EDWARD II - ROYAL OAKS AT HARESFIELD AND STANDISH

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Introduction

The adjacent parishes of Haresfield and Standish, which are located south of the city of Gloucester, both have traditions that certain large, old oak trees were planted on the route that the body of Edward II travelled between Berkeley Castle and Gloucester Abbey in 1327. This article looks at the available evidence to support these traditions and how these trees are located in the South Gloucestershire landscape.

Background

Edward II arrived at Berkeley Castle on April 5 1327. By now he was an ex-king, having been persuaded to renounce the throne. On September 21 he was murdered, probably on the orders of Roger Mortimer of Wigmore (Queen Isabella's lover) and on December 20 at Gloucester Abbey was given what amounted to a royal funeral, the chief mourners were his widow the Queen, his son the future Edward III and Roger Mortimer. Most authors give October 21 as the day when Edward's embalmed corpse left Berkeley. It was carried in Abbot Toky (or Thoky)'s personal carriage accompanied by the Abbot, monks and also Lord Berkeley, John Maltravers, and their men at arms[1]

The Route (see fig 1)

The route of the funeral cortege is not known[2] But it is likely that on leaving Berkeley Castle, the cortege would have used the present-day B4066 to meet the A38, the Roman road between Gloucester and Sea Mills, which gives a direct route to Gloucester. One of the important functions of this journey was to show the populace at large that Edward II was dead and thereby strengthen Edward III's legitimacy as future monarch. The image of royalty had been badly tarnished by Edward's enforced abdication, and a sense of royal normality needed to be restored[3] There is a tradition that Edward's body rested overnight in Standish Church, but documentary support for this cannot be found earlier than 1889[4]. But it does not seem unreasonable that a slow-moving cortege would find itself at Putloe, near Standish, as the day came to a close. Standish Lane, leading to the church, remained a rough track for most of its existence. The Arle Brook crosses the lane about a quarter of a mile west of the church, with 500 yards of shared road and stream bed[5]. Standish was owned by the Abbey, and the church and Abbot's lodgings would offer a safe and secure place for the night. The next morning, it would seem logical to resume the journey on the road running past the church, the present-day B4008. Half a mile north, at Little Haresfield, there was a choice. The suggested Route A turns left onto the section of the road thought to have been made in the mid C13th[6] and at the junction of Black Cross Lane (an earlier name for the present day Mount Lane), the cortege would have turned right, passing the church and the Lord of the Manor's dwelling to the south. Then the route turns left onto Haresfield Lane and rejoins the A38 at Four Mile Elm. The alternative would have been to go right and through Haresfield, joining Haresfield Lane, which runs between Brookthorpe and Hardwicke. At the Cross[7] the cortege would have turned left towards the church, there meeting Black Cross Lane, and at the end of the lane, it would have rejoined the B4008, and then be in sight of the A38. Following this suggested route, Route B, would have shown the cortege to most of the village populace.

Dating of the trees

There are well-established methods of age estimation for vulnerable specimen trees that avoid causing damage.[8] It is therefore possible to see if the age of these particular trees lends any support to these traditions. The dating process requires a girth measurement plotted with known growth rates for each species. The girth measurement should be taken at breast height (1.3m or 4'3" above ground level), but it is important that deformities, branch swellings and other irregularities be avoided. So finding the narrowest part of the trunk will give the most accurate results. John White from Westonbirt Arboretum visited the three trees located on Mount Lane in 1993, estimating the latest planting date to be 1370, but suggests that the trees could have been planted as early as 1293.[9] The Fairy Oak lies between Haresfield Court and the church and has recently been measured and given a planting date of about 1350.[10] The Standish trees appear not to have been measured and dated, but would probably fall within the planting dates listed above.

The Mount Lane Oaks (SO 805 109)

There are now only three old trees at the eastern end of the lane. The eastern-most tree is dead, the middle tree has a magnificent trunk which is rather obscured on the road side by elderflower scrub and ivy and the western-most shows signs of rot starting where large branches have been removed. Melland Hall records 'On the North side of this lane (referring to Black

