

51

PROCEEDINGS OF THE CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LI

JANUARY 1957 TO DECEMBER 1957

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DEIGHTON BELL

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THE RIDDLE OF THE DYKES

T. C. LETHBRIDGE

ONE of the most important qualities of an archaeologist, one moreover which he is seldom taught to cultivate, is that of patience. He cannot hope to solve most problems in one season's excavation: many cannot be solved in a lifetime. If you have a problem on a large scale and your funds are limited, it is necessary to wait for clues before launching an excavation which may cost a great deal of money.

When I first came to Cambridge in 1919, the accepted view of the dating of the dykes was the one proposed by the late Sir William Ridgeway, that they were of Early Iron Age construction. It was to test this theory that Sir Cyril Fox began his excavations on behalf of our Society. As a result of Sir Cyril's work and later as a result of mine, it became impossible to accept Sir William's thesis. We began to think that they must have been a phenomenon of the wars of the Heptarchy and date from the seventh century of our era. Some fifty decapitated skeletons at the Bran Ditch suggested this, for one was provided with Anglo-Saxon accoutrements. The Dykes were East Anglia's defences against that valiant old pagan, Penda, or so we thought.

This phase of belief did not last long. The next clue was provided by Mr H. Pepper, who found a skeleton at the Bran Ditch while digging out a rabbit. Here you see the need for an archaeologist to have a close contact with the people of the surrounding district. Had Mr Pepper not been conversant with our dyke problem, we should still at this stage be thinking in terms of Anna and Penda. However Mr Pepper duly reported. His find was examined and several male skeletons, mutilated by axes, spears and perhaps swords, were excavated. One of these had a Romano-British pot broken and placed in fragments round his head. At once the theory of the seventh-century wars became untenable. We seemed to be dealing with both Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon casualties.

In 1933 human skulls and Anglo-Saxon weapons were dredged out of the River Cam at Horningsea. I then submitted an appreciation of the whole problem and our knowledge of it, which appeared in the 1935 volume of our *Proceedings*. It probably seemed somewhat far-fetched at the time to those who had not made a close study of the matter.

Soon after the Second World War, fragments of human bones were reported from the Fleam Dyke near Mutlow Hill. Efforts to obtain permission to excavate were unavailing; but it was already known that Anglo-Saxon weapons had been found when levelling part of the dyke, apparently close to this spot. Sir Cyril Fox mentions these in his *Archaeology of the Cambridge Region* (1923), in which he came to the conclusion that they probably indicated burial in the dyke of men slain in war.

I made several examinations of the dyke at this point and am clear in my mind as to the sequence of events.

This section of the Fleam Dyke, between the high ground at Balsham and Shardeloes on Fulbourn Fen, was thrown up athwart several roads. When the fields are ploughed, after rain or frost, the traces of these roads can be seen clearly on both sides of the dyke. Some pass under the vallum, others pass, as hollow-ways, over it. The human bones were found beside a pair of hollow-ways, which extend from Wandlebury Camp to about 100 yards south-east of the Bronze Age barrow of Mutlow Hill. They pass over the dyke, are clearly seen in the field to the east of it and become a metalled road proceeding to Weston Colville. This is, I think, the Mare Way; although Sir Cyril Fox interpreted it as the Street, mentioned in an Anglo-Saxon Charter. I believed this till recently, but now I think that the Street named in the Charter is more probably the Ashwell Street, passing the dyke at Shardeloes. (I do not agree with O. G. S. Crawford's paper in *Antiquity* on the subject of the Ashwell Street.) The other road crossing the dyke near Mutlow Hill is, of course, the Icknield Way. This consisted of many trackways, some of which can be clearly seen passing over the hills to the north of Six Mile Bottom and on other slopes.

To return to our skeletons, we can be almost certain that they are Anglo-Saxons. The point at which they are buried is of great interest, for the dyke has been roughly levelled here and the ditch partly filled in. The skeletons are buried beneath the spread of the vallum. It is highly probable that, as Sir Cyril Fox suggested, there was fighting here. Anglo-Saxons were killed, but their friends ordered the demolition of the dyke as being an obstacle to free passage along the Icknield Way and the Mare Way. They buried their fallen companions beneath the rubble. This is some confirmation of the theory I put forward in 1936. The dykes were obstacles to people driving cattle from the Midlands to East Anglia. As one who has owned hill-cattle, I do not believe that fat plains' beasts could have been driven across them.

