

Outside Sutton Park: a walk around the boundary of the medieval deer park

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Sutton Park probably originated as a royal park, created by Henry I.¹ It is first mentioned when the manor of Sutton was given by Henry I to Roger, Earl of Warwick, in exchange for land in Rutland.² The document does not give a specific year, but it must date from sometime between Roger's inheritance of the earldom in 1119 and Henry I's death in 1135.³

The medieval Sutton Park was a private deer park, owned by the lord of the manor. Its purpose was to contain deer for hunting and to provide venison, so it was effectively a live larder. In the Middle Ages, venison was a meat that could not be bought; you owned it (by virtue of owning the park within which the deer were kept), you were given it, or you stole it (by poaching the deer), so a deer park was a sign of status – the medieval period was as much a time of status symbols as our own times. The boundary of the deer park consisted of a ditch and a bank with a fence on top of it, which together created a barrier too high and wide for deer to jump over. The ditch, and bank in some places, can still be seen along the present northern, western, and south-western boundaries of Sutton Park as it is now (along Streetly Lane, Thornhill Road and Chester Road North respectively). This line is indicated by a fence symbol on a map of 1725.⁴ The deer park originally extended further east, up to the town centre and Lichfield Road, and further south, beyond Monmouth Drive (land was taken out of it from the 16th century onwards), resulting in a total area of about 1250 ha (3100 acres) and a perimeter of nearly 12 km (about 7.5 miles).⁵

Like many other deer parks, Sutton Park was roughly circular because that shape encloses the maximum possible area for the minimum perimeter, but it is not a smooth curve. It is actually a many-sided polygon formed of straight lines which join at obtuse angles where the boundary changes direction, at changes in slopes, perceived on the ground as locally high or low points. The boundary was carefully laid out to include the heads of streams and dry valleys, which are particularly clear on lidar images. Beaters would have driven deer along the valleys to archers who shot them, in the hunting process known as “bow and stable”.⁶ The boundary would also have protected the water supply to fishponds and mill pools. On the north, west and south sides the boundary was laid out across open heathland, in which streams, valleys and high points would have been landmarks, but on the south-west and east it was constrained and determined by existing roads.

Where they form the present boundary of Sutton Park, the medieval ditch and bank are clear in places, but it is difficult to follow their entire length. Indeed, the trees and other vegetation that obscure it contribute to its preservation. The best way to appreciate how the boundary was laid

¹ M Hodder (2013), *The Archaeology of Sutton Park* (Stroud: The History Press), 97

² W Dugdale (1656), *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (London), 663

<https://archive.org/details/antiquitiesofwar00dugd/>

³ Thanks to Dr Andrew Watkins for this information. Agnes Bracken wrongly dated the document to 1125-26, in her *History of the Forest and Chase of Sutton Coldfield* (1860), 28, and others (including me) followed her

⁴ W Dugdale (1730), *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (London), 886-887

⁵ Hodder, *Archaeology of Sutton Park*, Chapter 3 and fig 36; I Trueman, M Poulton, M Hodder, L Large, S Hancock and S Phibbs (2023), *The Flora of Sutton Park* (Newbury: Pisces Publications), 101-107 and fig 3.5; I have also described the boundary and its layout in several talks to various organisations over the past few years, including the Sutton Coldfield Archaeological Society in October 2024

⁶ Hodder, *Archaeology of Sutton Park*, 13, fig 2, 98; 76, fig 36; 106-107; Trueman et al, *The Flora of Sutton Park*, 103, 105, fig 3.5

out is by walking around the outside of the Park, along the roads which now follow it,⁷ and occasionally glimpsing the boundary ditch inside the park fence. You can also trace the original extent of the deer park to the east and south (fig 1).

