

YELDEN IN BEDFORDSHIRE, THE SCENE OF THE BATTLE
BETWEEN THE ROMANS AND THE ICENI, RELATED
BY TACITUS, ANN: XII. 31.¹

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Yelden is a village at the northern end of the county, near Melchbourne the seat of Lord St. John, and about 14 miles from Bedford. The object of this paper is to identify some remarkable British entrenchments at Yelden, with the "*locus pugnae*," of Tacitus—a battle-field mentioned, and slightly described, by that author, in the passage quoted above.

It will be in the recollection of members of the Archæological Institute that, at the Northampton meeting, three years ago, I read to them a paper entitled "*The Nene Valley a Roman frontier, and the origin of the name Northampton*," which paper was afterwards printed in the *Archæological Journal*, vol. xxxv.

In that paper I proved to the satisfaction of other people besides myself, that it should be regarded as a settled thing—(a thing about which indeed there was little serious dispute before)—that the Frontier Line of Ostorius cut England in two parts, from the Wash to the Severn;—that it ran from Peterborough—(the then edge of the fen)—along the right or south bank of the "Antona" or Nene, up to Northampton; then across the high lands of Northants, Warwickshire, and Gloucestershire to some point, where its western end commanded the Sabrina, or Severn.

We learn that this determination of Ostorius to cut England with a chain of forts, and the preparations he made to this end, gave serious umbrage to one of the strongest of the British nations, who occupied the whole Eastern counties,—the Iceni, as they are generally called. No doubt Ikeni, or Ekenæ, is the more correct pronunciation, as the road called *Henild Way* teaches us, but I should be called pedantic if I said "Ekenæ," so I will follow our barbarous English custom and say Icëni.

These Iceni for their own good reasons had been friends of the Romans up to this time. They had looked upon the second invasion of Britain, and the conquest of the whole south with equanimity. Perhaps they thought this invasion would end like that of Julius Cæsar, three generations before, in the infliction of a tribute, which need never be paid, and the retirement of the Roman eagle for another hundred years:—leaving the friendly tribes in a better position than they were before, in fact, predominant:—the Romans being the cats'-paw which the Iceni used for pulling the chesnuts out of the fire.

These astute people never believed that the Romans would dream of

¹ Read in the Section of Antiquities, at the Annual Meeting at Bedford, July 28th, 1881.

subjugating the whole island, with its outlying hordes of fierce peoples, safe in their fastnesses of Wales, Cumberland, and Scotland:—people that were looked upon by the Iceni themselves, no doubt, as barbarous and implacable savages. No, it was absurd to think that Britain could ever be reduced to be a subject and tributary Province of Rome.

But when the Iceni heard of this actual preparation made for garrisoning the whole Nene valley and beyond it westward; when they obtained information that engineers were laying out a military frontier from the fens to the Severn; when news came that 10,000 natives were impressed to dig stone and burn lime for the walls of these forts, then they began to open their eyes to the real intentions of the Romans. They forthwith held assemblies for consultation, at which deputies from adjoining nations would attend, and the popular refrain of all the speeches was, no doubt, that Britons never will be slaves. The result was that they determined to throw up their allegiance, equip a strong army, and attack the Romans in the Nene valley.

Now all this, which must have taken some months, is related in half-a-dozen lines by Tacitus. Our own common sense will tell us what a great deal has to be filled in between the lines, and will guide us pretty well how to fill it in. Some people have an idea that Ostorius never actually carried out this frontier project, simply because he never found it necessary; that he got on without it. I don't agree with such an opinion for one moment.

Tacitus tells us that the Iceni marched a strong force to attack the Romans and entrenched themselves in a strong position for that purpose. Would the Iceni have taken this neck-or-nothing step if the Nene valley forts had been only a matter of talk? Common-sense says *no*. Besides there are the forts to this day, staring us in the face. Added to this the well-known character of Ostorius is strongly in favour of his then and there carrying out his intentions. He was a prudent as well as dashing commander. Tacitus makes the remark in the very next section that the general immediately fell back from North Wales, when he heard that the Brigantes had risen in his rear, for, says the historian, "he was one of those who took care"—*ne nova moliretur, nisi prioribus firmatis*—"not to enter upon new enterprises until previous ones had been secured."

To make the position plain I will give an outline of the narrative of Tacitus (Ann. xii, 31) leading up to this quarrel.

Taking for granted that we know all about the conquest of Southern England contained in the tenth book, unhappily lost, Tacitus here resumes the British narrative by telling us that the newly-appointed Proprætor Ostorius found his work cut out for him on his arrival in England; for the Northern tribes had been pouring like a flood (*effusis*) out of their forest fastnesses,¹ and devastating the conquered and allied territories (*i.e.*, Beds, Bucks, Herts and Oxfordshire, we will presume).

