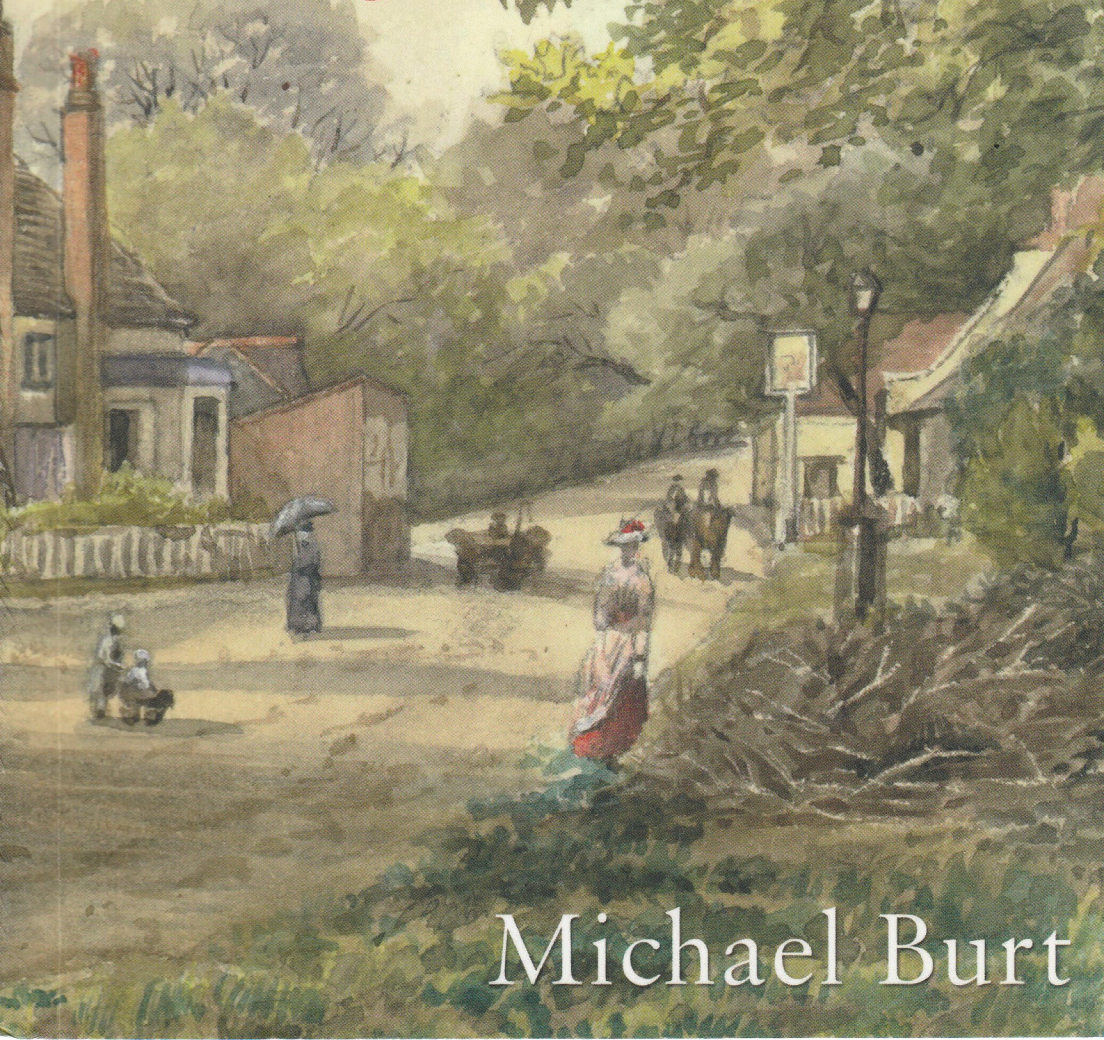


# Cowfold

*The History of a  
Sussex Village*



Michael Burt

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# Introduction

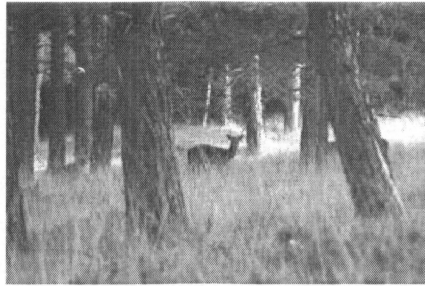


Cowfold and the surrounding area in 1920  
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## CHAPTER 1

# *The Development of the Cowfold Area*



If we could travel back in time 1,565 years ago to AD450 and if we stood at the centre of what is now Cowfold, what would we see? Mile upon mile of thickly wooded landscape, with, for company, the occasional wild boar or deer rooting round under the trees and possibly in the distance, and from higher ground, the Downs, although not the bare hills that we see today. It is more than likely that we would spend the whole day in and around that spot without seeing another person.

At that point in time, the history of England had already passed through several momentous stages of human creativity and activity; Celtic civilisation had been replaced by the development of Roman Britain, which in turn had declined and was being replaced by Saxon conquest and settlement, which would then be succeeded by Norman conquest that would eventually put Cowfold on the map.

