



## Benson, or Bensington.

*By John Edward Field, M.A., Vicar.*

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### PART I.—PRIMITIVE ANTIQUITIES.

**T**HERE is abundant proof that the present village of Benson was a site of human occupation from very early times ; and indeed it is obvious that its position on the river bank is one which primitive settlers would eagerly appropriate. It occupies the end of a ridge of gravel which stretches westward from the front of the Chiltern Hills, with the marshes towards Berrick and Warborough on the north side, and those of Crowmarsh on the south ; while the beautiful brook from Ewelme flows in a copious stream of two miles along the southern edge of the ridge. And the quantities of pre-historic remains which have been found here are sufficient proof that the early settlement was not inconsiderable. During the last few years gravel has been dug at a point near the north-east corner of the Churchyard and for some distance eastward along the fields behind the lower end of the village. Beneath the surface-soil were found here and there numerous pieces of broken pottery, pre-Roman as well as Roman-British, together with bones of various animals—goat, sheep, pig, and the Celtic short-horn ox,—with other relics, such as a primitive horse-shoe, a bone needle, and several broken querns. It was evidently a waste place along the north side of the village where the inhabitants threw out their rubbish ; and it shows that what is the lower end of the village now was also part of the village then.

A still more remarkable token of primitive occupation disappeared about forty years ago, when the improvements under the Enclosure Acts were carried out with a ruthless disregard of the historic features of the parish. A considerable earthwork between the Church and the river is mentioned by several old writers. Hearne states (in Roper's life of Sir Thomas More, 1716, p. 260) that : " The Castle stood on the west side of the present Church, where a few years since a great quantity of Bones, some of which were Humane, and the rest the Bones of several kinds of Animals, besides strange

old Spurs, Bridles, Swords, etc., was dug up. And 'tis on this side of the Town where there are still to be seen some Tokens of the Ditch that surrounded it in old Time."

Whatever may have been "the Castle" of which Hearne speaks, or "an angle of King Offa's palace near the Church" mentioned by Dr. Plot, there is no question about the earthwork, though Hearne magnifies it into the remains of a ditch surrounding the town.

In Brewer's "Oxfordshire," 1813, we read: "To the west of the Church are a bank and trench, which seem to have been of a square form. Three sides of the embankment are now much defaced; but the part on the north retains considerable boldness."

Again, Dr. Plot, in his "Natural History of Oxfordshire" (Ed. 2, 1705, x. 27), making a fanciful attempt to trace a Roman way from Dorchester crossing the river at this point for Wallingford, connects it with an earthwork at Benson, which is to be seen (he says) "running west of the Church, and is there called by the name of Medler's-bank." The present enclosure of about two acres between the Church and the river, with three rectangular sides and the roadways completely surrounding it, may perhaps be taken to bear out the account of the former existence of a camp at this point; and the extracts given above seem to show that the Medler's-bank formed the northern side of the camp, and was of greater prominence than the other parts. All traces of the bank have now disappeared, and local tradition only relates that the ground, being used for gravel pits, was very broken and irregular before it was enclosed and levelled, and that bones and weapons were often found there.

But a valuable account of the Medler's-bank has been left in some MS. notes on the antiquities of the district by the late Mr. Edward Anderdon Reade, of Ipsden, now in the possession of Mr. Francis Hedges, whose courtesy permits some extracts to be given. Mr. Reade compares this bank with the well-known Grimes-Dyke (or Grim's-Bank, as it is popularly called), which runs across the southern extremity of Oxfordshire from Henley to Mongewell, forming the northern boundary of a district of which the other sides are enclosed by a large horseshoe-shaped bend of the river, and evidently constructed as an artificial supplement to this natural boundary. He describes Grimes-Dyke as consisting of alternate bank and trench, the bank not being thrown up from the adjacent soil, but formed of chalk and stones and clay which can only have been carried from the excavated trench above or below; and he

suggests that it must have been formed in this way either because the imperfect tools of its makers could only work at intervals where there was less obstruction from the tangled roots of the woodlands, or else because the primitive race had a superstitious dread of disturbing needlessly the mother earth which gave them nourishment ; but the fact in any case indicates the very ancient character of the work. And it is suggested, further, that Henley, just within the north-east angle of the enclosed district, is in the Celtic tongue *Hen-Lle*, the "old place," the original settlement of the tribe as they came up the river, whence they proceeded to form their northern boundary while they spread themselves towards the south-west over the extremity of the Chilterns ; and, finally, that this tribe was known as the Ancalites—the *An-Cael*, or "Old Celts,"—whom all authorities agree in placing at this southern end of Oxfordshire.

