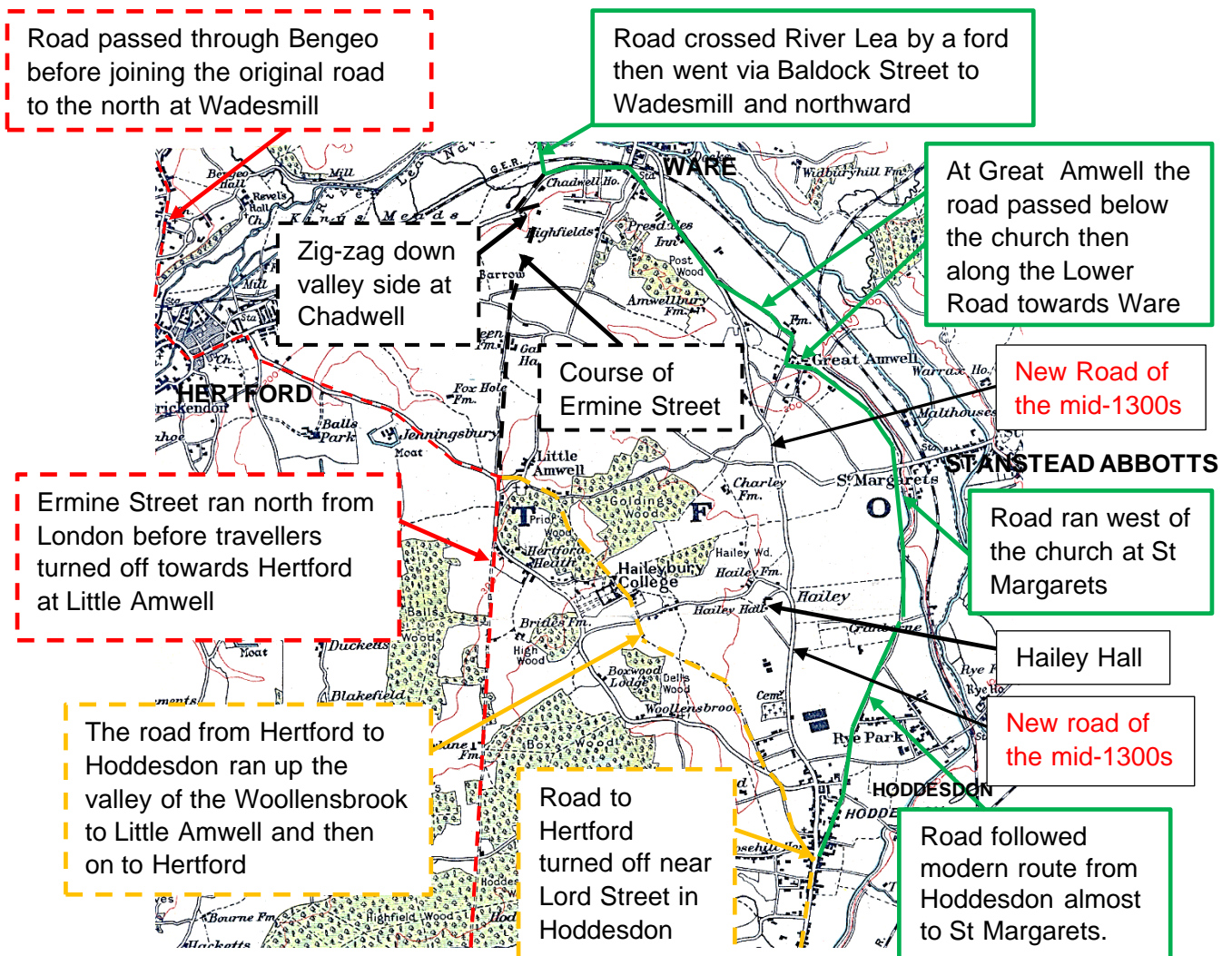


# THE OLD NORTH ROAD THROUGH ST. MARGARETS AND GREAT AMWELL 1066 to 1400

BY  
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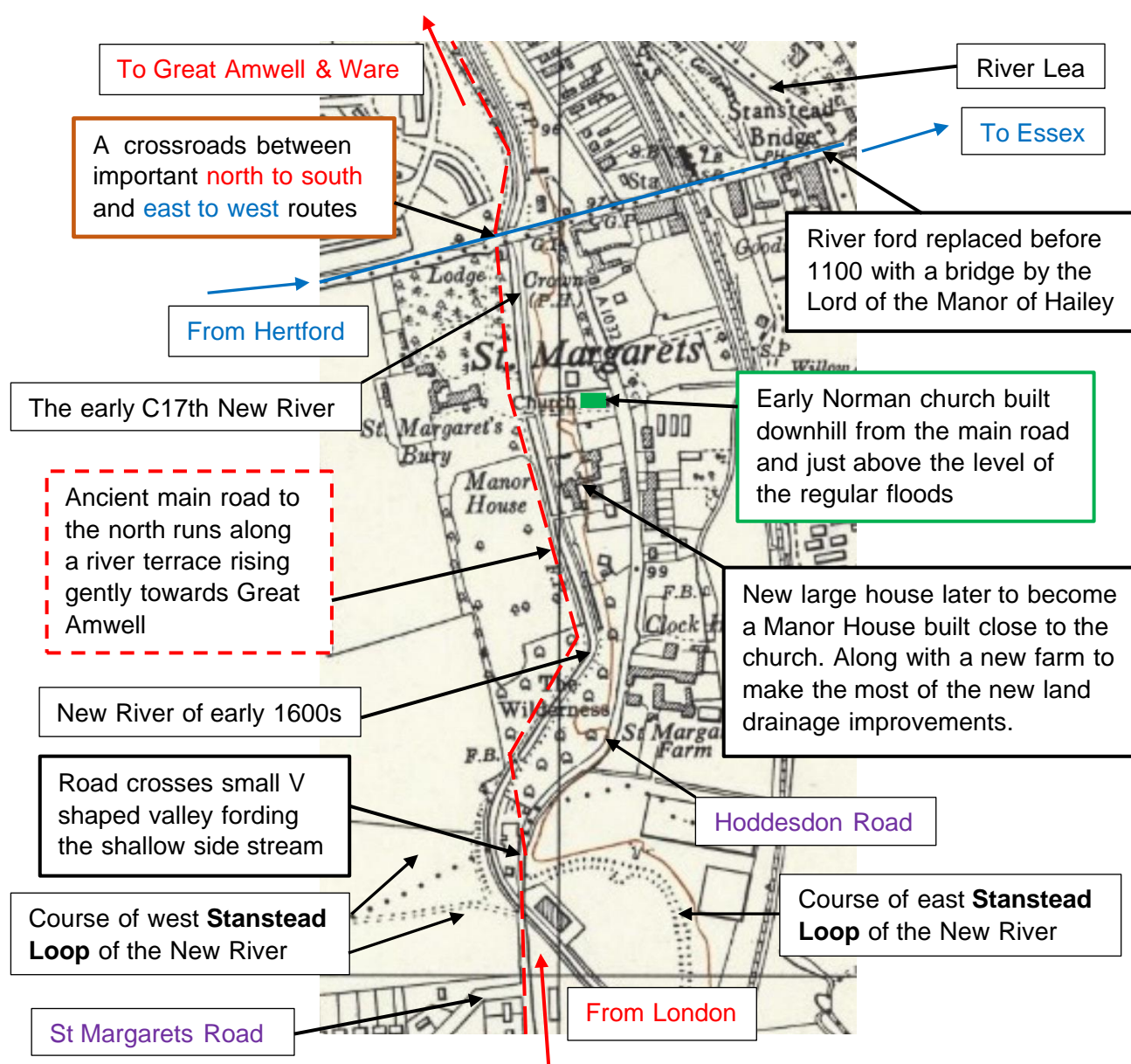
This article explores the changing route of the main road from London to the north as it passed through the parishes of St Margarets and Great Amwell in the C11th to the C15th. It is an historically early route from Shoreditch in London which follows the west side of the Lea Valley on its journey towards Ware and then onwards to the north. In early times it passed close to both where St Margarets and Great Amwell churches were later to be built. The Romans constructed one of their main roads to the north known as Ermine Street soon after their invasion in 43 AD. It passed some 2 miles to the west of Stanstead Abbots, following a direct route from London through higher ground to ford the river at Ware, which the Romans supplemented with a bridge. Once the Romans had left in the early 400s both roads remained in use but Hertford tended to be the place where the River Lea was crossed by long distance travellers rather than at Ware. This occurred after the Roman bridge at Ware failed and the ford at Hertford became a more reliable crossing point. The ford at Ware being subject to periodic greater flows of water, particularly after heavy rain, making it too deep and fast flowing to cross safely. The map below shows the main roads in early Norman times when the Royal Borough of Hertford was considerably more important than the neighbouring settlement of Ware.

