

The Kowback:

Stourbridge's misplaced brook

by

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Kowback has been suggested as an early name of the brook which flows through the village of Oldswinford, formerly in Worcestershire and now in Dudley Metropolitan Borough. The name occurs in only one historical source document, and by carefully re-examining this text in conjunction with later plans and maps it is demonstrated here that the Kowback was, in all likelihood, a completely different, although minor, brook to the east. Further, it is argued that the term may actually represent a transcription error for the contemporaneous name Robache, a lane bearing the latter appellation having led from the main Stourbridge-to-Lye road (now the A458) almost directly to the Kowback.

Introduction

It would probably be fair to say that most residents of Stourbridge are unaware of the extensive network of streams and brooks that cross the area. After all, these watercourses are now mostly hidden from view, having been diverted through underground culverts and pipes to make way for the intensive housing and road development that took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Today, Stourbridge's brooks are largely considered an irrelevance—if not a nuisance and a health-and-safety hazard—a view which is far removed from that of earlier centuries. Our streams and brooks were often used as field and property boundaries, and some of them even delineated portions of the local medieval manor and parish boundaries. The Coalbourne brook (in Amblecote) bounded part of the Norman forest of Kinver; the Withbrook formed the western edge Bedcote sub-manor, and the Salt Brook still marks the eastern edge of the ancient parish of Old Swinford* (now superseded by a cluster of civil and ecclesiastical parishes). The watercourses fed fish ponds, powered local mills and were essential sources of water for drinking, washing and agricultural irrigation. They also functioned as landmarks; and their crossing points have significantly influenced the pattern of roads in the vicinity. Their fords and bridges, as well as the watercourses themselves, have contributed to many local place names: e.g. to Brook Street, Brook Road, Spring Road, Sensall Road, Springfield Avenue, Shepherd's Brook Road, Ludgbridge, Lusbridge Close, Brook Holloway, Ravensitch, Waterfall Road, Redlake Road, Poole Street, Mere Road, Stepping Stones, Stambermill and Ham Lane, and, of course, to the names Oldswinford and Stourbridge.

Google Maps shows the fragments of brooks and streams which remain visible above ground today. If you view this online service, you will see that the brook which runs adjacent to St Mary's Church in Oldswinford is labelled the *Kowbatch* (a variant spelling of *Kowback*). This is surprising, for two reasons. Firstly, *Kowbatch* (or *Kowback*) is an old name which seems to have fallen out of use several centuries ago, and secondly, the name seems to have originally referred to a different brook entirely! I will return to this point shortly.

* Oldswinford has been traditionally written as two words in ecclesiastical contexts.

