

# A Summit Meeting on Castle Hill?

by 'BEORCHAM'

In December, 1066, the Saxon magnates met the Norman invaders at Berkhamsted and offered the English crown to William the Conqueror. But where did the meeting take place? At the home of the Saxon lord of the manor? If so, where was his house situated?

These questions are prompted by a brand new suggestion from the Department of the Environment. The recently published list of local buildings of architectural or historical interest contains many additional entries, one of which is "Ash", the hilltop home of Mr. Reg Butler, the distinguished sculptor. This house was spared when the main part of Berkhamsted Place was pulled down a few years ago. In the schedule, "Ash" is described as follows: "Medieval and later. Whitewashed brick with

rubble base. Traditionally Anglo-Saxon core to medieval house and thus probably the place where William I received the submission of the Saxon thegns."

## FALSE CONCLUSIONS

Note the word "probably". The only certainty is that no one will ever be able to pinpoint the site. If we could do so, we would surely mark it with an inscribed stone, thereby creating a tourist attraction which would probably be daubed by the many people who still fervently wish that King Harold had won!

In the past, many writers jumped to the conclusion that the meeting must have taken place at the Castle. But there is no evidence that a castle existed here until the Normans built one, and that was some time after the Conquest. It

is possible that the lord of the manor's fortified house previously occupied part of the castle site, but this is sheer guesswork, as is the latest suggestion of a meeting on the top of what we now call Castle Hill.

## COMMANDING SITE

Knowing that Berkhamsted Place was built in Elizabethan times, partly with masonry taken from the abandoned castle, most of us have never given thought to the possibility that the mansion was not the first building to occupy a remarkably fine site, commanding views over the whole valley. But why should there not have been an earlier building? Certainly it is an intriguing thought that there could have been a summit meeting in 1066!

Joining in the guessing game, I am inclined to favour St. Mary's, Northchurch, then a small Saxon church but probably the largest and best building for miles around. Its situation beside the highway could be a point in its favour. And what better place than a church for the exchange of vows of fealty?

At least it is reasonable to suppose that in midwinter the parley did not take place in the open air.

#### PRE-NORMAN DISCOVERIES

It does no harm, now and again, to discuss probabilities so long as they are not presented as facts. And so, from 1066 and all that, I go back in time to another mystery—the site of pre-Norman Berkhamsted

It is interesting, if not significant, that nearly all the Belgic and Roman remains have been found on the north side of the Bulbourne, where housing development is relatively recent. On the south side, dozens of roads and thousands of houses have been built, but for all the excavations that have been made one hardly ever hears of a discovery of archaeological interest. It could be that this area was developed at a time when people were not so archaeologically minded as they are today; builders may have got on with their work without realising the significance of anything that was turned up.

If the Belgae and Romans preferred the north side of the valley, did the Saxons build their houses there too? Unfortunately, there have been no Saxon finds; their houses were made of wood or even flimsier construction, and their poorly-made pottery does not survive so well as earlier work. It is widely thought that the largest settlement could have been in the vicinity of St. Mary's Church, but it is equally likely that many Saxons lived farther down the Bulbourne valley, where two water-mills certainly existed in the eleventh century.

#### DESERTED SITES

At least we know that after the Normans came, hardly anything, other than the Castle, was built on the north side of the river; a new town arose on the south side.

It is known that in some places many houses were destroyed to clear sites for castles, though we have no evidence that this happened at Berkhamsted. Old sites were abandoned for various reasons, and in our county alone nearly forty villages were deserted at one time or another. Recently the Hertfordshire Local History Council published a scholarly booklet on this subject by Mr. K.

Rutherford; it is entitled *Deserted Medieval Villages in Hertfordshire*, and costs 50p.

Among the deserted villages was Pendley, which was ruthlessly destroyed by Sir Robert Whittingham in the fifteenth century so that he could enclose 200 acres. Good ploughland was turned into pasture, and the inhabitants, among whom were craftsmen, were forced to leave Pendley.

There was a movement of population, too, at Little Gaddesden, one hopes for happier reasons. It seems that early inhabitants lived

near the church; from the tower one can see traces of the long-vanished village. As Vicars Bell says in his history of Little Gaddesden, a walk will disclose the hollows and bumps left behind when houses and huts were abandoned.

Returning to Berkhamsted, I hope that our active Archaeological Society will go on making discoveries, adding to our knowledge, still very scanty, of pre-Norman Berkhamsted. In the meantime, please do not mistake surmises for facts!



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