Mr. Reade then states that "the Medlars bank, which has the same feature as Grimes Dike of an earthwork raised by transport of its materials from a distance, is the memorial of Benson antiquity ; though its object, probably from its having been utilized for purposes connected with the Villa Regia [the Royal Town of Benson] during Saxon and Mercian tenure, cannot now be ascertained." It is evident that this description of the bank is given from personal knowledge, and the mode of its construction shows that it was a boundary-dyke of some considerable length like the other with which Mr. Reade compares it.

Now it should be remarked that the Thames has followed an eastward course for some miles until it approaches the Chiltern district, and then turns southward at Benson two miles above Mongewell ; and after it has rounded the southern end of the hills its direct eastward course is resumed two miles north-east of Henley, near Medmenham. Therefore, as the chief part of the district within this curve is enclosed by the dyke of ten miles from Henley to Mongewell, so the northern remainder of it would be enclosed if a parallel dyke of fourteen miles ran from Medmenham to Benson. And numerous traces of such a dyke are to be seen, consisting, like the inner one, sometimes of bank and sometimes of trench, as the different exigencies of the ground made the one or the other more convenient.

First there is the large entrenchment, known as the Danes' Ditches, near the river at Danesfield in Medmenham. It is said to have been thrown up by the Danes under Hasten, when they made

a raid up the Thames Valley in 893; and indeed the tradition implied in the name must be taken as an argument that it is Danish work; yet, even so, it is likely to have been an adaptation of earlier work which the Danes found ready to their hand. And if we take a direct course, curving slightly northward, between this point and Benson, it leads us along considerable earthworks in the Pishill woods and a well-preserved embankment of more than a mile in length along the ridge and the west front of Swyncombe Down, where it ends scarcely more than three miles from Benson. The interval of six miles between Medmenham and Pishill may possibly reveal further remains of a similar character to one who knows the district.

From the site of Medlers-bank at Benson a direct line of road, footpath, or field-way, may be followed without any important interruption to the end of Swyncombe Down, where its continuous course is carried on by the embankment. The primitive track is no doubt unchanged along the south side of Benson Churchyard and into the western end of the village. There it has been blocked by an extension of the Castle Inn and diverted into a parallel course a few yards southward as far as the boundary of Ewelme. For about a fifth part of a mile from the Castle Inn yard to the main crossing of the village the original track has been disused from time immemorial, though its line is still evident; but for half-a-mile along the upper part of the village it survived in the form of a footpath until the enclosure of 1856. Then for one-third of a mile across the Manor of Fifield there is no reminiscence of it; but its direct course is resumed as it enters the parish of Ewelme. Here it still forms, as the Benson footpath formed forty years ago, the boundary dividing the orchards and other small enclosures at the back of the village from the open fields to the north. Between the footpath and the hedge a small ditch may be the relic of a larger one; and there are evident traces of artificial embankment here and there. Passing some marshy ground, called "the Pitles," which adds its springs to the Ewelme brook, the direct track has disappeared for a few yards. But we speedily light upon it again at "the Shaw," a broad strip of waste ground, covered with grass and underwood, stretching nearly half-a-mile along the upper part of the Ewelme fields. Here the ditch beside the footpath measures some feet both in width and depth, for it has been enlarged within living memory to carry off the waters of a spring which breaks out at rare intervals in the adjacent field; but it would seem that already the ditch must have been of

considerable size. After a trifling interruption on the rising ground, a field-way continues the line, making direct for the mid-point of the Down, as if it were going to meet the line of bank upon the ridge ; but half-a-mile short of it, at the head of an opposite slope, the track diverges towards the south and meets a similar divergence of the bank. For the bank, instead of descending the abrupt front of the Down, is forked on the brow and throws a branch down each angle. Similarly our track, before descending into the hollow, is bent round towards the south to meet the end of the bank at the south-west angle of the Down. We must presume that a corresponding branch bent northward to meet the north-west angle, but of this no traces appear. Thus the forks of the bank westward and the forks of the field-way eastward would meet at the crossing of the Icknield Way, which passes close beneath the foot of the Down. The continuous line of the track which we have been following would be sufficient proof of a direct connexion between the lost Benson bank and the existing Swyncombe bank, even if the proof were not made more convincing by the remarkable ditch in the Shaw at Ewelme.

