

Memories of the River Ver – Markyate and Kensworth

What, why and where is the source of the River Ver?

Andy Webb, July 2009



Any traveller, historical or modern, passing south through Dunstable on the long and straight Roman road that is Watling Street, on their way to St Albans (or Verulamium), London (Londinium) and on to the south-coast,

will enter a gently graded and steep-sided dry valley; there is rarely, if ever a running watercourse here (there exists now a narrow gully on the western side of the road as it passes Kensworth Lynch, but this probably has its origins solely in its role for taking run-off from the road surface). No, the main valley is dry until its junction with the long, narrow side-valleys which cleave into the higher hills of the Chilterns to the west of Kensworth Lynch. (Any surface and upper- groundwater on the Dunstable 'plateau' drains east toward the watercourses of Leagrave Marsh and the source of the River Lea).

The embryonic River Ver has its origins in the dramatic tucks and folds of the high landscape west of Kensworth Lynch, and in particular, where two valleys merge at the point occupied on the surface by Lynch House and Corner Farm.



One, the most important in our explorations, is followed by the line of Lynch Lane and is guarded near its top by St Mary's Church, Kensworth. Along its sweeping line, between here and Lynch House, the

lane passes two ponds and occasional springs which sometimes overflow and combine to form a continuous stream, the 'top-waters' of the River Ver. For some of that distance a ditch is the intended watercourse but, more often than not, the flood and melt-waters flow down the road itself. Standing at the church we are at one of the highest points in the northern Chiltern Hills and, in effect, at the head of the Ver Valley. Here we turn south and follow the Ver's twelve mile journey, down the 'dip-slope' of the Chilterns, to the confluence with the River Colne near Bricket Wood. (Note, too, that the Ver has close association with Watling Street along its entire length, as this will be an important part of our journey).

The second valley, more obvious and dramatic in its scale, cuts due west into the hills to the north of modern-day Kensworth for approximately two miles, almost to the Dunstable Downs and to the very top of the Chiltern Hills. Although no water flows along its bottom and there is no evidence that it has ever done so, groundwater is still being funnelled inexorably towards Kensworth Lynch. A pond, nowadays lined, lies at the end of this valley in the garden of a 20th Century bungalow.

So, although a flow of water can be initiated from just north of Church End Farm and St Mary's Church at times of flood (nowadays following rain falling or thawing snow) to make a watercourse down or alongside Lynch Lane, it is where these two valleys fuse at the western base of Kensworth Lynch, that the River Ver is born and, augmented by a line of springs at the southern base of this natural promontory, it empties into the main Ver Valley at the point occupied by the Packhorse Inn on Watling Street.

For me, the source of the River Ver must be here, at the fusion and combination of these two tentacles of the Ver Valley. The area in front of Lynch House is a natural landscape bowl where these two valleys (one indistinct but occasionally with running water, the other dramatic but dry) combine to become a single valley with a definite watercourse. The four large grilles in the 18th Century boundary walls of Lynch

House surely bear testament to the (nowadays) astonishing and unbelievable amount of flood waters which appeared here in the past.



It is a place of magic and mystery; ostensibly to take flood water beneath the entrance drive of Kensworth House, the large brick and concrete culvert may also be where ghosts, ghouls and gremlins pass between our

world and the Underworld. At this point, in the long line of the Chiltern Hills, the seasonal top-waters of the Ver are squeezed from the underlying chalk aquifer like tears from a duct. And, like tears, they happen only occasionally and necessarily to purge the surrounding landscape of excess groundwater. In this way the 'woe-water' of legend is created presaging some forthcoming flood, plague or pestilence and general misfortune.

Indeed, this must surely be true, because following the two most recent, fleeting periods of flow at the source; we experienced an outbreak of Foot and Mouth virus and then a disastrous 'credit-crunch', in Jan/Feb 2001 and Feb 2009 respectively.

Surely no other river emanating from the Chiltern Hills has such a dramatic beginning as the Ver, and for this reason it has always been noteworthy and of special significance. Very few other rivers have their sources noted on Ordnance Survey maps – the source of the River Ver is marked so that the wary may avoid, and the adventurous may explore.