At this point, since we might not dig near Mutlow Hill, we had to wait in patience for another clue.

This year, 1957, Mrs V. Pritchard, driving along the Cambridge to Newmarket road, observed human bones on a road-widening excavation at the Bottisham Fen end of the northern limb of the Fleam Dyke. It is clear that at this point the dyke was made for two purposes. It was intended to block access to the river in the neighbourhood of Horningsea and also to prevent people crossing Quy Water at the outlet of Teversham Fen and so reaching hard ground on the Quy side. In fact, if the obstruction of cattle droving was the object, it was intended to stop people driving them to ships at Horningsea, or up the hard chalk land to somewhere further east.

Owing to the enthusiasm of Mrs Pritchard, Mr J. Lacey the Road Surveyor and Mr M. C. Burkitt, it has been possible to recover many objects found with these human bones and to reconstruct the conditions in which they were found. It is just possible that more burials could be recovered, but I am not very hopeful about this.

The road widening took in both the vallum and the ditch. The road men state that the skeletons were found at a depth of about 1 ft. 6 in. in the ditch. I could see no

trace of graves on the outer side beyond the ditch. It seems clear then that the bodies were buried in the filled-up ditch of the earthwork. They must, therefore, be later than the construction of the work. It is in the highest degree unfortunate that we cannot prove this statement, but many a man has been hanged on weaker evidence. I picked up a fragment of human skull myself on the line of the ditch, well below the level of the field outside it. I think we can accept this evidence as sound. The ditch was filled in before the bodies were buried.

Now what was the date of the burials? In all, six spears, one sword, two shield-bosses, one knife, four brooches, parts of two pairs of wrist clasps and a buckle have been recovered. Not one of these could possibly be as late as the wars of the Heptarchy. The sword (Pl. I, *h*), if the round iron ball is in reality its pommel, is more like the swords at Nydam in Schleswig than those found in our normal pagan Saxon graves. It may be of fourth-century date. Only one brooch can be dated approximately (Pl. I, *f*). In the old days we should have said that it was about A.D. 500, but since the new work done in Germany (F. Tischler, *Der Stand der Sachsenforschung*) on Anglo-Saxon matters we cannot be so confident. It may well be earlier. The shield bosses are of the ordinary local carinated type. They are not late in the Saxon period and are similar to one found in the river at Horningsea (*Proc. C.A.S.* vol. xxxiii, Notes) and those found in the other branch of the Fleam Dyke. Both men and women are buried here.

What does this evidence suggest? First, it surely means that the dykes have nothing to do with local Saxon wars. It can hardly be possible for all these groups of skeletons to belong to very different dates. They must be all of one disturbed age. Whatever it means, it seems certain that the Saxons were ultimately successful at the Fleam Dyke. Their dead were respectably buried. At the Bran Ditch they were the losers and were decapitated. The Fleam Dyke was 'slighted' so that Saxons could pass over it. Was the Fleam Dyke in truth the 'Flight' Ditch, and was it here that they stood at bay and won?

These dykes postulate a very violent phase of our local history. I think we must look to their origin in late Roman times and that the explanation is not far to seek. Let us turn to Ammianus Marcellinus for a moment. After the great disaster of about A.D. 367 and when Count Theodosius had been sent over to restore the situation, he writes (Giles edition): 'And dividing his army into several detachments, he attacked the predatory and straggling bands of the enemy who were loaded with the weight of their plunder, and having speedily routed them while driving prisoners in chains and cattle before them, he deprived them of their booty which they had carried off from these miserable tributaries of Rome.' Here we see a picture of the kind of thing which would be at once held up by a dyke, the gangs of chained prisoners and the driven cattle. Later we learn how he set about recovering the whole country: 'But Theodosius, a general of very famous reputation, departed in high spirits from Augusta, which the ancients used to call Londinium, with the army which he had collected with great energy and skill; bringing mighty aid to the embarrassed and disturbed fortunes of the Britons.'