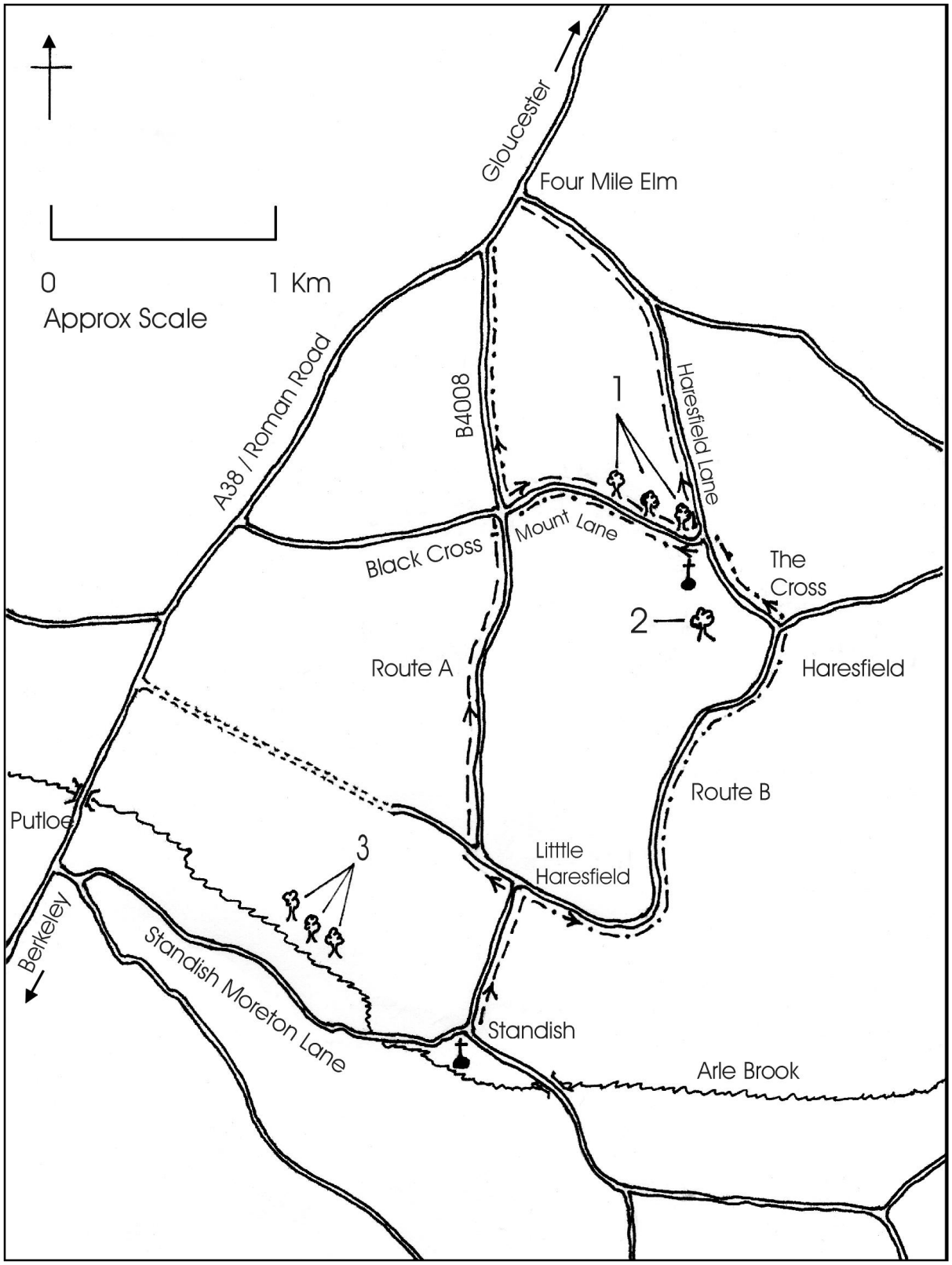


Fig 1: Location of oak trees: 1 = Mount Lane, 2 = Fairy Oak, 3 = Standish.
Route A and Route B: possible routes for Edward II's cortege through Haresfield. Road pattern as shown is prior to the building of Moreton Valence airfield. Other modern features, i.e. railway and M5 motorway not shown.

Cross Lane) stands a row of oaks of great age, probably the remains of an old land boundary.'[11] The first edition of the 25" OS (surveyed 1882) shows Mount Lane to be tree-lined, with 20 trees on the north, and 17 on the south at the eastern end; there are few trees shown on the rest of the lane. What is popularly known as the WI History of Haresfield, states, after a reference to the Domesday Book, 'There is a general belief, in the village, that the old oak trees, which border the North of Black Cross Lane were mentioned too, but we cannot confirm this.'[12] Both sources make the point of referring only to the trees on the north side and also acknowledging their great age. The trees gained official status in 2001 when they were entered on the Gloucestershire County Council's Sites & Monuments Record (SMR21091) as '3 ancient oaks trees at Haresfield'. With no documentary evidence connecting the trees and Edward II, the only other area to investigate is the oral tradition. I spoke to four people with long connections with Haresfield, asking "What can you tell me about the oak trees in Mount Lane?" Only one told me about the Edward II link.[13] The other three had no information about the trees.[14]



Fig 2: Haresfield Mount Lane eastern-most oak tree. (photo by author)

The Standish Oaks (SO 794 088)

When the Revd Alexander Nash took up the living at Standish in 1889, he found floating in the memory of one or two old parishioners the story that 'in some fields just north of the lane leading from Standish to Moreton Valence there are still standing five very ancient oak trees, venerable hollow trunksé these trees are the remnants of an avenue planted to commemorate and mark the road by which the body of Edward IIé the trees still standing do form part of an avenue is an undoubted fact, four on one side and one on the other; and a person standing in this avenue will discover the spire of the church almost exactly in the centre.'[15] Lilley considers the idea a doubtful embellishment 'that the procession, starting Northward again next morning, struck out a new course for itself across the fields to regain the Bristol Road, a course that was afterwards marked, according to the tradition, by a double line of oaks.'[16] The first edition of the 25" OS (surveyed 1879 and 1882) shows four trees in a line with another one to the south of the western-most tree. These would match Nash's description.

