 768, Oxfordshire History Centre.
5. Cowley Inclosure Award, 1853, OSD/A Vol. E, Oxfordshire History Centre.
6. "Flooding by Magdalen Bridge and the University Running Track, Oxford, 1947", Image reference EAW003932, Britain from above, accessed 17 March, 2014, <http://www.britainfromabove.org.uk/image/eaw003932?search=oxford%201947&ref=12>

Lower Fields

Compass Field was all the land between the ditch bordering Long Meadow and the Iffley Road (Turnpike Road [1777], Wallingford Way [1777], Henley Road [1840]), from near Magdalen Bridge to the border with Iffley Meadows. The lower part of this field, St. Edmund's Well Furling, was in St. Clement's parish, and the name is discussed in that section. The upper part of the field, where Chester Street, Bedford Street and Fairacres Road now are, was known as Mead Hill. It would have been a distinct promontory before it was built upon. Mead and meadow derive from Old English *mead*.

Subdivisions in 1777 included Dr. Wally's Butts (OE *bytt*, a ridge and furrow cut short by the shape of the field), Furlong shooting on Mead Hedges (referring to the hedge bordering Long Meadow), Wallington Way Furlong (referring to the road), and Furlong Shooting on Wallingford Way Furlong, and Clay Pitts.¹

Ridge Field was the triangle of land between the Iffley and Cowley Roads from the Plain to just beyond Howard Street, except for a small portion between Magdalen Road and Howard Street, where, ironically, the modern Ridge Field Road development is. Ridge Field is thought to take its name from the term used for the method of farming here 'ridge and furrow', although it is difficult to see why that term should be applied to this field and not one of the others. However, when this was an open field there may have been a visible ridge where the long shallow climb out of the Cherwell valley turns downwards toward Boundary Brook (roughly where Aston Street and Leopold Road now are).

Bartholomew Field (1777, 1840) occupied the land between the Cowley Road to the south, and St. Clement's Street and Morrell Avenue to the north, and stretched from Alma Place and Lane in the west, to Bartlemas in the east. The name for the field and Bartholomew Furlong (1777) is probably taken from St. Bartholomew's leper hospital which adjoined its east side. Shitten Corner (1777) may well have been 'a foul and muddy place' but since it was that part of the field just across the road from the old Bolshipton manor house, the name is probably a corruption of 'Bolshipton'.²

1. Benjn Badcock, Plan of Cowley Open Fields and Commonable Lands in the Parishes of Cowley, Iffley, & St. Clement, in the County of Oxford Copied from a Plan made by Wm Chapman 1777,1840. MPC 768, Oxfordshire History Centre.
2. Badcock, Plan of Cowley Open Fields, 1777, 1840.

Upper Fields

Wood Field and **Far Field** lie between the Horspath Road and Garsington Road. Wood Field was adjacent to Hollow Way and was approximately square, Far Field was less regular in shape and had the parish boundaries of Horspath and Littlemore as its eastern and southern borders.

Broad Field probably gets its name because of its size; it stretched from Garsington Road to the Littlemore Road, and from near Cowley village southwards all the way to Long Lane in the parish of Littlemore. The early maps don't show the parish boundary clearly, but the Chapman map (1777) and the Enclosure maps of

Littlemore (1817) and Cowley (1853) show it running across the field with occasional right-angled zig-zags so that the strips and furlongs are respected, as if the parish boundary been formally marked out after the furlongs had been established.¹

The name **Hockmore** appears all over Broad Field. There is a Hockmore Furlong on the Littlemore side in 1605, with Longe Hockmore and Shorte Hockmore in Cowley; Hockmore Streete leads from the village towards 'a fielde waye'.² Later Hockmore Cottages are right on the boundary, and Hockmore Farm is less than 100 yards away. Hockmore occurs in a Charter Boundary from 1004 the editors of the charter boundaries site Langscape suggest that the second element comes from the root *mere*, meaning a pool, and commonly a pool suitable for watering livestock, often at a road junction.³ There seems no obvious site for a pool like this in Broad Field.