His plan was to seek everywhere favourable situations for laying ambushes for the barbarians.'

This I think was the plan. You put an obstacle to impede the retreat of the laden barbarians till such time as pursuing cavalry could take them from one side and the cavalry from the Saxon Shore forts attack them from the other. At a rough estimate, 1200 cavalry could be concentrated at one of the dykes in two days, leaving 100 men to hold each of the three nearest forts. This was time enough for them to intercept slow convoys from the west or south. Theodosius, I think, began this plan and many of the dykes from the Thames to Norfolk are part of it. Later by order of Stilicho some of these banks were enlarged and others constructed. Perhaps the Devil's Dyke is his work.

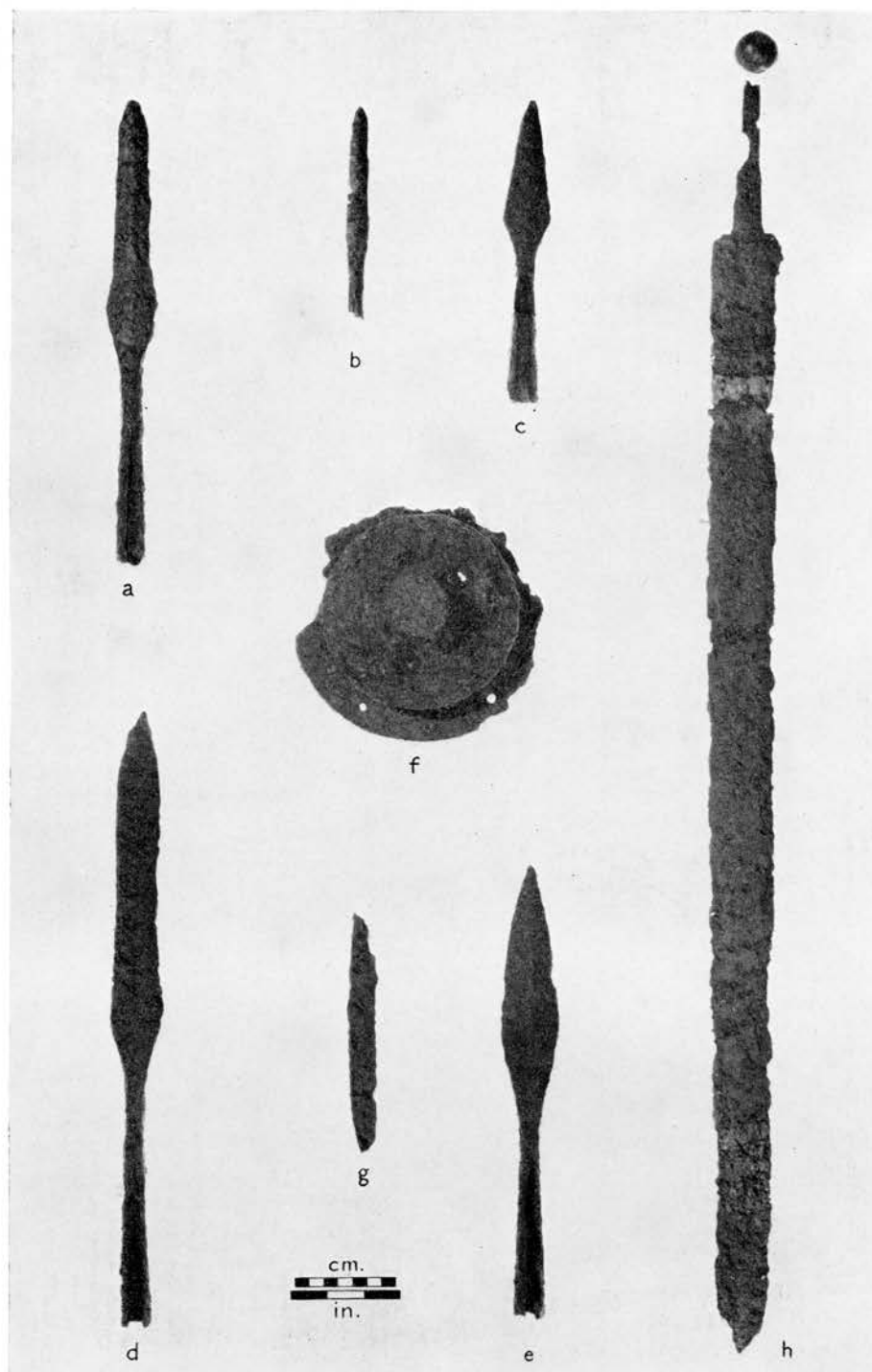
Professor Christopher Hawkes, with whom I have discussed this problem, deduces similar information from the dykes of Wiltshire. We seem to be near a reasonable solution of the whole problem, but it could not have been obtained without patience.

