

**THE BREAD OVEN  
AQUEDUCT ROAD – GELSMOOR**



**PHOTOGRAPH OF A COMMUNAL BREAD OVEN IN FRANCE**

**BY SAMUEL T STEWART - 2019**

## FORWARD

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNAL BREAD OVENS

Since Medieval times, communal bread ovens were common throughout Britain and Europe. Typically, they were built of bricks and fuelled with wood. The bricks gave them a large thermal mass which meant that they retained their heat after their fire had gone out. Thus, after raking out the ashes food could be cooked on the floor of the oven.

Medieval England and other parts of Europe also had "bannal mills" and "bannal ovens". The banal or bannal laws were the regulations that kept flour and grain under the control of the feudal superior. Peasants then had no choice but to bake in the feudal lord's designated oven after having their grain ground into flour in his mill, and to pay the relevant charges.

Communal brick bread ovens (bake houses) were built for use by groups of villagers. These were periodically fired up and, for a small charge, villagers brought along their loaves, pies and, in some cases, their Sunday dinners, to be cooked in the communal oven.

A baker usually presided over the oven and the dough would be marked with distinctive cuts or with metal "tallies" to make sure they got their own bread after baking.

Carrying the dough from the home to the bake house was a delicate task. Having risen in the warmth of the hearth, it would have to be covered with a flannel or thick cloth and carried quickly, as the cold air would check its rising. Where a lot of bread was being made, it would necessitate time slots being allocated to individuals.

Cast iron stoves in the home became more prevalent in the nineteenth century. However they didn't totally replace communal bread ovens since they were fired continuously and were too large for most domestic kitchens.

It is only during the last hundred years or so that people have cooked with smaller ovens. Together with the wide availability of ready-baked loaves, the traditional communal bread oven has been rendered obsolete and either converted into houses or demolished. Some are still operating in Europe.

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## THE BREAD OVEN IN AQUEDUCT ROAD - OUR LOST HERITAGE



About 150 yards along Aqueduct Rd from its junction with Gelsmoor Rd, marked **B & C** respectively on the appended extract from the 1923 published O/S map, there once stood a "Communal Village Bread Oven" marked **A**. It is also shown on the 1881 surveyed map. This was on the perimeter of the field opposite the group of old cottages which still exist. It unfortunately fell into disrepair and was subsequently demolished for some inexplicable reason. The photographs above, taken in 1980 are the only evidence of its existence. **Coleorton Heritage Group has restored a similar oven on The Upper Moor.**

The oven on Aqueduct Road would have had a coal fire (fire box) separate to the oven, which could operate for long periods with skilled stoking. The appended photographs suggest that it may well have been constructed with a double oven, and **it is interesting to note that Coleorton Heritage Group comment that the bread oven on the Upper Moor has a double oven, suggesting they are of a similar design, which makes sense.** The roof of the oven would most likely have been dome shaped internally in order to reflect and circulate the heat evenly. The exact date when this oven was built is not known, but it would probably have been sometime in the early 1800's. It would most likely have been financed by Sir George Beaumont of Coleorton Hall as a communal bakery for his tenants living in the many surrounding small cottages and crofts. They would no doubt have had to pay a fee to Sir George for using it. It is

