

Travelling Tales



The Cook, from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, 1410 Edition.

Harbledown and the Blean have a significant place in British travel history. Firstly, an important route passes through these great woodlands, as it did two thousand years ago when people moved between the fertile lands of the north Kent coast and the Stour Valley. It began as an ancient Celtic trackway, was later paved by the great Roman road builders and became known as Watling Street during the Middle Ages. Modern day travellers recognise it as the A2, which continues to link the historic route between Dover, Canterbury and London.

Another famous route is the Pilgrims' Way (now largely the North Downs Way), which emerges from the Blean nearby and is synonymous with the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket. His gruesome murder in 1170 by knights of Henry II, who supposedly misinterpreted the King's royal rant 'who will rid me of this troublesome priest', gave Canterbury its first saint. The city quickly became a major centre of pilgrimage. King Henry himself travelled to Canterbury for his own penance, tethering his horse somewhere here in Harbledown before walking barefoot into the city, where he allowed himself to be whipped by monks.

Some 200 years later Harbledown ('Bob-up-and-down') was the last stop on the journey of Chaucer's pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*. From here, tired yet excited travellers would finally glimpse the towers of Canterbury Cathedral.

The Maunciple's Tale

*Wite ye nat wher ther stant a litel town
 Which that y-cleped is Bob-up-and-down,
 Under the Blee, in Canterbury waye?*

*Do you not know where stands a little town
 That's called by all about Bob-up-and-down,
 Under the Blean, down Canterbury way?*



A view of Canterbury from Harbledown. (Canterbury Heritage Museum.)

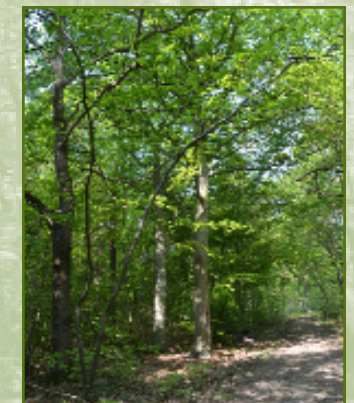


A map dated 1871-90 showing the remains of the tranche between Dunkirk and Harbledown, alongside Watling Street (now the A2). (Landmark Edition.)

However, travelling in Medieval England was dangerous, even more so through woodland! Therefore, trees were often cleared beside the roads, the clearings called tranches from the French *tranche* for slice. In 1285 King Edward I made tranches compulsory, commanding that highways be widened to 200 feet either side of wherever 'a man may lurk to do evil near the road'. However, it was only important commercial and military routes where this was put into practice, and in those times the route from London to Dover was probably the most important. Despite this, the Archbishop of Canterbury was known to have an armed escort through Dunkirk. The cleared area and earth-bank remains of this tranche can still be seen between Harbledown and Boughton, alongside the A2. So Celts, Romans, Kings, Pilgrims and Highway men are just some of the travellers that have passed by here.



King Henry II whipped by the Pope's Order. (Robert Burton 1685.)



A public footpath in the Blean today.

the **Blean** is just minutes away...

Covering over 11 square miles, the Blean is one of the largest and most distinctive areas of ancient woodland in England, important nationally for both its wildlife and its history. The Blean has been a working woodland for over a thousand years, and continues to provide woodland products, including firewood and fencing materials, for local people. The splendour and tranquillity of this special landscape can be enjoyed on a network of paths and trails. This panel is part of a series of 18 located around the Blean. To see all 18 panels, visit www.theblean.co.uk. For information about walking in Kent visit www.kent.gov.uk/explorekent.