Gelling suggests the root is from *(ge)mære*, 'boundary' and the context is such that the meaning as a boundary seems most likely.⁴ The first element may refer to a plant of the Mallow family, but it seems unlikely that a ubiquitous, short-lived perennial plant would be used to define an important thing like a boundary, trees and stones being the usual markers. A more likely root is a personal name like *Hocc*, especially as this root also occurs in Hawkwell in Iffley.⁵

The Langton map of Littlemore (1605) has an interesting detail; a tree is shown almost on the parish boundary, and about half way along. No other solitary trees like this appear in the other maps of the area – was there an actual tree here where the farmers from the two parishes would hold their meetings? Could this be the original source for Singletree on Rose Hill? ⁶

Finally, **Church Field** was between the line marked out by Rymers Lane, Beauchamp Lane and Littlemore Road on the east, and the parish boundary with Iffley on the west, the brook on the north and the Littlemore boundary on the south. There were several small enclosures along the Lanes as part of the village; St. James' Church was in one of these, but undoubtedly is the source of the name of the larger field.

There is an interesting small enclosure in the north-east corner of Church Field, bounded on two sides by the brook and Rymers Lane. It is marked but unnamed on the Chapman map (1777), it is there on the Enclosure map (1853) named as 'Shepherds Close', and it can still be seen on modern maps framed by Florence Park and the boundaries of the back-gardens of Cornwallis Road. It is now the car-park and Council depot in Florence park. The Langdon map (1605) is blank there, but names the road (now Rymers Lane) as 'Kames Shephouse Lane'.⁷ This does suggest a long association of this piece of ground with a sheep pen, but it is too small for permanent grazing by any more than a small number of sheep; perhaps it was used by people bringing their sheep to market in Oxford, and resting their flocks here overnight, to be in good condition the following day.

North of Bullingdon Green was an area known as The **Hundred Acres** (1777, 1840) used largely for rough grazing. The name should not to be taken literally, it is much smaller than 100 acres, but probably refers to 'a large open space'. Protruding into this space are Open Magdalen (Magdalen Oaks [1777], Open Magdalen's [1840]) and Open Brasenose (Oaken Brasen Grove [1777], Open Brasenose Grove [1840]), areas of woodland where the parishioners of Cowley had common rights.

The names come from the two colleges that owned the woodlands. Beyond these lay Cowley Common (Elder Stumps [1777], Elder Stubbs [1840]) another piece of common ground. The name is thought to come from Elder Stumps, literally what is left when elder trees are coppiced. When the Enclosure took place, the parishioners' rights here were extinguished, and a piece of The Marsh was set aside for 'the labouring poor'. This became known as Elder Stubbs, even though there was a farm on the original common called Elder Stubbs Farm.

The name The **Slade** was in use for a track alongside The Hundred Acres in 1854, when it was straightened and made a standard width. However the old English word *slæd* is thought to mean 'flat bottomed, especially a wet-bottomed, valley'.

This is a good description of the nearby **Lye Valley**, which has many springs near the bottom, leading it to be named as Bullingdon Bog, Hogley Bog, and other such names ('Hockley of the Hole' [1667]). The valley is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Local Wildlife Site because it is a 'rare example of lowland, alkaline fen'. Some of the plants here are nationally rare.⁸ Lye Hill (1777, 1840) was the name given to the end of the ridge on which the golf course has been built, from the public footpath east- and south-wards down to the Boundary Brook

Nearer the two village centres, some of the land was divided into small enclosures, privately owned, rather than large open fields. The Langdon map (1605) shows some of these, but gives no names, the Chapman map (1777) does not even show them. However there were places divided into the strips, which are shown on Pett's map, and the Tithe and Enclosure maps. It is hoped that further research will be able to place the names.

1. Benjn Badcock, Plan of Cowley Open Fields and Commonable Lands in the Parishes of Cowley, Iffley, & St. Clement, in the County of Oxford Copied from a Plan made by Wm Chapman 1777,1840. MPC 768, Oxfordshire History Centre; Cowley Inclosure Award, 1853, OSD/A Vol. E, Oxfordshire History Centre.
2. Thomas Langdon, Map of the estates of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, Map No. 18, November, 1605, reproduction, Oxfordshire History Centre.
3. "Cowley", Langscape, accessed 17 March, 2014, http://www.langscape.org.uk/descriptions/editorial/L_909.3_000.html
4. Margaret Gelling, *The place-names of Oxfordshire: Pt. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 28.
5. Gelling, *The place-names of Oxfordshire*, 33.
6. Thomas Langdon, Map of the estates of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, Map No. 20, November, 1605, reproduction, Oxfordshire History Centre.
7. Badcock, Plan of Cowley Open Fields, 1777, 1840; Cowley Inclosure Award, 1853, OSD/A Vol. E, Oxfordshire History Centre; Langdon, Map of the estates of Corpus Christi College, Map No. 19, 1605.
8. Lye Valley Biological Heritage Summary, accessed 4 March, 2014 http://www.headington.org.uk/lyevalley/about/biological_heritage_summary.pdf.