

THE PLACE NAME 'COLDHARBOUR'

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Cold Harbour is a remarkably widespread feature of English place names: whether Coldharbour Lane, Coldharbour Road, Coldharbour Farm or whatever. Oxfordshire boasts other examples at Henley, Great Rollright, Rousham, Stanford in the Vale, Whitchurch Hill and elsewhere.

Coldharbours were often sited a mile or so outside towns and villages, as at the end of the Abingdon Road in south Oxford. They boasted no foaming tankards or crackling log fires. A Coldharbour might comprise nothing more than a stand of trees, a derelict barn, a hollow in the hillside - anywhere that furnished some rude protection against wind and rain for those wayfarers who could not afford even the cheapest inns.

Coldharbours are especially associated with long distance drovers who shunned settlements of any size. This was partly to keep their cattle or sheep from being contaminated by any infectious diseases in local herds and flocks. They also planned their routes to avoid costly tolls - like the one at the southern end of the Abingdon Road which was established in 1826 (when Folly Bridge was rebuilt) and moved on to the bridge itself in 1844 (when the railway came to Grandpont). Drovers followed the wilderness paths, which is why you may find a Coldharbour in the middle of a wood or - as above East Hendred - high up on the Ridgeway.

Etymologists have long debated the meaning of the term. Some suggest Norman French origins in 'col d'arbres' a 'ridge of trees'. It might even derive from 'cul d'arbre' - the base of a tree - the most rudimentary shelter of all. It is, however, more likely to be a Saxon place name which means exactly what it says: a cold as distinct from a warm refuge. 'Cold' is from the Anglo Saxon *cald*; 'harbour' from the Anglo-Saxon *herbergh*, meaning a refuge, lodging or shelter.

'The proper name Cold Harbour was no doubt brought over to England by our Saxon ancestors, for Germany has also its Cold Harbours up to the present day. About four miles south of Aix-la-Chapelle there is a village called Kalterherberg, which is proverbially known in those parts as one of the coldest, most dreary, and dismal places any one can possibly imagine, being situated in the middle of the forest of the Eifel, where snow lies during the whole of the winter.'

JC Hahn, Two articles on the origin of the name Coldharbour (1), Notes and Queries, Series 3, 7, 253-4 (1 April 1865)