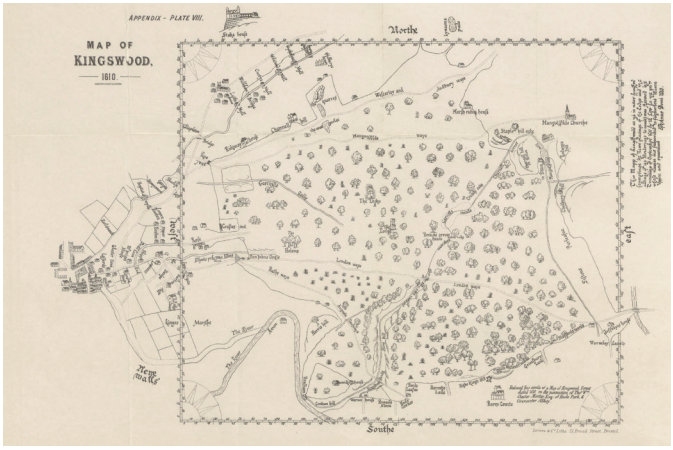


History of the Crooked Billet and Kingswood

Kingswood is a tiny hamlet of around thirty houses on the south side of the A41, midway between the villages of Ludgershall and Grendon Underwood in the Aylesbury Vale, Buckinghamshire. Small as it is, it sits at a genuine historical crossroads. Its name recalls the ancient Bernwood Forest, once a royal hunting ground that pressed right up against this spot, while the road it stands on is a good deal older than any king who ever hunted here – it follows the line of the Roman Akeman Street.



A royal forest on the doorstep

Bernwood Forest was a royal hunting forest from Anglo-Saxon times, probably dating to when the kings of England kept a palace at nearby Brill and a church at Oakley in the 10th century. It held particular royal significance: Edward the Confessor, later canonised as a saint, was born close by at Islip. At its greatest extent, under Henry II in the 12th century, Bernwood covered some 400 square kilometres across Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, stretching roughly between the River Great Ouse, the Padbury Brook, the Claydon Brook and the River Thame – a hunting ground fit for a king.

The land was appropriated to the Crown as "The Lords, Kingswood," though it was temporarily designated as "Queenswood" during the Elizabethan era.

Residents of the forest were legally forbidden from hunting deer or gathering wood without a special royal licence.

Like most royal forests, Bernwood was gradually whittled away. Disafforestation began around 1217, and by the time of James I in the early 17th century the forest had lost its royal status altogether and all but vanished as a distinct entity. A few precious fragments survive today as protected woodland, alive with butterflies, a stones throw from where the pub now stands. Kingswood's own name is the forest's last, quiet word on the matter.

For centuries, Kingswood functioned as a tiny outlying area within the broader Aylesbury rural framework. In the 19th century, it was listed as a hamlet inside the Ludgershall parish and formed part of the Aylesbury Poor Law Union, which was an administrative network established in Buckinghamshire on 6 July 1835. It was formed in direct response to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which completely overhauled how England handled social welfare and poverty relief.

The union centralised poor relief by grouping together 40 constituent parishes surrounding the market town of Aylesbury. The system was managed by an elected Board of Guardians consisting of 48 local officials. Larger areas were given more representation; for instance, Aylesbury-with-Walton had six Guardians, while tiny hamlets like Kingswood had one. This board reported directly to a central Poor Law Commission in London.

Under the 1834 Act, "outdoor relief" (giving money or food to able-bodied people living in their own homes) was largely abolished. Instead, to receive aid, the impoverished were forced to enter a union workhouse.

