ARE THE CAMBRIDGESHIRE DITCHES REFERRED TO BY TACITUS?[1]

By PROFESSOR W. RIDGEWAY.

When the Archæological Institute last visited Cambridge,[2] some thirty-eight years ago, that distinguished archæologist, Dr. Edwin Guest, late master of Gonville and Caius College, delivered a discourse on "The Four great boundary Dykes of Cambridgeshire," and the probable dates of their construction. Dr. Guest regarded the dykes as the boundary lines of the British and Saxon Princes, and he sought to trace their succession from the cursory notices of early historians, and from numismatic evidence. As far as I can ascertain there is one passage in an ancient writer of great interest which has not been made use of by any of the scholars who have dealt with this subject. In the *Annals* (XII. 31) Tacitus gives a brief account of the overthrow of the powerful British tribe of the Iceni (or *Eceni* as some prefer to spell their name from the inscription ECE on some of the coins found in the districts which they once occupied). When P. Ostorius Scapula arrived in Britain A.D. 50 as propraetor in succession to Aulus Plautius, he found things in a very disturbed condition. The still unconquered tribes had overrun the territories of those in alliance with Rome. Although the winter had already set in, he determined to strike a vigorous blow without delay. He fell upon the marauders, followed them up in their flight, set about disarming those who could not be trusted, and kept in check all the district between the rivers Antona (or, adopting Mr. Bradley's clever restoration, Trisantona) and Sabrina with a series of forts. The Sabrina is of course the Severn, whilst the Trisantona of Ptolemy flows out at Southampton. The

[1] Read in the Antiquarian Section at the Annual Meeting of the Institute, at Cambridge, August 11th, 1892.

[2] Archæological Journal Vol. xi, 393. Proceedings of Meeting held at Cambridge, 1854.

Severn alone is sufficient to indicate the region in which Ostorius was operating, and admitting the reading *Cis Trisantonam*[1] as right, we can define more closely the quarter from which he would advance against other tribes.

The first of the Britons who resented his policy were the Iceni, a powerful tribe, who held Norfolk, Suffolk, and at least part of Cambridgeshire. Their military resources were unimpaired, as they had become the allies of the Romans, without offering any resistance, on the invasion of Claudius A.D. 43. At their instigation the neighbouring tribes rose, and they chose a field for battle fenced with a rude dyke, and with a narrow approach to prevent the attack of cavalry. Ostorius, although he had not his legionaries, but only some auxiliary forces, determined to attack their fortifications, and succeeded in routing them with great slaughter. The actual words of Tacitus are as follows :—

hisque [Icenis] auctoribus circumiectae nationes locum pugnae delegere septum agresti aggere, et aditu angusto, ne peruius equiti foret. ea munimenta dux Romanus, quanquam sine robore legionum sociales copias ducebat, perrumpere aggreditur, et distributis cohortibus turmas quoque peditum ad munia accingit. tunc dato signo perfringunt aggerem suisque claustris impeditos turbant. atque illi conscientia rebellionis, et obseptis effugiis, multa et clara facinora fecere.

The difficulty of fixing ancient topography from the accounts given by Tacitus, and other ancient historians, is well known. As far as I am aware no one has ever attempted to fix the site of this battle. There are apparently no guide-marks. Let us, however, see if we can get any reasonably probable locality for the fight.

A glance at the ancient map of East Anglia will show us that it was bounded on three sides by the sea and its inlets; the fenland of Cambridgeshire defended it on the west; and the great forest region of Essex on the south-west. Thus the only approach was the narrow strip of open chalk country lying between the fens and the woodland. Along this strip passed the ancient British road, the Icknield (or Icenhilde) Way, in which we recognize the name of the people whose highway it formed into the west and south. East of Newmarket its direction is uncertain, although it probably went to Thetford. The Icknield Way, says Professor Babington, "may easily be traced from near

[1] Mr. Bradley, however, thinks that *Trisantona* was the Trent.