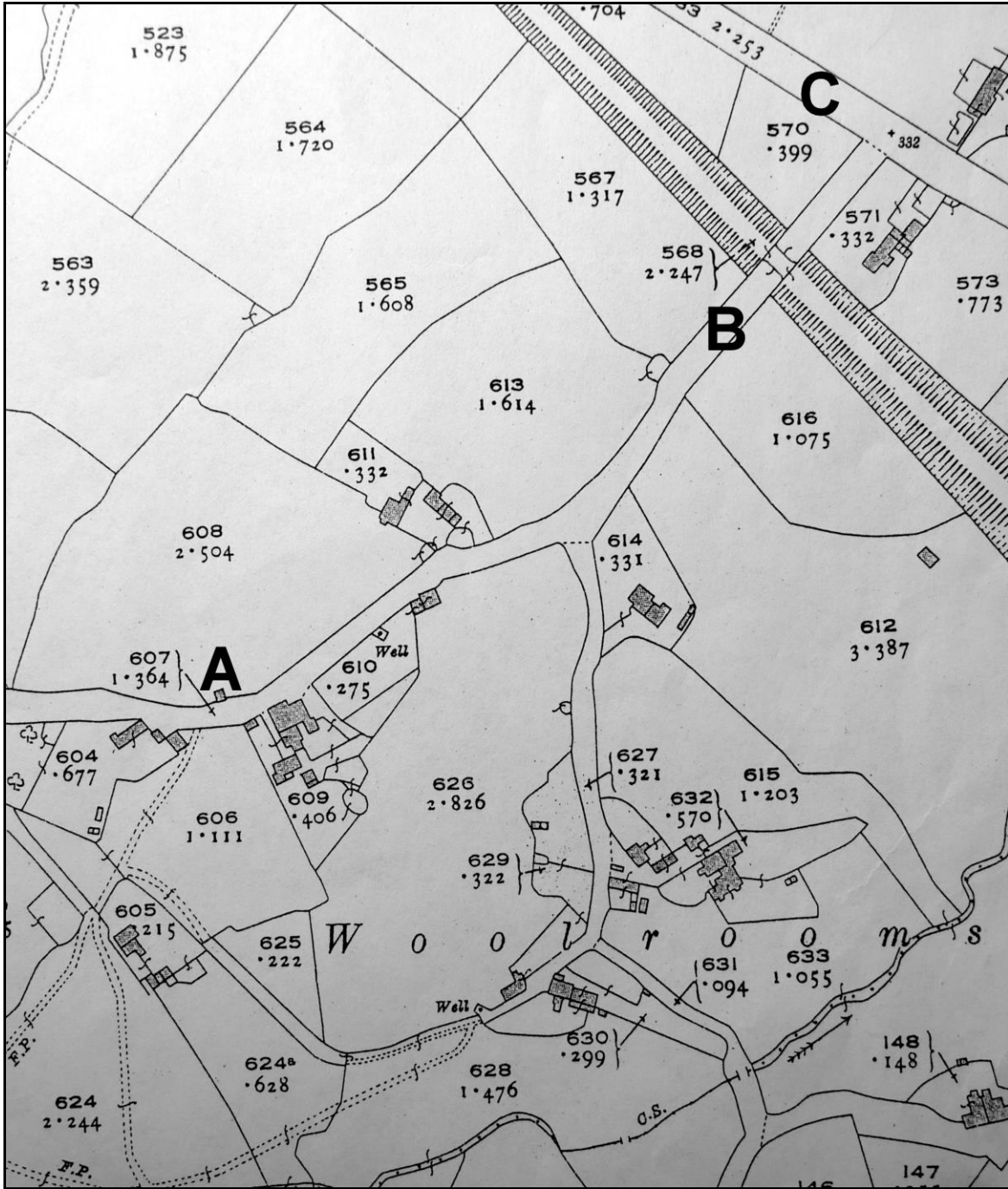
quite feasible that at some later date, dough was prepared in the tiny building directly opposite to where the bread oven was situated; this was a domestic residence at one time. This is only conjecture and we have no proof of this as yet. Hearsay has it that the communal oven / bake house in the "Woolrooms" was still in use in the 1920's / 1930's. With two families of at least 10 children living nearby, it would no doubt have been well used.

There was also another local bake house which is shown in the top RH corner of the map where the Warringtons' lived.

The photograph below would have been typical of the scene at a communal bread oven in the late 1800's / early 1900's. Except for the fact that it is only a single oven, it is probably not dissimilar in its basic design, to the one on Aqueduct Road. This one has a fire box below the oven. Note the arched metal plate with a handle leaning against the front of the building. This would have been placed at the entrance to the oven during baking instead of having a hinged door attached.



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1923 PUBLISHED O/S MAP