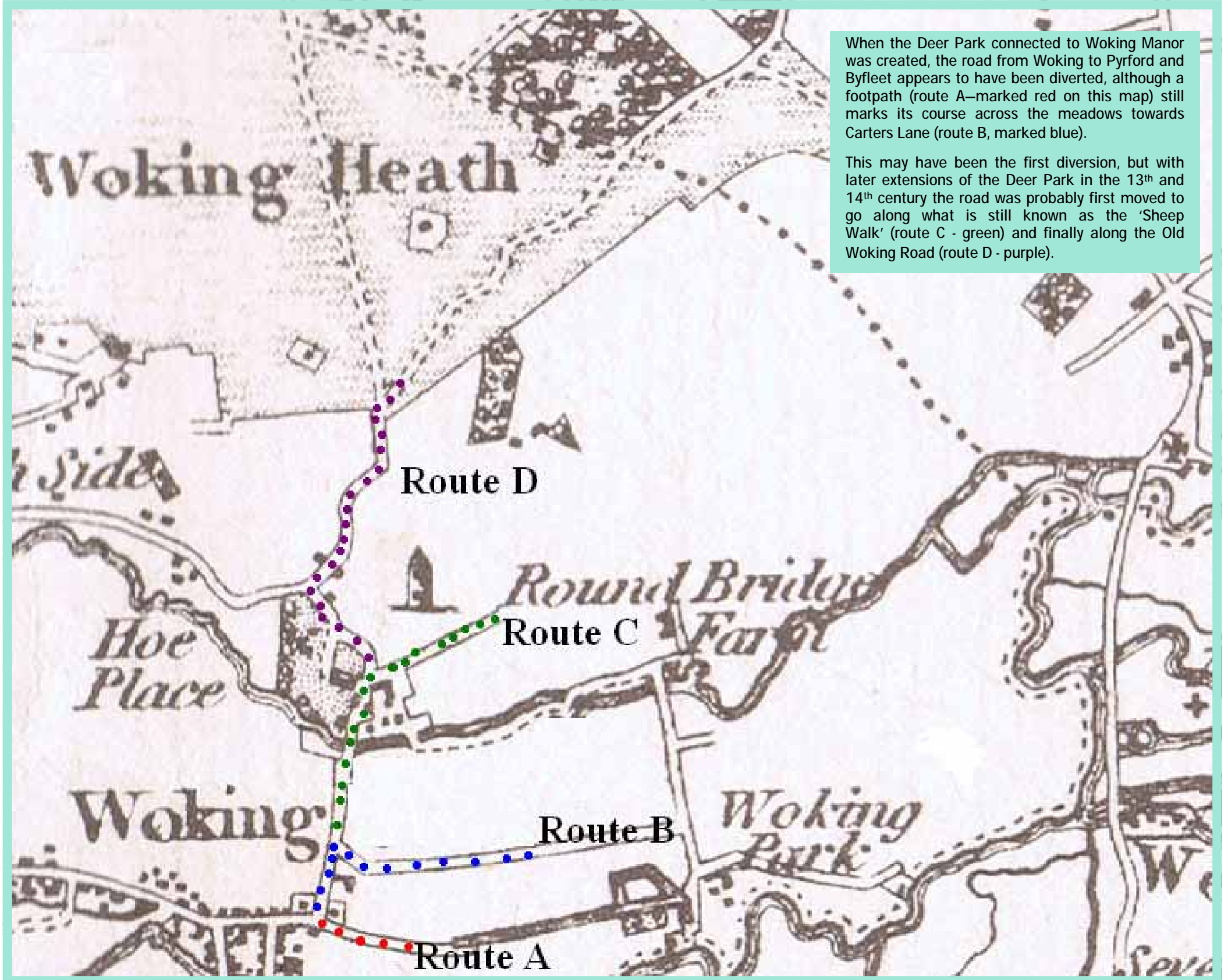


WHAT'S IN A NAME – HOW ABOUT 'ROYAL WOKING BASSETT'

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When the new town of Woking sprung up around the station in the late 19th century there was much debate about what the old town of Woking, down by the River Wey, should be called. Some referred to it as 'Woking Village' (although technically it was still the town) but in the end 'Old Woking' was settled upon, even though some at the time thought that the 'Old' made the area sound out-dated or even decrepit. But with a little imagination and knowledge of local history, they could have come up with something far more interesting. How does 'Woking Bassett' or even 'Royal Woking Bassett' sound?



