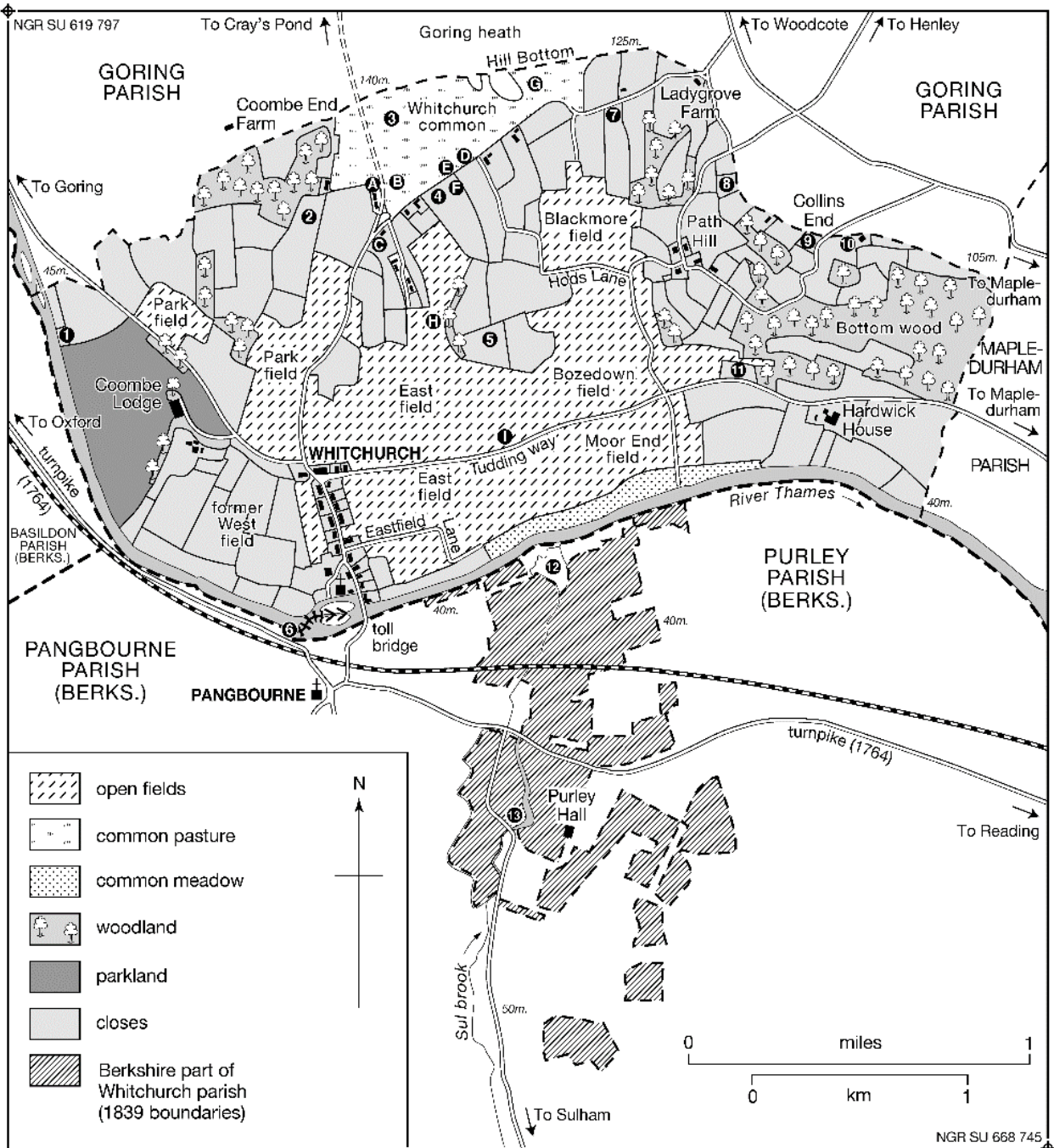


## Ancient Neighbours: Purley and Whitchurch

The ancient parish of Whitchurch has a long frontage to the River Thames, including a section opposite Basildon, the whole frontage to Pangbourne and longest of all to Purley, in a section roughly equivalent to Bozodown and the Hardwick Estate on the north side.



