

ROMAN BILLERICAY.

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In the *Book of Chantries*, it is stated of the above town, that it "ys a great towne and populous, and also a haven towne; there ys in it by estimacon about the numb. of 600 houseling people or more. Yt is no parish." Forming part of Great Burghsted, or as commonly spelt, Bursted, Billericay is situate about midway between Chelmsford and Tilbury, a straight line drawn from one to the other would pass as nearly as possible through it. It stands upon a long spur of hill running southwards towards the Thames; and consists mainly of one long street built upon the ridge of the hill. At the north end where the spur of hill joins the main body, stands the Union House; a little beyond this building is a large wood called "Norsey;" at the south end, on the brow of the hill, are two windmills, one of which stands upon what is apparently an artificial mound of early construction. The name of this place has given rise to much speculation. According to Morant, who states that in 1343 it was called Beleuca, the name "was probably derived from the old word *baleuga* or *banleuga*, a territory or precinct round a borough or manor; in French Banlieu." Littré renders the word Banlieue, thus, "Territoire dans le voisinage et sous la dépendance d'une ville, de *ban et lieue*, lieue du ban, c'est-à-dire, distance à laquelle s'étendait le ban seigneurial." It has also been suggested that the name may be derived from the two words Bellericastra, the camp of Bellerus. Other persons contend that its etymon can be found in certain Welsh words signifying the Fort on the Hill. Be the interpretation what it may, it is quite certain that the little town has borne its name for many centuries with but slight variation in

the mode of spelling, for in the year 1395, allusion is made in the Pipe Roll to one "Thomas Ledere, traitor to the king, beheaded at Billerica." The name similarly spelt frequently occurs among the documents stored in the Public Record Office, entitled "*Presentationes de malifactoribus qui surrexerunt contra Dominum Regem, 4 et 5 Ric. II.*" In 1563, we find among the accounts of the Churchwardens of Chelmsford, two entries of sums received from "Belyreca men for the hire of our garments," that is, costumes for a miracle play. Among some seventeenth century tradesmen's tokens in my possession, I have one inscribed "Abraham Thresher in Billericay, Essex, his half-penny, 1666."

The county of Essex, from its maritime situation on the shores of the German Ocean and the estuary of the Thames, possesses too many natural advantages to have been neglected by invaders so keen and enterprising as the Romans were; we are, therefore, not surprised to find that almost the first colony founded by them in Britain was that at Colchester. While from the great number of interments, and frequent discovery of tiles, etc., in Billericay, I am induced to think that it was not only a very early settlement, but that it was also a numerously populated one. Morant, in his *History of Essex*, says, "Hereabouts unquestionably was some Roman villa, or little station. For at Blunts-Walls (in Great Burstead) are earth-works, the remains of a ditch and rampart containing about four acres, one part of which hath been inclosed round; and within the inclosure have been some mounts artificially raised, now chiefly levelled." Of the remains thus described not a trace now remains, but the incorporation of the name of a former proprietor, with the word Walls (Blunt's Walls) proves that the remains must have been remarkable at the period when the name was conferred upon the manor. Robert de Blunt, who joined Simon de Montford, was the first of the name who held the manor.

Camden, in his *Britannia*, says "Burghsted by contraction Bursted, *i.e.*, the place of a Burgh. . . . Here I once thought was the *Cæsaromagus*." The exact site of this station, uncertain in Camden's time, is equally so now, and I shall not attempt to re-open "*vexatæ questiones*,"

such as whether Cæsaromagus, of the Iter of Antoninus, was at Chelmsford, Writtle, Buttsbury or Billericay, and Duroilitum at Romford, Barking or Leytonstone. Instead of vainly endeavouring to reconcile Roman and modern measurements of distance in order to fix the exact name of this station; I shall content myself with recording some of the numerous finds which have occurred in or near Billericay.

Morant in his *History of Essex* tells us, "In November, 1724, a person digging for gravel in a field near Billerica, on a high hill, after he had sunk about three feet, came to a large bed of black earth, or ashes, which endeavouring to clear away, he found mixt with a great quantity of pieces of earthen vessels of different kinds and colours; some white, some red, and some of a dark brown. Neither he, nor any who have since searched, have been able to meet with anything entire; but the pieces appeared plainly to be fragments of urns, pateras, etc. In one part of the earth, there was a place made like an oven, of the hard dark clay; and the man believed it was large enough to have held six half peck loaves. There is no clay within three miles of the place. There have been several Roman coins found here; and two of silver, one of Trajan, the other Hadrian." The high hill alluded to in this account is, probably, that south of the town, upon which the windmills stand. Morant is decidedly wrong in his statement of there being no clay within three miles of the town. There is very stiff clay within a radius of half a mile from the mill hill.

