

JOSEPH BELDAM, Esq. F.S.A. read a Memoir on some excavations which he had recently made at the Arbury Banks, near Ashwell, Hertfordshire, as follows :—

“The communication which I am about to make, will not, I regret, record the discovery of any rare objects, but may serve to throw some additional light on the early history of an interesting spot, and help to correct the errors of several eminent authors. The spot in question is known by the name of the ‘Arbury, or Harborough Banks,’ a name which is evidently Saxon, and without much doubt derived from the Saxon compound ‘Here-berga,’ a military camp or station. This ancient encampment occupies elevated ground at about half a mile to the south of the town of Ashwell, in Hertfordshire, and commands very extensive prospects. It has been noticed by many topographical writers, among whom I may first mention Camden, who describes the spot in the following manner :—‘I once imagined that the ancient Britons, who, according to Gildas, paid divine homage to mountains, rivers, springs, and groves, from the same circumstances, and with the same meaning, gave it the name of Magiovinium, and that it was the place so called by Antoninus. But time has better informed me, nor am I so fond of my mistake as to be ashamed to alter my opinion on this head. A proof of the antiquity of this place we have, however, in a *large square earthwork* adjoining, which by the Roman coins frequently dug up shows us who were its makers; and it is expressly called (that is, the town below), a “burgh,” in the Conqueror’s survey of England 500 years ago.’

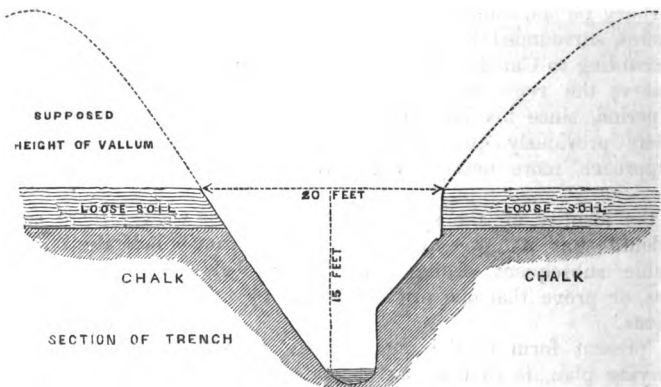
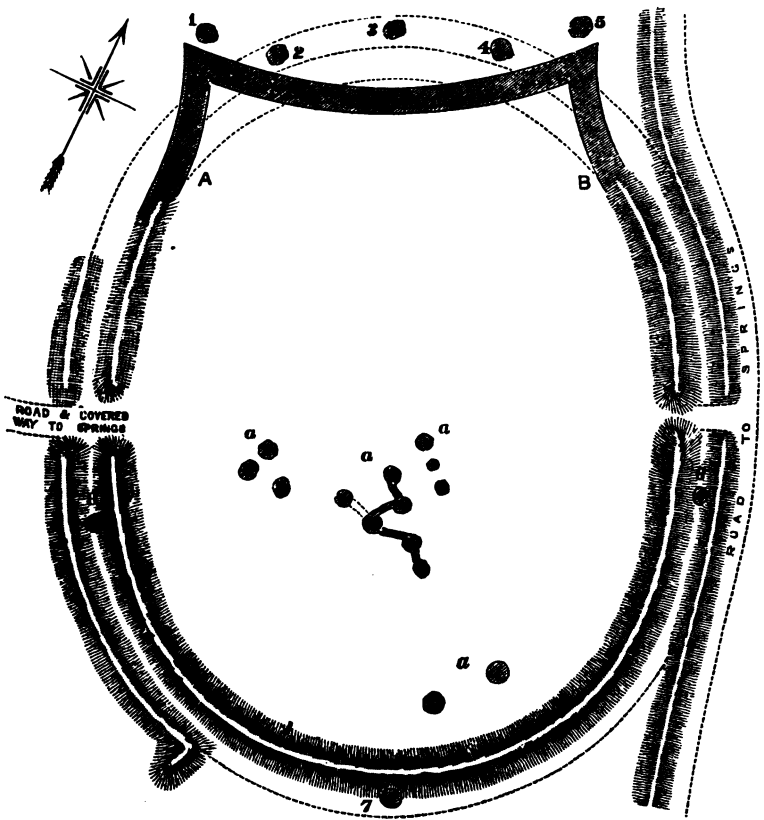
“Chauncy, in his county history, observes on the same place, ‘There are marks of a fortification on a hill within Harborough Field in this parish; where there is a large *quadrant*, inclosed with a trench or rampart [he does not appear to have known which], where the Romans kept a standing camp, from whence they could easily discern when an enemy appeared against them, and the coin that has often been dug up there shows as much.’