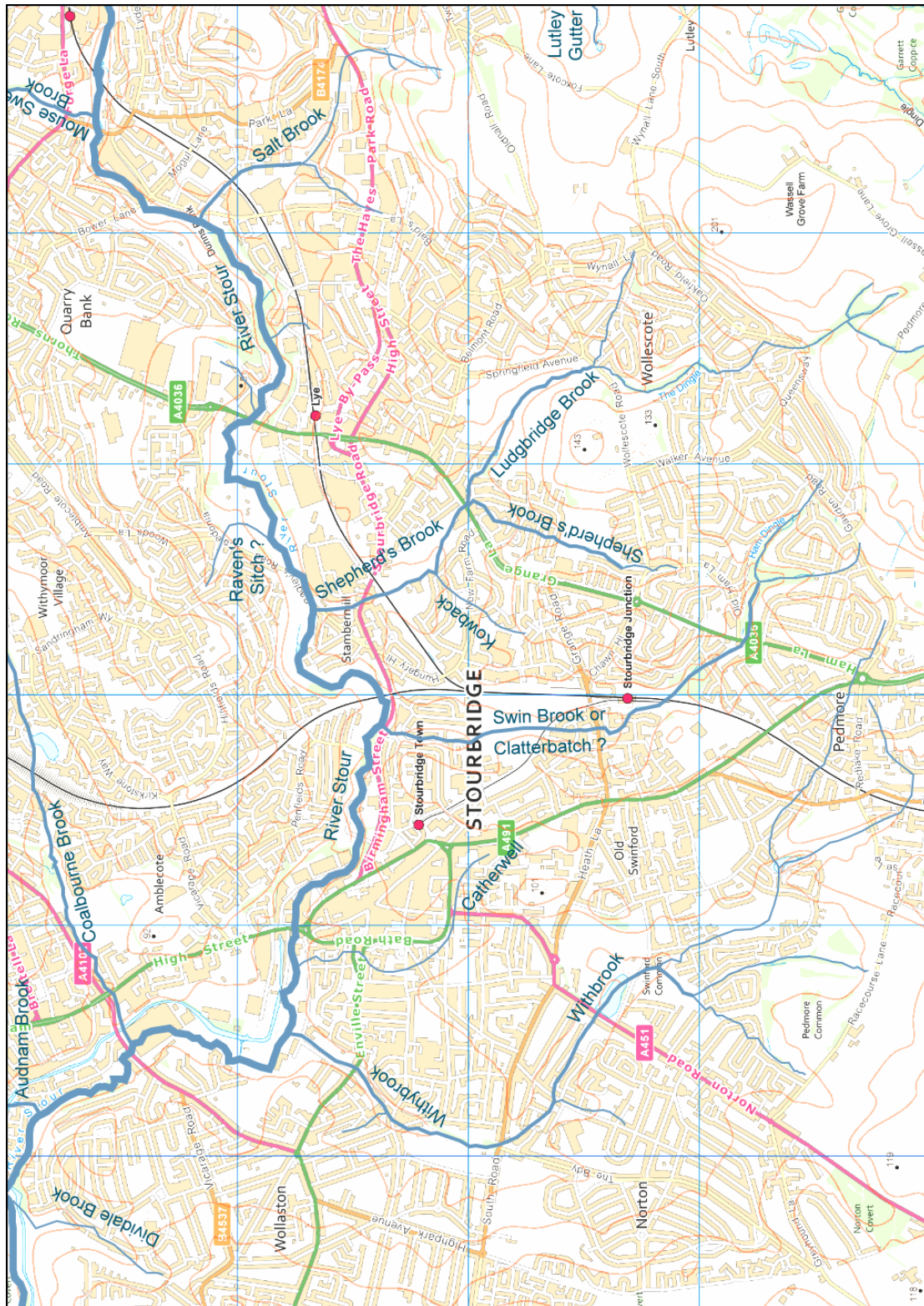


Figure 1. Approximate natural courses of Stourbridge's streams and brooks, many of which now flow through sub-surface pipelines and are hidden from view. The map's background is from the Ordnance Survey's Open Source Data Set, 2013.

The brook flowing through Oldswinford village

This brook rises as two separate springs on the lower slopes of Wychbury Hill near Pedmore Lane. It runs through Ham Dingle, under the railway line south of Stourbridge Junction, then past St Mary's Church, under Brook Road and through the Red Hill School grounds to join the River Stour near Stepping Stones (Figure 1).

In recent centuries the brook has been referred to by at least two names: the *Clatterbatch*, and the *Swin Brook* (or *Swinbrook*). Indeed, I have used the former in a number of articles, but in truth there are doubts about the applicability of both names to Oldswinford's brook.

In his composite online maps of 2002-4 and 2005-6, the Dudley Borough archaeologist, John Hemingway, names Oldswinford's brook as the *Clatterbatch*. However, as Chambers (1978) points out, *Clatterbatch* was actually a location near the River Stour. Indeed, the Ordnance Survey maps from 1903 to 1938 (both 6-inch and 25-inch scale) put *Clatterbatch* (and a meadow named *Clatterbatch Rough*) about 300 metres east of Stepping Stones near the site of an artificial channel that shortcuts the original, more convoluted, course of the river Stour. (The channel appears to be either a late-eighteenth-to-early-nineteenth century mill leat or perhaps a structure related to the construction of the nearby railway viaduct). This naming discrepancy throws doubt upon the attribution of the name *Clatterbatch* to Oldswinford's brook; and the likelihood is that the name *Clatterbatch* actually referred to this leat or to the section of the Stour that it bypassed. Another, albeit more remote, possibility is that *Clatterbatch* referred to the watercourse now known as Shepherd's Brook, which joins the Stour some 300m east of *Clatterbatch Rough*, near Stambermill, but their separation makes this seem unlikely.

