

FOLLOWING ROMAN STANE STREET

on foot through Epsom and Ewell

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The Route through Greater London

The Romans famously built straight or nearly straight roads all over their empire, including in Britain, and one traditionally known as Stane Street ran south-west from London to Chichester, passing through what is now the Borough of Epsom and Ewell. At its beginning in London the route is easily followed – it goes from London Bridge past Southwark Cathedral (which has a visible Roman road surface excavated beneath the cloister) and down Borough High Street in Southwark. This highway features many historical sites, including the original thirteenth century St Thomas's Hospital (under the current Post Office), the house where John Harvard (founder of the university) was born, the ancient galleried George Inn, and the spot in a side alley where stood the Tabard Inn, from which Chaucer's pilgrims departed. Another famous inn once stood at, and gave its name to, the junction of the Elephant and Castle. From here the modern A24 follows the Roman route through Clapham, Balham and Tooting to Merton. The craft centre of Merton Abbey Mills is on the site of a medieval monastery, where the road crosses the river Wandle - useful to the monks for supplying fish and fresh water from upstream, and carrying waste downstream! The road continues in a roughly straight line south-west, and clearly gave rise to yet further settlements with Anglo-Saxon names at Morden and Cheam. After North Cheam it reaches the boundary sign for the Borough of Epsom and Ewell, entering Ewell and so passing from Greater London into Surrey.

Into Ewell...

From this boundary Henry VIII's Nonsuch Park lies immediately to the left, ie eastwards, of the road, and ramblers will find it preferable not to follow the strict route via the (trunk) road, but to start the walk by entering the Park a hundred yards down, at the Sparrow Farm Gate. There is a free car park just inside the

gate, or it may be reached by taking the 293 bus from Morden station in one direction, or from Epsom clocktower in the other, and alighting at the Sparrow Farm Gate bus stop (about 15 – 20 minutes from either direction). There is then a pleasant if sometimes muddy walk along the edge of the Park, close and parallel to the road. After about half a mile a second free car park is reached just inside the London Road Gate (marked by a cross-topped war memorial) and the walk may also be started here. Drivers should beware though that a sign says the Gate is closed at sunset, and this could be true of the other car park too, though there is no sign.



Nonsuch Park London Road Gate entrance from the A24

If one diverts very briefly to follow the paved path ('the Avenue') that enters the park here, for about a hundred yards, a board is reached marking the site of a side wall of Henry VIII's Nonsuch Palace, built in 1538. The Avenue goes through the central axis (right to left) of the oblong palace, to where the other side wall lay, not far from the trees at the edge of the park. This point is marked by an obelisk with an inscribed plaque. The earlier board makes it clear that the parish church of the village of Cuddington lay within the walls of the palace, having been demolished – along with the whole village – to make way for the King's pleasure hall.

It is also possible to make a slightly longer diversion from here to the remains of the King's banqueting house nearby. From the Avenue, midway between the board and the obelisk marking the side walls, one should turn to have the London Road gate to one's right and the woods the other side to one's left. This is facing out from the front of the palace. Then, a walk of about two hundred yards almost due south, through grassy scrubland and woods, leads to the remains. These consist of a brick wall of around shoulder height, forming a

square with sides about forty yards long, and slightly convex, with a round tower at each corner. The site overlooks the Ewell by-pass, where traffic roars heedlessly by.

Returning to the site of the palace, and then the London Road Gate, the route from here necessarily follows the busy A24 for about a third of a mile to a major four-way junction, ringed by shops, petrol stations and a Honda car showroom. As might be expected, Stane Street did not follow the A24 in turning ninety degrees left here along the Ewell by-pass, but carried straight on towards the centre of Ewell village, which was indeed a Roman settlement. The traveller should therefore start by using the traffic lights to cross over the busy by-pass, the continuing route the other side still being called London Road. Once across there is a bus stop for the 293 (both sides of the road) called Welbeck Close, near the Honda showroom and the United Reformed church, and the walk may alternatively be started from here.