“Clutterbuck describes the spot as ‘a considerable entrenchment called Arbury Banks, consisting of an area of a *square* form of about twelve acres, surrounded by a single vallum, in the neighbourhood of which, according to Camden, Roman coins have been found.’

“I reserve the remarks of Salmon, a third county historian, to a later period, since his inferences, though founded, like those of the writers previously quoted, upon some inaccuracies, appear to me to approach more nearly to the truth as to the origin of the camp.

“Of the identity of the spot described by these writers there can be no doubt; but its present form and appearance indicate either considerable subsequent changes, effected probably by agricultural operations, or prove that the original reporters made very inaccurate observations.

“The present form of the encampment, as will be seen by the accompanying plan, is that of an elongated horse-shoe; the original vallum towards the north-east being completely levelled, the area in this part being somewhat expanded on both sides, and inclosed by



Plan of Camp at Arbury Banks, Ashwell, Herts.

a common field-baulk, which, instead of being convex, like the southern end, is curved slightly inward.

“The whole area of the camp stretches across the flattened crown of the hill or ridge, in a direction from south-west to north-east; the surface of the open field sloping away from each end, but more rapidly towards the south-west, where the vallum is consequently much the highest. The length of the area within is about 300 yards; its breadth in the middle about 220 yards, contracting to about 120 yards at the distance of 20 yards from each end. We may accept the admeasurement of former writers, therefore, at about 12 acres. Midway in this vallum, on either side, is an opening into the area, now used as a field-road, and probably indicating the original entrances, from each of which a road descends by a covered way to the Ashwell Springs. There is no appearance externally of a surrounding trench, and, until our recent investigation, no person in the neighbourhood had any idea of its existence.

“I may add that this camp is situated between two ancient roads, that it is something more than a mile to the north of the Ickniel Street, the use of which in Roman times is sufficiently attested by numerous Roman remains found along its whole course, and at about half a mile to the south of the Ashwell Way, with which, indeed, it appears to have been connected by a branch road, passing close under the eastern vallum. The claims of the Ashwell Way to be considered a Roman thoroughfare are still stronger than those of the Ickniel Street, the former being remarkable for its many antiquities, among which I need only mention, as being better known than the others, the remains of the Roman villa and cemetery at Litlington.* It appears, indeed, to have hitherto escaped the notice of antiquaries that this road was one of two vicinal ways running parallel to the Ickniel Street, one on each side of it, and forming supplementary lines of communication between the great Roman camp at Chesterford and several Roman stations in Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire. They traverse in fact what appears to have been always a border country, and evidently guarded the approaches into the high country to the south from enemies emerging from the marshes of Cambridgeshire to the north. Thus they originally separated the first Roman province from the country of the Iceni, and subsequently divided the kingdom of Mercia from the territory occupied by the Danes.

“An encampment of the form above described, though undoubtedly placed in the midst of Roman remains, seemed to me more naturally to suggest a British or a Saxon, than a Roman origin; and of this opinion was Salmon, though evidently mistaking several of the facts. Arguing from the supposition that this camp was placed neither on the apex of the hill nor on its sunny side, he infers that it could not have been a *Castrum Exploratorum* of the Romans; and from the imaginary absence of a trench he presumes that it was a place much more fitted for sports and exercises, or perhaps for British sacrifices. ‘Hence,’ he thinks, ‘that, although Ashwell might have been a town in British and Roman times, Arbury Banks could not have been a Roman camp.’

* See *Archæologia*, vol. xxvi. p. 368.

“ During the last autumn, an inclosure of the parish of Ashwell being immediately in prospect, which might possibly obliterate the remaining features of this interesting spot, I was invited by the proprietor to make a previous examination. From that gentleman I learned that some years before excavations had been made in the area, which had led to the discovery of broken pottery and bones of animals, and that in removing part of the vallum human skulls had been found, which were afterwards buried in the churchyard. Coins also were said to have been found by the labourers, none of which, however, had been preserved, though from the description given they were probably Roman. The vallum I understood to have been very much higher than at present, and until within a few years to have been covered with verdure, and remarkable for flowers said to be only seen on this and one or two other ancient sites in the county.

“ In the month of September I commenced excavations, which continued for five or six following days.