Mr Carter (b. 1922 Hawthorn Cottage, Kensworth Road) remembered a spring pond between Kensworth House and the present-day line of pylons. "This pond never dried up".

There was a Donkey Wheel for drawing water at nearby Bury Farm. Dunn's stables, to which the highwaymen retreated, is reported to have been by Kensworth Church. The local village moved to higher ground at the time of the Black Death".

"We used to crawl through the culvert in front of Corner Farm when I was a boy".

David Scott Flood waters from Pitchering Pond which “always had water in it” ran as an occasional stream beside Hollicks Lane and the Lynch, augmented by a spring near the Spratts Lane junction with Church Lane and the waters from the spring pond as the stream nears Kensworth Lynch.

Brick culverts bridged the stream on the north side of the lane for field access. Lower down the lane, a Grandmother insisted that “the stream flowed on the south west side of the lane” – probably to the old pond opposite Corner Farm. A modern bungalow has been built here using the pond as a garden feature.

Peter Fox “My Dad, ‘Young-un’ Fox (so called because he was second youngest in the family), delivered school meals between Garston and Kensworth during WWII; this would have been sometime between 1942-46. He did his delivery round in a big American Chevrolet truck.

On one particular day, the flood waters at the bottom of the two conjoining valleys at the ‘source’ was so great that his lorry left the road and he was unable to get it back on again. He trudged up the lane to St Mary’s Church to summon help, or to borrow some tools. He used to tell us that at that time the key to open the church door was extremely large”.

(Old-man Fox retained his local dialect: when pronouncing ‘key’ the ‘k’ was replaced with a ‘q’ as in ‘quick’ – “qey”)

Mr Carter The infant River Ver passes under Lynch Hill where “there was a line of springs on the north side of the road; the road surface was regularly lifted by the springs along here. By Dick Tanners house, to the east of my home, a deep pond reputed to have been 30ft deep (former gravel workings) was eventually filled in and the pumping station built over it I cannot ever remember the pond drying up; we used to catch newts here”.

Luton grey bricks were made at the top of the hill by Kensworth Common.

David Scott In the 1973 Bedfordshire County Council's Conservation Area (Kensworth Lynch) map the source of the Ver is shown in the grounds of Lynch Lodge and is noted in the script. An earlier, 1826 sale map of the Kensworth Lynch Estate, shows the pond source in front of the Mansion House. Note the gravel pits near the Packhorse Inn.

Provision for flood water is provided in the boundary walls of all the properties in the line of flow, most notably in that of Lynch House.

Sir Henry Chauncy “The Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire” (first pub 1700, reprinted 1826)

“The Verlume, the Ver, or the Muse rises at Row Beech in the highway called Watling-Street”.

Having passed through the formal gardens of Lynch House, the Ver flows at the front of Lynch Farm house and then swings eastwards, briefly round the base of



Kensworth Lynch and on into the main Ver Valley; initially the channel is on the north side of the busy Kensworth/Whippsnade road (B4540), beside the pedestrian footpath, and is usually a dry, insignificant little ditch.

Behind the Packhorse Inn and in front of Kensworth PS it swings under the road via a culvert, and then in a deeper, overgrown channel in the grass verge.

Local antiquarian Worthington G Smith noted on his 1903 map that the Ver began at the spring line on Lynch Hill, then flowing south towards Markyate in the gutter of Watling Street. The Dury and Andrews Topographical map of Hertfordshire (1766) indicates the Ver rising in the narrow field immediately south of the Packhorse Inn.

In a map showing the pre-enclosure (1798) field system and their individual names hereabouts, these two long, narrow fields on the western side of the ancient highway as far as the river's turn into Markyate Cell are called 'The Long Meadow' and 'Long Mead' respectively; they surely mark the extent of the infant Ver's flood plain here.

Today (Aug 2009) the River Ver is culverted beneath a busy petrol-garage and industrial estate and then flows in a deep cutting in front of Red Cow Cottages before entering another culvert beneath a hedge beside the road.

Ashley Ward (b. 1910, Kensworth; lived most of his married life in Dunstable; River Ver memories relayed to John Figgins, son-in-law, butcher, Central Drive, St Albans).