It is not possible to follow the exact Roman route from the bus stop, as its line cuts across houses and gardens, and a zig-zag is necessary. The traveller should continue down London Road, but then take the first left into Church Street. The Victorian parish church of St Mary the Virgin and its churchyard lie on the right. After about two hundred yards, at the further end of the churchyard, the medieval tower of the former St Mary's church can be seen, with Ewell Castle School opposite, on the left.



Old St Mary's Church Tower, Ewell (c.1450), by the likely route of the Roman road on Church Street

At this point Church Street bends right into an alignment close to that of the Roman road, and continues to the junction with the High Street and two other streets which forms the centre of the village.



Ewell village centre: the approximate route of the Roman road enters from the left and exits distant right

There is a lot of history close to this spot! Firstly, just before Church Street reaches the High Street the village's eighteenth century lock-up stands on the left, where offenders were confined before appearing in court. Then at the junction itself an ancient jettied house lies to the right and the King William IV pub (now the Neapolitan Kitchen Italian restaurant) a few doors to the left, from whose basement important Roman artefacts were excavated in the 1960s.

The junction is also a short distance past the spring in the lake in front of Bourne Hall. This is where rainwater percolating down through the chalk of the North Downs reaches non-porous rock underneath and emerges on the surface, to give a water supply which supported the Roman settlement. It flows away north to the Thames as the Hogsmill river.

From the junction, after a sharp turn left past the Italian restaurant and almost immediately sharp right past the former Star Inn, the High Street and then Epsom Road form a nearly straight line south-westwards. This better approximates to the route of the Roman Road, rather than the S-bend of Staneway close by, notwithstanding its name. The modern A24 is then reached at the end of the by-pass, near Hessele Grove, and should be followed for about three hundred yards, past three cul-de-sacs on the left.

...and through Epsom

This stretch of the A24 however now bends westwards, to be going almost due west by the time it becomes Epsom High Street; and it then swings south via Leatherhead and the Mole valley, on low ground, to Dorking. It is evident though that the Roman road did not veer west and subsequently south like this, but diverged from the A24 by continuing roughly south-west through a residential part of Epsom and then in a straight line towards Dorking across the North Downs.

So what is the evidence for this? Archaeological excavation* has indicated that we are on Roman Stane Street at the old St Mary's church tower. Another key point similarly identified as lying on the road is St Martin's church in Epsom 'village' (as it is known by some) which is the oldest part of Epsom. The area long predates the current town centre half a mile away, which developed in the seventeenth century to be closer to the famous well on the Common producing Epsom salts. From St Martin's a third point we can be sure of is Thirty Acre Barn, about two miles to the south-west on the Downs, and just beyond Epsom and Ewell's southernmost boundary. Although it is apparent that the road slightly changed direction in the Borough, if we join these three points – old St Mary's church tower in Ewell, St Martin's church and Thirty Acre Barn - in a straight line, we get a broadly corresponding route through Epsom village. Sometimes this aligns quite closely to modern residential roads, but as in Ewell it is often necessary to zig-zag around the straight line to follow the broad route.

This is especially true at the beginning, for anyone seeking to follow the road's route from the A24 just south of Ewell at Hessle Grove. After about three hundred yards down the A24 one should turn left off it into Windmill Lane, across the railway bridge, and sharp right into Mill Road, whose second half is aligned with the A24 before its turn, and which brings us near to the route of Stane Street. We follow Mill Road for its full length and then, crossing Alexandra Road (to the left) and Upper High Street (to the right) continue straight on along Church Road - still remaining close to the route of Stane Street.

Before we enter Church Road though it is notable that this crossroads is very close to the Old Cottage Hospital, which lies about a hundred yards uphill in Alexandra Road, on the right-hand side. A window of the building bears the insignia VR for Queen Victoria and the date 1887, and it is still a GP practice and day surgery clinic. It was to this hospital that the suffragette Emily Wilding Davison was brought, critically injured, on 8th June 1913, after being struck by the King's horse at the Epsom Derby while grabbing its reins to disrupt the race.