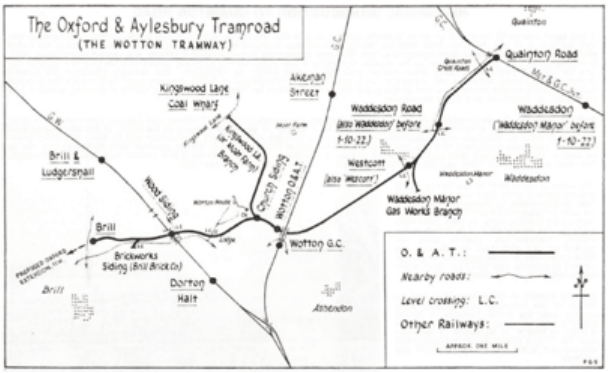
The Roman road outside the door

Whatever the name above the door, our pub has always stood on the same old road. Akeman Street was a major Roman road running some 117 kilometres in a rough line from Watling Street, just north of Verulamium (St Albans), west to the Fosse Way at Corinium Dobunnorum – modern Cirencester. Along the way it passed through Hemel Hempstead, Berkhamsted, Tring, Aylesbury, Alchester near Bicester, and on through Oxfordshire towards Bath and Cheltenham. There is good reason to think the Romans didn't invent this route from scratch but straightened an older track that already crossed the country.

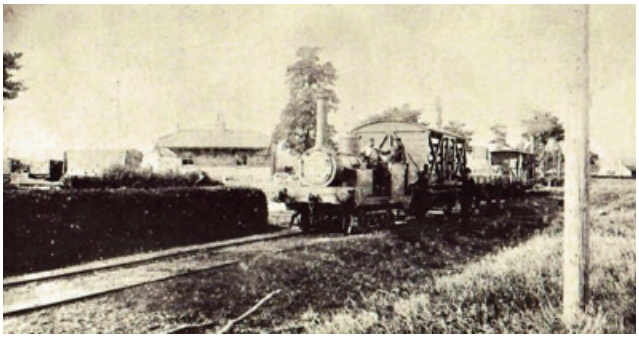
Quite why it was called 'Akeman Street' is genuinely uncertain, and we would rather admit this than invent a tidy answer. One theory ties the name to Bath, whose Anglo-Saxon name was Acemannesceaster, itself possibly derived from the Roman Aquae Sulis – the idea being that a road leading towards Bath's healing waters lent its name to the whole route, even the stretches nowhere near Bath. Another theory is plainer: that 'Akeman' comes from the Old English acmann, an 'oak man', perhaps a woodsman or forester – which, this being the edge of Bernwood Forest, would fit our corner of Buckinghamshire rather nicely. Both are only theories. Nobody alive can say for certain, which is, we think, half the fun of it.

The world's slowest railway

Kingswood has one more claim to fame, and it is a wonderfully small-scale one. In 1871 the 3rd Duke of Buckingham built his own private railway, the Brill Tramway, to connect his estate at Wotton to the main line at Quainton Road, later extending it to the village of Brill. It became famous, if that is the word, for being agonisingly slow: locomotives averaged around four miles an hour, and the journey from Brill to Quainton Road took the best part of an hour and a half to cover six miles. One contemporary letter-writer complained of a train that stopped half a mile short of the station and simply left its passengers sitting there.



A branch of this eccentric little line ran north from Wotton to a coal siding near Kingswood, and – in a detail we rather love – the branch was deliberately routed past a pond so that the horses hauling the wagons could stop for a drink along the way. The Kingswood branch was abandoned at the end of 1915; the main line staggered on, latterly under the Metropolitan Railway, until 1935. Today, sadly, you would be hard pressed to find a trace of it.



A pub of two names

This building has been an inn since the 17th century, an important coaching stop and staging post on the old Akeman Street route west towards Cirencester, Cheltenham and Bath. For most of that long history it was known as the Crooked Billet. A 'billet' is simply a length of wood – originally a piece of firewood – and a 'crooked billet' is a bent one; it was a common and easily-drawn sign for English inns for centuries, with no grander story attached, although on the fringe of a royal forest once thick with timber, it feels a fitting enough name for a house that has stood here for over 300 years.







For a period following a major refurbishment by Oakman Inns in the 2010s, the pub traded as the Akeman Inn, named for the road that it sat upon. Acorn Pubs came along in 2025 and felt that restoring the original name was the right and proper thing to do, and so, onto the next chapter.

Between a vanished royal forest, an uncertainly-named Roman road, a firewood-inspired inn sign that we are glad to be back under, and the world's slowest railway, Kingswood punches well above its weight for a hamlet of thirty houses. We are glad to be part of it – come in, get warm by the fire, and we will tell you the rest over a pint.

With thanks to Historic England, the Victoria County History of Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire Council's Heritage Portal, and the volunteers of the Brill Tramway and Bernwood Forest history projects, from which much of this information was drawn.