

THE MEETING PLACE OF COPTHORNE HUNDRED

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THOUGH it has been possible to identify the meeting places of some of the hundred courts in the county of Surrey, this has not been possible until now in the case of Copthorne Hundred. There is strong, though necessarily circumstantial, evidence to suggest that the original meeting place was at the geographical centre of the hundred, near fields called Copthorn and a linear earthwork and hedge, formerly known as Nutshambles. This earthwork runs along the top of a prominent ridge on the boundaries of Epsom and Ashted, between the valleys containing Langley Bottom Farm and Thirty Acres Barn. The purpose of this article is to present the evidence for this claim.

Copthorne Hundred has included at various times the parishes of Chessington, Epsom, Ewell, Cuddington, Banstead, Walton-on-the-Hill, Headley, Mickleham, Ashted, Leatherhead, Fetcham and Newdigate, which formed a detached part of the hundred south of Dorking in the Weald.¹ In the Domesday Survey, however, Chessington was included in Elmbridge Hundred and the village of Banstead in Wallington Hundred.²

In the seventeenth century, and probably in the later medieval period, the hundreds of Copthorne and Effingham appear to have had but one meeting place. This was identified by Mr. J. H. Harvey³ as Leith Cross, on the boundary between Fetcham and Great Bookham, which was also the boundary between the two hundreds. Though the sheriff's tourn quoted by him as meeting there in the reign of Edward I (1272–1307) was not itself the ordinary hundred court, the two hundreds may have been meeting there by that time. They certainly met there in 1651 by which time they had been presented to the Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames,⁴ though it seems clear from the Surrey Quarter Sessions records that the two were never amalgamated. The probability that the two hundreds met jointly in the later medieval period raises the question whether this had always been so or whether they combined some time after the conquest, when the amount of business at hundred courts tended to decline and the number of people attending must have been greatly reduced. By 1275 the hundred was no longer settling important land disputes, as it had done under Henry I, though it still had important business to transact.⁵

¹ *V.C.H., Surrey*, III, 246.

² *M. & B.*, I, xlv et. seq.

³ *Sy.A.C.*, I, (1953), 157.

⁴ *M. & B.*, I, 339. Charter of Kingston-upon-Thames, 14, Car. I, 1638.

⁵ Cam, Helen M., *The Hundred and the Hundred Rolls*, 1930, reprinted 1963, 17–18.

It does not seem necessary to assume, however, as appeared to be done in Mr. Harvey's article, that the small size of Effingham Hundred would have prevented it having a separate meeting place. Its assessment in 1066 at 49 hides was not much smaller than that of Wotton with approximately 60 hides. Equally had it been wished originally to combine Copthorne and Effingham as one hundred with but one name, the combined hidage would in 1066 still have been less than that of Wallington, the largest in Surrey, so excessive size would have been no obstacle.⁶ In fact there was much less uniformity in the size of the hundreds in the south of England than might be supposed and than there was in the Midlands,⁷ and size alone did not prevent the smaller ones having separate meeting places.

Furthermore, the theory in the article that the settlement of the hundred proceeded from Fetcham, which would therefore have had a good claim to be the administrative centre, is not borne out by the evidence collated by Dr. John Morris in his *Gazeteer of Saxon Surrey*.⁸ The earliest settlement in Surrey is shewn there to have been near the Wandle and, as two of the more northerly parishes of Copthorne Hundred, Ewell and Cuddington, are nearer to that river than to Fetcham, it seems more likely that they should have been settled from that direction. This may in fact have been the case, since the earliest finds from the cemetery at Ewell are said to date from the sixth century, while those at Fetcham date from the late sixth and seventh centuries.⁹

It seems preferable, therefore, to accept the existence of two separate hundred names as evidence of two separate administrative units in the initial period. This view is reinforced by the fact that when the two hundreds did combine, a meeting place on the boundary between the two was selected, suggesting that until that date they had been independent. A neutral place on the boundary would prevent either place claiming precedence over the other. The existence, before the two hundreds combined, of a separate meeting place for each, would avoid the difficulty presented by a meeting place for the two at Fetcham, so far from the centre of the area in question, which was the most common place chosen. Fetcham, too, would have involved a river crossing, which may have been of considerable inconvenience, for over two-thirds of the parishes concerned.