“ A careful inspection of the ground leading me to conclude that the present horse-shoe form must have been originally oval, and that the whole must have been surrounded by a trench, I commenced by projecting an imaginary line at the northern end of the area, from A to B, passing through C, corresponding with the form of the vallum at the opposite end. Around this line, holes were then dug in search of a trench, as well as along the concave line of the present baulk. Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, will show the places where the ground was thus opened. The natural soil of the field is about 2 feet deep, where the solid chalk is reached. At Nos. 1 and 5, along the line of the present baulk, we soon came to the undisturbed chalk, proving that no trench had been there; but at Nos. 2, 3 and 4, a trench was found, and excavated to a considerable depth. In order to ascertain the continuity of the trench round the entire area, the same process was pursued, and with similar success, at Nos. 6, 7 and 8. The result was sufficient to establish both facts, namely, that the original form of the camp was neither square nor horse-shoe, but oval, and that it was surrounded by a wide trench of unequal depth. The excavation at No. 2, having been more complete and decisive than the others, I will briefly describe it.

“ The workmen were here ordered to dig to the bottom, and to clear out the trench sufficiently to draw a section. This being effected, though with great labour owing to the extreme hardness of the soil filled in, a clean cutting in the solid chalk was discovered, of the depth of 15 feet, with a width of about 20 feet at the upper margin, and 3 feet at the bottom. Here lay a heap of vegetable matter, about 3 or 4 feet in diameter, and 6 or 8 inches in thickness, beneath which was a circular pit about 2 feet deep, which contained nothing worthy of remark. A specimen of this vegetable substance has been submitted to Professor Quekett, whose obliging report upon it, as well as on the bones afterwards discovered, will appear at the end of this paper. It will be seen that the position of No. 2 is precisely at the bend of the supposed vallum. It was here, therefore, that we were to look for a corresponding curve in the trench; and of this we had the most decisive proof in the slant cutting through the whole depth, making it certain that its form corresponded with the supposed convex vallum above. It may suffice to add, respect-

ing the other excavations in the trench, that, though they seemed to show some inequality as to depth and width in different parts of its extensive circuit, we were led to conclude that the admeasurements at No. 2 might be accepted as an approximate average of the whole. If then to the depth of 15 feet below the surface we add a probable elevation of 10 or 15 feet above ground for the vallum, we obtain an average depth from the apex of from 25 to 30 feet. And if again to the width of 20 feet across the margin we add 15 or 20 feet for the inclination of the vallum above, bearing also in mind the probability that in the more exposed parts of the camp an outer vallum existed, we obtain at least an average width of from 35 to 40 feet. Clutterbuck, indeed, affirms that the vallum was single, and at the southern and northern ends, where the ground falls away, it probably was so, but on the eastern and western sides, where the level within the camp is nearly the same with the external level, there is reason to suppose the existence of a second vallum, a probability which seems to be confirmed by the scarped appearance of the field-baulks, which evidently follow the margin of the trench on these sides, and look like the remains of a second rampart.

“I come now to our excavations in the area of the camp. Here, having no certain guide, we opened the ground chiefly near the middle and in the southern half, where pottery and bones were said to have been found before. The workmen presently came to black earth and bones, and opened a considerable number of circular pits, irregularly placed at short distances from each other, and generally connected by meandering passages or drains—see *a a a* in plan. The depth of the pits varied from 4 to 5 feet, with nearly the same diameter, usually bulging out a little as they descended, and altogether resembling in form the small circular vessels, of which abundant fragments were found among them. The passages or drains leading from one to another were in general not quite so deep as the pits, being about 3 or 4 feet deep, and about 2 feet wide. Both pits and passages were filled with a fine black kind of garden mould, intermixed with bones, most of which were splintered, and with fragments of coarse pottery, of various forms and colours, but none of them entire. The colours were chiefly black or chocolate, but some of them were of a light reddish hue, and many of them were scored or scratched into different patterns, exhibiting a kind of soft soapy glaze. A very large proportion of them were fragments of small cups or pipkins. Some of them were still incrustated with soot, and all of them seemed to have been adapted to culinary or other domestic purposes. Among the fragments, we counted between thirty and forty differently shaped lips of vessels: while a few were of larger size, and had handles designed to be suspended by a cord. The pottery appears to be a mixture of British and Saxon: but none, I think, are of a decided Roman character. In some of these pits we found ashes and other marks of fire, with large stones or blocks of chalk at the bottom, probably designed to assist in the cooking operation. No coins of any kind were found, nor any other article of human manufacture, except a bone piercer and a bone pin, both of the rudest forms; a small black stone, resembling a celt, which may have been used for some burnishing purpose, and the blade of a small knife, probably Saxon.