The river ran every 3 or 7 years. There were three ponds in the source/Lynch area which were always full:

Pitchering Pond	(Church End)
Black Ditch	(Dove House Lane)
Dick Tanners' Orchard	(at the bottom of the Hill, mostly spring water)

He remembered a boat in the pond/lake in Markyate Cell c.1918.

His father remembered the Duke of Bedford's carriages passing along Watling Street

in the late 1800's (his retinue presumably travelling to or from his great estate at Woburn, and his London home); he maintained that if you put your ear to the surface of the road you could hear them approaching, such were the numbers of pounding horses hooves and carriage wheels!

The A5/Watling Street between the Packhorse Inn and Dunstable is "covered in blood" because of the number of road traffic accidents that happened on this stretch of road.

Mrs Roe (writing in 1987) remembers spending a lot of time with her Grandmother, Mrs Hughes, who lived in Red Cow Cottages on Watling Street. "The river ran in front of the houses fast and full between us and the main road".

"Later when I lived in Markyate, local people picked watercress in the ponds south east of Hicks Road. We fished there and caught minnows and sticklebacks. Mother always said that the river started up Church Lane, Kensworth Lynch".

Mr McClelland (writing in 1987) "Until a few years ago wild watercress grew in the field outside the pub (The Packhorse Inn). This is now gone".

Norah King, Caddington Common (writing in 1987, b. 1917) "I am 70 now and when a little girl my grandparents farmed Red Cow Farm and I have happy memories of walking through the stream that was the Ver in front of Red Cow Cottages where Grandfather's farm-hands lived. It was then a sparkling, living stream and its source was in the area of Kensworth Lynch".



"At the age of 9 my parents bought a large house 79/81 High Street, Markyate (now derelict) on the east side of the village. It was delightfully timbered at the back, but a Georgian front had been added. It had been an old coaching inn and the stables and

rooms for the ostlers lay behind with a clock on one side of the granite-laid yard. Beyond this was a garden which ran down to the River Ver. Here I would paddle in the spring and the summer and was even small enough to creep through the small footbridge that led from Turneys, the Butchers' shop on the High Street, into the lovely meadows beyond. From our garden to the fields, the river was crossed by stepping stones".

"In the years when the spring waters ran high, the cellars at 79/81 were flooded, sometimes to a depth of 3 feet".

W Pilkington, High Street, Markyate. "I came to the village in 1939. The Ver flowed along the bottom of the garden about a yard wide. My neighbour grew watercress at the bottom of the garden. After the War (WWII), I was able to keep a number of breeding Aylesbury Ducks".



Roy Cutler "I played in the river before the bypass (Markyate) was built; there were shrews (pigmy shrews) and newts, grey and black with a reddish belly. The springs ran at Markyate when they built the bypass, 1957/8".

Further down river, "Phillip Jordan's cattle were watered in Archie Skegg's meadow about 1947-50. Water seemed to flow in 7 year cycles. 1935 was a dry year".

David Scott (writing in 1987) "From Markyate Cell, the channel then goes under both old and new roads (B4540) by St John's Church and soon crosses back to the west side of the A5, culverted now under factories and through private gardens for a distance of

1km. In earlier days before the Markyate bypass it went through a lake and open fields; gravel was extracted for local use and photos exist of swans on the waters and young



people fishing”.

KENSWORTH, the village, its place in the landscape and other points of interest:

Derivation is an old English person's name and “Worth”.

“Worth” = OE farmstead, enclosure, enclosed settlement

Therefore, Kensworth = the farm or enclosure of a man called ‘Cægin’.



Today the focus of the village is clearly along a straight mile stretch of the B4540 (Kensworth Common) road between the top of Lynch Hill and Isle of Wight Farm. It is remarkable, then, that the Parish Church of St Mary's

lies at the end of a steep and narrow lane (Hollocks Lane), half a mile to the north. Indeed, a legend emerged that locals began to build their church only to find the stones and other materials transported by magic in the night through the air across a little valley, up and over Bury Hill to its present position.