## LONG-DISTANCE ROADS IN THE LATE C11<sup>th</sup>



The main roads as shown in the map above appear to have been in use for many centuries before the Norman invasion. As for Stanstead Abbots it had grown into a market town based on the products of its agricultural hinterland to the north and its road and river connections to London. Great Amwell had been a pre-roman Belgic settlement of some note, located above the later church, with impressive earthworks more for show perhaps than for defence. The settlement we know today as St Margarets had not existed with the location being an undeveloped part of the Manor of Hailey. Towards the end of the C11<sup>th</sup> Stanstead Abbots was in the hands of the De Wancy family who were in considerable financial difficulties with probably little money to spend on improving the manor of Stanstead. By 1100 the manor of Stanstead had been transferred into the hands of the Cannons of Waltham whose many properties were seen as sources of income rather than places to be nurtured. In contrast, the Manor of Hailey had acquired a new Lord of the Manor one Roger De Burun. He and his descendants saw their land close by the river ford, three quarters of a mile to the north east of their manor house, as an area for future development. By the year 1100 Roger De Burun had built a large house, a farm and church at the base of the valley side, all just above the regular flood level, as well as a bridge across the Lea to replace the ford. For a century or so this new small settlement was to be close to a secondary main road from London to the north where it crossed the east to west route that connected Hertfordshire to Essex.

### THE EARLY NORTH ROAD THROUGH ST MARGARETS c1100





## THE OLD ROAD THROUGH ST MARGARETS

On the map above the road from London is first shown as it passes the bottom of today's St Margarets Road. The old north road went straight ahead and did not veer away downhill to the right as it does today. A traveller in the late C11th would have descended into a small side valley and crossed a shallow ford before climbing back up the opposite side. The road then ran along a valley side ledge provided by a river terrace which was just above and to the west of today's New River. The line of the road northwards is not obvious to the observer today as the valley side was altered when the New River was built in the early 1600s along with later changes related to quarrying and the landscaping of the gardens at St. Margaretsbury. Later still the C19th removal of the New River's 'Stanstead Loops' required a considerable re-shaping of the land in the vicinity of what is now the area surrounding the New River Pumping Station near the bottom of St Margarets Road. Further on the old road passed to the west of the St Margarets church and considerably higher up on the valley side.

The modern Hoddesdon Road which replaced this lost section of the old road runs near the base of the valley side close to the edge of the flood plain and just above the height of the deepest historical floods. It passes the church unusually close to the chancel end of the church in the narrow gap between the church and the lower level of the flood plain. The actual build date of this new road is not known with any certainty; however, we can be sure that it must have been constructed no later than 1609-10, when this section of the New River was constructed. The next place the line of the old road can be seen today with any clarity is where it once formed a crossroads with the Hertford Road.