In 1953, G M Davies researched the fields on the north side of the Standish-Moreton Valence Lane and found 'three old oak trees with dead tops, in a field directly behind the (Arle) brook, between Standish Moreton Farm and another farmé . called Devonia. Two of these trees are in an open field, the third is in an orchard.'[17]

In November 2007, I walked the footpath from Standish Church to Standish Moreton Farm and found the trees mentioned above. The eastern one is a large hollow oak and at about 80 paces to the west is another oak with a very large trunk. The footpath runs through what is now a derelict orchard where the third oak is. The church spire is just visible over the untrimmed hedges. I could find no trace of a trackway/sunken lane. The tree found in the orchard does not belong to Nash's group of four but is on the same alignment.

The Fairy Oak, Haresfield (SO 809 102)

This is a very large, hollow tree, much reduced by age and pruning, with only about 10% of the cambian bark alive. This is the tree apparently referred to by Oliver Rackham: 'Trees, still extanté The Fairy Oak (Haresfield) supposed to commemorate the foul murder of Edward II nearby in 1327.'[18] Rackham stayed at Haresfield Court with the Heywood family, sometime prior to 1986, and presumably heard about the Mount Lane oaks. He was also told that the Heywood children called the old oak tree between the Court and the church 'the fairy tree'[19]. It appears that Rackham was either told the above in some jumbled form or during an editorial process combined the

information. The children of another village family who passed this tree walking to and from church, called it 'the magic tree'.[20] These are family appellations - the tree does not have a village name. The appeal for children of a tree that you can actually go inside must surely evoke memories of bedtime fairy stories.

Conclusion

The trees at Haresfield are located on a possible route and have planting dates to support a connection but there is no documentary or oral evidence to prove this. The location of the trees at Standish is highly problematic, but with the Standish Lane prone to flooding, could the cortege have been forced onto what is now the footpath between Putloe and Standish, an old track now ploughed out? Although the evidence here is of an earlier date, it still fails to prove the connection with Edward II.

The evidence presented here is really too weak to prove the link between the oak trees and Edward II, particularly as there seems no record of other trees south of Standish having a connection with the possible cortege route. The South Gloucestershire landscape has many magnificent oaks. Why certain ones should be associated with particular historical events is a mystery and will probably remain so. But perhaps there is a clue from the "Fairy Oak" reference. Could these alleged connections be all down to a casual remark repeated and misrepeated often enough to take on the semblance of fact? In other words these so-called traditions should, at best, be relegated to the status of factoids[21].

References

1. MARCHANT G. *Edward II in Gloucestershire*, 14,Privately printed, 2007. (Available from Gloucester Cathedral Shop.)
2. David Smith, answering a question, at a talk he gave at Gloucester Cathedral, 21 September 2007.
3. Ref.1, 15.
4. ELVINGTON C R, and HERBERT N M, *Victoria County History of Gloucestershire*, vol 10, 233. Oxford University Press 1972.
5. LILLEY H T, *A History of Standish*, 52 Charpentier Ltd, 1932.
6. Ref.4, 232
7. POOLEY C, *Notes on the old crosses of Gloucestershire*, 23. London, 1868. Pooley records the remains of a C15th cross. The site is now marked by the Haresfield Millennium Monument.
8. WHITE J. *Estimating the age of large and veteran trees in Britain*. Forestry Commission 1998.
9. The assessment form is held by Mark Heywood, Haresfield Farms Ltd. There is no copy of this assessment form in John White's files now held at Alice Holt Lodge, Dr Richard Jinks, personal communication, 14 March 2008
10. Stephen Dennis, personal communication, 24 July 2008
11. MELLAND HALL J, *Haresfield: Manors and Church*. TBGAS, 29 (1895), 355.
12. WI HARESFIELD, 'Our village within living memory', 1956. Typescript. Glos Archive. SR 642/3371 GS
13. Hubert Matthews, moved into the village in 1934 aged 9, recalls hearing the story at the village school. He added what probably counts as an embellishment, that the original intention was to transport the body up the Severn, but the river was in flood. Personal communication, September 2008
14. "Dinky" Palmer, born 1925, Derek Ryder, born 1932, Len Tomlins, moved into the village 1952, personal communications, September 2008
15. 'Report of the annual spring meeting' TBGAS 32 (1909), 9
16. Ref.5, 227
17. DAVIES G M. 'Royal avenue at Standish' Manuscript (2 pages, 1953-4). Glos Archive RF 281.3 GS. At the bottom of page 2 are the words 'Four photographs', these are not present, but the negatives can be found with DP11/45517(Box 3) in an envelope marked 'Standish Royal Oaks'.
18. RACKHAM O. *The history of the countryside*, 229. Dent 1986.
19. Mark Heywood, personal communication, 11 March 2008
20. The late Iris Tudor, personal communication, 13 March 2008
21. 'Factoid - an unprovable statement which has achieved unquestioning acceptance by frequent repetition' *Chambers Dictionary*, 2001. See also RACKHAM O, *The Illustrated History of the Countryside*, 16 and 17. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003.