The Wiltshire town of Royal Wootton Bassett (and Compton Bassett, Winterbourne Bassett and just about any other 'Bassett' in the country) like Woking, was owned in the late 12th and early 13th centuries by the Bassett Family. They came originally it seems from Wycombe in Buckinghamshire, but went on to own numerous manorial estates throughout the country.

Arthur Locke writing his articles on Woking Past in the 1930's claimed that Alan Basset, who was granted the Manor of Woking by Richard I in about 1189, was 'an upstart – whom Henry I had raised out of the dust and over the heads of the Barons'. It would seem that he was not universally liked, although what the ordinary people of Woking thought of him we do not know.

The grant to Alan Bassett was later confirmed by King John, and in 1215 when the King

signed (or sealed) Magna Carta at nearby Runnymede, Bassett was one of the knights present at the ceremony.

Alan Bassett appears to have added to his manorial holdings in this area by buying or swapping land, a practice that was continued by his sons, Gilbert (who inherited Woking in 1233), Fulk (who took over in 1242) and Philip who inherited his estates in 1259.

It was Gilbert who first created the deer park at Woking, but it was probably Fulk who diverted the main road from Woking to Pyrford & Byfleet when he extended the park into what had been the 'Lammas Lands' of Woking (marked on later maps as 'towne lawne'). He swapped them for land in the Broadmeads (actually in Send) for the tenants to use after Lammas Day (1st August).

Phillip Basset was a loyal servant of the King

and in 1261 replaced Hugh le Despenser as the Justiciar (the Medieval equivalent of 'Prime Minister'), before Despenser went off to support Simon de Montfort (Earl of Leicester) in the First Barons War. Philip was captured with the King and his son, Prince Edward, at the First Battle of Lewes in May 1264, but evidently escaped and defeated de Montfort at Evesham in 1265.

It is possible that Woking was caught up in the fighting, or at least paid heavily for the high profile role its lord played in the war, as when Philip died in 1272 the manor house at Sutton was worth just one shilling and the buildings at Woking were apparently worthless.

The Manor then passed to his daughter, Aliva - who perhaps ironically had been married to Hugh le Despenser, whom her father had replaced as Justiciar and fought against just a few years previously.



The Broadmeads - Medieval Tournament Ground?

When Gilbert inherited Woking in 1233 he apparently failed to pay his 'relief' (a sort of inheritance tax) and according to Locke, Henry III 'directed the local sheriff to seize the corn growing in the fields at Woking and sell it'.

Soon after this, Gilbert is said to have enclosed the Little Park at Woking without obtaining the necessary royal licence. This time, Henry sent the Constable of Windsor to pull down the palings, but by 1236 the king had apparently relented and it is said that 'he even sent Gilbert fifteen doe's to help stock the little park'.

If all the stories are true, Gilbert was obviously quite a character. Locke recounts another story.

'Tradition says there was a bridge across the Wey leading into a tilting ground in the Broadmead' (seen here from the roof of St Peter's Church). Apparently 'Gilbert was fond of tilting but when in 1241 he got up a tournament between English and foreigners at Guildford, which might have started a war, Henry sent the Prior of Newark and the Abbot of Waverley to stop it'.

Poor Henry III must have been sorely tried. When Gilbert was thrown from his horse and killed whilst out hunting in 1242, the king may well have given a large sigh of relief!



Runnymede - Birthplace of Democracy?



It was in another local meadow called Runnymede, below Coopers Hill between Egham and Windsor, that King John signed (or sealed) what has become over the years regarded as one of this country's greatest documents. Amongst other things it sought to prevent the king from exploiting his power in arbitrary ways and it made clear that the king was subject to the law of the land, not above it

One of the clauses of the Charter of Liberties

(as it was originally known) dealt with the law of the forest, but when it was confirmed in 1217 those items were taken out to form the shorter 'Charter of the Forest' leaving the larger charter to be known as The Great Charter (or Magna Carta).

Alan Bassett (and presumably some of his tenants in Woking), would have been very interested in the lines restricting Forest Law as this area was within the Royal Windsor Forest causing all sorts of problems for

landlord and tenants alike. The King's deer were all important – they could roam where they liked, eat your crops, disturb your land, and there was nothing you could do about it. If you killed one (either by accident or by poaching) the punishment was death, and even enclosing or clearing land in the King's forest was difficult. Any restriction to the Forest Laws would have been welcomed. It is no surprise, therefore, that Alan Bassett was one of the knights present at Runnymede when King John put his seal on the charter.