

# An Ancient Ridgeway

The ancient ridgeway which follows the high ground between the rivers Chater and Gwash from east Leicestershire through Rutland towards Stamford is perhaps one of the oldest routes in the county, linking Lincolnshire and East Anglia with Leicestershire and the counties beyond. Until the end of the first millennium much of this ridgeway, particularly in east Leicestershire and west Rutland, was through forests. The high ground afforded greater safety from attack and avoided the often-flooded valleys. Part of this ridgeway, the bridleway through Martinsthorpe, is shown on an early nineteenth century estate map as an old coaching road, and today most of the ridgeway still exists as a combination of footpaths, bridleways and country roads.

Recent research by Joy Childs (*Leicestershire and Rutland Life*, March 2006, 27-29), has discovered that Mary Queen of Scots' last journey alive included passage through Rutland along this ancient ridgeway. Drawing on the journal of the French physician Dominique Bourgoing, who accompanied the Queen every step of the way, she was able to trace in some detail the route taken by Mary, then a prisoner under heavy armed guard, from her prison at Chartley, Staffordshire, through Leicestershire and Rutland, to Fotheringhay in Northamptonshire, a journey which took five days.

Mary Queen of Scots, who travelled by coach, and her huge escort, which included armed guards on horseback and carts laden with her belongings, entered Leicestershire from Burton on Trent, Staffordshire, on Thursday 22nd September 1586. She was accommodated overnight at Ashby Castle and The Angel Inn at Leicester. She left Leicester at 10am on Saturday 24th September, a very wet and miserable day, and travelled along the Gartree Road to join the start of the ancient ridgeway at Great Stretton. The royal cavalcade followed this route through Houghton on the Hill and Tilton on the Hill to arrive that evening at Withcote Hall, '... the house of a gentleman named Mr Roger Smith'.

Entering Rutland on Sunday 25th September, the route was now on the very narrow ridge between the Chater and the Gwash. The first settlement encountered was Martinsthorpe, by this time almost certainly a deserted village, although the Feilding family, later the Earls of Denbeigh, had a hunting lodge here by this date. The next part of the route was through Manton and Edith Weston, now overlooking the south shore of Rutland Water. Dominique Bourgoing mentions passing by the royal palace at Collyweston, just over the county border into Northamptonshire, suggesting that the entourage would have continued from Edith Weston towards Ketton where the River Chater would have been crossed. The medieval Collyweston Bridge would have provided a safe crossing of the Welland, leaving only seven miles before Fotheringhay Castle was reached.

On the orders of Elizabeth I, who saw her as a threat to the English throne, Mary Queen of Scots was beheaded there on 8th February 1587.



*Mary Queen of Scots' final journey alive was through Rutland on Sunday 25th September 1586 (RO)*