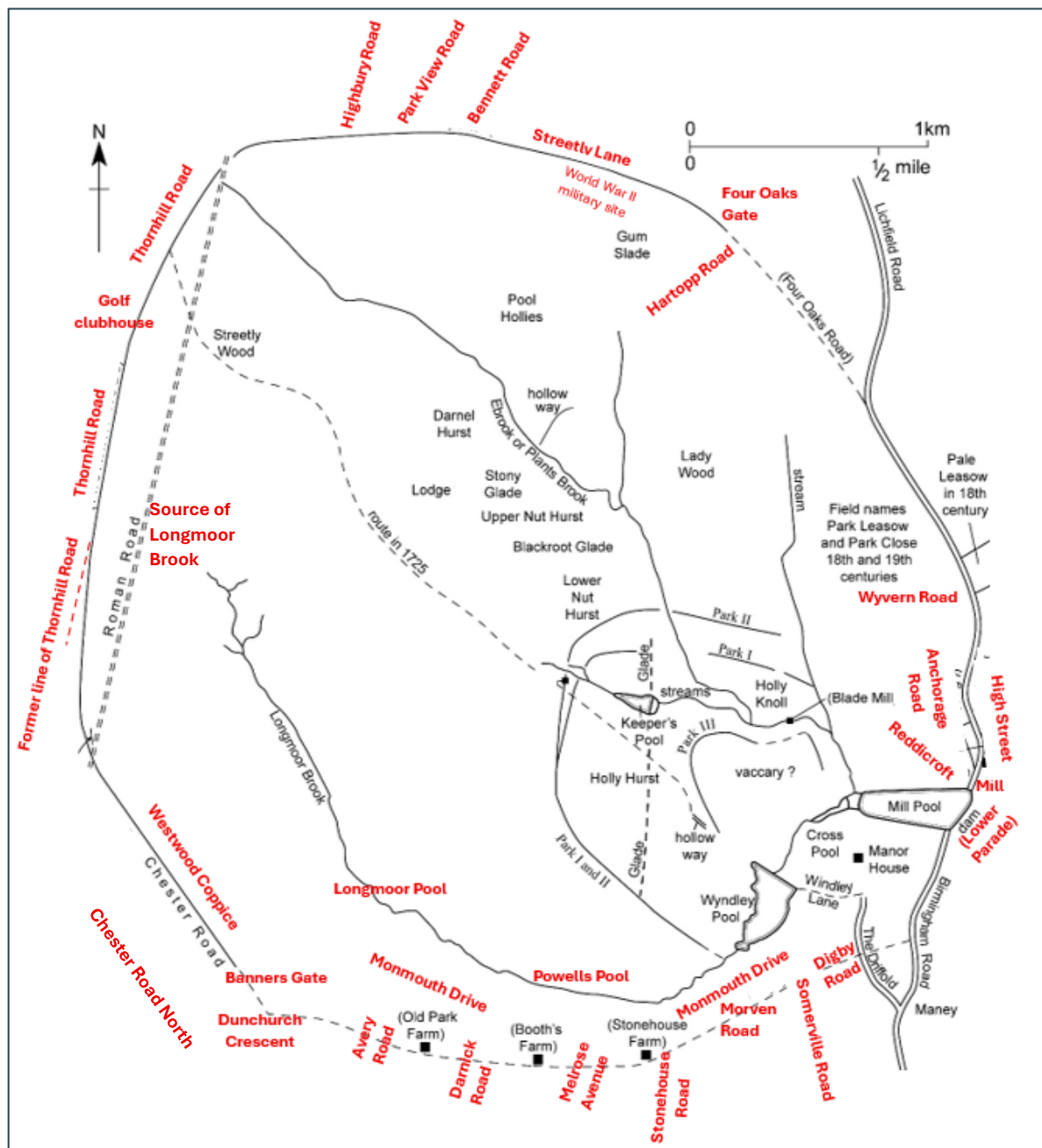


Fig 1: The medieval Sutton Park, showing locations around the boundary mentioned in the text. Adapted from M Hodder, *The Archaeology of Sutton Park*, fig.36. Copyright Mike Hodder

The people who laid out and constructed the boundary did not have access to aerial photographs, lidar images, detailed maps, or equipment to survey and measure large distances,

⁷ Streetly Lane and Thornhill Road were created following enclosure of common land around the Park in the late 18th and early 19th century, but they may have followed an existing 'freeboard'. This was a narrow strip of land around a park which provided access to the boundary for maintenance and repair and facilitated capture of escaped deer and poachers (J Fletcher, 2011, *Gardens of Earthly Delight. The history of deer parks* (Oxford: Windgather Press), 146-148)

but they had a practical appreciation of the landscape and a keen feel for topography. They saw the land from head height, horseback, standing in a cart, or occasionally from up a tree (although much of the boundary line ran through what would have been relatively treeless heathland). Where the route runs near the town, they might have been able to view it from the roof or upper floor of a building, but along much of the boundary there were no buildings at the time it was constructed.