The density of the Wealden forest was why so few people could be found in the area around Cowfold, and in most of the Wealden area; it has been estimated that around 33% of England was covered by woods and forests in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and 70% of the Weald was wooded at the time of the Domesday Book in 1086. A forbidding wilderness of trees stretched between the lines of the North and South Downs, with occasional clearings or lighter covering on higher or sloping ground. The forest was thickest on the lower clay lands and was made up predominantly of oak trees providing food for wild boars and other animals; the ground itself was cold, heavy and often waterlogged. The streams and brooks threading the country were probably wider than now, bordered by bog and marshland which made travel difficult. Travelling through this area might have felt like a voyage into the unknown.

The area that eventually became the present parish of Cowfold lies mainly on the clay but the ridges of the High Weald encroach into its north-eastern parts down to Wallhurst. Below those steeper slopes the country rolls gently southwards forming the shallow basin of a stream flowing down from St Leonard's towards the Adur; this was called Whitingroll in a 17th century survey although that name is not used now. Towards the boundaries of the parish on either side of this basin the land rises slightly. Low ridges project from east and from west towards the Whitingroll about midway in its course through the parish, pinching the lower levels into a narrow valley before they open out again to the south. The village of Cowfold subsequently grew up on the western ridge.

The difficulty of maintaining an existence in the forest probably accounted for why there was so little penetration into the area in early times. But a few Bronze Age people – probably semi-nomadic hunters – must have been in the area because a hoard of flint implements was found in a field on the north-west side of Wallhurst. Significantly this location is on the slopes of the central Weald rather than in the denser woodland lower down.

### *The Development of the Cowfold Area*

After this there is no evidence of human activity for many centuries. During the Roman period, the area that became Cowfold seems to have been part of a wilderness between sites of Roman activity to the east and west, in particular the exploitation of the Weald's iron deposits. The only people who passed through the Cowfold area were probably members of an occasional hunting party.

After the Romans left in the 470s, Aelle and his Saxons conquered the Downland area of Sussex. Their villages and settlements spread along the length of the South Downs. However the Weald forest was as daunting a prospect to the Saxons as it was to the Romans and their predecessors and they were slow to start to explore and exploit it. The distances were enormous and full of unknown hazards and to superstitious minds the forest was the home of evil spirits. Probably in the main, people who went into the forest were hunters, refugees from justice or the dispossessed fleeing from their new masters. That some of the latter may have found a refuge within the area of Cowfold could explain the derivation of the name, Wallhurst, which in Saxon means "Wood of the Britons".

Eventually, the Saxons began to exploit the forest in particular for timber for their Downland villages. The value of the forest for pasturing swine led to deeper penetration and exploitation of the Weald. At length new settlements were established in the Weald itself where conditions were favourable and where the soil could be more easily turned to agriculture; one such settlement was Henfield which had a manor in its own right by 770 AD.

The herdsmen were therefore the first to open up the Weald; by following their droves of swine they explored and opened up new corners of the forest. However, they were soon competing with the villages along the Downs and within the fringes of the woodland where pastures or 'dennes' had been established and had become more regulated. In effect what we see is the beginning of the crystallisation of land holdings within the Weald and the development of the manorial

system; this development provides the first clues to the origins of Cowfold.

It is very likely that, within each 'denne', the herdsmen built timber or wattle and mud shelters where they ran their animals. Over time they would have built better huts and would have extended the surrounding clearings. These people were becoming settlers and colonists instead of wandering nomads. As a result the Cowfold area started to gain its first permanent inhabitants. It is therefore perhaps not improbable that the Cowfold area at this time would have had nascent track-ways and scattered herdsmen's huts in grassy clearings through the forest all of which represented the beginnings of a more permanent community and the settlement of recognisable farmsteads.

But when did this happen? The usually accepted view is that while settlement around the fringes of the Weald, including the greensand belt, had made considerable progress by late Saxon times, the colonisation of the more central parts, at least in West Sussex, was much slower and was only just emerging by the time of the Norman Conquest. The aftermath of the Conquest resulted in more extensive settlement of the deeper regions of the forest and in the rapid development of the scattering of farmsteads around the Cowfold area. This seems to be borne out by the 1086 Domesday Book entries for the locality, such as for Streatham Manor.

*The Bishop himself (ie of Chichester) holds in desmesne Hamfelde. In the time of King Edward it was assessed for 15 hides and now for 11 hides and one virgate. There is land for 20 ploughs. On the desmesne are 2 ploughs, and 23 villeins with 15 bordars have 10 ploughs. There is a church and 40 acres of meadow(land). A mill and a fishery are wanting because they have been made over to William de Braiose.*

*Of these hides William holds of the Bishop 3 hides and there he has on his desmesne 1 hide, and one villain with 10 bordars have half a plough. Woodland yielding 3 swine. The whole manor in the time*

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*of King Edward was worth £10 and afterwards £7. Now what the Bishop holds (is worth) £10. (Note: A “hide” was equivalent to 40 acres. A “virgate” (also called a “yardland”) was equivalent to 30 acres. One plough was estimated to cultivate about 100 acres a year. A “border” and a “villein” were tenants and smallholders who were closely subjected to the manor and owed fixed services to the lord).*