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Chaucer and Harbledown, Kent

Andrew Breeze

Amongst the things that must puzzle Chaucer's ghost is the heavy weather made of Bobbe-up-and-down, a place figuring in the opening lines of the *Manciple's Prologue*:

Woot ye nat where ther stant a litel toun
Which that ycleped is Bobbe-up-and-down,
Under the Blee, in Caunterbury weye?

Comment has been as follows. Skeat noted the usual identification with Harbledown, outside Canterbury on the main road from London, and situated under 'the Blee' or Blean Forest on Canterbury's north side. But he also cited a letter by J. M. Cowper in *The Athenaeum* for 26 December 1868, which proposed that Up-and-Down Field in the parish of Thanington (south-west of Canterbury) was the place Chaucer really meant. The early layout of Canterbury's western approaches was not well understood when Skeat was writing, and he took Cowper's suggestion seriously.¹ He thus helped to give it a prolonged influence, as we shall see.

Manly spoke of Bobbe-up-and-down as a jocular reference to Harbledown, between Boughton under Blean (mentioned in the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue*) and Canterbury. Yet he cited Cowper's letter, concluding that if he was right the old road was different from the modern one.² Robinson referred to Furnivall's collection of allusions to Harbledown by early pilgrims to Canterbury, and also (though in neutral terms) Cowper's letter on the field at Thanington.³ Donaldson contented himself with identifying 'the Blee' as Blean Forest.⁴ Donald Howard spoke of Bobbe-up-and-down as 'probably' Harbledown, though he was vague as to its location, apparently not knowing that Harbledown is where travellers on the

old London road come within sight of Canterbury.⁵ Norman Blake, though uncertain of Bobbe-up-and-down's exact whereabouts, was (rightly) sure that it was by Blean Forest, since *Blee* can be nowhere else.⁶

Despite this, Professor Scattergood in his notes on the passage makes confusion worse confounded. Not only does he mention both Harbledown (described as 'two miles north of Canterbury on the old road from London') and Thannington, but he cites a paper by a certain Walter Rye in *Notes and Queries* for 1932, which identified Bobbe-up-and-down as Bobbing, near Sittingbourne.⁷ This bewildering range of choices is accurately conveyed by Jill Mann, who notes: 'Although these lines imply that the "litel toun" is well known, it is not easily identifiable. The most likely candidate is Harbledown, two miles north-west of Canterbury, but Up-and-Down Field, in the parish of Thannington Without, and Bobbing, two miles west of Sittingbourne, have also been proposed.' In support of this she cites D. C. Baker's Variorum edition of the *Manciple's Tale*, published by the University of Oklahoma.⁸ These ambiguities are relayed by Rory McTurk who, in discussing the pilgrimage to Canterbury and the pilgrimage of life, calls Bobbe-up-and-down somewhere which 'whatever its precise location, does not seem to have been a place of much importance' (correct, as we shall see).⁹

The purpose of this note is to liberate readers and editors from the perplexities associated with this question once and for all. It tries to show there can be no reasonable doubt that Bobbe-up-and-down is the village of Harbledown, and not a field in Thannington or a settlement off the main road near Sittingbourne. In this the writer has the benefits both of Ordnance Survey maps at hand, and of having been brought up and schooled in East Kent. He has thus visited or gone through Thannington and Harbledown scores of times, an advantage less easily available to scholars in California, Oklahoma, or Indiana.

Because the arrangement of roads to Canterbury was not clear in his time, Skeat felt that the pilgrims from London might have approached via Thannington, crossing the river Stour upstream from the city. But the difficulties here were cleared up in the 1950s, as noted by Ivan Margery. The original Roman road left Canterbury along a line going westwards to Harbledown, now marked by a footpath (at National Grid Reference TR 140581). When the medieval walls were built the London road was shifted to its present more northerly alignment. Yet this made no difference to the road at Harbledown, which still follows a bend made by the Romans to skirt the valley west of the village.¹⁰ There is, therefore, no reason to think that Chaucer's pilgrims reached Canterbury by any route other than the Roman road from London (always a major highway, since it led to the Channel ports and

the Continent), which went straight through Harbledown.