We don't know which way round the boundary was laid out, but we'll walk anticlockwise. To get to Sutton Park from the town centre now, you have to walk down Park Road to Town Gate, which has been the main entrance to the Park since the 19th century, when Meadow Platt was included in it.⁸ Before that, the boundary ran near the Visitor Centre and Browns (Park House, formerly Blade Mill),⁹ but the medieval park extended right up to the town centre, which is where we'll start our walk. Lower Parade was the dam of a mill pool which extended across what is now Gracechurch Centre, across Brassington Avenue and up to Clifton Road; McDonalds is close to the site of the mill itself. There was a water mill in Sutton by the 12th century.¹⁰ The dam formed one boundary of the deer park: the 16th-century antiquary John Leland says that the mill pool was within the deer park, along with Bracebridge, Keepers, Wyndley, and Cross Pool.¹¹

As it went up the hill from the mill, the boundary could have run along Mill Street, High Street and Lichfield Road, or alternatively along Reddicroft (behind the Gate Inn), over Railway Road, across King Edward Square and then along Anchorage Road¹² which runs along a ridge. To its west the ground slopes down to one of the streams included in the deer park, and to the east it slopes down to High Street. In either case, it would have run along the back of house plots, as in Birmingham city centre where a deer park just north of Digbeth included what is now Selfridges and its multistorey car park.¹³ Whichever of these lines is correct, the boundary continued north along Lichfield Road. On the left, Wyvern Road occupies a group of fields which are marked on a map of 1765 with a 'park' element in their names, showing that they were originally within the park, and fields named 'pale', i.e. park boundary, on the other side of the main road on a map of similar date.¹⁴ This land may have been taken out of the park in the provision for enclosure of up to 60 acres of 'waste' in the 1528 charter.¹⁵ The fields named Park Leasowe are mentioned in documents between 1635 and 1642.¹⁶ Where Lichfield Road now bends to the right to join the present Four Oaks Road at the Methodist church, the deer park boundary would have run along

⁸ N Evans (1989), 'Seeking signs of former times in Sutton Park', in R Lea ed, *Scenes from Sutton's Past*, 35-40 (Sutton Coldfield: Westwood Press)

⁹ *A Plan and Admeasurement of Sutton Park within the Parish of Sutton Coldfield and Counties of Warwick and Stafford. Taken in the year 1779*. Library of Birmingham, Wolfson Centre for Archival Research, Sutton Coldfield Map Collection Drawer 10, No. 114

¹⁰ Dugdale, *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, 663

¹¹ L Toulmin Smith (ed) (1964), *Leland's Itinerary in England and Wales in or about the years 1535-43*, Volume 2, 97 (London: Centaur Press). Cross Pool is probably the same as Middle Pool, which documentary sources show was north of Wyndley Pool

¹² Anchorage Road was created in 1870 on the line of a footpath (J Lillywhite (1989), 'The Anchorage Road estate: late 19th century residential development in Sutton Coldfield', in R Lea ed, *Scenes from Sutton's Past*, 121-32. Sutton Coldfield: Westwood Press)

¹³ M Hodder, *Birmingham: the hidden history* (Tempus 2004/ The History Press 2011), 89-91 and fig 46

¹⁴ Maps by John Snape: Library of Birmingham, Wolfson Centre for Archival Research, MS 20/431 A& B

¹⁵ *The Charters of the Royal Town and Borough of Sutton Coldfield.....*(Sutton Coldfield Borough Council, 1935), 19

¹⁶ J Jordan and K Osbourne (2026), *Sutton Coldfield Rental 1635-1642*

<https://sclhrg.org.uk/research/research-tools/3347-corporation-rentals-1635-1642-transcription.html>

the original line of Four Oaks Road (which was slightly diverted to the east between here and the present Hartopp Road in 1823 to put it out of sight of Four Oaks Hall).¹⁷ The deer park boundary would have changed direction at a high point just north-west of the junction. The land now forming Four Oaks estate, which was taken out of the Park in two parts, in 1756 and 1827,¹⁸ contains the line of a stream (now largely invisible) flowing north-south in one of the valleys that was originally included in the deer park.

The boundary next changes direction at the north-east corner of the Park, a point where the ground falls away to the north-west along Walsall Road and to the north-east along Belwell Lane (near to the highest point in Sutton Park, just west of the car park at Four Oaks Gate). The white building at the corner is on the site of a keeper's lodge just inside the Park on Four Oaks Road is marked on the 1779 map.¹⁹ It was probably the successor of a medieval lodge near Darnel Hurst which was shown by excavation to have been occupied into the early 17th century.²⁰ The land attached to the lodge, to its south-east and north-west, was taken out of the park. It is now occupied by houses and Burcot Court.

