

## Powell & Pressburger's Road of Steel



*'Everybody loves the sound of a train in the distance,  
Everybody thinks it's true'* (Paul Simon)

From his cot in Howletts Farmhouse, Michael Powell could hear trains on the South Eastern and Chatham Railway whistling and rumbling past his father's hop-gardens and through Bekesbourne Station, on their way to London or the Channel coast.

As soon as he could walk his mother, Mabel, or father, Thomas, would take him to watch the trains coming and going - and what he remembered as the daily 'splendid chocolate and cream boat-train' steaming through.

Even more exciting to young Michael, and an occasion for which the stationmaster would don his bowler hat, was when the Royal train carrying King Edward V11 on the first stage of his next visit to Biarritz would dash past at 80 miles an hour in a flurry of smoke and smuts.

Nearly everyone in the village would gather on the 'down' platform and wave, among them schoolchildren who had been excused lessons for an hour; the stationmaster would doff his bowler - and that was that!

For the rest of his life Michael remembered those visits to the station, and trips from there to the next one up the line, Canterbury East.

He once wrote, 'It was my favourite game to be a locomotive on the South Eastern and Chatham with sound effects, also doubling as a porter on arrival'.

Fast-forward to summer 1943, when Michael and Emeric Pressburger were preparing to film 'A Canterbury Tale'. They had agreed the outline of the plot; the script was in its final draft; the cast and production team had been recruited.

The locations, though, had yet to be finalised. For these, Michael drew on his memories of familiar places recalled from his boyhood life in east Kent, and sent Bill Paton, his PA, out into the countryside to make the necessary arrangements with the likes of the owners of the smithy and wheelwrights' yard (see Chapter 6); Wickhambreaux Court (Chapter 7); Elbridge Farm (Chapter 8); Chilham Watermill (Chapter 11), and farmers whose fields offered panoramas for landscape shots, and space for a camera truck (page 101) and other vehicles, and the cast's catering and dressing room caravans.

In Canterbury, Bill confirmed the suitability of Philpot's Garage for the episode where Alison visited her caravan (Chapter 17), and he negotiated with The Buffs Regiment, City Police and cathedral authorities for their co-operation to create the dramatic scenes in the city that comprise the finale (Chapter 18).

Meanwhile, for scenes that could not be filmed in situ, Powell's scenery designers were at work sketching, measuring and photographing Taylor's Hill, Chilham, for his draughtsmen to produce construction drawings for the set builders at Denham Studios to replicate for the 'chase' sequence (Chapter 3). Their task for the episodes ostensibly enacted at Fordwich Town Hall, Canterbury Cathedral and the Cathedral Tea Rooms was even more demanding, resulting in some of the most convincing interiors created in the pre Computer-Generated Imagery age.

Much work, for only a few minutes of screen time.

### A train in the distance

Despite all the pre-production preparations, one location remained unresolved when Powell and Pressburger's film company, 'The Archers', gathered at the pilgrims' church on St Martha's Hill, Surrey, in July 1943 to film the opening sequence (Chapter 2). Powell wanted to create a transition from medieval pilgrims on foot and on horseback from Winchester to Canterbury, to August Bank Holiday 1943 when his three troubled souls travel there by train.

But where and how to achieve this?

Chief cinematographer Erwin Hillier described (page 21) how, from St Martha's, he spotted a train chugging along the valley below, likely at Chilworth, several miles to the south, on the North Downs Railway that served Dorking, Guildford and intermediate stations.

Too far from St Martha's to be filmed, but surely there was a closer viewpoint?

Hillier found the ideal spot, eight miles to the east on Ranmore Common, below the crest of the North Downs and by happenstance traversed by the Pilgrims' Way. Here at grid reference TQ137501 or thereabouts he set up his camera - but how to ensure that the train was immediately noticeable as it passed?

According to Hillier he sent George Maynard, his production manager, to meet the locomotive driver at a nearby station, probably Gomshall, and asked him to put on as much steam as possible when his train approached Ranmore Common.

