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THE GRIM'S DYKE MYSTERY DEEPENS!

The Great Park of the Castle

Now and again someone makes a discovery or has a flash of inspiration which challenges a long-accepted belief. Recently, for instance, a stir has been caused by a new pronouncement on Grim's Ditch, the ancient earthwork which runs across Berkhamsted Common from Potten End to a point near New Road.

Archaeologists have often disagreed about the age of this earthwork, but they have always associated it with other Grim's Dykes which survive on high ground elsewhere in the Chiltern Hills.

Mr. J. F. Dyer, of the Chiltern Earthworks Research Committee, has new ideas. Addressing the Local History Society, he said the ditch on the Common differed in size and construction from other Grim's Dykes, and was of a later date. In his opinion it was made to form the northern boundary of Berkhamsted Castle Park, and before reaching this conclusion he traced connecting boundaries down the hillside from the Common to the river Bulbourne.

A PUZZLING CLAIM

I congratulate Mr. Dyer upon an original piece of detective work. Not being an archaeologist, I do not question his archaeological findings, but as a local historian I am puzzled by his claim that the ditch marked part of the Park boundary.

The area he defines is from a point near the Castle to the Common, where the ditch forms the northern boundary, and from Potten End to the valley a mile or so east of the town. This bears little resemblance to the shape and position of Berkhamsted Park as historians know it. We have documentary evidence that it once stretched westward almost to Coldharbour and the modern road across Northchurch Common. Of a Park extending from Potten End to the valley on the east side of the town there is, to the best of my knowledge, no record whatever.

THE 1353 ENCLOSURE

Another snag, as I see it, is that the ditch runs right across the Common, enclosing a considerable acreage of waste land. Surely it is rare for parkland to revert to common land? Usually it is the other way round.

And why do we find no mention of

the great ditch in documents relating to Berkhamsted Park? An order dated February 6, 1353, states that the Park was then still largely unenclosed, and directions were given for it to be enclosed with a paling "for the preservation thereof and of the game there." No reference to a ditch, you will note, though there must have been hedges, for the order continues; "Pending the making of the paling, the hedges of the Park are to be repaired as well as possible." Beeches to the value of £20 (equal to perhaps £2,000 at the present day) were cut down and sold to pay for the oak paling.

FIRST REFERENCE

Dodderidge's survey of the manor of Berkhamsted, dated 1607, contains a reference to the earthwork on the Common—the earliest I have been able to find. Leading townsmen were required to define "the Circuite, Buttes Boundes and Lymittes of this Mannor," and the following is an extract from their reply: "And so downe along Freesden Valley to the first bound of the corner of Southwoode in the parish of Barkh'msted And soe lying eastward along by Southwood, unto Swilly Pond in the same parrish, and from thence to Grymes Dytch in the same parrish; And from thence in a direct lyne unto Shermans bounde in the same parrish."

How interesting to find that "Grymes Dytch" (if only that part of it between what is now the Nettleden road and Potten End) was given as a boundary. But the *manor* boundary, please note—not the Park boundary.

HEDGES AND DITCHES

Ditches—but not the great earthwork on the Common—are mentioned in much earlier documents than Dodderidge's survey. When Ashridge Park was created in 1286, the King granted a licence to "enclose the king's highway, leading through his wood of Esserugge (Ashridge) and Berchamstede, with a dike and hedge for the enlargement of his park there." It is also interesting to find that in 1357 the Black Prince granted Henry de Berkhamstede (among other perquisites) "the hedges and ditches round the fields for the enclosure and safe keeping of his crops."

Mr. Dyer, having ascribed other Grim's Dykes in the Chilterns to the

Iron Age and stated that our local earthwork is more recent, will no doubt carry out further investigations to establish its date. If he finds it is of Saxon origin, he may decide that it was the boundary of the park of some Saxon chieftain. This would strengthen the rather vague claims which have been made regarding the existence of a fortress at Berkhamsted before the Norman Castle. It might also suggest that a very early Park, much older than anything we had ever imagined possible, occupied an area other than that of the Black Prince's happy hunting ground.

PRESERVED FOR SPORT

Meanwhile, I shall go on believing that no Park existed until Norman lords of the manor preserved a large part of the most easily accessible land for their own sport. When did they take this action? I do not know, but hunting was well organised long before the Park was properly enclosed, as we know from the fact that in 1302, "William called Hereford of Berchamptede" was given custody of the "wood, park and warren," receiving 5½d. a day, a robe costing 10s. a year, and all the wind-fallen timber. He was responsible for the preservation of game. Hay was bought specially to feed the deer during the winter.

In the Black Prince's time the parker and other estate officers were generally men who had served with the Prince in the French wars. Robert le Parker, who had been commanded to accompany "six good companion archers, the best he could find," to fight for the Prince,

returned safely to Berkhamsted and was ordered, in 1347, to take "a buck of grease" (a fat buck) to the Abbot of St. Albans, a relative of whom was about to start his studies at "Oxenford" and evidently wished to start well by making a handsome present to the Head of his college.

For generations Berkhamsted Park provided good hunting, and deer were still numerous in the days of the greatest of all royal huntsmen, the Stuarts. In 1616, Charles I, as Prince of Wales, visited his tutor, Dr. Thomas Murray, at Berkhamsted Place, and spent the afternoon hunting in the Park, where he killed a fat buck. Always a fat buck—a lean one was never mentioned!

REDUCING THE PARK

Two years after Prince Charles's visit, 300 acres of the Common, in the Coldharbour area, were enclosed and added to Berkhamsted Park; but in 1627 the area of the Park was reduced from 1,132 to 375 acres, and Dr. Murray's widow was authorised to use the disparked land for agricultural purposes. It was soon found that the Coldharbour enclosure was less suitable for tillage than had been expected; the land was "worne out of harte," stony, cold, and "squeasy." To this day we speak of Stony Bottom.

More and more land was taken for farming, until only a relatively small area, below Berkhamsted Place, continued to merit the name of Park. In 1862 the land was purchased from the Duchy of Cornwall by the second Earl Brownlow, in whose family the vast Ashridge Estate, stretching from Studham

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to the Bulbourne, remained until 1924.

Recent history is well known, though few people can still remember the nine-hole golf course which was made in the Park for the benefit of players who found the walk to the Common too arduous. The name "Kitchener's Field" recalls the time when "Kitchener's Army," and afterwards the Inns of Court O.T.C., trained in the Park. Here, incidentally, it was intended to build a Senior Modern School after the second World War; this plan was abandoned when Ashlyns School was acquired. 'BEORCHAM'

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