The origin of the hundred courts is still controversial, for when the first documentary evidence occurs in the middle of the tenth century they appear as well-established institutions with all the characteristics of an ancient popular assembly.¹⁰ It is thought, however, that the need for the meeting of the people of an area must

⁶ *V.C.H., Surrey*, I, 275-328. Darby, H. C. and Campbell, E. M. J., Eds., *The Domesday Geography of South East England*, 1962, 364.

⁷ Stenton, F. M., *Anglo-Saxon England*, 1946, 295.

⁸ *Sy.A.C.*, LVI (1959), 132.

⁹ *Sy.A.C.*, LVI (1959), 140-1.

¹⁰ Stenton, *op. cit.*, 295-6.

have been felt as soon as settled conditions prevailed¹¹ and there appears to be some evidence for popular assemblies in some places as early as the seventh century.¹² Any connection between these and the hundred courts may not have been direct, however, and the areas covered by each would not of necessity coincide. There may have been more early moot sites than eventually became hundred sites, so a site for Copthorne from, say, the earliest period to the thirteenth century would not necessarily preclude other possible sites, as, for instance, Horsehead Cross of Mr. Harvey's article for the initial period.¹³ Standard Hill, Effingham, was suggested as an early site for Effingham in Dr. Morris's gazeteer.¹⁴

The linear earthwork, on part of which the ancient hedge grows, can be traced on the ground for one and a quarter miles from Pleasure Pit, Epsom, almost to Walton Hurst Farm.¹⁵ The bank and ditch must originally have had an overall height of about 10 feet and width of about 35 feet. The earthwork still forms part of the boundaries of the parishes of Epsom, Ashted, Walton-on-the-Hill and Headley. Though excavation has not provided any positive dating evidence, it seems to have been in existence before the parish boundaries and is likely, therefore, to date from Saxon times or earlier. It may have been a boundary like the Grim's Ditches of the Chilterns¹⁶ or an obstruction placed across open chalk country, flanked on either side by a natural barrier of woodland, like the more massive Cambridgeshire dykes across the Icknield Way.¹⁷ It is known that barrows had a tendency to become meeting places,¹⁸ partly because they formed prominent landmarks, but also because they may have been used as platforms in the course of the meeting.¹⁹ Linear earthworks would have tended to attract moots for these reasons but also because even when they were not constructed as such, they tended to become boundaries, which in their turn were often chosen as meeting places.

The name Nutshambles was given to the line of the hedge and earthwork by John Lawrence on his map of Ashted, 1638.²⁰ In the Epsom Tithe Award, 1843,²¹ the name was given to two fields of 9 and 17 acres which abut upon this hedge to the west and the former boundary of the parishes of Epsom and Walton-on-the-Hill to the

¹¹ Stenton, *op. cit.*, 294.

¹² Blair, P. H., *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, 1962, 239.

¹³ *Sy.A.C.*, L (1953), 159.

¹⁴ *Sy.A.C.*, LVI (1959), 147.

¹⁵ N.G.R. TQ 198577-206562.

¹⁶ Wheeler, R. E. M., *London and the Saxons*, 1935.

¹⁷ Phillips, C. W., *V.C.H., Cambridge and the Isle of Ely*, II, 1948, i *et. seq.* In this case the natural barrier was fenland and woodland.

¹⁸ Grinsell, L. V., *Dorset Barrows*, Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, 1959, 68. *Cam, op. cit.*, Appendix IV.

¹⁹ Wood, E. S., *Sy.A.C.*, LIV (1953-4), 44.

²⁰ Map of Manor of Ashted in Surrey, in 1638, by John Lawrence. *Sy.R.O. Acc.* 169. *P. Leatherhead L.H.S.*, I, 10 (1956), 20-23.

²¹ Diocesan Copy in *Sy.R.O.*, 1590-1.

south.²² These presumably formed part of the properties described as Nutshambles Wood and Nutshambles Piece, amounting to 50 acres, described in the marriage settlement of John Parkhurst and Richarda Dormer in 1725.²³ But it is an earlier form of the word given in an account of the metes and bounds of the manor of Epsom, accompanying a rental of 1496 in the Cartulary of Chertsey Abbey,²⁴ which indicates the probable meaning of the name and points to a meeting place. The name given there to the hedge is Motschameles, which almost certainly has its roots in two Old English words 'mot' and 'sceamol.' The fact that there is a reference to Notshameles in the Ashtead Beadle's accounts for 1383²⁵ suggests that the form in the cartulary was already obsolescent when recorded, probably because it was a copy of an earlier document.