But study of old maps reveals that, in fact, the Church End hamlet and that of the source settlement around the western base of the Lynch, lie at the hub of extensive network of ancient lanes and tracks to the south of Dunstable, and that modern Kensworth was a windswept tract of heath or common land on top of the high hills hereabouts with a scattering of farmsteads on the northern side (some of these older dwellings can still be seen, set back from the main road). St Mary's Church and 'old' Kensworth lie tucked away in the cosy folds of their discrete landscape along the line of the top-waters of the River Ver.

Although nowadays Kensworth resides in the District of Central Bedfordshire, it was for centuries, part of the ancient County of Hertfordshire and as such, we claim the River Ver belongs entirely to that fair place!



Witch-haunted path (Kensworth Common to Bury Hill and Hollicks Lane) A witch and a headless milkmaid are said to haunt the footpath across the dry valley from the village, over Bury Hill towards the church. It is marked as

such on W G Smith's antiquarian curiosities map of 1903. Intriguingly, he also marks the line of the path with "Dog-hare-cat" which have all been associated with spells and omens, good and bad, in Hertfordshire for centuries.



St Mary-the-Virgin, Parish Church, Kensworth is situated in the hamlet of Church End. The nave is Norman, built 850 years ago of flint and Caen stone by the Patron, the Dean and Chapter of St Pauls, London. The tower was

added in the fifteenth century, the roof is Victorian and the north porch containing modern amenities was added to mark the Millennium. Surrounded by mown grass and well-tended graves and fringed with ancient sycamore trees, it is a tranquil place. There are car parking spaces by the main gate fronting the lane.

Kensworth Lynch, or lynch is derived from Old English "Hlinc" (noun), meaning rising ground or a ridge, ledge or promontory, especially on the side of a chalk down; it can also be an unploughed strip serving as a boundary between two fields.

Row Beech (or Beech Row) is the name given in old maps and manuscripts to identify the source of the River Ver. Row Beech is the name given to the scattering of the dwellings, including the Pack Horse Inn on Watling Street by the Kensworth turn on the Dury and Andrews map of 1766 (there was also a Tollgate here in Turnpike Trust days). On a map of local field names Row Beech is the name of one small, narrow field bounded by the Ver and another, larger field encompassing most of the end portion of the Lynch; the name must be derived from the long line of ancient beech trees which occupy the distinctive summit of this promontory which projects out, southwards into the Ver Valley.

Kensworth Quarry is a large opencast chalk quarry, which has eaten into a portion of the high Chiltern country, a mile to the north-west of St Mary's Church. The chalk is used in the manufacture of cement and other industrial processes and it is fascinating to view the naked rock strata which underly the top end of the Ver valley from the public footpaths which skirt the quarry's southern perimeter.

Take the footpath heading north-west, off Hollicks Lane and behind Churchend Farm. After a mile the path ends abruptly at a (fenced) precipice! Also, take the footpath left, shortly before, towards Codlings Bank to see more of the quarry and rock faces.

Kensworth Pumping Station is situated at the foot of Lynch Hill, behind the Pack Horse Inn. It was built in 1945 to supply the surrounding area with fresh water; it is licensed to abstract six million litres of water a day from the Ver's aquifer and is currently operated by Veolia Water. Unfortunately the resulting 'cone-of-depression' in the groundwater beneath the source area means that the top-waters of the Ver rarely flow, and when this does occur (if only fleetingly) it is invariably the result of heavy rain falling or thawing snow (January and February 2001 twice, February 2009 once) and not as a result of springs bursting into life. In the winter of 2000/01 Dr J. Crarer of Corner Farm House stated that he had seen the Ver flowing just once in twenty five years of residency there.



'Hag-Stones' and lucky flints can sometimes be found when traversing the footpath across the end of Kensworth Lynch, between Watling Street and the Ver at the base of

Lynch Hill. Cross this large arable field after it has been ploughed and, if you are lucky, you will find a piece of flint with a hole all the way through it. These Hertfordshire 'hag-stones' will undoubtedly bring you seven years good luck and many more enjoyable walks in the Ver Valley.

Such lucky flints can also be found in the large field between the M1 and Verlam End, north of Redbourn (Walk 3) and in the field south of Redbourn on the steep slope up to Beaumont Hall Lane (Walk 4).