It was here that she died, and she is commemorated by a maple tree sapling planted in 2013 and a plaque, amongst bushes and plants in front of the building, between the carpark and the pavement. It is strange to think that the civic dignitaries who supported this memorial would surely hardly approve of such criminal action for a radical cause were it to happen today. The event retains some mystery as Emily was found to have bought a day return ticket from London to Epsom - did she think that she might not be seriously harmed by the violent encounter, and so be able to return home? Or did she buy a return to allay suspicion, in case she was under surveillance, and in the knowledge - or intention - that she might well not survive? Or perhaps it was just in case she was unable to reach the trackside and had to turn back?

After the junction Church Street continues broadly in a straight line, and we pass the 'Mini Store' local shop on the left and the Railway Guard pub on the right.



St Martin's Churchyard, Epsom

The shady churchyard appears ahead and then the church, its west tower medieval but main body dating from regency times. The position of the church on the old Roman road suggests that it could well be on the site of Epsom's earliest church, by tradition founded by the Anglo-Saxon missionary St Ebba in the seventh century. The settlement, Ebba's Ham, was named after him and its name later contracted to 'Epsom'. The west door of the church, under the tower, faces a beamy and historic pub called Ye Old King's Head. This dates from the seventeenth century and is mentioned in Samuel Pepys's diary. Turning a few yards to the left (the pub's right) and opposite the gateway to Pitt Place, there is a public footpath sign pointing down an alley, which is again on the straight

line that is putatively the route. On emerging, one proceeds on in the same direction down St Martin's Avenue.

On arriving at the T-junction with the trunk route of Ashley Road one is faced with St Martin's School and next to it the W.S. Atkins site. The straight line south-westwards continues down the access road into the latter, entrants being greeted by a blue and white billboard saying Atkins and then underneath 'Woodcote Grove'. Straight ahead in the distance can be seen an eighteenth century manor house (called Woodcote Grove on Victorian maps but unnamed on modern ones) at the far edge of the company's site, which may well have been built on the line of the Roman road when it was still a highway. Unfortunately though it is not clear whether access to, and past, the manor house has ever been public; and at the time of writing the access road stops abruptly in front of a fenced construction site barring further progress. The best way to reach the manor house therefore is to turn right further back, when emerging from St Martin's Lane into Ashley Road, and then first left into Worple Road.

According to a long resident local couple that I have spoken to Worple Road is a very ancient thoroughfare, and some of the gardens have walls of clearly centuries-old brick or stonework. It reaches its end at a T-junction with Chalk Lane.

A right hand turn here features some charming stone and white clapper board cottages that have the feel of a village.



Chalk Lane, Epsom

The seeker of Stane Street however should turn left up Chalk Lane, go past the Amato pub/Grumpy Mole restaurant, and - on reaching the front gate of the

aforementioned Woodcote Grove manor house - take the right turn immediately opposite, up a lane called Woodcote End. **Warning:** Woodcote End is in effect a cul-de-sac, so the 10-15 minutes' walk up it must be re-traced. However, we intersect with Stane Street here, and it is notable that a house on the left is called Stane House. A few yards further on is a large gateway in the wall surrounding the Durdans, an ancient manor house and estate whose most famous owner was the Liberal Prime Minister Lord Rosebery. Here he entertained dignitaries including royalty and political colleagues, most notably his predecessor William Gladstone. Above the gate are the initials AR and the date 1878, the letters presumably referring to Lord Rosebery, whose first name was Archibald.



The Durdans

Woodcote End ascends with trees on the right shielding some back gardens, and the very old-looking wall of the Durdans, encompassing more woodland, on the left. Beyond the wall, in the Durdans estate, lie buried four Derby winners (the horses, not the jockeys!) - Amato (1838), and Lord Roseberry's winners Ladas (1894), Sir Visto (1895) and Cicero (1905). It may be that the Roman road survived here as a property boundary. At the top of this fairly gentle climb however, at a spot called World's End, one faces an insuperable barrier.