The next discovery occurred about eighty years since, when a large number of urns were dug up in Norsey Wood. These were preserved by the owner, the then Lord Petre, at Thorndon Hall, and probably were destroyed in the disastrous fire which consumed that mansion on the 22nd of March last. The next find took place some twenty years later, when about 1,100 copper or bronze Roman coins were found on the edge of a ditch, by a labourer, on a farm called Tyled Hall, now known as Ramsden Hall, about a mile and a half from Billericay. I am told that these coins, with one exception, were all sold in London by the discoverer within twenty-four hours of the find.

The immediate neighbourhood of this post has proved

rather rich in urns, pateræ, and amphoræ, which have been found in more or less perfect condition ; one vessel is described to me as having the impress of a human face or mask. Some of the urns contained burnt human bones, and were discovered in groups of three or four. A large number of urns similarly filled and arranged were found some years since by Mr. Wood, from time to time, in the mill fields, and from the quantity of fragments spread over a considerable extent of ground, as well as from traces of burnt earth and charcoal, this locality appears to have been the site of a burial place, attached to a Romano-British village or town occupying the position of the present town of Billericay.

Mr. Shaw, a former resident in Billericay, records the discovery among other relics, on the site of the same burial place, of a small gold British coin, and coins of Trajan and Antoninus Pius, and that he excavated a pit twenty-five feet deep, from which he procured a large quantity of fragments of pottery. He also states that in widening the road near the Union House (the Chelmsford road) a number of urns were found. Major Spitty, of Billericay, has in his possession a large number of articles found in the field near the Union House. His collection consists of ossuary and other urns of various colours and forms, including one or two of Samian ware, two bronze specula, (broken) an earthen lamp, and a number of black beads. The whole of these articles were found between the years 1863 and 1866.

In 1865, a number of Roman urns were found in Norsey wood, at the end nearest Billericay. They were discovered as usual, whilst digging for gravel ; they were fifteen in number, all of a brown colour, and lathe turned, and were found mostly in groups of two or three ; only one in each group contained bones, and these but little burnt. The groups of urns were placed without any order of arrangement. All but one were broken, for on account of their nearness to the surface, the roots of the underwood had grown into, and through them. One urn contained bones, ashes, and a bronze fibula ; another contained some pieces of metal, very much corroded, probably the remains of two fibulæ. At a spot near these urns was a deposit of bones not contained in any vessel. Some corroded articles

of iron were found near this deposit, one being very much like our modern bill hook in form. One of the men employed in digging gravel told me that he had, about twelve years ago, near this spot, "come upon" a ditch about three hundred yards long, eight feet deep, and wide enough to walk in comfortably. At the end there was a circular place about fifteen feet in diameter, and a little deeper than the ditch. Of this excavation no trace now remains. It will be remembered that Stow tells us that the insurgents of Essex, in the 5th year of Richard the 2nd, gathering a new multitude together at Byllica, "had fortified themselves with ditches and carriages; nevertheless, although there was a great multitude of them, with small business, they were scattered in the woods, where the lords inclosed them, lest any of them might escape." It is therefore possible that the ditch above-mentioned may have been of that period.

In 1865 further discoveries were made in Norsey Wood by the Rev. E. L. Cutts, in opening tumuli. The first tumulus opened was on the south-east side of the wood overlooking the valley of the Thames. It was circular in form, about twelve feet across, and six feet high. In the centre of it was found a British urn of rude workmanship and coarse brown material. It was about eighteen inches high, and contained burnt bones and ashes. A few inches from this was found another of about the same size, filled in the same way; both were placed upside down. At a distance of three feet were the remains of a third, placed on rather a lower level, and of a redder colour. Near these urns a bronze coin was found, but so corroded as to be undecipherable. The second tumulus opened was on the west side of the wood, close to the Ramsden road. Nothing was found till nearly the centre was reached, when within a circle of about two yards diameter were found no less than seven urns, and numerous fragments. Other tumuli remain unopened, and only the other day a beautiful little lathe turned urn of light colour was dug out from the gravel in a perfect condition, but being clumsily handled, was dropped and broken into fragments, some of which were lost while en route to me.