For about 100m the present park boundary along Streetly Lane does not follow the original boundary. In 2021, I was pleasantly surprised to find this surviving as a bank and ditch in woodland just inside the park (fig 2).²¹ The present park boundary was created when Four Oaks Common was enclosed, and the present road system was established.²²



Fig 2: The one-metre-long scale rod stands alongside the medieval park boundary bank which is now just inside the present fence. Copyright Mike Hodder

The boundary then follows Streetly Lane, which dips slightly into the top of Gum Slade (fig 3), one of the valleys incorporated in the deer park. It is dry in its upper reaches, but a stream that flows along its southern part joins the Ebrook near Blackroot Pool. The park boundary ditch is visible just inside the pedestrian gate off Streetly Lane at the top of Gum Slade (fig 4). The boundary runs west from Gum Slade and it changes direction at a high point near the entrance to a Second World War military establishment²³ and again at another high point near Bennett

¹⁷ <https://sclhrg.org.uk/history-spot/111-articles-401-440/1823-four-oaks-2-409.htm>

¹⁸ Bracken, *History of the Forest and Chase*, 92–3

¹⁹ *A Plan and Admeasurement of Sutton Park*

²⁰ R White, M Hodder, H Chapman, H Reynolds and D Smith (2022), 'Birmingham, Sutton Park, medieval lodge', *West Midlands Archaeology* (Council for British Archaeology, West Midlands) 63, 141–42; Trueman et al, *The Flora of Sutton Park*, 106

²¹ M Hodder, 'Sutton Park, Birmingham, earthwork surveys and reinterpretation of earthwork boundaries, and military features', *West Midlands Archaeology* (Council for British Archaeology, West Midlands) 64 2023 and 2024, 107–108

²² R Lea (2003), *The Story of Sutton Coldfield* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing), 147

²³ <https://sclhrg.org.uk/research/original-research/3320-the-2nd-world-war-anti-aircraft-base-in-sutton-park.html>

Road. The outer boundary bank is visible under the park fence opposite Park View Road (fig 5). There is a slight change in the direction of the boundary opposite Highbury Road, at the top of a drainage channel which runs into the Ebrook above Little Bracebridge Pool and may follow an original watercourse.



Fig 3: Streetly Lane dipping into the top of Gum Slade. Copyright Mike Hodder



Fig 4: the medieval boundary ditch near the top of Gum Slade. Copyright Mike Hodder

The deer park boundary ditch is very clear inside the fence, on both sides of an electricity sub-station (fig 6), just before the north-west corner of the park, which is a high point near the roundabout at the junction of Streetly Lane with Rosemary Hill Road, Roman Road and Hardwick Road. Turning to run south-west along Thornhill Road, the park boundary crosses over the line of the Roman Rykniel Street (which runs west of the present 'Roman Road') and changes direction at, and rises from, a dip which corresponds to the source of the Ebrook (fig 7).



Fig 5: the medieval boundary bank opposite Park View Road and the change in direction at a drainage channel. Copyright Mike Hodder



Fig 6: the medieval boundary ditch near the north-west corner of the Park. Copyright Mike Hodder



Fig 6: the change in direction near the source of the Ebrook. Copyright Mike Hodder



Fig 8: the medieval boundary bank along Thornhill Road. Copyright Mike Hodder

The boundary ditch is also visible, just inside the boundary fence, between Streetly Lodge and the entrance to the clubhouse of Sutton Coldfield Golf Club, which is another high point where the boundary changes direction. This is close to the second highest point in Sutton Park, near

Streetly Wood. A long, virtually straight stretch of the boundary runs south from here, with a slight change in direction at the source of Longmoor Brook which was deliberately included in the park. The boundary ditch is visible inside the boundary fence along the whole of this line, for example just inside the pedestrian gate opposite Millcroft Road, and the bank is visible under the fence along most of it (fig 8). Thornhill Road was created in the early 19th century when former common land here was enclosed into separate fields. It now veers sharply to the south-west, away from the Park, but it originally continued southwards (its tarmac surface can still be seen). Rose Cottage (now demolished) was constructed in the land between it and the original park boundary's bank and ditch, which are now wholly within Sutton Park and extremely well-preserved.²⁴ The boundary then joins Chester Road where it crosses the Roman Ryknield Street, and follows it to the present south-west corner of Sutton Park. As well as the ditch, the original boundary bank is visible near the electricity substation at Royal Oak Gate and it is prominent along the south-west side of Westwood Coppice; at the south-west corner, behind Banners Lodge (near Banners Gate), it is separate from the fence (fig 9).²⁵