In *English Place-Name Elements*²⁶ 'mot' or 'gemot' is said to be found in place names with two distinct meanings. The second one given, that of a river confluence, need not, in this area of chalk ridges and dry valleys, concern us. The first is connected with an assembly of people, especially concerned with judicial matters, and is found frequently in combination with words for hill, such as 'hlaw' and 'beorg,' and other places where assemblies met. Among others instanced are Motelowe in Northants, the meeting place of Wymersley Hundred and Modbury in Dorset, the meeting place of Modbury Hundred.

The second element 'sceamol,' 'scamol' or 'scomol'²⁷ originally meant a stool, and then a bench or stall for displaying goods for sale and in the latter sense is found in street names like The Shambles in York. The word is also thought to have been used in a topographical sense, meaning a shelf of land. The common factor in both uses is a flat, bench-like quality. Two possible explanations of its use here involve this quality. It might be possible to claim that the word described a flat topped ridge, but in that case it ought to apply to the whole of this considerable hilltop. On the other hand, the word is found elsewhere in connection with hundred names and meeting places. In Kent the thirteenth century form of Shamwell Hundred was Schamele²⁸ and in Essex there is a reference to the sheriff's tourn meeting in 1341 at Tendryngschameles in Tendring Hundred.²⁹ In the Cambridgeshire hundreds of Stain and Radfield there are references to now lost minor place names in the parishes of Great Wilbraham and Balsham which contained this word. These hundreds

²² Boundary of Epsom was moved to the south under the Surrey County Review Order, 1933.

²³ Marriage Settlement of John Parkhurst and Richarda Dormer, 8 May, 1725, in the possession of Epsom and Ewell Corporation.

²⁴ Sy. Rec. Soc., XII, No. 1233.

²⁵ I am indebted to Mr. A. W. G. Lowther for this information.

²⁶ Smith, A. H., *English Place-Name Elements*, E.P.-N.S., XXVI, 1956, 44.

²⁷ Smith, *ibid.*, 100.

²⁸ Anderson, O. S. (now Arngart), *The English Hundred Names, The South Eastern Counties*, 1939, 116.

²⁹ Reaney, P. H., *Place Names of Essex*, E.P.-N.S., XII, 1935, 325. Anderson, *op. cit.*, 45.