Ostorius soon showed himself equal to the emergency, for he snatched together a few light troops, and without warning, pounced down into the midst of the marauders, and soon swept the country clear of them, and sent them back over the Nene. Then the historian goes on to say that Ostorius did what any prudent general would have done: he disarms all the doubtful tribes of the border-land (*detrahere arma suspectis*), and

¹ Of Northants and Warwickshire.

makes preparations (*parat*) to fence in the Nene and Severn rivers with a girdle of camps. (*Cinctosque castris Antonam et Sabrinam fluvios cohíbere parat*).

Now there is a world of significance in the little word *parat*. It is a word of only five letters; but what does it convey? *Parat* means sending a staff of engineers to explore the country from sea to sea, and to pitch upon the strategically best points for camps in a continuous line right across mid-Britain. This of itself would take weeks. Ostorius would, no doubt, ride over the line himself, to confirm the judgment of his subordinates. Then would come the work of impressing men from the subject tribes, and very likely requisitioning their dutiful allies, the Iceni also, for constructing the forts. Besides the soldiers, an army of miserable natives would be set to work as navvies, lime burners, and quarry-men, from Peterborough to Tewksbury; for at average intervals of eight miles over one-hundred miles of country, a more or less strong military post had to be erected.

These castles were not all equally formidable; stronger and larger ones seem to have been erected (among others less so) at intervals of about three camps in distance, and no doubt at important and commanding points of the line, at intervals of about twenty-four miles. One of these was at the fen end of the line at *Chesterton*; the next was at *Irchester*; both these were large stone-walled camps. The next of this kind was *Castle dykes* (or, more strictly speaking, *Stowe camp*; for "castle dykes" is a strong British camp side by side with the Roman one). This had evidently been fortified with a wall of vitrified clay. I know what kind of fort *Irchester* was, for I was digging there for nearly six months in 1878.

Irchester has an area of twenty acres; and had a deep foss and an earthen agger all round; and, in addition to that, a wall of lime-stone eight feet thick. Portions of this still existed above ground in the reign of Queen Anne. I found the foundations still existing under ground nine to ten feet wide, and going down six feet deep to the iron-stone rock. A new cut had been made in the meadows, and the river led up alongside of the northern wall. Roads had been constructed leading in the direction of the other riverside camps. *Speculæ* or signal mounds were erected in positions commanding a view of these camps.

It will be seen from this description that the little word *parat* has not a little significance. It meant months of hard labour by soldiers, navvies, lime burners, stone cutters, &c., &c. (Mr. Scriven has calculated that the *Irchester* Camp wall, if ten feet high above ground, contained over 13,000 cubic yards of stone work). And we must not forget the ten thousand other things preparatory to the organising, feeding, and otherwise supplying works of this nature and extent. *Parat* implies all this.

The historian goes on to say—"quod primi Iceni abnuere," &c., &c. The following is a free, but faithful, translation of the passage, to the end of Sect. 31.

"The Iceni were the first to object (to these frontier works). A strong and valiant nation were the Iceni, and one that had not been weakened by battles with us; for they had, of their own choice, become our allies. Well, these Iceni and the neighbouring peoples, at their instigation (marched an army to interrupt these works and) selected as

their battle field a place fenced round with earthen banks, and with an entrance so narrow as to be impervious to cavalry. These fortifications the Roman general proceeded to storm; although he lacked legionary troops, and only had a force of allies. And having duly disposed his cohorts of infantry (for the attack) he equipped his cavalry also, as foot soldiers, for the occasion. Then, at a given signal, the earthen ramparts are carried by assault, to the consternation of the ranks of the defenders, —hemmed in as they were, by their own defences. They, on their part, conscious of being in the position of rebels—(expecting no quarter) and cut off from seeking safety by flight, performed many brilliant deeds of valour. In this battle, the son of the general—Marcus Ostorius—gained the Victoria Cross—(literally, ‘the crown of honour for saving the life of a citizen.’)”

The next Section (32) begins thus :—“By the slaughter of the Iceni, the peoples who were hesitating between war and peace had their doubts set at rest; and Ostorius led his army (thence) into the territory of the Cangi.”

Now I proceed to speak of the several reasons which have induced me to accept Yelden as the most probable site of this historic battle. A friend of mine wrote to me the other day, that I should have to draw largely on my imagination if I set to work to show that. I hope to prove that I have sober and solid grounds to build upon, in this theory of mine, and that imagination will play no part in the matter.

My theory is built upon the following six grounds, or points of argument :—

1. The point of the compass the Icenian army *marched from*, and the general direction they marched for—both these we know.

2. The special point they *aimed at*—this we get at by using our reason and observation.

3. The consequent *Line of march* may be inferred.

4. The natural *point of that line of march* for the Icenian army to halt and entrench, any modern strategist will tell us.