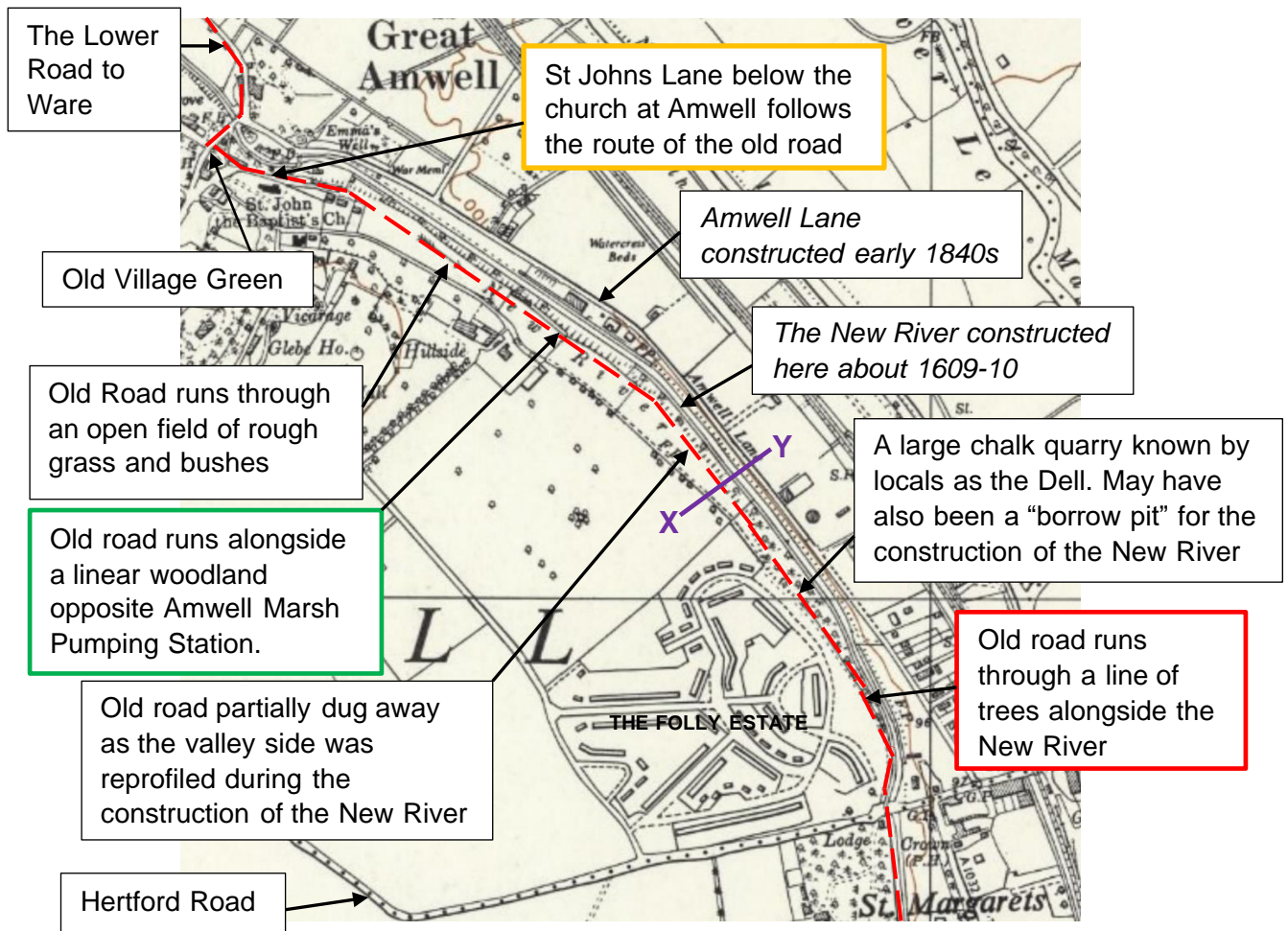
*The above picture was taken from the entrance to St Margaretsbury and shows the ancient location of the crossroads between the Old North Road and the Hertford Road. The pedestrian entrance to the Folly Residential Estate, on the opposite side of the Hertford Road, follows the route of the old road for a short distance. The old road continued straight on towards Amwell.*

*It is not known exactly when Roger De Burun took possession of the Manor of Hailey which was in the overlordship of the crown. It may be that the building of a bridge over the river Lea and the development of the unused land within the manor was part of the agreement by which he was granted the manor. For Roger De Burun the location down by the river may have seemed to offer the opportunity to develop river trade with London and in a much smaller way mirror the success that Stanstead on the other side of the river had achieved in the previous 150 years of years or so.*

*The Norman Kings were particularly keen to ensure new infrastructure was built [particularly building new bridges across the Lea] and more generally the bringing of waste land into economically productive use, so included suitable clauses into agreements for new occupants of estates. [A later local example of this practice was the well documented grant of the Rye to Andrew Ogard in the 1440s, during the reign of Henry VI.]*



## THE OLD NORTH ROAD FROM ST MARGARETS TO GREAT AMWELL c1100



For X to Y cross section see page 5 below. Coloured boxes match colours around pictures below.