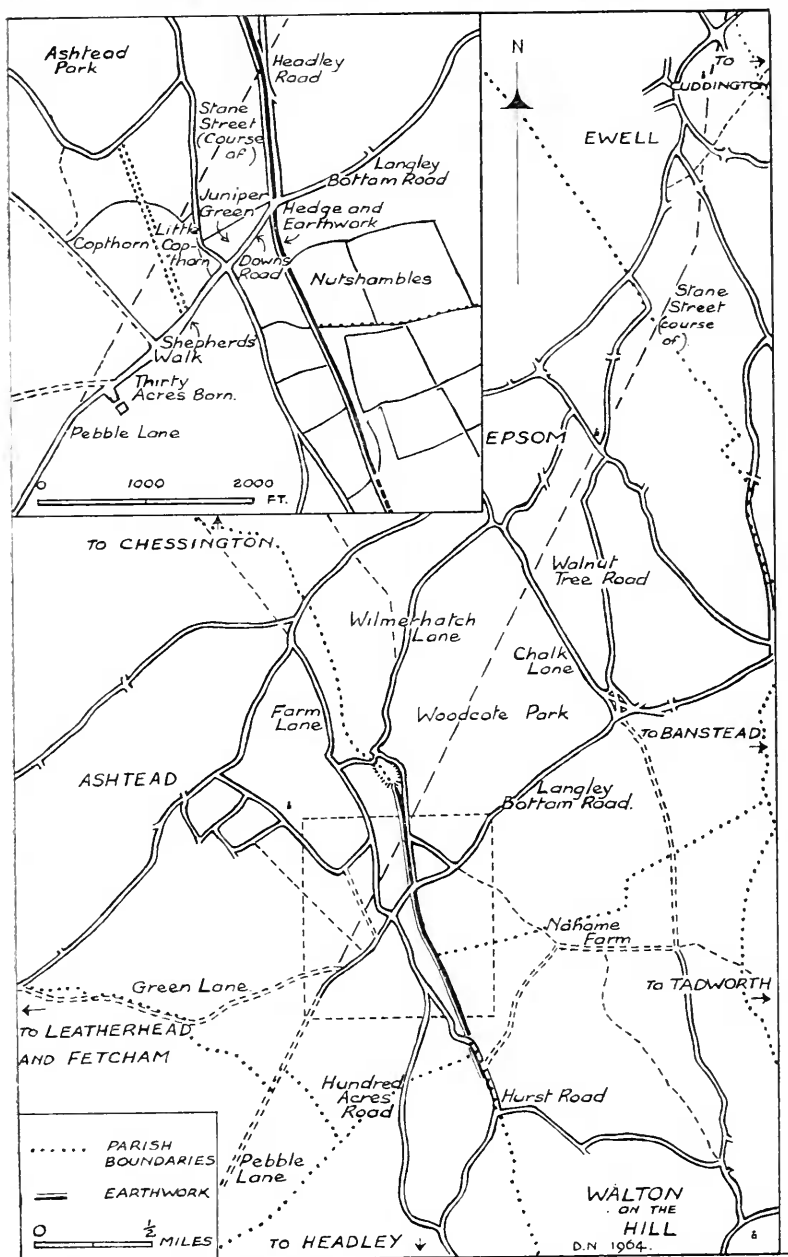


FIG. 1.—SITE OF THE MEETING PLACE OF COPTHORNE HUNDRED c. 1870.

eventually had a joint meeting place with Flendish Hundred at Mutlow Hill, a tumulus on the Saxon linear earthwork, Fleam Dyke,³⁰ at the junction of these parishes and Fulbourn Hundred. It was assumed in the Place Name Society's volume for that county that the word referred to the benches on which members of the hundred court sat. It seems reasonable to claim, therefore, that the literal meaning of the word benches, in this case used in the course of a meeting rather than for the sale of goods, is implied in all these cases. Some names which include the element 'sceamol' are quoted by O. S. Anderson in *The English Hundred Names* as words which give an indication of the manner of holding the hundred court.³¹

The name Copthorne is thought to refer to a 'pollarded thorn tree' at the place where the hundred met.³² Supporting place-name evidence is found in the preservation of this name in two fields in Ashtead abutting on the road called Shepherds' Walk which leads from Thirty Acres Barn to this hilltop. These fields, now divided by an ancient avenue of limes leading to Ashtead Park, are named Copthorn and Little Copthorn in the Ashtead Tithe Award, 1840.³³ The shape of the fields suggests that the two formed one field known as Copthorn before the planting of the avenue, which is shewn on Rocque's Map of Surrey, 1762.³⁴ This probably took place shortly after the purchase of the manor and the commencement of the building of the new manor house by Sir Robert Howard in 1680.³⁵ In Edwards' *Companion from London to Brighthelmston*, written about 1789,³⁶ there is described to the south of Ashtead Park, 'Copthorn, a pleasant walk skirted by lime trees extending near half a mile from the house and terminating at the old Roman Road called Staen Street Causeway.'³⁷ A field in Banstead known as Copthorn seems unlikely to preserve the hundred name since it was apparently known as Copthall in 1682,³⁸ and may not originally have been part of Copthorne Hundred.

Every parish in the hundred had a road leading to this hilltop by a very direct route (see Fig. 1). Almost all appear on Rocque's map but there is documentary or archaeological evidence for a much greater age for many of them.

One of these roads can be traced as a track and green lane from Chessington, over Epsom and Ashtead Commons, until, as Farm Lane, Ashtead, it reaches this ridge at the junction of Downs Road, Ashtead³⁹ and Shepherds' Walk. With the road from Walton-on-the-Hill via Walton Hurst Farm this can be identified as the King's Highway from Kingston to Walton-on-the-Hill mentioned in the

³⁰ Reaney, P. H., *Place Names of Cambridgeshire*, E.P.-N.S., XIX, 1943, 138.

³¹ Anderson, *op. cit.*, 182 *et seq.*

³² Anderson, *ibid.*, 59.

³³ Diocesan Copy in the Sy.R.O., 45, 46.

³⁴ Published by Sy.A.S.

³⁵ P. Leatherhead *L.H.S.*, II, 1 (1957), 31.

³⁶ Edwards, J., *Companion from London to Brighthelmston*, II, 1801, 28.

³⁷ Shepherds' Walk, not the known course of Stane Street.

³⁸ Lambert, H. C. M., *History of Banstead in Surrey*, I, 1912, 283.

³⁹ Prior to 1964 this was Headley Road.

