

The present parish of Kimpton lies in the south-west of North Hertfordshire District, the main settlement area today occupying a valley running west to east. A now lost river, the River Kyme, once flowed through the valley but now runs in a culvert beneath the High Street. Before that, the High Street cannot have existed, and it periodically suffers floods after heavy rain, most notably in 1795 and 2001. We do not know when the river was diverted underground, but it must have been before about 1600, when the earliest maps fail to mark it.

Where was the village when the river still flowed along the valley bottom, to join the Mimram on the edge of the parish? Maps provide an obvious clue: the parish church of Ss Peter & Paul lies to the northeast of the village centre, on a south-facing slope. Lidar shows that it sits inside an artificial-looking embanked rectangular enclosure very similar to a group at Pirton shown in recent years to be early medieval in origin. At Pirton, they have been



dated to the end of the early medieval period (8th or 9th centuries) and probably belonged to people of high status, perhaps the type referred to as *begns* (thegns or thanes) in documents of the period. In this case, the church may have originated as a proprietary church, belonging to a local landowner.

Proprietary churches caused much discussion in the eighth century over how bishops might manage the priests there, something the owners often resisted. With ecclesiastical reforms in the tenth century leading to the development of the familiar parish system between then and the twelfth century, proprietary churches were gradually brought into the system as the main parish church. This is possibly what happened at Kimpton. Although the present building dates mostly from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the writer observed work on the church in 1989 that revealed a foundation trench on a different alignment running beneath the wall of the Victorian vestry and earlier than the original north wall of the church. This is a good sign that there was an earlier building - not necessarily the precursor to the church - here in the past.

Another clue is that the road to Welwyn, which continues the line of the High Street to the east, runs slightly uphill to the south of the River Kyme as it emerges from the ground just before its confluence with the Mimram. Perhaps the original route kept to the slightly higher ground before migrating into the valley bottom after the river was covered over. A more radical solution might be to look for evidence of earlier routes through the parish.

The present road layout existed by 1766, when Dury & Andrews published their map of Hertfordshire, although there were then very few buildings on the south side of the High Street. Apart from the High Street, many routes run north to south across its line, including the road to Whitwell and ultimately Hitchin, which runs alongside the eastern edge of the church enclosure. At least one of these lines, running north from Blakemore End, has been seen as Roman.

R H Reid, a member of the group of amateur Roman road hunters who called themselves the Viatores, proposed in 1964 that a road ran from the Roman city of *Uerolamium* to Ickleford and on to Bedford and, eventually Irchester in Northamptonshire. He excavated a section across the proposed line at Heron's Farm, south of Gustardwood, in August 1959 and showed that this was a properly engineered Roman road. It had a base of pebbly clay 0.10 to 0.23 m thick, topped with a tightly packed layer of gravel, flint pebbles and angular flint between 0.13 and 0.25 m thick. There was a camber (the curvature of the surface) of 0.36 m across the width of 5.5 m, and a supposed shallow ditch to the west, although the published section does not inspire much confidence, showing it to be about 1.1 m wide and only 0.2 m deep. Nevertheless, this section of the road is real enough.

Lidar data confirms the line of the road north through Blackmore End to south of Kimpton Hall, where landscaping (perhaps medieval gardens) has obliterated it. It then follows the northern part of Hall Lane, where it has worn into a hollow way as it descends into the valley. The line is lost north of the High Street and Kimpton Park, established in 1346, has hidden any traces that might have shown on Lidar. The route that Reid proposed went north towards Whitwell and through Gosmore to Hitchin. Not one stretch of this line can be shown to be Roman, and parts belong to an eighteenth-century road past Stagenhoe.

R H Reid proposed a second road through Kimpton, running from Coleman Green to Baldock. He took it on a strangely contorted route along the eastern parish boundary, past Abbotshay in Codicote, and east of Rye-end Farm. There is nothing on the supposed line to show a Roman origin until it reaches Rush Green, where it falls into line with the previously known course. Instead, Lidar data shows a clearly engineered road on the western edge of Prior's Wood in the southeast corner of the parish, which aligns almost precisely with the section north-northeast from Rush Green. Beyond the northern edge of the wood, it turns to a more northeasterly alignment, probably to negotiate the valleys of the River Kyme and River Mimram.

Reid also suggested third route, which he called a 'lateral way', between Friar's Wash and Ayotbury, largely following the southern parish boundary. There is nothing to show that this is Roman, and many of the claimed sections of *agger* (the raised foundations of engineered roads) are nothing more than denuded field banks. We can discount this as an ancient road. But what of the road through Blackmore End? Where did it go after crossing the River Kyme in the valley bottom? Aerial photographs show a complex of buried ditches west of Park Wood, including some double ditches that look like tracks or roads. They are evidently the remains of a village or hamlet and their form suggests a Roman date. Projecting the main double-ditched feature to the southeast reaches Kimpton High Street exactly where the road

through Blackmore End reaches it. It is reasonable to conclude that this was where the road headed, not in the Hitchin direction but aiming towards Breachwood Green. We must leave tracing it further in this direction for another occasion, but it would pass very close to the likely site of [the sixth-century burial mentioned a few weeks ago](#).

There are no reported finds from the area of the cropmarks, either made by detectorists or casual walkers. The cropmarks indicating the settlement were best visible on Google Earth™ in 2012 but can be seen on several others by enhancing the contrast, which shows that the marks are not random difference in crop growth but instead reflect buried features. They appear to show a settlement consisting of enclosures separated by trackways, although there is not enough detail to give us a complete plan.

One final point to note is the name of the River Kyme. The river-name expert Eilert Ekwall was in no doubt that Kyme is a back-formation from the village name (in other words, it was never an independent river-name). Although Cyma is a genuine Old English personal name, there is river-name Kyme in Lincolnshire, which Ekwall derived from a hypothesised Old English **cymbe*, 'a hollow'. If the river-name came first - which is what we usually find, as in nearby Luton, named from the River Lea - could Kimpton be the *tūn* ('enclosed farm') on or close to the River Kyme? The next possibility is that because many river-names belong to an older stratum of place naming than Old English village names, **cymbe* may not be Old English but from the Celtic dialect Brittonic. An earlier **Cumbja* ('valley-river') would develop regularly into **cymbe*, and this possibility seems the most likely etymology.

This analysis of the landscape of Kimpton points towards an understanding of how settlement shifted over time. The earliest village, in Roman times, lay to the west of Park Farm, next to a road that came up from the south before crossing the River Kyme and turning to a more northwesterly alignment. This was perhaps the first village community in the valley.

Later, perhaps in the eighth or ninth centuries, a local lord established a chapel in his defended enclosure that later became the parish church. As the River Kyme vanished underground, perhaps partly through human agency and perhaps partly through a lowering of the water table, so a new route along the valley bottom became the focus for the settlement by the later Middle Ages, developing into the focus of the current village.

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