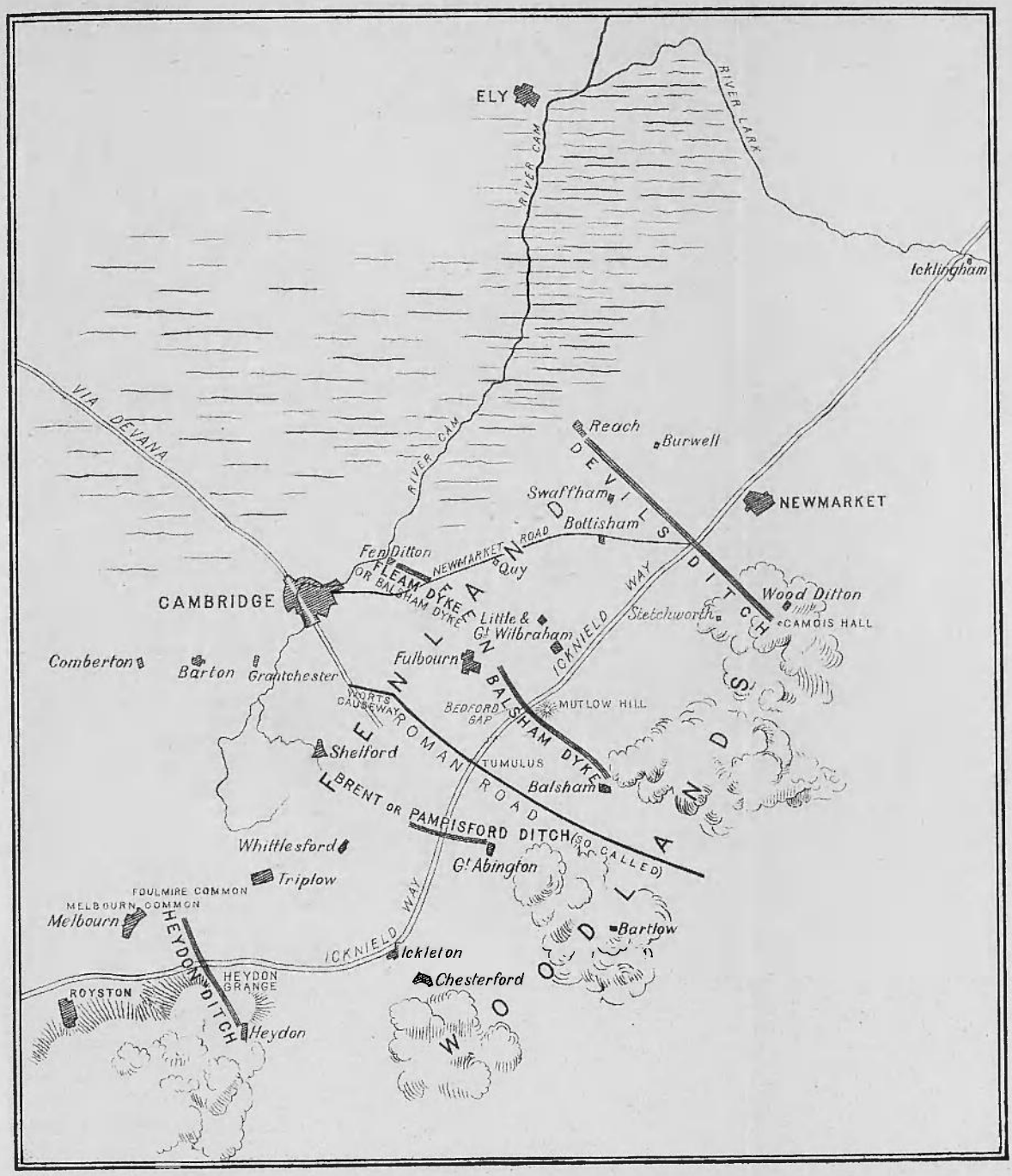
Thetford [a British stronghold, as the huge earthwork there still testifies] to Icklingham,...then crossing the river Lart at Lackford, and falling into the line of the present road at Kentford."[1] It passed by Newmarket, across the Newmarket Heath to Ickleton, passed not far from Great Chesterford, on by Royston and Baldock to Dunstable. There can be little doubt that the Icknield Way is pre-Roman. The Iceni possessed chariots, as we shall see below, and the keeping of chariots implies the use of some regular and well-defined roads, or at least tracks. If the Icknield Way had been made in Roman times it is hardly possible to imagine why it should have carefully avoided the important Roman station at Great Chesterford. Since it may be assumed without hesitation that there was some chariot-way along the chalk downs into East Anglia, and since we have a road of undoubtedly great antiquity running along this strip of chalk and yet shunning a great Roman camp, we may well follow Professor Babington and all the older authorities in regarding the Icknield Way as British. Now this road in its course passes through the four famous Dykes, which ran right across from the fenland to the woodland, the Brand or Heydon Ditch, the Brent Ditch, the Fleam or Balsham Dyke, and the Devil's Ditch—to take them in order from west to east (see Plan). "Each of these ditches extending from fen or marshy land to a wooded country, and quite crossing the narrow open district which lay between the woods and the fen, by which alone East Anglia could be approached without great difficulty, must have presented a formidable obstacle to the usual predatory inroads which formed so large a part of the warfare of those ages."[2] So the Brut-y-Tywysogion describes the origin of Offa's Dyke, "In the summer the Cymri wasted Offa's dominions, and Offa had a dyke made as a boundary (terfyn) between him and the Cymri to enable him the more easily to withstand the attacks of his enemies."[3]