World's End! The line of the Roman road continues straight ahead through the golf course

A stone wall backed by metal railings blocks off access to the extensive RAC golf course, down through which our straight line would pass to its southern extremity. It is possible to turn right into the residential Woodcote estate but all its roads funnel the walker back north rather than allowing progress south-westwards.

It is therefore necessary to diverge from the route to get to the point where it emerges from the other side of the golf course. In fact one has to turn back down Woodcote End (or, if preferred, never go up it in the first place) to its junction with Chalk Lane; and then turn right to walk up this attractive country lane to its summit, near the grandstand at the western end of Epsom race course. En route there are trees on either side, flanked by fields containing horses, but it is a steady climb of about three quarters of a mile. For the less energetic it might be preferable to stop a little further back at the point where St Martin's Avenue reaches Ashley Road, and turn left for about two hundred yards to a bus stop opposite the W.S. Atkins entrance, to catch the 460 or 480 (about a half hourly service) up to the racecourse grandstand.

From here there is either a tedious one mile walk south-west alongside the busy Langley Vale Road; or one can take the footpath almost due south from the grandstand, across the race course, to reach Nohome Farm, thence right along a wooded track to Langley Bottom Farm. Or a footpath south-south-west across the race track goes more directly to Langley Bottom Farm. There is then a short footpath left from the farmyard up a slight hill to reach the end of Langley Vale Road, and the Epsom and Ewell Borough boundary sign. The highway continues for a couple of hundred yards as Downs Road, crosses the lane from

Ashtead to Headley, and continues for a similar short stretch as Shepherd's Walk to terminate at Thirty Acre Barn.

This route skirts round the *eastern* boundary of the RAC golf course. An alternative is to take the (unfortunately not very frequent) E5 bus from Epsom station (stop outside Nandos) via the district hospital and the *western* boundary of the golf course, to Langley Vale village. Here it is a few yards to Langley Bottom Farm, and then about a quarter of a mile on a footpath next to the highway, to the Epsom and Ewell Borough boundary sign. Then as per the other route to Thirty Acre Barn.

There *is* an old barn here but it is now a house, and the principal building of a walled and gated enclosure of the same name. Though just outside Epsom and Ewell it is the natural end to the walk, and the start of the next and completely rural stage of the Stane Street path. The nearest route to public transport is to turn right (north-west) down a track called Gray's Lane, to reach Ashtead after a mile for buses and Ashtead station after a mile and a half for trains. The site of Ashtead Roman villa is about half a mile beyond the station, on the Common, and must have been linked to Stane Street by a nearby route. Alternatively from Thirty Acre Barn one can re-trace about a mile to Langley Vale village for the (unfortunately only about two hourly) E5 bus back to Epsom; or take a track for two miles westwards to Leatherhead.

Beyond Epsom and Ewell

Thirty Acre Barn marks the end of roadway but the route of Stane Street clearly continues, and is signposted as such. It rises from here as a straight footpath through rural woodland, proceeding for four miles or so through Tyrrell's Wood and Mickleham Downs to the village of that name, close by Dorking. For some stretches, for example just before the footbridge that carries the path over the M25, one can see the enduring ditches either side of the track, which is wide enough here for two carts to pass, giving a vivid sense of the Roman road. Beyond Dorking the modern pattern of lanes and farm and field boundaries, with much barbed wire, makes it impossible to follow the route in any meaningful way. However it resumes after four miles, just north of Ockley, as the A29 trunk road, down through Billingshurst, Pulborough and Bignor (qv Roman villa) and as a footpath over Bignor Hill, in the South Downs, and down towards Chichester.

So there are interesting parts of London to be seen by following Stane Street, and two beautiful footpaths over the North and also over the South Downs. But the section through Ewell and Epsom, hitherto little recognised, is well worth tracing and takes the walker through a wealth of history.