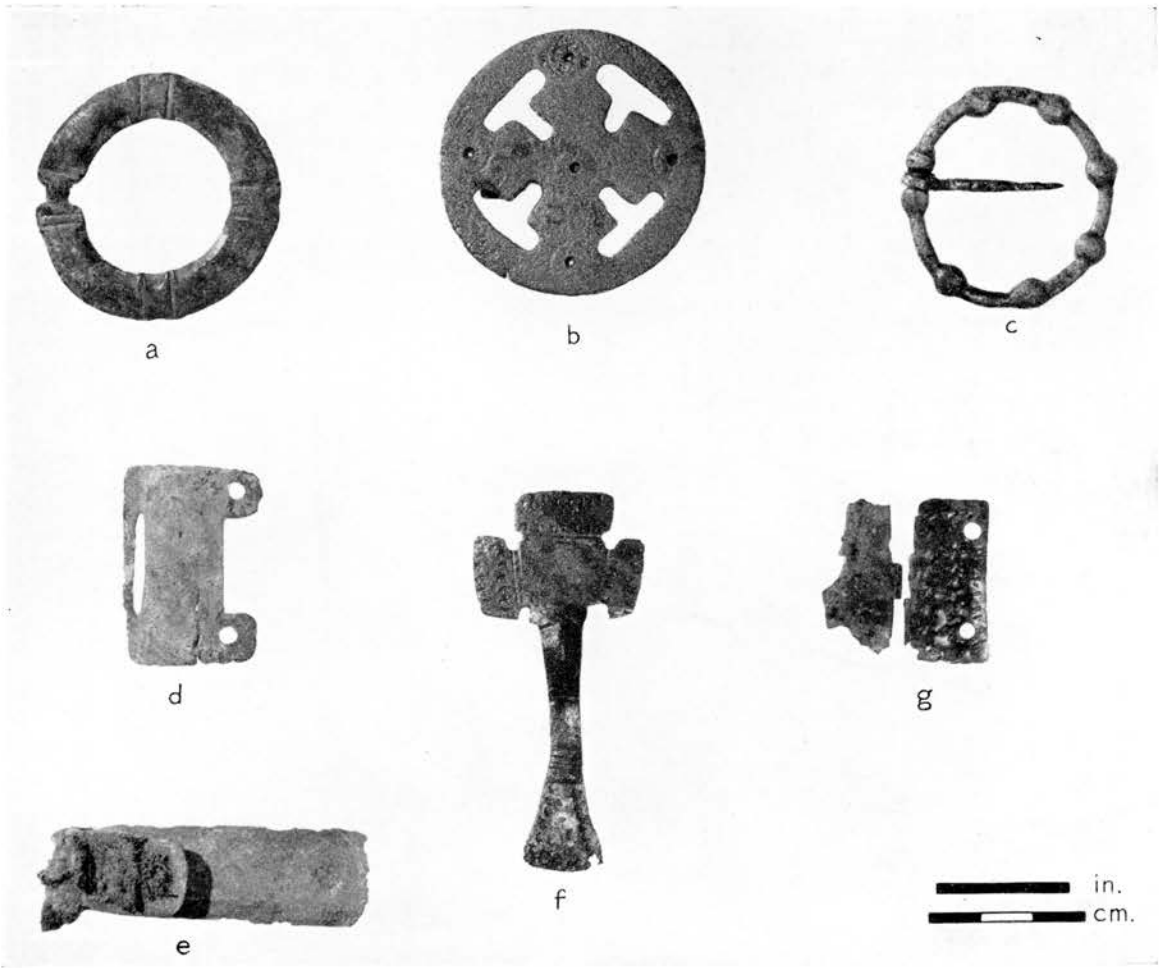
A table of information may be of value:

- (1) *Wheeting Dyke*. Dug through a Roman village. Late Roman or later.
- (2) *Devil's Dyke*. Stands on rubbish from a Roman villa. Almost certainly later than third century A.D. Saxon weapons found.
- (3) *Fleam Dyke*. North section. Numerous Anglo-Saxon bodies and weapons in filling of fosse.
- (4) *Fleam Dyke*. South section. Anglo-Saxon bodies beneath spread vallum. Weapons found.
- (5) *Brent Ditch*. Skeletons in filling of ditch. Could not locate these.
- (6) *Bran Ditch*. Dug through edge of Roman village. Anglo-Saxons decapitated. Romano-Britons killed by weapons. Vallum apparently above third-century pottery. One skeleton in ditch.
- (7) Nothing is known of the Mile ditches on Royston Heath, but they resemble the earliest state of the Bran and probably Fleam ditches.
- (8) Nothing is known of the ditches on Cavenham Heath.
- (9) Numerous skeletons with iron weapons found beside the Worstead Street at the Loaves (2 barrows on the golf links) in the eighteenth century.
- (10) Weapons and skulls indicating fighting in probably early Saxon times at junction of Car Dyke with the River Cam.

CATALOGUE OF OBJECTS RECOVERED FROM THE BURIALS

- (1) Five iron spears and a socket from a sixth. Four of these might have been found in any local Anglo-Saxon cemetery (Pl. I, *a, c, d, e*), but one (Pl. I, *b*) is not so characteristic. It is the head of a light javelin and its form of manufacture suggests some contact with Roman types.
- (2) One complete and one fragmentary shield boss (Pl. I, *f*). (Compare *Recent Researches*, fig. 21, B 1.) This type seems to have been replaced in later pagan times by a domed and not carinated form.
- (3) Iron knife of typical angled Anglo-Saxon form (Pl. I, *g*).
- (4) Iron double-edged sword (Pl. I, *h*). Apparently once fitted with a globular iron pommel, which must once have contained some heavy filling. This sword type, except for the blade, does not conform to local Anglo-Saxon designs. It may be late Provincial Roman.





(5) Annular brooch of cast bronze (Pl. II, *a*). A common local type not easily dated. A burnt example was found with Roman objects in a cremation burial in the Lackford cemetery (T. C. Lethbridge, *C.A.S. Quarto*, 'A Cemetery at Lackford, Suffolk', Fig. 7, no. 48, 2474) in a pot which appears to be of fourth-century date on the continent. The origin of the type does not appear to be Anglo-Saxon.

(6) Disc brooch of bronze (Pl. II, *b*) resembling the well-known 'Swastika' brooches. This type has its origin in the late Provincial Roman disc brooches. Date unknown, but not late in the pagan period.

(7) Annular brooch of cast bronze, with beads at intervals round its edge (Pl. II, *c*). Flat on the underside. Date unknown, but annular brooches seem to have evolved in Britain.

(8) Parts of two pairs of wrist clasps (Pl. II, *d, g*). These are of simple local types and cannot be dated.

(9) Bronze buckle with iron ring (Pl. II, *e*). The form is abnormal in local collections and cannot be dated. A piece of cloth is preserved in the rust of the buckle.

(10) Small-long brooch of bronze (Pl. II, *f*). This is a very common local Anglo-Saxon type and is early in the series since side lappets on the foot are not yet developed. (Compare examples from Holywell Row Cemetery. T. C. Lethbridge, *C.A.S. Quarto*, 'Recent Excavations in Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries', Figs. 10, 16, 17, 18, etc.) Before the publication of F. Tischler's *Der Stand der Sachsenforschung, archäologisch gesehen* I should have dated this brooch \pm A.D. 500. Now it seems probable that this date is too late.

The general impression given by this collection is that it is comparatively early in the Anglo-Saxon settlement period. Since it now appears that Anglo-Saxons were already settled in the district in late Roman times, more work will have to be done before we can fix our typological system of dating to its proper limits. It is possible that all these burials were made before the time of Vortigern.

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