Let us now hear what the Father of English Archæology, Sir William Camden, has to say about these earthworks. "Not far off from Castle Camps, there are the remains of

[1] Babington's *Ancient Cambridgeshire*, ed. 1883, p. 55.

[2] Babington's *Ancient Cambridgeshire*, ed. 1883, p. 97.

[3] Guest's Origines Celt. ii, p. 274.


ELY
RIVER CAM
RIVER LARK
Icklingham
VIA DEVANA
RIVER CAM
Reach
Burwell
DEVILS DITCH
Swaffham
NEWMARKET
Bottisham
ROAD
Fen Ditton
NEWMARKET
Quy
FLEAM DYKE
OR BALSHAM DYKE
CAMBRIDGE
Little &
Gt Wilbraham
ICKNIELD WAY
Stetchworth
Wood Ditton
CAMOIS HALL
Comberton
Barton
Grantchester
Fulbourn
WORTS CAUSEWAY
BEDFORD GAP
MUTLOW HILL
Shelford
TUMULUS
Balsham
BALSHAM DYKE
ROMAN ROAD
BRENT OR PAMPISFORD DITCH (SO CALLED)
Whittlesford
Gt Abington
Triplow
FOULMIRE COMMON
MELBOURN COMMON
Melbourn
HEYDON DITCH
Bartlow
Ickleton
ICKNIELD WAY
Chesterford
HEYDON GRANGE
ROYSTON
Heydon
WOODDITCH

those great and large ditches which were undoubtedly thrown up by the East Angles to prevent the incursions of the Mercians, who frequently ruined all before them. The first begins at Hingston [now written Hinxton] and runs eastward by Hildersham towards Horseheath for five miles together. The second next to it, called Brent Ditch, runs from Melbourne by Fulmer.

" There is a third ditch thrown up in old times, beginning at the east side of the cam, which runs by Fenn Ditton (or rather Ditchton from the forementioned ditch) between Great Wilbraham and Fulburn as far as Balsham. At present it is commonly called Seven Mile Dyke, because it lies seven miles from Newmarket ; formerly called Fleam[1] Dyke, as much as to say Flight Dyke as it seems from some remarkable flight at this place.

" Five miles more inward to the east is the fourth fortification or ditch with a rampart, the largest of all called Devil's Dyke by the common people, because they look upon it as a work of devils rather than men, and Rech Dyke by others from Rech, a little market town at the beginning of it. Questionless this is the same that Abbo Floriacensis speaks of in his description of the Eastern Angles : ' from the same part when the sun declines to the west, this province joins to the rest of the island and consequently there is a clear passage ; but to prevent the enemies frequent incursions it is defended by a bank like a lofty wall and a deep ditch.' This, for many miles together, crosses that plain that goes by the name of Newmarket Heath, a place most liable to invasions, beginning at Rech, beyond which the country is fenny and impassable and ending just by Cowlidge, where the woods stop all marching. It was then the bounds of the kingdom as well as of the bishoprick of the East Angles. It is uncertain who was the founder of such a mighty work. Later writers ascribe it to K. Canute the Dane, though, in truth, Abbo who mentions it dyed before Canute began his reign, and the Saxon Chronicle where it treats of Athelwolf's rebellion against Edward the Elder, called it simply the Ditch. It says ' that King Edward destroyed all the country between the Ditch and the Ouse as far as

[1] The name is written Flamicgedik in Domesday (in hundreto Flamicgedik)

the North Fens, and that Athelwolf the Rebel, and Eobric the Dane were killed in the same battle.'

