Excursion to the Vale of the White Horse.

——:o:——

ONE of the most successful and enjoyable excursions which have been made under the auspices of the Berks Archæological and Architectural Society was that which took place on July 16th to the Vale of the White Horse. The party, numbering between 40 and 50, assembled on the down platform of the G.W.R., and proceeded by the 10 a.m. train to Didcot Junction, where they were joined by some 15 to 20 members of the Oxfordshire Archæological Society. The Reading party included: The Rev. J. M. and Mrs. Guilding, the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield (hon. sec.), the Rev. J. T. Brown and the Rev. A. Carr (Wokingham), Rev. H. Tomlinson, the Rev. E. A. Gray (Woodley), Capt. Goolden and party, and Mr. J. Rutland (Maidenhead), Mr. and Mrs. G. W. Palmer, Mr. S. S. Stallwood, Mr. S. Griffith, Mr. S. C. Stallwood (assistant secretary), &c. The Oxford party were:—Sir Henry Dryden (President), Canon Slatter, Rev. E. Walters, Dr. Wood, &c. At the foot of the White Horse Hill, at Kingston Lisle, the party dismounted and immediately proceeded to

THE BLOWING STONE.

After examining the same and testing its powers as to emitting sound,

Mr. S. S. STALLWOOD read the following short reference to the relic by Dr. Stevens (who has given several interesting and able papers in Reading on the Vale of the White Horse and its historical connections):—"Another relic associated with the name of the great Alfred is the Blowing Stone, known traditionally as Alfred's Bugle-horn, standing under a tree at Kingston Lisle. It is a sarsen block about a yard square with holes at the top and sides. By blowing into one of the upper holes a discordant noise is emitted, but whether its original intention was the alarming and calling to arms of the Saxon inhabitants of the district is at this period of time impossible of verification."

The Rev. J. M. GUILDING said the stone had been removed from its original situation on the top of the hill, and he certainly did think that it was used as a military summons, when there was any danger of a Danish incursion. No doubt, in view of such, that huge stone, which was then on the top of the hill near the Ridgeway, would be blown, and he supposed an expert blower at that height would make the sound heard a great distance off; and the house carls and other men connected with the Saxon thane would get their weapons ready and meet on the camp side. He certainly thought there could be no question that the stone was formerly used as a call for military purposes.

After several of the party had tried the strength of their lungs in blowing the stone, a labourer of the neighbourhood made it emit a very loud noise resembling the sound of a fog-horn, and then a walk of about a mile along the old Roman road, on the Ridgeway, brought the party to the fortified camp, the scene of

THE BATTLE OF ÆSCENDUNE.

Here a capital luncheon was partaken of. After the meal the party assembled just on the edge of the camp, when papers describing The Battle of Æscendune were read by the Revs. P. H. Ditchfield and E. R. Gardiner (Vicar of Fawley, who had joined the party at Kingston Lisle).

The Rev. P. H. DITCHFIELD remarked that they were doubtless aware that the Battle of Æscendune was one of the greatest conflicts of Saxon times, and was the turning-point in the history of the Danish invasion. If the Danes had then beaten Alfred and his brave Saxons, nothing could have stayed the victorious course of the heathen plunderers; Christianity would have been well-nigh exterminated for nigh 100 years, the power of Alfred crushed, and the nation would never have enjoyed the benefits which he conferred upon the English people. He wished he could assure himself, and them also, that this was the actual battlefield, and that Alfred's men on the day after the victory carved the famous horse as a memorial of the fight. But there had been considerable difference of opinion among antiquarians concerning the site of the battle. They might dismiss in a few words the sites which had been suggested outside the borders of Berkshire, such as Ashdown Forest in Essex, or Ashendon in Bucks. From the Chronicles they gathered that three battles were fought within three weeks, viz., at Reading, Ashdown, and Basing. That would have been impossible if Ashdown were a

long way off; and besides that Alfred was too wise a general to retire, after the defeat at Reading, past the great stronghold of the Danes, and leave Wessex, his own country, entirely undefended. Bishop Gibson, in his edition of the Saxon Chronicle, said he thought Aston, a village five miles from Wallingford, was the place mentioned; Mr. Wise, with whom many writers agreed, considered Ashdown Park to have been the site of the battle, and the figure of the White Horse a memorial of the victory. Lysons was of opinion that Ashdown (spelt Assedone in the Domesday Survey), which was near Ashampstead in the Hundred of Compton, was the place where the battle was fought. Antiquarians and historians fought as fiercely over the battle as did Saxon and Dane 1,000 years ago; and it was difficult to decide, as in the case of many a Saxon and Danish skirmish, on which side victory lay. Mr. Ditchfield went on to quote from Asser's Life of Alfred, which gives a full account of the battle, and minutely describes the various incidents.