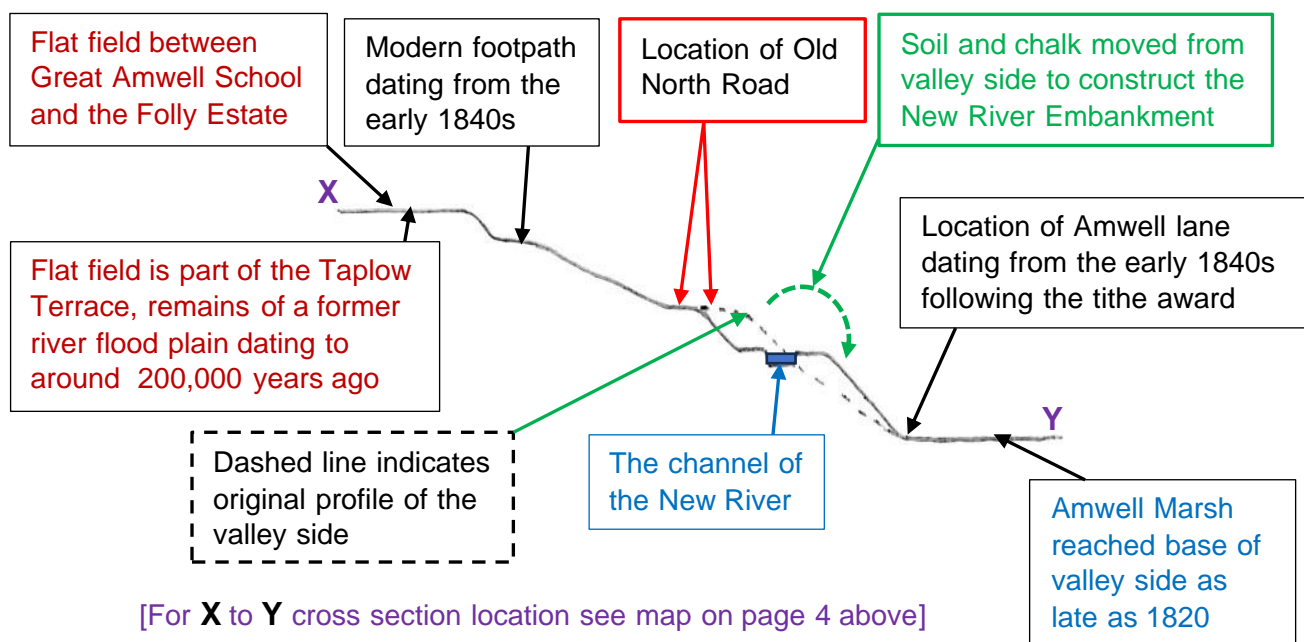
Beyond the crossroads of the Hertford Road and the Old North Road is a pedestrian entrance to the Folly Estate.

The old road can be traced today northwards from the Hertford Road among a line of trees that runs alongside and slightly elevated above the New River. Mature trees now grow up through the old road surface but it is possible to walk along the old route although an alternative footpath runs parallel just to the west of the trees. Local oral history tells us that this was a roadway to the old abandoned chalk pit that can be found some distance along this route from the Hertford Road. Before reaching the old quarry a large rectangular raised area of land can be found which is clearly man made. This has the appearance of having served as a flat area for some past industrial activity.

Further on the land upon which the old road ran has been excavated away to form a large quarry, known locally as the “Dell.” This would have seen the removal of a large amount of chalk with an overburden of sands and gravels. This chalk pit has been abandoned long enough for trees on the floor of the quarried area to reach the end of their lives, die off and topple over. This has prompted the local authority to cut down those trees considered to be a risk to the public who have open access to the site. It is possible that the quarry went out of use about the time the New River was built some 400 years ago which would fit in well with the loss of mature trees through old age over the last 50 years. If this is so the last use of this quarry was about 1609 close to the start of the construction of this section of the New River. With the absence of documentary evidence, the date of the working of this chalk pit remains uncertain in any case the earlier start of the excavation of the quarry removed a section of the old road ending its possible use as part of a through route as it once had been.