5. The existence of remarkable British entrenchments in that line of march, and at the point indicated by consideration No. 4—is a fact.

6. The non-existence of entrenchments of the same importance any where else in that neighbourhood for miles round—is also a fact.

I will dwell a little upon these six grounds of argument in order :—

1. We know *from* what side of the country the Icenian army would naturally approach, for we know that they occupied the eastern counties. We know also that the enemy was occupying the whole forty miles of the Nene valley in force, for the purpose of constructing forts all the way up its course to Northampton, and beyond. So no doubt the Iceni would direct their march upon *some* part of that forty miles of the Nene valley. To do this they must pass through Huntingdonshire or Bedfordshire, or just between the two.

I think it is not worth while discussing the question whether they might not have attacked some point of the Roman line further westward, beyond Northampton, towards the watershed. If they did this, they would, no doubt (in order to avoid the Romans in the Nene valley) have marched through Southern Beds and Bucks. But is such an extraordinary piece of strategy likely? They would be leaving the Roman forces in the Nene valley in their rear, to cut their line of communication and

place them between two fires. If they possessed a grain of common sense they would not do this.

Still more incredible is it that this great battle came off at Bury Hill, Daventry, as some have held. To get there the Eastern Counties men would have had to evade, or successfully break through, the Roman lines, before they were pulled up and made to pay for their temerity. The supposition appears simply absurd, if we credit the Iceni with common sense and the Romans with common vigilance.

It follows then that the Nene valley was what the Iceni would make for. What *point* of the Nene valley? is the next consideration.

2. We can guess, I think, pretty well what particular point of the Nene they would aim at. They would naturally make for the most important Roman fort and depot upon that river. And that undoubtedly was Irchester, which is near the middle of their Nene valley line, 25 miles above Peterborough, and 25 miles below the water-shed at Arbury.

I am personally well acquainted with all the camps upon the Nene, and, setting aside Chesterton near Peterborough, which also was a walled camp, Irchester was undoubtedly the strongest, and the key of the whole position, watching as it does the mouth of the Ise valley, a feeder of the Nene, and the natural pathway and outlet of the northern tribes, when they invaded the southern midlands. I have not the slightest doubt that Irchester was the most important link of the Ostorian chain on the eastern side of the watershed.

Now, if the Iceni wanted to settle the business once for all, they would not be nibbling at any of the smaller camps of the Nene; nor would they be likely to attack Chesterton, the last link next the fens, but they would go boldly at the centre of the chain, and try and break it. There is reason to conclude that on this occasion the Iceni had, metaphorically, "burnt their boats," and gone in to conquer or to die. Judging from the whole tenor of the narrative of Tacitus, it was a case of "aut Cæsar aut nullus" with them. Hence it is that we can make a rational conjecture as to the point they would boldly aim at in this life and death struggle.—Irchester.

3. This being so we can chalk out within a few miles their line of march, especially when they came to converge upon Irchester, and the nearer they got to Irchester, the more certainly we shall know where to look for them. They would undoubtedly pass through the southern end of Hunts, or the northern end of Beds, and if they did *not* actually pass through Yelden they could not help being somewhere *near* it. This may be judged by the sketch map.¹

4. When they got on towards the Roman position, Tacitus tells us they chose a place for battle and strongly entrenched it (or possibly found it entrenched and made it still stronger.) What was their object in so doing? Why, no doubt to secure a position whence they could at a favourable opportunity fall upon the Romans.

Now, let us ask any military man how far from Irchester that position was likely to be. I think even a civilian could conjecture that they would chose a place not too far off, nor too near. Just far enough off in fact to be within *striking distance*, and a daily menace to the Romans. As such the Roman general evidently regarded them. He could not

¹ Mr. Baker exhibited at the Meeting a map of Mid-England, showing the positions of Irchester, Yelden, the

Icenian country and the Roman frontier line from the Wash to the Severn.

afford to leave them and wait for their attack. They must be dislodged at any risk; although he had troops in which he could not place that reliance which he could have done in a Roman Legion. How many miles can be called *striking distance*? I should say (speaking under correction) a couple of hours' march or about the average distance of the Nene camps from each other, *i.e.*, seven or eight miles.

5. Well, now let us walk from Irchester eastward in the direction in which we expect the Iceni to appear, and see if we can find any British earthworks or indication of that nature. We walk seven miles due east, and we do come upon some most remarkable entrenchments of a decidedly British character, as Mr. Bloxam allows, fenced all round with an earthen agger, still very steep and formidable as a defence after a lapse of 1830 years. Yes, here in the village of Yelden is the *thing* we want, and just *where* we want it.¹

The place consists of a central keep, a mound forty feet high, from the bottom of the foss. Appended to this are two fortified *wings* (as I call them) of irregular shape. A moat, still holding water in the winter, surrounds the mound and the south wing. The north wing has a high *agrestis agger* all round it, and a (now) dry moat. A little brook runs outside the ground. We have little doubt that it was dammed higher up in old times and turned into the moats. On the east and south-east are some rectangular additions to the fortress defended by slighter fosses and aggers, which, however, show signs of having been levelled down, at a more recent date.