"But the writers since Canute, have called it St. Edmond's Liberty and St. Edmund's Ditch, supposing that Canute made it, because a most devoted adorer of St. Edmund the Martyr, who (to make amends for his father Sweyn's horrid cruelty to them) had granted to the Religious of St. Edmundsbury vast privileges as far as this very ditch; whence William of Malmbury in his book of Prelates says, 'That the custom officers in other places fall out madly without considering right or wrong, but on this side of St. Edmund's Ditch the modest suppliants immediately put a stop to all quarrels.'

"Sure enough these two last mentioned bulwarks were called St. Edmund's Ditches; for Matthew Florilegus declares that the battle against Athelwolf was fought between St. Edmund's two ditches [inter duo fossata Sancti Edmundi]."

Let us now give what is known about the ditches in the present day, as regards the question of relative positions of these ramparts and fosses, and the question as to whether they are older or younger than the Icknield Way.

The Heydon Ditch runs from a fen called Melbourne Common to the village of Heydon, a distance of three miles. The rampart is on the east side, and was seven feet above the level of the surrounding country, and its extreme breadth from the western side of the foss to the eastern edge of the vallum was about eighty feet. It was crossed by the Icknield Way, near Heydon Grange. The road is more ancient than the dyke.

The Brent or Pampisford Ditch extends for about a mile and three-quarters from the fen at Brent ditch end to Abingdon, where the woodland began. It is shallow, and much effaced. It seems difficult to decide on which side the rampart was, as Mr. Hartshorne says it was on the east, Professor Babington maintains it is on the west, while Mr. Beldam considered the earth to have been thrown up equally on both sides. It is crossed at about the middle by the turnpike road, which represents the old Icknield Way, and it is said that the ditch has been filled up to allow the road to pass. Consequently the ditch is older than the road.

The Balsham or Fleam Dyke ran from the Cam at Fen Ditton for nearly two miles to Quy bridge. There Wilbraham Fen formed a sufficient defence as far as Great Wilbraham, within half a mile of which it commences again, and runs for six miles on to Balsham, where the woodland began. The depth of this ditch from the top of the rampart, which is on the eastern side, is about twenty feet. "It crosses the supposed line of the Icknield Way near to a tumulus called Mutlow Hill [at the Bedford gap], and is said to have been filled up to allow it to pass, but of that, however probable it may be, there is no proof[1]."

The Devil's Ditch extends from the fen at Rech, across Newmarket Heath to Camois Hall near Wood Ditton (Ditch town, like Fen Ditton). The rampart is about thirty feet above the bottom of the ditch, and is on the eastern side. It is crossed by the Icknield Way. Professor Hughes has shewn from the discoveries made when the railway from Cambridge to Mildenhall was in progress, and a cutting was carried through the Ditch, near Burwell, that the evidence, as far as it goes, from the Roman remains being found on the upper part of the earthwork and not down at the original level of the soil, is in favour of the Ditch being pre-Roman.

To these four great dykes Professor Hughes would add a fifth—the so-called Roman Road, which passes along the Gogmagog Hills[2].

I need make only one or two remarks respecting these Ditches.

But, Dr. Guest, following Camden, referred these last two ditches to Saxon and Danish times. "The Fleam Dyke he considered the Anglo-Saxon *limes* of East Anglia in the wars of the seventh century between the Mercians and East Angles, whilst the latter (Devil's Ditch) may be a Danish work of the close of the ninth century." The grounds on which he did so seem nothing more than that there is no mention of these earthworks from any earlier period, and that we have Abbo Floriacensis' actual statement for one of them, at least, being used by the Angles as a defence against the Mercians. Camden himself shows us that the common belief that Canute was the builder of the Devil's Ditch was probably wrong, by quoting

[1] Ibid p. 99.