Chertsey Cartulary.⁴⁰ From Chessington and the site of the former Horton manor an old path crosses Epsom Common to join Wilmerhatch Lane, an ancient road from the Woodcote area of Epsom. Another road is that from Headley which was called Hundred Acres Road on the Ordnance Survey 6-inch map, 1871.⁴¹ Judging from the considerable hollow way this road becomes near to Headley, it must be of some antiquity. It is also possible to trace in hedgerows, footpaths and bridle roads, old ways from North and South Tadworth. These could have been the roads from Tadorne and Tadeorde, two of the Domesday manors of Banstead which were in Copthorne Hundred.

From Leatherhead and Fetcham there approaches a road known as Green Lane, which after being joined near Thirty Acres Barn by Stane Street and paths from Ashted, reaches the top of the ridge near Nutshambles as the Shepherds' Walk already mentioned. This road has been claimed to be prehistoric in date⁴² and certainly seems to have had Saxon associations. By the side of this road, in the grounds of the Goblin Factory, Leatherhead, a pit was found in 1927 containing burials whose condition suggested a Saxon date. These were reported by Mr. A. W. G. Lowther together with further burials which had been found near the road, next to the field Little Copthorn⁴³ in 1910. These were also thought to be of Saxon date.⁴⁴ The road continues to Epsom as Downs Road, Ashted and Langley Vale Road.⁴⁵ The latter can be identified as the Portway mentioned in the account of the metes and bounds of the manor of Epsom.⁴⁶ The Portway, meaning a road between towns, is thought to be that between Croydon and Leatherhead and possibly continuing to Guildford, linking the succession of Saxon villages along the spring line at the junction of the tertiary sands and the chalk slopes of the North Downs. It is probably the predecessor of the road shewn by J. Norden in his map of Surrey, 1594. It is mentioned in the Memorial of Ewell in 1408⁴⁷ as 'portweye leading from Codyngton to Ledred.' The road has been traced in Ewell entering the village from the site of Cuddington in Nonsuch Park, skirting the centre and leaving in the direction of Epsom.⁴⁸ After the enclosure of Woodcote Park c. 1100,⁴⁹ all roads to the south-west from the old centre of Epsom near the parish church would have had to avoid the park, so the road from the church to the known section of the Portway at Langley Vale Road was probably the Walnut Tree

⁴⁰ Sy. Rec. Soc., *op. cit.*, No. 1233.

⁴¹ O.S., 6-inch, Sheet XIX, 1871.

⁴² *P. Leatherhead L.H.S.*, I, 3 (1949), 20.

⁴³ Now occupied by the house Tudor Croft.

⁴⁴ *Sy.A.C.*, LI (1949), 151, Note i.

⁴⁵ Formerly Langley Bottom Road.

⁴⁶ Present writer, unpublished.

⁴⁷ Deedes, C. M., *Register or Memorial of Ewell, Surrey*, 1913, 58.

⁴⁸ *Bulletin of the Nonsuch and Ewell Antiquarian Society*, Series II, 6 (1964), 7.

⁴⁹ *V.C.H., Surrey*, III, 273.

Road of the early Ordnance Survey maps,⁵⁰ which was known as Dorking Way in 1679⁵¹ and c. 1540.⁵² Since this was also the name of Langley Vale Road in 1679⁵³ this route towards Leatherhead seems well established. Though Norden's map is only diagrammatic in form, alternative routes are shewn to the north and south of Ashted. The fact that the more southerly one became known as the Portway, despite its route away from the village, suggests that at one time this had been the more widely used road. This could have occurred because of the existence of a hundred meeting place along its course. This road is joined on Epsom Downs near the present racecourse by Yew Tree Bottom Road, from the site of Bergh, the remaining Banstead manor which was included in the Hundred of Copthorne in the Domesday Survey.