Fig 9: the medieval boundary bank inside Westwood Coppice. Copyright Mike Hodder



Fig 10: Chester Road North rising up to Welshmans Hill, the original south-west corner of Sutton Park. Copyright Mike Hodder

From Banners Gate the line of the original park boundary rises up to a high point at Dunchurch Crescent near Welshman's Hill (fig 10), where the 19th-century parish and county boundary turns to the south-east for a short distance, probably indicating the park's corner. The rounded obtuse angle is consistent with that at other changes in direction of the park boundary line. If the line were continued to the south-east, it would join a change in direction of a continuous field boundary with three farms along it which marks the park's original southern boundary. Land to the north of this was probably removed from the park as a result of the 1528 Charter.²⁶ It is not possible to follow this boundary on the ground now because none of the present roads conforms to its line, but looking south from Monmouth Drive you can appreciate the slope along which it runs.

The boundary runs east, along the slope, to include the valley of the Longmoor Brook, in which Longmoor and Powells Pools were constructed in the 18th century. Its line runs through New Oscott School and its former playing field, which is now built over. Archaeological evaluation in advance of the development did not locate any trace of the former park boundary,²⁷ but the trenches may not have crossed its line. The boundary crosses Avery Road, then through the site

²⁴ Hodder, 'Sutton Park, Birmingham, earthwork surveys and reinterpretation of earthwork boundaries, and military features'

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ Lea, *Story of Sutton Coldfield*, 88

²⁷ C Rann, in press, 'Birmingham, New Oscott Primary School, Markham Road, Sutton Coldfield', *West Midlands Archaeology* (Council for British Archaeology, West Midlands) 65

of Old Park Farm (at the end of Grendon Drive) and there is a slight change of direction to the east of this, near Darnick Road, then changes direction near the site of Booths Farm, between Carnwarth Road and Melrose Avenue. It could have been aligned on a high point just south of Booths Farm if it were laid out clockwise, from the east. The next change in direction is a high point near the site of Stonehouse Farm, at the junction of Stonehouse Road and Corbridge Road, where it turns to the north-east. There is a slope down from this point to the present park; the rise up to it from Jockey Road to the south is prominent. The original deer park boundary then continues on this alignment, running almost parallel to Monmouth Drive and crossing the headwaters of a former small stream feeding Wyndley Pool near Morven Road. It forms the rear boundary of land occupied by Addenbrook House and Packwood House and continues across Somerville Road on high ground (fig 11), and south of Digby Road its line is indicated by a field boundary marked on the Corn Rent Map.²⁸



Fig 11: the high point on Somerville Road, in the distance, near its junction with Monmouth Drive and Digby Road, is the line of the original southern boundary of Sutton Park. Copyright Mike Hodder



Fig 12: the boundary wall is on the original line of the park boundary as it joins Birmingham Road. Copyright Mike Hodder

Field boundaries indicate another slight change in direction in Kirby Green (off Digby Road), then the boundary crosses The Driffold. This road approaches the site of the manor house off Manor Drive²⁹ from the south. It branches off Birmingham Road to continue straight on where Birmingham Road veers to the north-east to run downhill. The Driffold runs uphill, but avoiding the steep eastern slope of Manor Hill, and crossing the line of the park boundary at what must have been the main entrance into the park.

The field boundary running from Kirby Green on the Corn Rent map is broken by the railway and continues as the northern boundary of 52 Birmingham Road (Maney Villas), opposite While Road (fig 12).³⁰ Birmingham Road runs on a long-established route which was regarded as one of the major roads of the country in the 14th century, when it is marked on the Gough Map.³¹ The deer park boundary ran along Birmingham Road down the valley slope of the Ebrook to the end of the millpool dam, at the junction of Lower Parade and South Parade and along the dam to the starting point of our walk.

Acknowledgements

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²⁸ Library of Birmingham, Wolfson Centre for Archival Research, BCOLQ.333.20942496WED

²⁹ Bracken, *History of the Forest and Chase*, 51-56

³⁰ Trueman et al, *Flora of Sutton Park*, 102 and fig 3.5

³¹ <https://goughmap.uk/>