[2] *The Cambridge Review*, 6 May, 1885, p. 292

an historian who died before Canute was born. It is quite possible that generation after generation used, repaired, and strengthened these earthworks, and that it was only in the course of many centuries that they reached their present dimensions. As regards the relative ages of the ditches, we may assert with tolerable certainty that the shortest are the oldest.[1] The first effort made by the inhabitants of East Anglia to employ such a ditch as a defence against their neighbours would take as its site the point where forest and fen came nearest to one another.

The Pampisford Ditch is the shortest, and next to it comes the Heydon Ditch. The former is only one and a third miles, the latter three miles long. Now, as the forest was narrower, and fens much smaller in extent and much less deep at the points connected by the two last-mentioned ditches than was the case more to the east, an enemy could, with comparative ease, make his way either through the forest on the south or across the fens on the north, especially in summer. If we look at the map we shall see, on the other hand, that the line of defence made by the Fleam Dyke from Fen Ditton to Balsham, although much larger and more costly, gave great security against outflanking. The Fleam Dyke ended at the Chalk Hill, which stands over the Cam at Ditton, its fosse forming the present village street.[2] The river here was wide and deep, and quite impassable, and beyond it lay Chesterton, Milton, and Waterbeche Fens, making up an area, several miles wide, of hopeless quagmires before an enemy could even get to the river's brink. The same holds good in a still stronger degree of the Devil's Ditch. It ended where the present village of Rech stands, on the very verge of the deep fens and meres which lie between it and the river Cam at Upware, the river was broader and deeper than at Fen Ditton, and on its western side there was a still wider belt of impenetrable morass. In similar fashion the defence afforded by the forest of North Essex at the south-eastern

[1] Dr. Guest (loc. cit.) "assigned the Brent Dyke to the period of the second great Belgic Conquest, B.C. 90. and the Pampisford Dyke to about A.D. 30."

[2] Although the Fleam Ditch has been long levelled down and made into a parish road from Fen Ditton to the Newmarket road, traces of it still remain, and its memory is preserved by the road being called Highditch road. The ditch seems to have been made into a road when the parish was enclosed in 1807. The fathers of old villagers still alive used to walk along the *vallum*, just as people now walk along the top of the ditch between Fulbourn and Balsham.

termination of each ditch was much more complete than it was more to the west. For the invader who wished to outflank the end of the Fleam Ditch at Balsham would have to march far into the depths of the forest, and if he wished to turn the strong position at the end of the Devil's Ditch at Wood Ditton he would have a proportionately more difficult task. To guard against such outflanking, it is most probable that at the Balsham end of the Fleam Ditch, and at the Wood Ditton end of the Devil's Ditch, the line of the vallum was taken up and continued far into the forest by stockades of felled trees. For whilst the villages of Fen Ditton and Reach are built on the very ends of the Ditches, the villages of Balsham and Wood Ditton stand about a mile from the ends of the Ditches. There has been, probably, continuity of habitation on all four sites, and we may therefore infer that the villages of Balsham and Wood Ditton were originally built almost a mile in the forest at the end of the stockaded *junctura* between ditches and forest.[1]

The ramparts of three, and these the most important, are on the *eastern* side. Consequently the builders of these fortifications lived in East Anglia. As we saw above there is a conflict of authorities in the case of the Brent Ditch. Secondly, it is most important to note that they all cross and defend the line of the Icknield Way. In one case, at least, the dyke is older than the Way, and probably the Balsham Dyke is also older than the Way. But, whilst it is a good proof that the dykes are British, if they are older than the ancient British road, it by no means follows that the other dykes are later than British times if they are later than the Icknield Way. There is no reason why the Britons should not have made the dykes at a period later than the road. Thus, in the case of the Devil's Ditch, as it is ascertained to be pre-Roman, it matters not if it is more recent than the Way.

From what has now been said it is plain that Ostorius Scapula, when marching against the Iceni, could only approach East Anglia through the narrow strip between the fens and woodland. It surely is not unreasonable to suppose that he actually marched along the Icknield Way.

[1] The villagers of Fen Ditton and other fen villages still speak of this country from Balsham to Wood Ditton as the Woodlands.