Hillier's account made meeting the driver sound easier than it must have been. Timetables had to be checked, a fine day had to be chosen, and while Hillier was setting up his camera, Maynard presumably drove the three miles from the common to the station in good time to find and brief the driver of the appropriate train - and get back in time to warn Hillier when it would be on its way.

Meanwhile other trains may have passed 'full steam ahead', which Hillier likely filmed in case his original idea failed, but it all went according to plan and thanks to Mark French we now know to within 50 yards where the deed was done (see page 175 of the 2006 and 2025 editions of this book). In 2004 Mark was the first 'A Canterbury Tale' devotee to find Hillier's camera position.

In Hillier's panoramic view looking south from the common, to Westcott and beyond, the train emerges into view from the right edge of the frame and proceeds across several level crossings, which in 1943 were for pedestrians only, with only BEWARE OF TRAINS, LOOK BOTH WAYS and STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN signs to protect the unwary. Hillier panned left while the train puffed purposely to its next stop, which in reality was Dorking, five minutes away, but as far as the story was concerned was 'Can'erbury', a 90 minute journey from London Victoria for our three 20th century pilgrims.

A full day's work for Hillier and Maynard, for a few seconds of screen time, but vital to the story.

As was (and still is) cinematographic practice, Hillier ensured the train he filmed was proceeding from right to left, signifying it was setting out on its journey. The same principal applies to shots of ships leaving port. On returning they are depicted travelling from left to right. Somehow it all makes sense.

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Next on the case was George Godyn, after reading Mark's account, commenting that from 1938 (by when the North Downs Railway was part of the Southern Railway) until the 1960s, the line's trains were hauled by ex-Great Western Railway 2-6-0 and 4-6-0 locomotives, so there can be little doubt that one of these appeared on Michael Powell's Road of Steel.

'Also', George added, 'Ranmore Common is on the Surrey section of the Pilgrims' Way and the train is heading towards Canterbury! A modern "railway pilgrim" from Winchester would have to change at Guildford and then again at Ashford. The railways involved were close to the route of the old Pilgrims' Way.

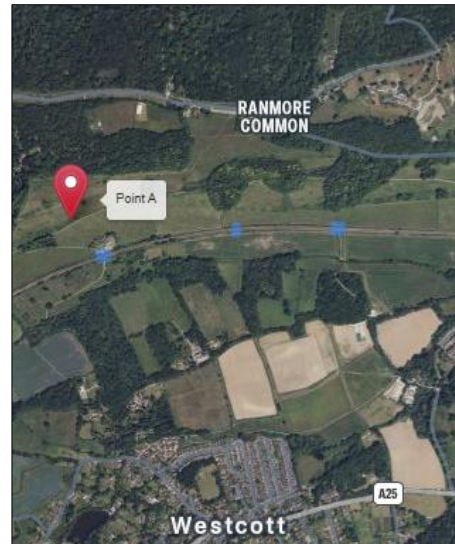
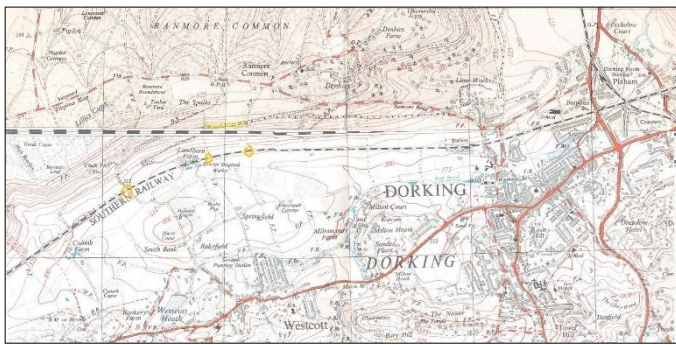
'So if this case I hope I have helped support both Michael Powell's choice of location, the direction of travel, and the original wording on page 21 of your book.