Mr. GARDINER, in the course of his paper, said that of all the military achievements of the great King Alfred, whose name was a household word in this neighbourhood and of whom they are all so justly proud, the battle of Ashdown or Æscesdun—to give its Saxon name—is universally acknowledged to be the greatest and most important in its results. The exact site of the battle was not so precisely ascertained as all good Berkshire folk have been accustomed to believe. As a matter of fact there are four spots in Berks alone which claimed the honour of being the Æscesdun of the Chronicles where King Æthelred and his brother Alfred in the year 871 gained the great and glorious victory over the Pagan Danes. These four spots were Ilsley, Ashampstead, Aston in the parish of Blewbury, and Ashdown, close to White Horse Hill, the spot where they now stood. It seemed clear that Ashdown was in Saxon times the name of a district or country rather than a town, and this district stretched over a considerable portion of the chalk range, and it was quite possible that all the above sites may have been included in the district; and so they need not insist very much on the name, though the opinion of Thomas Hughes—no mean authority on this point—tells in favour of the last named site. Mr. F. Wise, in 1738, spoke of the district of Ashdown as the ridge of hills from Letcombe going on to Wiltshire and overlooking the Vale with the downs in it, where the Great Western railroad passes, and is called the Rudgeway or Ridgeway. These downs appear to have been adorned with woods of ash, whence they received the denomination of Ashdown.

The Ilsley site was supported by Hewett in his Antiquities of the Hundred of Compton written in 1844, and his argument mainly rests on the fitness of the ground for the scene of a great battle; and the fact that the name of Ilsley is *Hildi lag*, the field of battle. This did not amount to much, and in favour of Ashampstead there was still less, resting mainly on the fact that Lysons, in his Topographical History of Berks, mentioned it as the probable site of the battle, but without giving any reason. Aston had a strong case. It was situated between Wallingford and Ilsley, and on a range of chalk hills which rose just above it were considerable earthworks. There was a chapel, called Thorn Chapel, on the eastern slope of the hill, and there was a tradition that this was built on the spot where some Saxon King heard Mass on the morning of the battle. Bishop Gibson was in favour of this spot, on account, it would seem, of a passage in the Saxon Chronicle for the year 1006, which runs as follows :—"They (the Danes) destroyed Wallingford and passed a night at Cholsey. Then they returned along Ashdown to Cwichelmes Low." The Bishop says that the latter place is Cuckhamsley Hill or Scutchamore Knob, as it is generally called, and he argued that as the Danes went from Wallingford by Ashdown to Cwichelmes Low we must look for Ashdown between Wallingford and Cuckhamsley Hill. Aston lying directly between the two is Ashdown the site of the battle. The name of Aston, however, was written *Estoni* in Domesday book, meaning simply "East Town" or enclosure and not *Mons fraxini* "the hill of the ash tree." There, therefore, only remained the site which we called Ashdown at the present day. Mr. Gardiner quoted Asser in support of that site on which they were now resting as the scene of the battle, and added that Francis Wise, in support of the Ashdown site, surmised that the Danes occupied the Roman entrenchment known as Uffington Castle; and spoke of the fact that about half-a-mile lower westward, on the brow of the hill nearer to Ashbury, overlooking the farm house called Hardwell, was a camp, fortified seemingly after the Saxon manner with two ditches, but not nearly so strong as the former which had only one. This was called "Hardwell Camp," and here, he supposed King Ethelred lay the night before the engagement. The same authority also referred to another camp called both "Ashbury Camp" and "King Alfred's Castle," which was about a mile distant from Uffington Castle. Beside these camps Wise said "He might add the barrows scattered over the downs in great plenty were sufficient to convince any man that this part of the country must

have been formerly the scene of war and bloodshed." He also referred to a number of other barrows in the district, in various forms. Referring to the single thorn spoken of by Asser, Mr. Gardiner said that Compton, one of the ancient Hundreds of Berks, was named in Domesday *Nachededorne*, i.e., "The hundred of the naked thorn." As the Hundred was divided between Faircross and Compton and that in the survey the manors of Contone and Assedone were mentioned as part of the now extinct Hundred, there seemed sufficient evidence to connect this district and northern Compton with the above places. Robert of Gloucester said a castle was built by Cnut in commemoration of the battle, and that Ilsley might occupy the site of the very church of which "Radolpeurs was Presbyter." The conclusion which he (Mr. Gardiner) had come to was that nobody knew, or ever would know, the exact spot upon which this great battle was fought. There could be little doubt it was fought in Berks, and that, he thought, ought to be enough for Berkshire folk. Taking it for granted that it was fought in Berks they might consider it as the most important historical event, with the exception perhaps of the first battle of Newbury, which had ever happened in the county. They might be content to remember that in this fight Alfred learned that the hordes of Pagan Norsemen were not invincible, and entered on that glorious career which made England a law-abiding, united and Christian nation, and gave her peace for two generations, with institutions and literature which still excited the admiration of statesmen and scholars.