This way was crossed probably by all four ditches at that time, most certainly as we have seen above by the Brent Ditch. Tradition states that the Balsham Dyke was filled up to permit the road to cross it. Of the relative age of the Devil's Ditch and the Icknield Way we have no evidence. But the evidence at hand is sufficient to prove that the Romans met at least one dyke, and it is not going too far, if we suppose that Tacitus by the words *septum agresti aggere* refers to these ditches, or at least to one of them. Anyone who has ever walked along the Devil's Ditch or the Fleam Dyke will recognize the appropriateness of the term *agrestis agger* to these ramparts of plain earth. Again, from the words of Tacitus we may probably infer that the place selected by the Iceni was already fortified by the *agger*. At all events when two chapters later Tacitus relates how Caractacus fortified a stronghold in the land of the Ordovices his turn of expression is quite different :

> Sumpto ad proelium loco, ut aditus, abscessus, cuncta nobis inportuna et suis in melius essent, tunc montibus arduis, et si qua clementor accedi poterant, in modum valli saxa praestruit.[1]

This gives us a clear notion of the distinction in the mind of Tacitus between an *agrestis agger* and a *vallum*, the term applied to the stockaded rampart of a regular camp. The words of Tacitus indicate clearly that it was not a regular British camp or fortress. The very term *saeptum*, which is employed instead of some term like *munitum*, points clearly to something quite different from an ordinary fort. But that which puts the question beyond doubt is the statement that they selected as a field for battle a place fenced by a rude dyke, and with a narrow approach, to render it impassable for cavalry. What historian, ancient or modern, when about to describe a regular fortress, would say that it was fortified in such a way as to render it inaccessible to cavalry ? Would it not be ridiculous if Kinglake were to write that the Redan or the Malakoff fort at Sebastopol was so fenced that it was impassable for horse soldiers ? From this it is certain that the Ancient British camp called Vandlebury, on the top of the Gogmagogs, cannot be the place meant by Tacitus.

[1] *Annals*, xii. 33.

On the other hand, if an historian were describing a position in a plain, nothing is more natural and common than to say that a large ditch or stream protected the place from the enemy's horse. The reason is perfectly obvious, every historian assumes that his readers will at least be aware that cavalry are not employed in storming regular forts.

The use of the word *locus* in the second passage quoted shows that it includes a wide area of country, and does not merely mean a fortified camp or fortress of small extent. The use of the word would very well suit any of the areas between any pair of the ditches. The distance measured on the map from the point where the Icknield Way crosses the Brent Ditch to that at which it cuts the Balsham Dyke is less than four and a half miles. The Iceni undoubtedly possessed chariots (like the tribes who fought against Julius Cæsar in the preceding century), as we learn from the story of Boudicea, or Boadicea (to give her a more familiar if less accurate name) in *Annals*, xiv. 35.

When once then their first line of defence was stormed, if they turned to flight, such a barrier as the Balsham Dyke, or Devil's Ditch, lying in their rear, would offer a formidable obstruction. The words *obseptis effugiis* would well express their position shut in on the flanks by forest and fen, and with a large earthwork behind them, with but one narrow gap in it through which the Icknield Way passed, and towards which the victorious Romans would press quickly along the direct road. Moreover, the foss of this ditch in their rear lay on the wrong side for them, as it was on the western side of the rampart, and thus it was still more difficult for them to cross the latter.

It would be vain to speculate which of the great Cambridgeshire Ditches witnessed the overthrow of the gallant Iceni. Even if the topographical description was more explicit than it is, we must remember that Tacitus, writing many years later, would simply write down certain impressions concerning the place perhaps derived from his father-in-law Agricola. But I think that a certain amount of probability can be established that the battle took place at one of these four ditches. There is evidence that the regular road into the land of the Iceni passed through all those dykes, there is also evidence that at least three of

them existed before the Roman Conquest. Was Ostorius likely to march by any other route? Certainly not through the forest or fen, when he could find a regular roadway leading across a high strip of chalk-land, where there was no danger of surprise or ambuscade. These considerations alone would point to the site of the battle lying somewhere within the limits described. Finally, we have the words of Tacitus giving a description of the place which suits very accurately any of the four great ditches, each in turn approached and passed through by the Icknield Way.

I venture then to submit that there is a reasonable probability that the passage of Tacitus refers to two of those great earthworks which still exist. The Fleam Dyke and Devil's Ditch fit best the historian's description, and they certainly were the strongest positions, and thus the most likely to be occupied by the Iceni at such a juncture.