The name *Swin Brook* seems to have originated with Rev Dr Treadway Russell Nash in 1781 as part of an attempt to explain the origin of the place name Oldswinford, his explanation being that the settlement had been named after a ford which crossed a brook (hypothetically) named *Swin*. Unfortunately, some authorities (e.g. Scott, 1832 and Noake, 1868) have adopted this name and quoted it as though it were the historical name of the brook. During the last century, it has gradually become clear that Nash's hypothesis is wrong: the settlement of Oldswinford was actually named after its parent Domesday manor (known in 1086 as Suineford); and this manor, together with that of Kingswinford, was named after a ford on the main north-south route—now the A491—across the River Stour. (Presumably the name arose because of the ford's relevance to swine herding along this ancient route.) Thus the name *Swin Brook* seems to have no genuine historical basis. It should be noted here that Scott (1832) asserts that Oldswinford's brook "*may properly be called Swinford brook*", but he also provides no historical justification for that statement.

As already noted, between 2002 and 2006, John Hemingway and his colleagues in Dudley Metropolitan Borough's Historic Environment Team published a series of composite maps showing the Borough and its various townships at different representative dates. Oldswinford's brook is named on these maps as the *Kowback* in 1750; and the *Clatterbatch* in 1835 and thereafter. With the greatest of respect to Dr Hemingway, I would suggest that both attributions are dubious, particularly that of the *Kowback*. (The association of the two names might have originated in a footnote written some 170 years earlier by William Scott in his book, *Stourbridge and its Vicinity*... Scott states that *Kowbatch* is an earlier name for the *Clatterbatch*, but he does not clarify the location of the brook in question.)

It is disappointing that the misattribution of the aforementioned stream-names is now being reproduced on mass-media services like Google Maps. Place-names (including the names of brooks) carry fragments of historical and topographical information, and it is important to avoid corrupting this information—especially when quoting it on online platforms which tend to uncritically perpetuate misconception and myth as readily as they do fact.