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For many centuries Whitchurch and therefore Oxfordshire have included the whole width of the riverbed as shown on the map above. This is contrary to the ancient legal presumption

of ownership of a running stream bed from each side up to halfway. Theories abound as to why that exception should be, but once the Thames was the boundary between the Saxon Kingdom of Wessex and the immensely powerful Mercia, which seems to have claimed all of this valuable asset for itself. For example much of the Swan Hotel and its car park at Pangbourne are on land reclaimed from the river and treated as part of Oxfordshire until transferred to Berkshire only thirty years ago.

The biggest exception of all was the 300 acres of open strips of scattered former agricultural land in the vicinity of the valuable Saltney Mead at the outfall of the Sulham Brook. This is the only place locally where I have seen otters, though as a continuing link between our two parishes, otters are also reported to have settled on the north bank opposite and now invade our village. Sulham Brook is said to be a remnant of a wide channel through the gap between Sulham and Theale which once linked the Thames to the Kennet. Disturbingly its outfall is rumoured to include a less desirable outflow from Aldermaston.































The 300 acres surrounded Hyde Hall (now Purley Hall) and were once associated with the family of the "low born" Anne Hyde, first wife of James II, though she could have been no more than a distant cousin of the Hyde Hall family. At some date some of the open strips seem to have become parkland for Hyde Hall. It is famous that a later owner, Frances Hawes, was ruined by the collapse of the eighteenth century South Sea Bubble. When the agents of Sarah Duchess of Marlborough came to purchase for her much of the open fields of Whitchurch they did not overlook the 300 acres across the river close to Purley Hall. It is well known that Warren Hastings later lived there and he or his successors even maintained a remarkable menagerie, presumably in part on the Duchess' land. Even so it remained legally part of Whitchurch for many centuries and was not finally transferred to Purley Parish until 1894, apart from a small portion which had become part of Sulham.

This curious historic discrepancy of boundaries has never been fully explained. Whitchurch called a lot of shots as a Royal Manor until 1605. With its large Mill and important quayside it was perhaps the wealthiest place hereabouts, certainly larger than Pangbourne from the Domesday survey onwards. The names Whitchurch Lock and Whitchurch Bridge seem to confirm its greater significance. It also had the benefit of a dry route (the Tuddingway) on the north bank running from Mapledurham towards Wallingford when the southern route (the present A329) was often a boggy quagmire until taken over as a turnpike in the eighteenth century. Of course all access across the river was by boat and maybe a ferry ran from Whitchurch to Saltney Mead as well as to Pangbourne. Those fertile acres on the Purley bank must have compensated for the shortage of lowland meadow on the north side of the river. For the same reason in the twentieth century both Westbury Farm Purley (the Hardwick Estate) and land south of the lock (the Mapledurham Estate) were the property of landowners from across the river but not included in the Oxfordshire parish boundaries.

The most attractive present link between our two parishes is by way of the Thames Path across Pangbourne Meadows, but since a crossing near Mapledurham Lock is not now possible, the beautiful round trip through Hardwick is unavailable.

*Peter Hawley, Whitchurch and Goring Heath History Society, March 2024.*

Key to the map on page 1:

	parish boundary
	county boundary
	church
	roads
	paths or tracks
	line of later railway (1840)
	Whitchurch weir
	Whitchurch lock
	Hartslock Farm
	Beech Farm
	Tinepit pond
	Butler's Farm
	Bozedown (Binditch) hillfort
	Swan pub (Oxon.)
	Copyhold Farm
	Westholme Farm
	Holme's Farm
	Collins End pub
	Hardwick Farm
	Saltney mead (common to Whitchurch, Purley, and Sulham)
	Lower or Home Farm
	site of later St John's Room
	site of later St John's church
	site of later Hatch Gate pub
	site of later Barracks poor houses
	site of later Wesleyan Methodist chapel
	site of later public well
	site of later Sun pub
	site of later Bozedown House
	site of later Bozedown Farm