Nor is there any difficulty in taking 'Bobbe-up-and-doun' as Chaucer's jocular allusion to this village, where the road goes with a sharp rise and dip over the crest of a ridge. The colloquial ring of Chaucer's phrase is brought out by *OED*, which records no other instance of *bob* 'to move up and down' before the sixteenth century. It is not hard to think of similar and mainly oral by-names in our own time. Londoners know what 'Buck House' (noted by *OED*) and 'the Gherkin' are; in the West Midlands the Gravelly Hill Interchange is more familiar as 'Spaghetti Junction' (also noted by *OED*); in New South Wales all Sydneysiders recognize 'the Coathanger', and so on. These terms are familiar to millions but do not appear on maps, and may one day baffle a philologist from Mars. It is likely that Chaucer actually envisaged the difficulties his slower readers would have with 'Bobbe-up-and-doun', and so glossed it with *Under the Blee, in Caunterbury weye* to make its position, as he thought, quite clear (though unfortunately reckoning without the perverse ingenuity of later critics).

So there is every reason to regard Bobbe-up-and-doun and Harbledown as one and the same. Thannington can be ruled out for three reasons. First, it does not lie on the normal and direct route from London, but on a longer way round via a bridgeless crossing of the Stour (maps still show a ford at Thannington). Second, Chaucer would hardly have known a field-name there or called it *a litel town*, since a field is a field and not a settlement. Third, Thannington does not lie *under Blee*, the great forest north of Canterbury. This is a region of cold and sticky London Clay, unattractive to farmers, so that the area is thickly wooded to this day. Travellers on the old Boughton to Canterbury road still pass miles of dense woodland on each side. In Chaucer's time nobody going to Canterbury on this route would forget Blean Forest, a natural haven for thieves. It contrasts with Thannington, where lighter soils made for a parish of orchards (many of them now grubbed up to provide room for housing estates and warehouses).

It is easier still to rule out Bobbing (TQ 8865), a mile west of Sittingbourne and sixteen miles west of Canterbury. This is neither *under the Blee* nor *in Canterbury weye* at all, but on the road to the Isle of Sheppey. If Harry Bailly had been so inept as to turn the pilgrims off the main road and take them through Bobbing, pithy comments would have been quick to arise.

Let us end by looking at what has been said of Harbledown. It is neither 'two miles north of Canterbury' nor 'two miles north-west of Canterbury', as Professors Scattergood and Mann variously inform us. Harbledown church is just over a mile and quarter west of Canterbury Cathedral. It is situated on a small hill and is thus

conspicuous to travellers. After traversing miles of dreary forest, they would know they were nearing Canterbury. The village is unusual in having an ancient hospital by its church. These almshouses (though much rebuilt) were founded by Lanfranc of Bec (d. 1089) in his last years. His modern biographer speaks of their position 'on the hill of Harbledown, where the traveller suddenly has his first view of the cathedral below him' and where they occupy 'a hollow in the crown of the hill, well drained, generously planned, separate from the city yet not inaccessible.'¹¹

So we may end with the cheering reflexion that Chaucer's *litel town* or small settlement of Bobbe-up-and-down was surely Harbledown 'hill of Herebeald' on Canterbury's western outskirts.¹² And we may thereby hope to bid everlasting farewell to the red herrings of Thanington and Bobbing long ago supplied by Cowper and Rye, and passed on by certain editors ever since.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by W. W. Skeat, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899-1900), V, p. 435.
- ² *Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by J. M. Manly (London: Harrap, 1928), p. 654.
- ³ *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by F. N. Robinson, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 763.
- ⁴ *Chaucer's Poetry*, ed. by E. T. Donaldson (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1958), p. 415.
- ⁵ D. R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 79, 163.
- ⁶ N. F. Blake, *The Textual Tradition of the Canterbury Tales* (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), p. 27.
- ⁷ *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by L. D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 952.
- ⁸ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Jill Mann (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 1079-80.
- ⁹ Rory McTurk, *Chaucer and the Norse and Celtic Worlds* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 98.
- ¹⁰ I. D. Margery, *Roman Roads in Britain: South of the Foss Way* (London: Phoenix House, 1955), p. 37.
- ¹¹ Margaret Gibson, *Lanfranc* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 185-6.
- ¹² Cf. *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, ed. by V. E. Watts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 278.