Another spot abounding with Roman interments is a

field between the Mill hill and the Union House, and adjoining the old burial ground belonging to the Non-Conformists. Among the vases here found was one of very large size, and although lathe turned, composed of an extremely coarse material, and utterly devoid of ornament; it is stated to have contained a large quantity of half burnt bones. Another is described as being smaller in size, but very elegant in shape, and to have been ornamented with circular bands of a light yellow colour. A third was very shallow, with a deep overhanging lip serrated upon its lower edge.

In the adjoining burial ground is a vault, built many years since by a farmer named Mabbs, who at the time of its construction placed therein three large stone coffins; where these coffins came from, my informants are utterly ignorant; but one of them, Mr. Curtis the obliging post-master of Billericay, a builder and undertaker by trade, tells me he has several times been in the vault, and has seen these coffins, that "they are very large, and now contain the wooden coffins of three members of the Mabbs family." Not having seen them myself, I can of course offer no opinion as to their age; and the vault being full, there is but little probability of its being re-opened. Although I have made the most diligent enquiry, I have failed to find any record, or tradition of the discovery of stone coffins in Billericay or its immediate neighbourhood, but the well known fact, that interment of the entire body was contemporaneous with cremation among the Romans, renders it not altogether unreasonable to suppose them to belong to that period. About ten years since, a man engaged in draining a field about half a mile from the town, found, at a depth of about two feet, a most beautiful flint celt; it is six and a half inches long, and the cutting edge two and a quarter inches wide. It is now in the possession of Mr. Coleman, who, like many other persons resident in Billericay, possesses a rich store of relics of "Long Ago." Within a quarter of a mile from the spot where the flint celt was found, a labourer in January last, ploughed up in a field, known as the Pond Field, belonging to Edgar Jones, Esq., a bronze celt of the loop class; with it were fragments of its ashen

handle. By the courtesy of Mr. Jones I was enabled to exhibit this relic at the meeting of the Institute in April 1878.

Among the numerous Roman coins found in or near Billericay, which have come under my observation, I have noticed those of the Emperors Hadrian, Germanicus, Constantine, Licinius, Nero, and Trajan, and of the Empresses Faustina and Helena. The last find I have to record took place in July of last year, under the following circumstances. Some men were employed by Mr. Salter, the ironfounder, in digging a hole for the reception of a gasometer on his premises, situated on the left side of the road leading from Tilbury to Chelmsford; when they reached a depth of about three feet from the surface, they came upon a mass of broken pottery. On receiving information of this, I of course hastened to the spot, and found a platform or pavement of Roman construction, about six feet square, and three inches thick, made of mortar principally consisting of powdered brick. Upon this had been placed a number of cinerary and other urns; unfortunately all were broken, but I have secured a large quantity of fragments. Among the pieces are some of Samian ware, one of which bears the name DACMUS, which name also appears upon a patera found at West Tilbury some years since.

Although the evidences of Roman occupation, hitherto found in Billericay, consist, with the exception of a few beads, fibulæ and specula, of coins and interments, there are, I think, sufficient of the latter to justify my opinion that it must have been a place of some little importance. What became of the dwellings of those whose ashes lay all round the town I know not. No foundations have been discovered, no fragments of tessellated pavements to mark the abodes of the great ones of a station, which very probably rose upon a spot near to, but not actually upon, the site of a British town. It was a spot well suited for a military post, standing upon a height, which in the county of Essex is not to be despised; its very position may have induced a feeling of security similar to that which led to the overthrow of Camulodunum. It may be that after the destruction of that unfortunate colony, the victorious army of Boadicea, in its triumphant

march, attacked the station here, and destroyed town and stronghold, their blackened ruins serving to teach the Roman, that it was necessary to fence his cities against even those whom he regarded as his slaves. The Roman returned, but not exactly to the old spot, for a sort of superstitious dread attached itself to the scene of so much slaughter and misery. Therefore, possibly on the spot known as Blunt's Walls, he threw up a stronger and more important fortress.