Beyond the chalk pit the old road once ran along the flat ledge of a river terrace in a field which now lies beyond the Folly Estate. Much of the line of the road was lost when the valley side was dug away during the construction of the New River. The excavation being required to form a sufficiently wide flat ledge to provide room for the channel of the New River and the maintenance trackways on either side.

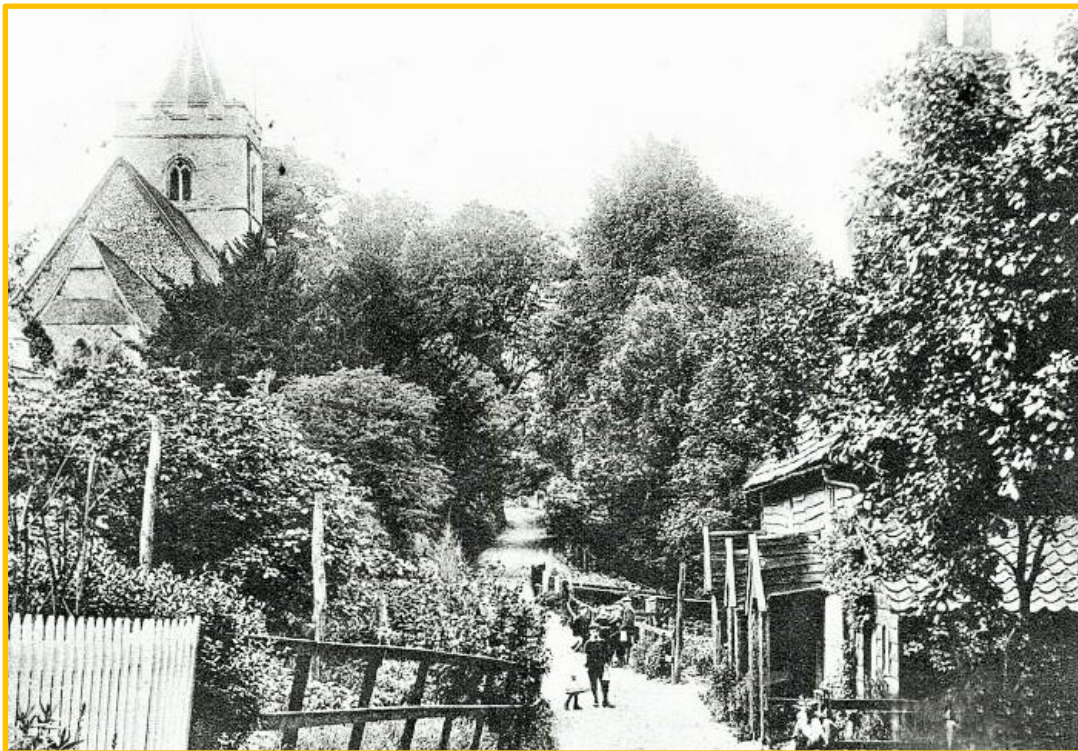
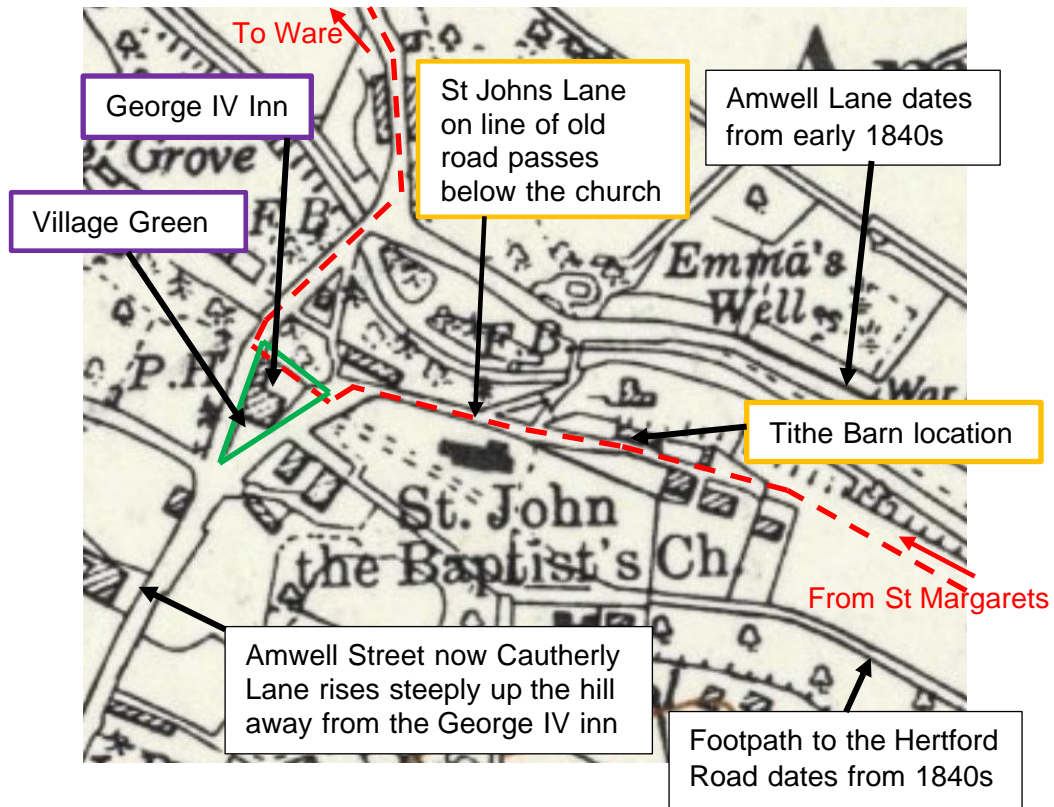
#### CROSS SECTION OF VALLEY SIDE IN FIELD BEYOND THE DELL