'The whole "road of steel" sequence lasts for about 20 seconds, from 4 minutes 50 seconds into the film through to 00:05:10. It consists of a left to right panning shot, of about 10 seconds' duration, from 00:04:50 to 00:05:00, after which the camera is stationary for another 10 seconds, from 00:05:00 to 00:05:10, during which time the locomotive appears, from offscreen, moving right to left. *[see screen capture, right, of one of the final frames]*'

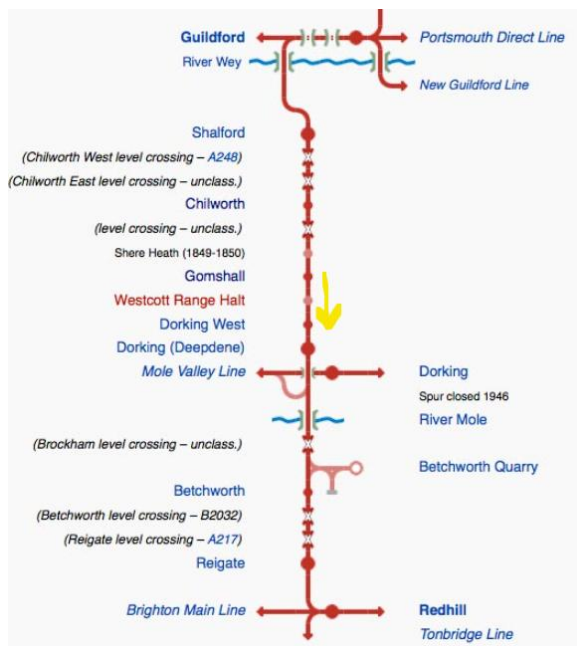


When the locomotive is about a third of the way across the screen there is a slow fade-out, leading to the scene (enacted on a sound stage at Denham) where Stationmaster Thomas Duckett (Charles Hawtrey) announces “Chillingbourne! Chillingbourne! Can’erbury next stop!”

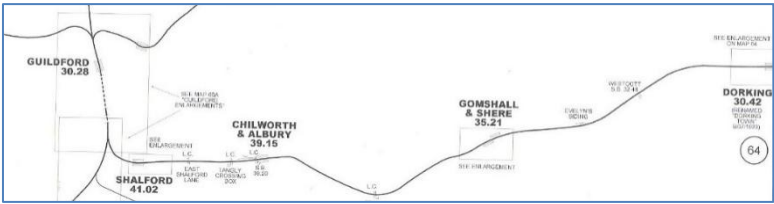
Mark French drew attention to a level crossing on the train’s path, next to an off-center telegraph pole he noticed during his site visit. This is no longer there, leaving three contenders for the crossing in question, the most likely being the one that leads to Landbarn Farm. George Godyn confirmed that in WW2 there were no level crossings for road traffic on the section depicted along the Road of Steel and that the crossings visible in the film, and on contemporary maps, were unguarded foot crossings.



George Godyn’s composite map, above, from Ordnance Survey maps TQ14 and TQ15 shows (highlighted) level crossings (for pedestrians only until after WW2) and the section of the Pilgrims’ Way explored by Hillier while choosing his camera position. On our screen capture (right) from UK Grid Reference Finder the crossings are highlighted and the Pilgrims’ Way is marked Point A.



Above: The North Downs Railway (courtesy George Godyn), Top right: a 4-6-0 locomotive (Wikipedia); right: a 2-6-0 locomotive (West Somerset Railway). Similar locos operated on the North Downs Line in WW2.



Southern Railway Atlas (1923-1947) showing the North Downs line from Dorking to Guildford. Gomshall and Shere station was renamed Gomshall in 1980. Dorking Station opened in 1849. In the 1923 regrouping of Britain's railways the new Southern Railway's former Reading, Guildford and Reigate Railway's Dorking station became Dorking Town, its name when the Road of Steel sequence was filmed. The town's former London, Brighton and South Coast Railway station became Dorking North. In 1987 the name of Dorking North reverted to Dorking and Dorking Town became Dorking West. *(courtesy George Godyn)*



*Right: Down in the valley: St Martha's Church and part of Michael Powell's Road of Steel on the North Downs Railway. (Google Earth)*

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- Errata: Page 22, for 'TR137 501' read 'TQ 137 501'. Page 175, for Chapter 21 read page 21. Page 175, for 'west of St. Martha's Hill' read 'east ...