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OUR PAST

California? Isn't that in the United States?

This week's contributor is **TREVOR OTTLEWSKI**; researcher, author and Chairman of the Wokingham History Group. Trevor has a wide knowledge of local history and specialises in the area's historic buildings.



WHEN most British people hear the name California, they think of California USA, and perhaps sunny beaches, Hollywood, or the gold rush, however there are some seven places named California in Great Britain.

In Berkshire, the name California refers to an area of land that runs alongside Nine Mile Ride; it is now wholly in the parish of Finchampstead, although in the past has had portions in Barkham, Wokingham and Wokingham Without.

Defining the confines of California is not easy as it had no specific boundary; by the late 1850s the name described the area around a brick yard and sawmill located, as we would say today, at the Nine Mile Ride end of Kiln Ride, however some 70 years later it extended further west to California cross roads at the junction of Nine Mile Ride and Finchampstead Road, and then further still to California in England, the holiday camp.

The area of "California in England" had historically been Longmoor Bog and after the lake was formed, Longmoor Lake, the adoption of the name California seems only to have extended west with the new attraction. It is the latter feature, now a local country park that in most minds is the focus for the name California, albeit a mile or more away from the original site/centre of California.

Why California? There is no definitive answer, but the most likely reason being an appreciation of California in America by one of its land owners; whether the subsequent planting of Wellingtonia (Sequoia) trees nearby in Finchampstead was deliberately intended to add to the character of California is not known, but they were a notable feature in California USA.

It would seem that the name California and the business arrived together in the early 1850s; details are not clear regarding

its original size, however by 1856 it had not only the brickyard and sawmill, but its own rail link, the California Tramway, that joined the main South Eastern and Chatham Railway line between Crowthorne and Wokingham, at California Junction.

The original brickworks may have been located a little to the east of its eventual site, but by the early 1870s it was firmly established with at least four kilns, two clay mills, a brickyard, sawmill and timber yard. In addition there were five homes built for employees, one detached for the manager, and two semi detached.

The houses remain to the present day and are among the very small number of 19th century buildings that were built on a virtually undeveloped Nine Mile Ride. Whilst the main tramway ran east from the kilns crossing Sandhurst Road and on to the main line, a further line ran from the brickworks to a clay pit at Wick Hill to assist in carrying clay to the clay mill.

The business was first in the hands of civil engineer and surveyor, Henry Read, but was soon incorporated into the huge Walter estate. It is reputed that bricks from this yard were taken by rail to London and used to construct The Times newspaper printing office.

The other feature of note within California was a rifle range, this was sited east of the brickyard and was established by the 1870s. Shooting was directed from south to north at which point there was a large target site cut into the hill with a signal post and hut.

Distances were laid out in intervals of 50 yards, starting at 50 and reaching 650 close to the junction of range Road and Nine Mile Ride; by the 1890s this had been extended to 950 yards by increasing the range across Nine Mile Ride (then a little used forest track), a situation hard to imagine today.

There was little change to the area



That was then – the yellow dot on the map shows California's junction at Nine Mile Ride and Kiln Ride....



Trevor stands next to one of the sleepers from California's tramway

until after the First World War, when throughout the 1920s, a steady stream of people moved to the area, many buying plots fronting Nine Mile Ride, but also sites along other previously undeveloped roads; the plots were often narrow, but very long, probably because the price was based on the width of the frontage.



... and this is now - The same junction as it looks today; the site of the former California brickworks and sawmill.

California at this time described land on both sides of Nine Mile Ride from the junction with Finchampstead Road, east to some point beyond Range Road.

A huge number of bungalows were built, and in a wide variety of materials; timber, asbestos, breezeblock and brick were all in common use, and even today a few of these original buildings survive.

Reputedly a lot of the incomers were ex-servicemen and/or Londoners.

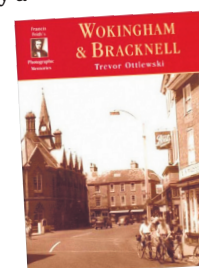
The influx of new residents continued throughout the 1930s and it could be argued has never stopped.

The development of shops and service station around 1930 moved the emphasis of California further west,

and the establishment of the "California in England" amusement park and eventual holiday camp virtually relocated the name away from its original site, even the speedway team were known as the "California Poppies".

The area now bears almost no resemblance to that of 100 years ago and for most people California is the name of a managed country park, its original history long forgotten.

■ **Trevor is the author of Wokingham & Bracknell: Francis Frith's Photographic Memories. ISBN: 978-1859375938**



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