No distinct traces of the bank can now be seen at Benson ; but if it was strictly west of the Church, and if it continued for any distance from the river, it follows that the Church must have been built upon it ; just as the early Norman Church of Mongewell was built upon a tumulus beside the river a short distance within the other boundary bank, and as in many familiar instances—the mounds of Didcot and Taplow, for example, and the entrenched camps of West Wycombe and Finchampstead,—an old earthwork was chosen for the same purpose. And a few yards directly east of Benson Church, at a depth of eight feet below the surface and two feet below the level which previous burials had disturbed, a fragment of rude pottery was found in 1881, with the jawbone and other bones of an ox, proving that the soil at this depth had been deposited after human occupation had commenced here. When, therefore, we observe that the old portion of the Churchyard is a ridge from which the ground slopes sharply northward and slightly southward also, we may conclude that it still represents a trace of what was once the Medlers-bank.

Thus there is ample evidence of the existence of this dyke, carried across from the lower to the upper Thames, parallel with the inner Grimsdyke and exceeding it in length by nearly one-third, though otherwise it is of smaller dimensions ; and as the inner bank

enclosed the cluster of springs which give the name to Mongewell, so the outer one enclosed the still more valuable springs of Ewelme with the brook which flows out by Benson.

It is impossible, as Mr. Reade remarks, to ascertain its object. Is it an extension of the same tribal boundary which appears in Grimsdyke, carried out at a later period when its possessors were able to annex this strip of two or three miles' width along their northern border? Or is it the original boundary from which the tribe was eventually driven back and forced to raise for themselves a more formidable barrier to protect an inner territory against their invaders? Or again, is the Medlers bank the boundary of some later comers who settled at Medmenham on their first incursion up the river and threw up their entrenchment from that point and spread themselves towards the south-west, over some thirty square miles of adjacent territory, exactly as a tribe preceding them had dealt with a somewhat larger territory upon which they entered from their "old place" at Henley? Perhaps the last view is the most probable.

The similarity of the names of Medmenham and the Medlers-bank is striking, and suggests the thought that the *medmen* who had their *home* at Medmenham are identical with the *medlers* who had their *bank* at Benson. Are they not *midmen*, or *middlers*, so called from holding a middle position between two other races or tribes? And are they perhaps intermediate between the people who lived in the open country north of the Thames and those who were enclosed by Grimsdyke and the southern curve of the river?

Again, if Medmenham is the original home from which the Medmen occupied this district, and Henley is the original "old place" from which the other race occupied the adjacent district within Grimsdyke, there is a contrast between these two names, reminding us that Medmenham and the Medlers take their designations not from the Celtic, like Hen-lle, but from the Saxon standpoint; and so, again, does Grim's Dyke, the Dyke of Grimm, or the evil one, so called because it appeared to the Saxon to be a work of superhuman power. Then, if we are interpreting these names rightly, do they not belong to a period when the Saxon race had become predominant in the open country, and the Celt still held his ground in the innermost extremity of the Chiltern, or Celtern, hills? and do they not imply that the intervening district was occupied by a race whom the Saxons recognised as middle-men, still retaining their own primitive home at the one end and their own bank stretch-

ing across to the other end? The question is more easily asked than answered: yet as the evidence of a lengthened continuance of a Celtic remnant in Saxon days becomes stronger, and as the old idea of their complete extermination becomes weakened, the question may be worth the asking and fuller historical research may in time give the answer. Meanwhile we may consider how far our present knowledge of the history accords with such a theory.

*(To be continued.)*

## The Church Bells of Berkshire and their Inscriptions.

The following notes on the Bells of Berkshire and their inscriptions will not be without interest to Antiquaries. No work has yet appeared on this subject, and these notes may prepare the way for a complete collection.

### EAST LOCKINGE.

- (1) I. W. Praised be thy name O Lorde that hast sent.  
1578.

The initials I.W. may stand for John Wallis, a bell-founder in Salisbury in 1581.

- (2) W: Taylor. Oxford. Fecit. 1851. ✝

This bell was re-cast from an earlier one, which was cracked.

- (3) God be our spyd in our begynnyng. W. T.

The only initials corresponding to these are W. Tosier (1723), but this is clearly of earlier date. This bell has no cannons cast on it, but is bolted to the stock by simple bolts passed through holes in the crown of the bell.

- ✝ Robt. Wells, Aldbourne, Fecit. 1793.

Sanctus Bell. Rob. and Jo. Wells, Aldbourne.

### ADDINGTON CHURCH.

This ring of six bells was re-cast in 1855 from three old ones.  
John Taylor and Sons, Loughborough, late of Oxford,  
founders, 1855 ✝ F. S. MDCCCXLVI.