At the far end of the field the road ran along the top of a tree covered slope with Amwell marsh Pumping station below and on the opposite side of the New River. The field was grazed by dairy cattle until the 1970s, since when nature has taken its course with bushes and small elder trees invading the grassland. That is except where the old road used to run, as can be seen in this picture. Looking through the trees to the right, down onto the pumping station roof, shows how much the old road had climbed in altitude since it crossed the Hertford Road. In the mid distance ahead, a hedge crosses the old line of the road and beyond is a long narrow stretch of private land which rises gradually towards Amwell Church.



## THE OLD NORTH ROAD NEAR GREAT AMWELL CHURCH



*The picture above taken about 1900, shows St John's Lane as it passes below the church at Amwell.*

*The road here had probably changed little from the dirt road of previous centuries.*

*To the right can be seen a row of 3 cottages built on the site of the ancient tithe barn in the early 1800s  
In the distance the road is seen to rise towards what is now the George IV inn and was once the village green of Great Amwell village.*



## THE OLD NORTH ROAD AND THE VILLAGE GREEN AT GREAT AMWELL



Picture notes;-

*Top Left: A view from St Johns Lane with the George IV Inn to the right of the picture.*

*Top Right : A view from behind the George IV inn. The old north road once ran just beyond the wooden fence seen at the rear of the Inn.*

*Bottom Left: A view looking at the front of the George IV inn which was built on the widest part of the old village green. Cautherly Lane rises on the left and St John's Lane comes up the slope to meet it on the right. [The ancient Village Green was mentioned in the early 1600s by Rev Hassall, vicar of Amwell 1600 to 1657]*

Cautherly Lane has been cut down into the valley side where it passes the inn to reduce the earlier steep gradient and was originally level with the ground on which the inn was built. The George IV stands on what would have been the widest part of the triangular green. The village green once ran from behind the inn to near where the road markings meet close to the camera. Travellers would have faced a rather steep hill down to the bottom of the valley before following the Lower Road to the town of Ware. Cautherly Lane continues to rise steeply for some distance away from the George IV. This road was once called Amwell Street and formed the main street of Great Amwell. *[This is not to be confused with the Amwell Street in modern Hoddesdon which only acquired this name in more recent times.]* The original village centre was lost during a process of gentrification which occurred in this part of Great Amwell in the 1700s.