These appendices, which I call *supplementary camps*, may have been for the purpose of sheltering a larger force on some occasion, or they may have been simply cattle *kraals*. They are found in connection with other British strongholds; notably two I have lately examined, Lavendon in Bucks and Castle Dykes in Northants.

On the north side is the road, which runs in a nearly direct line for some miles east and west. The whole area including the supplementary camps is fourteen acres.

6. We have found a place which serves extremely well for the *locus pugnæ* of Tacitus. Now, if the battle after all was not there, it must have been somewhere else. I have looked all over the counties of Hunts and Beds, the only rational counties for the search, and I can find a "somewhere else."

Valpy, in his edition of Tacitus, thinks that the battle came off somewhere in Huntingdonshire. I know all that side of Hunts very well, from having resided near it all my life and ridden over most of the ground. I have also scanned every inch, and half inch, of the Ordnance Map most carefully, and cannot find any other British camp such as Tacitus describes, anywhere in that part of the country. The nearest one of any consequence is "*Lavendon Castle*," in Bucks, before alluded to. But that is too far south, and also too far off Irchester, to be within *striking distance*. I once thought that the battle may have come off at the village of Covington in Hunts, three miles north of Yelden, for there are moats and entrenchments all over the village, but they are but slight entrenchments and present nothing so pronounced and emphatic as the *agrestes aggeri* of Yelden.

Thus then, I have given my six reasons for locating this historic battle at Yelden:—

¹ A plan of Yelden as surveyed by Mr. Scriven and Mr. Baker was exhibited.

Firstly. We know *whence* they marched and *whither* they marched.

Secondly. Reason tells us *the point* they marched for.

Thirdly. Hence we can chalk out the *line of march*, especially as it nears Irchester.

Fourthly. Reason again will tell us *how far short* of Irchester they will halt and entrench.

Fifthly. We find *the place* we want just *where* we want it.

Sixthly. We *cannot find* any other such place anywhere in Beds or Hunts, in one of which two counties it most decidedly must have come off.

Of course, all this does not amount to *proof*; but it amounts to a probability, almost next door to proof. We have no *direct* evidence on the subject; it is a matter of circumstantial evidence,—the putting two and two together. Until still stronger arguments in favour of another place are met with, it is not an irrational request of mine to ask for belief in Yelden, as ennobled and dignified by one of those bold and patriotic stands which our Celtic fathers made, but made in vain, against the Conquerors of the world.

Very little can be gathered from the books respecting the history of *Yelden Castle*. It may have had a life, like that of *Violet le Duc's* typical fortress, about which he has written so charming a book. Yelden may have been British, Roman, Saxon, Danish, Mediæval, all in turn. All that we can learn is, that a family of the name of *Trally* had a castle there at the time of the Conquest; a Saxon house probably. The *Trallys* had become extinct, and the castle a ruin in 1360. Yelden is called in Domesday *Gibeldene*, or *Giveldune*, also *Yveldun*. No doubt, *dun* is the correct termination; and *Yeldon* more correct than *Yelden*. Perhaps some one can enlighten us as to what *Gibel*, *Givel*, or *Yvel* means. The last Trally, or rather his executors, founded Northill College. It is curious that we find in Lysons that Northill was anciently written *North-Yvel*. Does *yvel*—(mean) hill?

As so little light can be thrown upon the mystery of "Yelden Castle" by books, I intend, in a few weeks, to have recourse to the best book of all—mother earth. The present proprietor—Mr. Hoare,—has given permission for some excavation within and upon the entrenchments. There are signs of stone work upon the keep, but not the slightest upon the earthen aggers; but the spade will doubtless reveal the secrets of the place.

NOTE.—In the October following the reading of this paper, digging was commenced at Yelden, but was relinquished in a few days owing to the inclemency of the weather. This slight excavation was commenced in the southern "wing," and revealed several foundations near the surface as of a somewhat similar character, but probably of mediæval date. Below these, at the depth of six to eight feet, a stratum of black mould mixed with charcoal was met with as well as fragments of coarse pottery, bones, animal and human, and what appear to be hand-worked flints. The excavation will be proceeded with this summer, and extended to the great central mound, and the results communicated to the Institute at the Carlisle Meeting. No foundations could be detected on the "*agrestes aggeri*" of the north wing. Mr. Baker (Hargrave, Kimbolton) will be thankful for contributions towards the exploration.