Flints with holes in them were traditionally used as charms against illness and kept carefully. They were also hung in barns or with brasses on harness as charms against diseases in horses. Holed flints, too, were said to prevent horses from sweating by keeping away the dread 'night-hags' that got into stables at night, took the horses and galloped them over the fields before returning them, lathered with sweat, to their stalls.

MARKYATE, the village, its place in the landscape and other points of interest:

Derivation of the name is 'Gate at the (County?) boundary'
Old English 'mearc' and 'geat'.

The County boundary between Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire has shifted from time to time over the centuries as illustrated by this note by Edwin Cussons (19th Century Herts Historian):

"The high road, which is here the village street, forming the boundary of two counties, many legal complications arise. Thus the public houses on one side of the street are compelled to close at 10 o'clock, but on the other side they remain half an hour longer. So long as a Hertfordshire drunken brawler remains on his own side, he cannot be interfered with by a Bedfordshire policeman and vice versa. A Sherriff's writ good on one side of the road, is invalid on the other. In the summer of 1877, unmuzzled dogs could freely enjoy themselves in Bedfordshire: but if they allowed a Hertfordshire policeman to whistle them over the centre of the road, they subjected their owners to a penalty of 40 shillings".

For nearly four hundred years the suffix 'Street' was added to Markyate (and its various spellings).

There is no written record or definite physical remains for the existence of any settlement at Markyate before the foundation of the little Priory of the Holy Trinity in the Woods in 1145. This was built on the east bank of the infant River Ver, overlooking a natural little hollow and pool, in what was then the Parish of Caddington, and what is now known as Markyate Cell.

The village itself probably developed about this time on the east side of Watling Street when narrow plots of land backing down to the river were laid out and later occupied. Long strips of land of this type with buildings on them are referred to as

'toft and croft' (see early OS maps). This early town-planning exists to some extent, even today in the layout of buildings in the middle/east side of Markyate High Street.

Markyate Priory was founded on the site of what is known today as Markyate Cell, in 1145 by Abbott Geoffrey of St Albans for the holy recluse Christina and her followers. In the four hundred years of the Priory's existence there were never more than ten nuns and a prioress; its earthly maintenance was funded by gifts of land and occasional grants, but there were often financial and moral difficulties within this holy community and, sometimes, the accommodation was ruinous. Taxes went unpaid and at times, the nuns conduct was reported to be less than virtuous.

Denise Lovelych, prioress in the 1430's, brought scandal to the Priory after a visitation declared she had "clove in the flesh one Richard, late seneschal of the said Priory, with incestuous, adulterous and sacrilegious embraces in the same Priory and elsewhere". Other scandals of a worldly nature were not uncommon. Towards the end of its existence (it was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1536/7) the prioress Joan Zouche, was ordered not to impede Markyate villagers fishing in the large spring fed pond formed in the bottom of the valley by the little River Ver.

In 1539 the old Priory buildings and associated land holdings were leased by the Crown to Thomas Bouchier and although 'he did much coste in translating of the priorie into a manor-place, but he left it nothing ended'.

He died in 1540 leaving the house to his daughter Elizabeth, who married into the Ferrers family in 1548.

The Wicked Lady of Markyate was the reclusive Lady Katherine Ferrers, the last of her family line. In the late 1650's she fell in with one Ralph Chaplin, a local farmer who supplemented his income by holding-up travellers hereabouts and further afield who introduced her to the thrill of highway robbery.

Chaplin was finally caught in the act of robbing a military baggage train at Finchley Common, and was summarily shot. It was after this that the terror of Markyate began: houses were set on fire with the occupants in their beds, cattle were killed in the fields and the Caddington Constable was murdered on his doorstep. Many travellers on Watling Street were terrorised.

According to local legend Lady Katherine's last exploit was the attempted hold-up of a wagon on No-Man's Land Common between St Albans and Wheathampstead. Hertfordshire Historian John Cussons asserts:

"It is said that in the disguise of male attire and mounted on a coal black horse with white fore-feet, she robbed travellers on the highway but at length was fatally wounded at No-Man's Land, when so engaged. She was found lying dead outside a door leading, by a secret staircase, to a chamber where she changed her dress".