There now remains the approach to this hilltop from Mickleham. At the time of the Domesday Survey this was a small village⁵⁴ without any immediately obvious need for a road to Epsom Downs. Yet in the fifteen miles of Stane Street between Buckingham Farm, Ockley, and the London Road Plantation, Ewell, only the short section between Mickleham and Thirty Acres Barn survived to become a medieval road called Pybyl Stret⁵⁵ and the present bridle road, Pebble Lane.⁵⁶ This survival would have required substantial use of the road in Saxon and early medieval times. Yet even if Mickleham's close connections with Leatherhead⁵⁷ had not made that the more obvious route towards the north-easterly parts of Surrey, the normal amount of village traffic would hardly have been sufficient to keep the road in constant use. When it is considered, however, that attendance at an early moot would have meant considerable traffic at least every three or four weeks, and that this was probably the most direct road from Newdigate also, then a likely explanation for this survival becomes clear. Moreover, Stane Street fell out of use precisely where it met the Portway before that road proceeded to the top of the hill at Nutshambles and disappeared so completely that for many years its course through Epsom was unsuspected, and was not confirmed until Mr. Winbolt's excavation in Woodcote Park in 1936.⁵⁸ Pebble Lane veers to the east and leaves the line of Stane Street just a few hundred yards before its junction with Green Lane, cutting off a corner. This emphasises still further that when the section of Stane Street continuing to Epsom was being allowed to fall into disuse, possibly

⁵⁰ O.S. as above. Now called Downs Road and partly diverted.

⁵¹ Survey of the Manor of Epsom, 1679. Sy.R.O., 31/4/1.

⁵² Rental of Manor of Epsom, Edward VI, 1547-50, P.R.O. L.R. 2/190.

⁵³ Survey of the Manor of Epsom, 1679.

⁵⁴ V.C.H., Surrey, I, 304. In Domesday survey assessed at 5 hides.

⁵⁵ Gover, J. E. B., Stenton, F. M., Mawer, A., *Place Names of Surrey*, E.P.-N.S., XI, 1934, 81.

⁵⁶ N.G.R. TQ 193565.

⁵⁷ In later years both Thorncroft and Pachenesham Manors were to hold parcels of land there. *P. Leatherhead L.H.S.*, II, 6 (1962), 169.

⁵⁸ Winbolt, S. E., *With a Spade on Stane Street*, 1936, 219. *Sy.A.C.*, XLIV (1936), 146.

because of the enclosure of Woodcote Park already mentioned, the destination of the people who were still using the road from Mickleham was a place to the east of its junction with the Portway, where the site of the hundred moot probably lay.

The continued use of this part of Stane Street suggests that this could have been an early folk moot which survived to give its name to the hundred. This view is supported by the name Copthorne itself, since thorn trees appear in early charters as boundary marks⁵⁹ and are known to have been sacred objects in Celtic and Teutonic religion.⁶⁰

The exact position of the meeting place on this hilltop is not certain. The flat top of the ridge where it is spanned by Downs Road, Ashtead, seems a probable place. Roads from the western part of the hundred and the boundary of Little Copthorn meet at one end of that road, while at the other end are the roads from the eastern part, the hedge, earthwork, and fields called Nutshambles and the parish boundaries. To the north of Downs Road is a triangular piece of land, now planted with trees, which stretches from the earthwork on the east to Little Copthorn on the west. On the Ordnance Survey 6-inch map of 1871 this was shewn as unenclosed scrubland and in the Ashtead Tithe Award, 1840,⁶¹ pasture called Juniper Green. This seems a possible site. At the western end of this land were found some of the burials already described and this raises the question whether any of them could have been those of executed criminals. The giving of the name Motschameles specifically to the hedge on the earthwork could be taken to imply either that the earthwork had some definite connection with the meeting place, presumably as a platform, or that the hedge, for part of its length, marked one of the limits of the meeting area in the way in which the Moot Hedge of Gore Hundred in Middlesex appears originally to have done.⁶² If this were so, however, a larger area than the former Juniper Green must have been involved. In absence of any definite archaeological evidence it seems wiser not to try to locate the meeting place more precisely than on this hilltop, assuming that the fields called Nutshambles and Copthorn, the hedge and the earthwork acquired their names from their proximity to the meeting place.

The hilltop can be seen, therefore, to have many of the characteristics commonly associated with hundred moots. There are two separate significant place names, of which one preserves the hundred name and the other suggests a meeting place and benches used there. Geographically the situation is suitable in that this is a prominent ridge, in open country between the villages, at the centre of the hundred, where three parish boundaries met. There is further the familiar association with an earthwork; nearby are unexplained

⁵⁹ Birch, W. De G., *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 1885. No. 34.

⁶⁰ Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 12, 1908-1926, 452. Anderson, *op. cit.*, 214.

⁶¹ Ashtead Tithe Award, 1840, 25.

⁶² T. London & Middx. A.S., New Series, VII, pt. II (1953), 218 *et seq.*

burials. Finally, though there is no evidence of settlement to account for traffic to the area, many ancient roads are seen to meet there. This suggests the continued use of this hilltop for an important purpose.

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