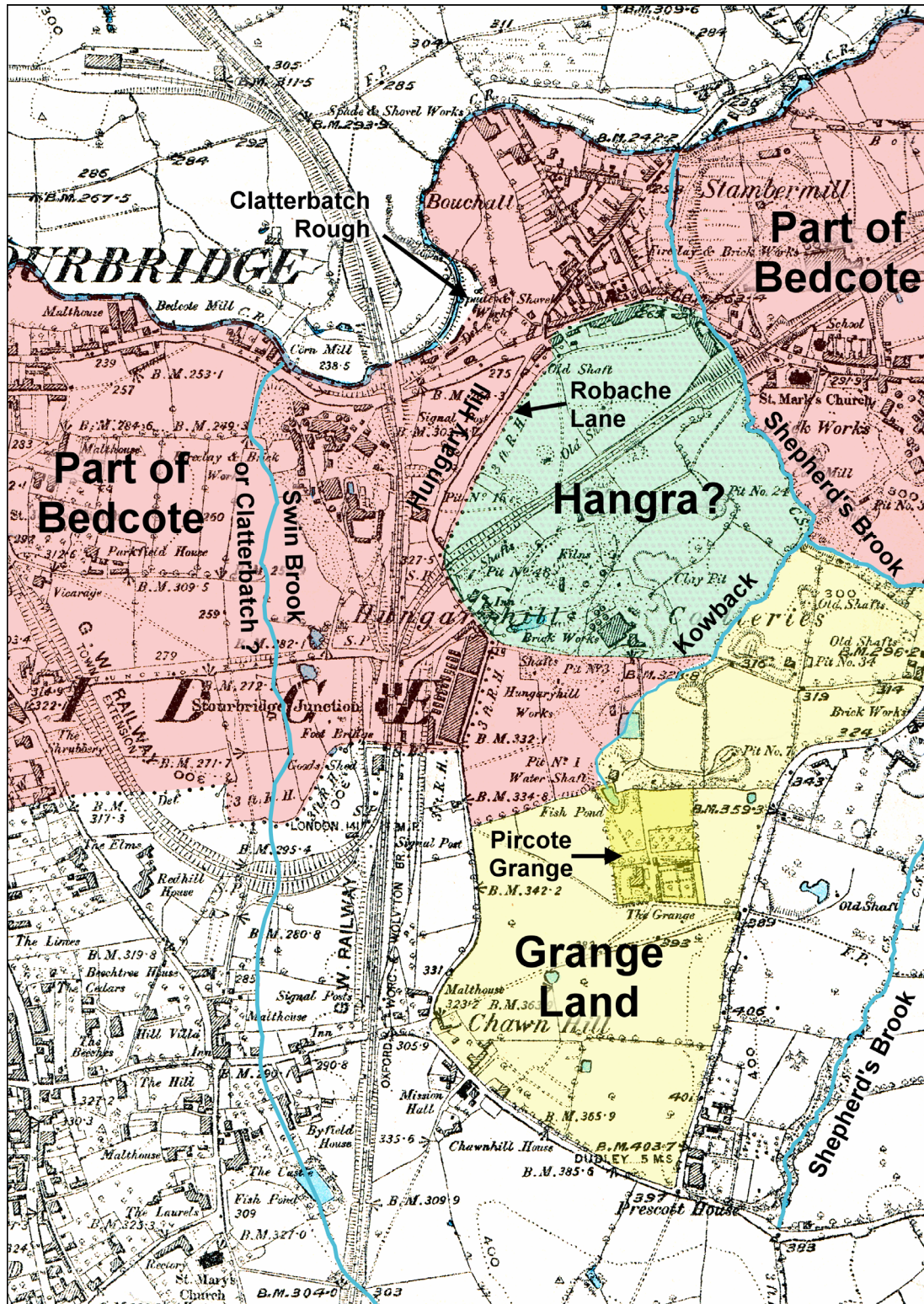


Figure 2. Location of the Kowback in relation to the 1622 Bedcote perambulation (pink tint) and probable extent of Pircote Grange lands (yellow tints). The conjectural *Hangra* (hill-side wood), which may be the source of the name Hungary Hill, is also shown (green textured tint). The figure's background is an extract from the 1888 Ordnance Survey 6-inch County Series map, Worcs. sheet 4—the earliest accurately-drawn large-scale map of the area.

The location of the *Kowback*

In the historical source literature, there is only one known reference to the term *Kowback*. This occurs in a document compiled by Bishop Charles Lyttelton (apparently in 1754) from the proceedings of a Court Baron of Thomas Jervois held in 1622. The document details the "*Metes and Bounds*" of the sub-manor "*of Bedcoat*" and lists a perambulation (a sequence of landmarks) around the boundary of Bedcote. Chambers (1978) provides a detailed account of the whole perambulation, and an outline plan of its entire course is provided in James (2016). The section of Bishop Lyttelton's perambulation most relevant to the present discussion is reproduced below.

...to a Lane near Stamborn Mill [Stambermill] and leading from thence to Stourbridge, and along that Lane to Highman's Green, and beyond it to a Lane leading to Oldswinford, and so to Kowback and Pircote Grainge, and taking in a close called Gorstie Leasow to the upper end of Fryar Meadow...

The first lane mentioned here is the main Lye-to-Stourbridge road (now the A458), and the initial direction of travel is clockwise around Bedcote sub-manor which, at this point, means that we are moving westwards along the A458 away from the site at which the road bridges Shepherd's Brook. The landmark, *Highman's Green*, was located at the junction of today's Bagley Street, Hungary Hill and the A458. From here we travel along *a Lane leading to Oldswinford*. This lane is Hungary Hill (or, more accurately, a route running parallel to, and about 20m to the east of, the present road).

The next waypoint, *and so to Kowback and Pircote Grainge*, has led to some confusion. Chambers (1978) simply says that:

Kowback remains mysterious, since it can hardly be the same as Clatterbatch, as at least one authority has suggested, because Clatterbatch was down by the Stour, near to Stepping Stones, but this does not hold us up...

Unfortunately, Mr Chambers does not identify the authority he refers to, but it seems likely he meant William Scott (1832). Chambers then proceeds to discuss the remainder of the perambulation and leaves the question of *Kowback*'s identity unresolved.

Nevertheless, the matter is very easily settled by careful consideration of the perambulation's wording and a brief examination of the Ordnance Survey's 6-inch and 25-inch County Series maps of 1888 and 1903 respectively. It is clear from the perambulation that *Kowback* and *Pircote Grainge* were fairly close together, if not contiguous (there is no mention of, for example, a lane, path or other route-way joining them); and the words "*and so to*" seem to imply that the route to *Kowback* and *Pircote Grainge* is an obvious (perhaps well known) extension of the road we are already on (Hungary Hill). Fortunately, the location of *Pircote Grainge* is known; it lay upon an easterly extrapolation of Hungary Hill (Figure 2). OS maps show ponds around Pircote Grange which are fed and drained by a small stream that runs roughly north-east to join the lower reaches of Shepherd's Brook. Evidently, it is this tributary of Shepherd's Brook that the Bedcote perambulation of 1622 names as the *Kowback*. It would be encountered shortly after leaving Hungary Hill and, tracing this watercourse upstream, one would have soon encountered *Pircote Grainge*, before continuing the perambulation west towards *Gorstie Leasow* and *Fryar Meadow* (now obliterated by the railway line and Red Hill School's playing fields).