“The bones on which I subjoin a report, obligingly furnished by Professor Quekett, are of the kind usually found in ancient sites, consisting chiefly of horns and bones of the *bos longifrons*, the deer, the goat, the horse, and the boar, with but one single fragment of the human skeleton, namely, a small portion of a cranium. The extent of ground thus opened in which pits were discovered might be about 30 or 40 yards square: and a few excavations were made elsewhere without success, though it is probable that similar pits might have been found in many other parts of the encampment. But enough had been done to ascertain their general character, and also to conclude that they would not repay the trouble of a further search. Here, therefore, our labours terminated.

“I will in conclusion venture to suggest that the pits and passages may have been the dwelling-places of human beings. The idea of these passages forming part of a system of camp drainage seems to be rebutted by their being found chiefly in the highest and most exposed part of the camp. However small and inconvenient these pits must have been for human occupation, they were in all probability used by the occupants of the camp as huts, and not improbably thatched over in inclement weather, while some of them were obviously used for culinary and other domestic purposes. I believe that during the late Crimean war our own soldiers found refuge, shelter, and accommodation in similar places, and they do not appear to differ very materially from pits and holes discovered on other British and Saxon sites.

“Meanwhile, I beg to present a summary of facts actually established, namely,—First, that the original form of the camp was not square as described by former writers, nor of the horse-shoe form as it appears at the present day, but oval; secondly, that it was surrounded by a deep and wide trench, as well as by a lofty vallum, with, most probably, a second vallum and trench in its most exposed positions; and, consequently, it must have been a place of great strength, not designed for recreation only, but well adapted for the purposes of a permanent military station. From these facts, and from the absence of any certain Roman pottery or other Roman remains in the interior, added to the discovery of much pottery and several articles of a decidedly barbarous period, I am led to infer that this camp was originally constructed and occupied by the Britons; that it was, perhaps, little used by the Romans; but probably occupied for a lengthened period by Saxon, and possibly also by Danish, forces, during the long-continued and bloody conflicts of those races in this part of the country.”

*Professor Quekett's account of the Bones, &c., discovered at
Arbury Banks:*

The bones consisted of the following:—

Bos longifrons.—Seven specimens of the horn cores, a nearly complete ramus of the lower jaw, and one metacarpal bone.

Deer.—Portion of right ramus of lower jaw of a large species.

Goat.—Two horn cores of a small-horned goat, and a horn core of a longer horned goat.

Horse.—Portion of left ramus of the lower jaw, with three teeth.

Pig.—Portion of superior maxillary bone, left side (upper jaw), with four teeth.

Human.—A portion of a parietal bone of a skull, rather thicker than usual.

The three masses of siliceous material are principally made up of the husks and awns of a species of grass, and more closely resembling those of the *eared barley* than any other. These masses must have been exposed for a considerable time to a red heat, as the carbonaceous material is almost wholly removed.

Several fragments of pottery accompanied these bones; they are principally composed of a coarse black clay, in which are numerous pebbles; some of them appear as if they had been subjected to the action of fire, subsequent to their manufacture.

Thanks were ordered to be returned for these Exhibitions and Communications.

Thursday, March 3rd, 1859.

OCTAVIUS MORGAN, Esq. M.P. V.P. in the Chair.

The following Presents to the Library were announced, and Thanks ordered to be returned to the respective donors:—

- From John Williams, Esq. F.S.A. 28 volumes, viz. :—
1. *Pyramidographia; or, a Description of the Pyramids in Egypt.* By John Greaves. 8vo. London, 1646.
 2. *De Hibernia et Antiquitatibus ejus disquisitiones.* By James Ware. 8vo. London, 1654.
 3. *Thomæ Bartholini de Armillis veterum, et Olai Wormii de Aureo Cornu Danico responsio. Th. Bartholini antiquitatum veteris Puerperii Synopsis. Caspari Bartholini (Thom. F.) de Inauribus veterum Syntagma. Th. Bartholini de Annulis Narium (cap. 19).* 12mo. Amsterdam. 1676.
 4. *Claudii Rutilii Numatiani Galli Itinerarium, integris Simleri Castalionis, Pithoei, Sitsmanni, Barthii, Graevii, aliorumque animadversionibus illustratum. Ex Museo Th. J. ab Almeloveen.* 12mo. Amsterdam. 1687.
 5. *Descrizione di Roma antica. Descrizione di Roma moderna.* 2 volumes. 8vo. Rome, 1727.
 6. *Le Antichita della citta di Roma.* Small 4to. 1588.
 7. *Observations upon the Antiquities of the town of Herculaneum.* By Mr. Bellicard, architect. 8vo. London, 1753.
 8. *Eduardi Bernardi de Mensuris et Ponderibus Antiquis Libri tres.* 8vo. Oxford, 1688.