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A Roman Settlement on the Common

In his "History of Berkhamsted Common," published in 1935, the late Mr. G. H. Whybrow wrote: "Grims Dyke is not the only object of archaeological interest on the Common. The pavement of a Roman villa was discovered not long ago on the golf course, on the east side of Frithsden Beeches, and unfortunately received very bad treatment. Close by this villa, although actually not on the Common but in the adjoining copse, funerary urns of Roman date (in one of which was a spindle whorl) have been dug up."

It is not surprising that this reference to a Roman villa on the Common arouses interest. The site has never been properly excavated, but surveys show that it must have been of considerable size. Archaeologists believe that the extensive foundations of dressed flint walls are at least 1,800 years old—and, as we shall see, it is possible that the Roman building was preceded by a wattle-and-daub structure of Belgic origin.

THE INVADERS

It was the Belgae who invaded south-eastern Britain about 80 B.C. and began opening up the wooded Hertfordshire hillsides. Evidence is available that their farms at Welwyn and Park Street (near St. Albans) were later transformed into Roman villas. A similar sequence may have occurred on Berkhamsted Common.

Why did the settlers choose a lonely plateau instead of the valley, with its abundant water and its highway (Akeman Street)? "Splendid isolation" may have determined the choice of site; on the hill there must have been less risk of trouble from marauders than beside an easy river route.

But wherever the pioneers went they

had to clear and cultivate the land. On the Common, curiously enough, they farmed land which, in after years, was to become one of the few uncultivated areas in the district, and indeed one of the largest commons in the country. I imagine that shortage of water was at least an occasional problem. Did those early farmers obtain supplies from a pond or from a well?

FIRST ON THE SCENE

But we must not speculate too much about the first settlers. The remains of their farmstead are of greater interest, and all the available facts have been collected by two young men who have spent much time on the site and have themselves made useful discoveries. So, for the second month running, I am indebted to Mr. John Sayer and Mr. Antony Burch for allowing me to use their notes.

It was in 1927, or thereabouts, when foundations and a plain tessellated pavement were found on the Common. A new green was being made on the golf course, and I can remember the indignation and despair of the late Mr. A. C. Meek (who, I believe, was the first amateur archaeologist on the scene) when the "very bad treatment" mentioned by Mr. Whybrow occurred.

From time to time Mr. Meek, Mr. E. Popple and other local residents inspected the site and made further discoveries. In its 1937 review of Roman Britain, the Journal of Roman Studies says: "The substructure of a considerable building with dressed flint walls and tessellated pavements was found . . . close by the site of the discoveries made in 1927."

POST-WAR FINDS

Then came the war, and interest was not resumed until April, 1954, when Mr. Burch and Mr. Sayer sought more detailed information. They had no intention of excavating, but merely wished to make a preliminary survey to find the approximate extent of the site and to see if there were sufficient remains *in situ* to warrant further investigation.

The site was much overgrown with bracken, gorse and small birch trees. But three sections of wall were immediately located. They were constructed with dressed flints laid in regular courses in soft mortar containing small, sharp gravel. Numerous potsherds (fragments of earthenware pots) and pieces of tile and broken brick were incorporated in the walls.

One small section of wall seemed to be about 2-ft. thick, and just by this wall, below the surface of the ground, were found many fragments of coarse red unglazed ware. Two pieces had a concentric ring pattern and may have

formed the bottom of a shallow dish. A nail with mortar adhering to its shaft was found, and on the surface a few feet away were a pile of large flints, more potsherds, and about half a dozen tesserae, one red and the others buff.

UNDER THE TRACK

The second section of wall examined was about 30-ft. away and of similar construction. This section, it is thought, almost certainly continues under a cart-track and gives rise to a pronounced hummock across the track.

About 40 yards westward is another hummock across the track, which, between these two positions, is level and about 2-ft. 6-in. higher than elsewhere. Unlike other portions of the track, the elevated section is barely clad with

OLD LOCAL MAPS

Have you any old maps of local interest? If so, "Beorcham" will be pleased to hear from you. He is preparing a new series of articles on the development of Berkhamsted and hopes to reproduce sections of old maps. Any pre-1900 map will be welcomed—and returned promptly.

grass, suggesting that walls and possibly a floor are buried beneath it.

To the south of these two positions, the third visible section of wall was found as a continuous line of large flints extending for about 20-ft., with traces of mortar and pieces of brick. Two more nails were found, as well as small fragments of pottery and brick beside the wall.

ORNAMENT OR BOTTLE?

In October, 1954, further finds were made about 70-ft. due east from the sites mentioned above. Among the objects were pieces of brick, potsherds of differing types, two pieces of what may be iron slag, and one small piece of clear green glass containing numerous bubbles and moulded on one edge. Was this part of an ornament or of a square glass bottle?

Professional advice was sought, and Mr. Gurnow, of the Verulamium Museum, pronounced the objects undoubtedly genuine and comparable with exhibits at the museum. Some small lumps of red clay are daub, and these, together with the nails, suggest the possibility of wattle-and-daub buildings on the same site as the flint and brick structures.

BELGIC REMAINS

Certain of the potsherds, of a light buff colour, resemble in colour, texture and rim-shape certain Belgic (pre-Roman) pottery, of local origin, found during excavations at Verulamium and Prae Wood. It is therefore conceivable that the site near Frithsden Beeches had two stages of occupation, the first Belgic with wattle-and-daub buildings and pale-coloured pottery, and the

EMERGENCY MEDICINE

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (6-7 p.m.) and Sunday morning (11.30 a.m.—12.30 p.m.) service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

February 1-7: Dickman.
February 8-14: Taylors.
February 15-21: Boots.
February 22-28: Figg.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:—

Monday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.
Tuesday—10 a.m.—7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—Closed.
Thursday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.
Friday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.
Saturday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m.—5 p.m.

(Continued from previous column).

second Romano-British, with flint and brick walls and coarse red pottery.

Mr. Sayer and Mr. Burch had a further surprise when they saw workmen digging a pit about 160 yards south of the site, close by the road to Ashridge. Quantities of large dressed flints, with many pieces of brick and broken pottery, were thrown up from an area about 20-ft. long, 10-ft. broad, and 1-ft. deep. No organised structure was visible, and the pieces presumably represented rubble from fallen walls scattered over a wide area.

Altogether, the discoveries show that the site is an extremely large one, and from evidence at present available it is thought the villa belonged to the second century.

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