WAYLAND SMITH'S CAVE.

A pleasant walk of about a mile and a half along the Ridgeway brought the party to this interesting spot, and here a short paper was read by the Rev. E. R. Gardiner. Several who could not manage the walk in the very trying heat contented themselves with a visit to the White Horse and inspecting the same. After a few words from Dr. WOOD,

The Rev. E. R. GARDINER said that that remarkable relic of primæval days known as Wayland Smith's Cave, around which legend, superstition and fiction have woven a quaint chain of picturesque interest, went far back into prehistoric times. Nevertheless Wise thought he had discovered the place of burial of King Bagsag or whatever his name may be in Wayland Smith's Cave. He said "The place is distinguished by a parcel of stones, set on edge, and enclosing a piece of ground raised a few feet above the common level which every one knows was the custom of the Danes, as well as

of some other Norman nations." And Wormius observes that if any Danish chief was slain in a foreign country they took care to bury him as pompously as if he had died in his own. Whether that remarkable piece of antiquity ever bore the name of the persons there buried was not now to be learned, said Wise, the true meaning of it being long since lost in ignorance and fable. All the account which the country people are able to give of it is: "At this place lived formally an invisible smith, and if a traveller's horse had lost a shoe upon the road, he had no more to do than to bring the horse to this place with a piece of money, and leaving both there for some time, he might come again and find the money gone and the horse new shod." The stones standing upon the Ridgeway, as it is called, (which was the situation that they chose for burial monuments) he supposed gave occasion to the whole being called Wayland Smith, which is a name it was always known by to the country people. . . . . These stones were, according to the best Danish antiquaries, a burial altar; and their being raised in the midst of a plain field near the great road, seemed to indicate some person there slain and buried, and that this person was probably a chief or king; there being no monument of this sort near that place, perhaps not in England beside. He thought they might regard the name as an illustration of the practice of the Anglo Saxons of connecting their myths and traditions with monuments which they found on their arrival in England. "Weland" was a Scandinavian Deity, and in the North Sagas he is represented as "making arms for the heroes, as did Hephæstus for the gods and warriors in Homer." The legend of Wayland the smith is considered of older date than even the Edda, that venerable collection of the sacred writings of the north. They might even find its prototype in the Mosaic Tubal Cain. It was incorporated into nearly all the older European tongues with singular uniformity of idea. While modern learning and research had brought to light the most ancient literate forms of the Northern myth, it was extraordinary that in Berkshire only it had survived to our own days as a living popular tradition. That this was an antiquity in the Anglo Saxon period was proved by the Charter of Edred, A.D. 955, in which it was spoken of as "Weland's Smithom," which showed that the tumulus had at that time been broken into, thus exposing the "cave" with which the Anglo-Saxons connected the traditions of their Vulcan or Weland as before mentioned. It was most probable that this tumulus was British.

UFFINGTON

was the next spot visited. The company assembled in Uffington Church of which a short account was given by the Rev. W. MACRAY. He said that Uffington was supposed to derive its name from Offa, King of Mercia, and that it was given to the Abbey of Abingdon by Ethelsone the Ealdor man between 924 and 941. Domesday Book spoke of it as having always belonged to Abingdon. In the Abingdon Chronicle there was mention of a dispute about a piece of pasture land between 1154 and 1189 which was settled by a duel in which the representative of the Abbot of Abingdon won. The manor belonged to Reading Abbey. The earliest church of which anything was known was built by Abbot Fairitius in the first quarter of the 12th century. The present edifice was entirely early English. There are remarkable recesses for two altars in the north trancept, and one in the south transept, gabled roofs which were said by Mr. J. H. Parker to be believed to be unique. There is a room over the south porch with an original fireplace and chimney, but the staircase was ruinous and consequently inaccessible. The spire was destroyed by lightning in the middle of the last century and in falling broke the roof of the church so that the present roof cuts off the tops of the windows. The sedilia and piscina are noticeable, as also are the octagonal tower and doorway in the south transept as well as an ancient iron-bound chest. Over the south porch are curious figures of two animals resembling lizards. The registers are sadly deficient, commencing only at 1654.

It was intended to have visited Kingston Lisle and Childrey Churches, but time would not permit, so the next stopping place was

SPARSHOLT.

The ancient church at this village is beginning to show signs of recovery from the dilapidated state into which it was allowed to fall by the late vicar, the work of restoration having been commenced. A brief paper by Rev. J. M. Guilding, was read by Mr. S. S. STALLWOOD. It stated that the church of to-day with its large chancel and transept and nave must have been completed in the year 1337. The building now used as the vestry was probably the residence of the priest formerly. There were some interesting monuments. The chancel and the south transept together with the nave, and fine roof belonged to the period between 1312 and 1353.

At the Didcot station the Reading and Oxford parties separated, all having thoroughly enjoyed the long and tiring but exceedingly interesting excursion.