



## Notes by the Way by H.E. Malden

... from the Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News archive 1997

### Around Abinger circa 1880

I think it probable that Oke-wood has nothing to do with oak trees. Far enough back, before the 15th century people knew how to spell, and spelling was not altered as it was later, and oak trees were not spelt okes. The form of oak was, in Anglo Saxon, *Ac*, which remains in the Scottish Aik.

Okley is certainly the *Oak-lea*, as in the Domesday Book, and in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, it is *Acleah;Haclia*.

If Okewood appeared in early documents as Ac-wood or Ak-wood, it might be derived from oak trees. But it is on the river Oke (which appears in an old map of 1610, and in others a hundred years later), the stream which flows through Forest Green, and winds through the centre of the parish and past Okewood Mill, and under Okewood Hill, it is most probable the name is derived from this stream. I believe that I am right in saying that this word Oke, or Ock, or Ox, is a Celtic word meaning water. There is a river Ock in Berkshire, an Oke in Devonshire, on which is the town of Oke-hampton. Therefore Okewood would be the wood by the Oke, i.e. by the water.

In the time of Edward the Sixth, and his sister Queen Elizabeth, in the parish registers the name is almost always spelt Okewood.

You know that the parts of Surrey and Sussex which lie between the North Downs (the hills reaching from Guildford to Reigate) and the South Downs are called the weald, that means the forest; all the country was a great tangled forest, with narrow paths leading from clearing to clearing.

Many places are still called *hurst*. like Billingshurst, and *hurst* means a wood. Oke-wood, and Oak-leigh, now spelt Okley, tell us the same story.

The south Saxons who lived in the weald were so barbourous that they are said not even to have known how to fish, till Willfrith, who converted them to Christianity, taught them fishing as well as other useful arts.

Where you find the name *fold*, like Slinfold, there was a space enclosed in the forest where they folded their cattle to keep them from the wild beasts. There were wolves on the look-out for their cattle, perhaps for their children.

In some parts of England, only 600 years ago, refuges were erected, which travellers might climb up to escape from wolves; and there must have been wolves in the weald as long as anywhere in England. There were wolves in Scotland about 200 years ago, and in Ireland less than 200 years ago.

A great deal of the weald was cut down to supply the iron furnaces which were worked here. Now the iron is smelted or prepared with coal in the north and midland counties, but formerly it could only be done with wood, and as there was both wood and iron here the trade flourished.

The iron railings round St. Paul's in London, were about the last great piece of ironwork cast in this neighbourhood. Since then the wood has grown up again, but there are not a great many old oak trees in the weald compared with the number in other parts, owing to this practise of burning the trees in furnaces.

### Another entry by H. E. Malden in September 1884 refers to part of Coldharbour Lane.

Robbing Gate, by Redlands Wood, is often wrongly called Robin-gate, or even Robin Hood Gate. It is named for the "robbery" by highwaymen, which took place there. The old high road from London to Arundel went by it. A description of that road, a hundred years ago, tells us that near Robbing Gate there used to be two highwaymen hanging in chains on a gibbet, to encourage travellers.

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