The route of the old north road remained a secondary choice for long distance travellers who continued to prefer the Roman Road and the route through Hertford for most of the 1100s. However, changes taking place in Ware were to make the route through St Margarets and Great Amwell the preferred main road to the north from London once again. The key to this was the construction of a new main street with two large market places and a river bridge at the eastern end of the town of Ware in about 1188-90. The person who oversaw this development in Ware was Petronilla de Grandmesnil who is known to have lived in Ware before her husband the Earl of Leicester died in 1190. She came into possession of the Ware estate herself on her son's death in 1204. She then became the first resident owner of Ware Manor since the Norman invasion of 1066. The work she started was, following her own death in 1212, continued by her descendants in the de Quincy and Wake families. They recognised that the location of Ware at the head of reliable navigation and the redirection of the main North Road traffic through the town created the potential for considerable commercial growth. The merchants at Hertford were very concerned by the changes at Ware and, supported it seems by the Warden of the Royal Castle at Hertford, broke down the bridge at Ware as early as 1191. Petronilla was not hindered for long by their intervention and the bridge was soon rebuilt. Similar trouble at the bridge was to occur again in 1217 and even later in 1258. In the end the economic advantages of Ware's location allied to the affluent and influential descendants of Petronilla saw Ware grow at the expense of Hertford and the now busier and preferred road north passed close to the churches at St Margarets and Great Amwell.







*A modern view of the junction between the lower road on the right and the new main road that later became known as the A10. The original junction of the two roads was close to where the furthest lamp standard seen in the picture is located. The New River can be seen to the right and has run side by side with the road from the town of Ware to Amwell Hill for the last 400 years or so.*

Sometime in the mid-1300s this new road was brought into use but a lack of documentation makes it difficult to exactly date the opening of the new road as the first reference to it does not appear until 1374. At that date the old road passing close to St Margarets church is referred to as “Le Elde Streete” and the new road, passing close to Hailey Manor House, was called “Via regia versus Wayre” [*The Royal Road to Ware*]. The new road is much straighter and somewhat shorter than the old route. It also avoided the rather steep hill down the valley side in Great Amwell and bypassed the section of the old route that was liable to flood on the Ware side of Amwell church. The opening of the new road left the settlements around the churches at St Margarets and Great Amwell isolated from the passing long-distance traffic. The Goldington family, descendants of the De Buruns, now saw the main road moved away from their new settlement down by the river and instead pass close to their manor house at Hailey. Their small settlement around the church, left in relative tranquillity, was to grow only slowly in the following centuries. The Goldington family, descendants of the De Buruns, were to sell both the manors of St Margarets and Hailey to Andrew Ogard owner of the Rye House estate in 1423.

The question arises as to who was responsible for the creation of the “Via regia versus Wayre” sometime in the mid-1300s. As a small section of one of the four Royal Roads of England the redirection of the road between Hoddesdon and Ware was of national as well as local importance. Therefore, it would have required well regarded people with national influence and a local interest in the road to promote its improvement. One such person that comes to mind was Joan of Kent sometimes known as The Fair Lady of Kent. She was descended from the Wake family and through this inherited the Manor of Ware, becoming the Lady of the Manor in 1352. Her wider importance can be assessed by noting that by 1377 she had amassed the following titles; Baroness Wake, Countess of Kent, Princess of Wales and Mother of the King [*Richard II*]. Although she did not live in Ware, she regarded it as her most important holding and supported the town in many ways. This included the considerable rebuilding of the church of St Mary’s, a lengthy task completed by her eldest son Robert following her death in 1385. There can be little doubt that she would have at least encouraged the improvement of the road from Hoddesdon to Ware as her Manor of Ware was to particularly benefit from the improvement of this section of the Old North Road. The road undoubtedly contributing, along with other factors, to the considerable economic growth of Ware that occurred in the following centuries.

As for Stanstead Abbots the route to Hoddesdon still ran along the ancient road running above and to the west of St Margarets Church leading to Hoddesdon and on to London as before. This route may have lasted for over 200 years longer before the road was altered to run along the line of the current Hoddesdon Road passing at a lower level close to the east end of the church. The closest to Stanstead Abbots the redirected Old North Road ran was at Amwell Cross roads known historically as Four Went Ways. The road to London remained very important for the transport of goods to London from Stanstead Abbots and Ware for centuries, despite repeated improvements to the navigation channel of the Lea.