Kowback cannot possibly have referred to the brook flowing through Oldswinford, otherwise the Bedcote boundary would have had to oscillate wildly to the west, to the east and then west again via some combination of unspecified routes. That would represent a geographical improbability as well as a very imprecise and unlikely construct in a boundary perambulation.

***Robache* and *Kowback*: A transcription error?**

The similarity between these two contemporaneous names, and the apparent proximity of the features they represent, is interesting, and seems to support the idea that the *Kowback* was located between Pircote Grange and Shepherd's Brook. A few decades ago, the local historian and author Nigel Perry discovered a reference in the Oldswinford manor court roll of 1630 to a route named *Robache Lane*, which abutted closes named *Ridggrove* and *Hassold Fields* (Haden, 1988 and Perry, 2001). A field named *Ridgegrove* can be identified on Court and Blackden's 1782 map of Oldswinford manor at the lower (north) end of Hungary Hill—indeed, Ridge Grove survives as a modern road name there—and from this evidence it has been surmised that *Robache Lane* was the 17th-century name of Hungary Hill (or, more likely, a lane running parallel to Hungary Hill, just 20m to the east).

Apart from the initial letter, the word *Robache* is strikingly similar to *Kowback*. The second elements of these names, *-bache* and *-back*, relate to a brook or a stream. They are simply variant spellings derived from the Old English (OE) *baece*. Both derivatives are common in the West Midlands, their meaning being either a stream or a "fairly well marked, but not dramatic, (stream) valley" (Gelling, 1984; Gelling and Cole, 1997; Smith, 1956a). (A related word, *beck*—from Old Norse *bekkr*—is still used throughout much of north-east England to denote a stream.) The letter <w> in *Kowback* is probably insignificant given the variation in phonetically-based spelling common in historical documents. That leaves only the different initial letters of the names to be explained. In some seventeenth- and eighteen-century handwritten scripts, the upper-case letters <K> and <R> look remarkably similar, and it is not inconceivable that a misreading or transcription error—either historical or modern—has resulted in two different versions of the same name making their way into modern printed works. Chambers (1978) notes, for example, that Bishop Lyttelton's scribe was "a better calligrapher than copyist".

Perhaps the most convincing reason for believing that *Kowback* and *Robache* represent the same name arises from the question: If the *-bache* (brook) in *Robache* did not refer to the *Kowback*, what brook did it refer to? There is certainly no other significant watercourse in the vicinity; and the corollary of that is obvious.

In short, I believe the two names probably refer to the same geographical feature: the first, a lane leading towards a named brook, and the second, the brook itself.

If we accept this hypothesis, the question then arises as to which name is closest to the correct (original) form. It seems unlikely that *Kowback* is the original. The obvious meaning of this would have to be Cow Brook, but the root forms of Cow rarely give rise to the spelling *Kow*. Even the OE plurals *kye* and *kyn(e)* tend to result in modern names beginning with Ky, Ki or Ke. A more likely explanation is that *Robache*, rather than *Kowback*, most accurately reflects the original name, and this may have derived from the OE *rūh* or, more probably, *rūgan*, meaning rough (Smith, 1956b). The latter commonly produces modern place-names beginning with a Row syllable (i.e. either a rəU or raU sound). The "rough" adjective could have arisen because the brook flows down a fairly steep slope, perhaps leaving rocks exposed as the surrounding soil washed downstream. Alternatively, the land through which the brook flowed may have been left ungrazed and overgrown. This seems to be the most likely reason as there is evidence that the area was wooded at this time. The place-name and road-name Hungary Hill probably derived from OE *hangra* or *hongra*, which means a wood on a steep slope (Smith, 1956a). The word hunger or hungry in today's West Midlands place names is not an uncommon derivation from this OE root; and a transmutation of hungry to Hungary is easily conceivable. Additionally, the Bedcote boundary itself (as evidenced by Bishop Lyttelton's 1622 perambulation) clearly circumnavigates something geographically significant—perhaps a wood—on the hill-side (see Figure 2).

Conclusion

In light of the foregoing arguments, I suggest (a) that the *Kowback* was a small stream located north-east of Pircote Grange, and (b) its name may be a corruption of *Robache*, meaning rough brook, perhaps one running through, or along the edge of, a hill-side wood.

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