There remain stories of the sighting of Lady Katherine's ghost riding on her horse in and around the Cell and of her ill-gotten gains being buried in the grounds:

“Near the Cell there is a well,
Near the well there is a tree,
And ‘neath the tree the treasure be”.

In a footnote made by Cussons at the time of his writing down the story of the Wicked Lady, he mentions a visit to the Cell:

“I hope you slept well” said Mrs Adye (wife of owner Reverend Francis Adye) to me at breakfast.

“Perfectly, thank you. I remember nothing between going to bed and the servant waking me”. “Well, you said last night you would like to see Lady Ferrers, so I purposely put you in the haunted room. I never slept in the room myself”. She continued, “but many persons who have, have told me they have heard most unaccountable noises in it all night; and there is hardly one of the village people but would rather sleep in the stable than in that room”.



To this day,
the pub/
restaurant
'The Wicked
Lady' stands
on the
northern edge
of No-Man's
Land
Common as
testament to
this local
legend.

Roads, Mails and Coaches, Markyate lies on the ancient route of Watling Street (now known as the A5) between London, St Albans and Dunstable and on to the Midlands and north country. The Romans probably utilised, at least in part, an ancient track way on this approach to Dunstable and its intersection with Icknield Way.

At the height of the stage coaching days (late 1700's, early 1800's) many passenger coaches and wagons passed along Markyate's narrow High Street, not to mention the thousands of beasts and animals being driven to and from market.

Pickford Road commemorates the famous firm of carriers, still operating today as house movers and storage experts, who maintained a depot here at that time to service their fleet of horse drawn wagons.



Markyate, like all busy staging posts on coaching and carrier routes, was well equipped to service their needs and of the passengers. There were Farriers, Blacksmiths, Wheelwrights and Inns. The Swan Inn and the Sun Inn

(64 High Street) were foremost in the coaching trade.

The coming of the railway age meant the death-knell for the coaching and wagon route trade, within just a few years of the 1840's it had disappeared. The 1957 bypass means that the main road passes the village to the east of the Ver.

Markyate Bypass: Motorised vehicular traffic increased inexorably through the early part of the twentieth century; they were becoming progressively faster and heavier. As traffic increased, so did the number of accidents, to both people and buildings.

Abortive attempts to press for a bypass were made in the 1930's. This from "The Book of Markyate":

"So it was, in 1950, that a Bypass Action Committee was set up. They were very concerned about the volume of traffic going through the village, and in a 20 year period up to 1954 37 buildings had been rammed, 9 houses and 2 shops had lorries smashed through walls,



Mr Hugh Turney's butcher's shop was hit 33 times and 7 people were killed".

The village residents staged a protest march

in November 1954, closing the road. These efforts were ultimately rewarded, and the new bypass was opened in May 1957.



But, even now, a narrow section of the High Street, in the old heart of the village, between Pickford Road and the old White Hart can be very congested at times.



Where to see the River Ver in Markyate:

- 1) Upon its exit from Markyate Cell Park, at the old Luton Road bridge, on the spur of the old

road to the east of the High Street (use the underpass by the Old White Hart public house).



- 2) It is possible to see the Ver where it passes beneath the bypass. (This is recommended only for the fleet of foot and firm of thigh).

A public footpath leads east opposite the Post Office in the High Street, across Roman Way to the bypass and its pedestrian footpath. Cross the busy road and clamber down the steep east embankment by a large tree to view the river channel where it enters the culvert beneath. It emerges on the west side briefly before entering the longer culvert through the central part of the village.

- 3) Hicks Road open culvert; on the south side of the road, in front of the industrial buildings.
- 4) Long Meadow: a residential road built following construction of the bypass where the river channel was pushed against the embankment. A grassy verge at the south end of this road reveals the river as it makes its way out of the village.
- 5) London Road (southern end of the village, west side of the road as it exits from the culvert beneath the road).

NB: For further information on the village see "[The Book of Markyate: the Parish and its People](#)" by Markyate Local History Society.