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*Surrey Archaeological Collections, Vol. 94, 225–249, 2008 (Surrey Archaeological Society)

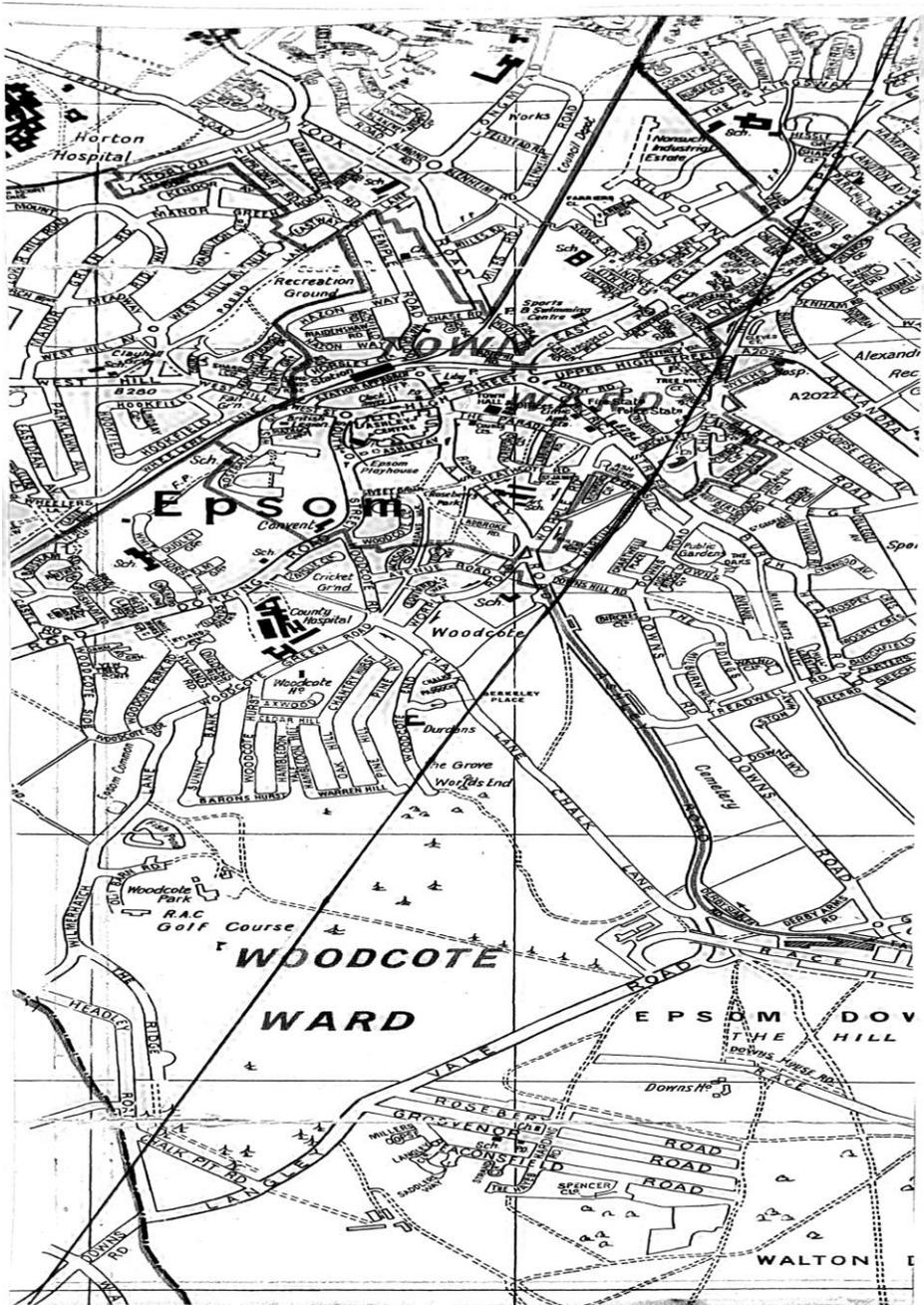
The archaeological evidence for the route of Stane Street from Mickleham Downs to London Road, Ewell

ALAN HALL

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