

EXCAVATIONS AT THE BURIES, REPTON.

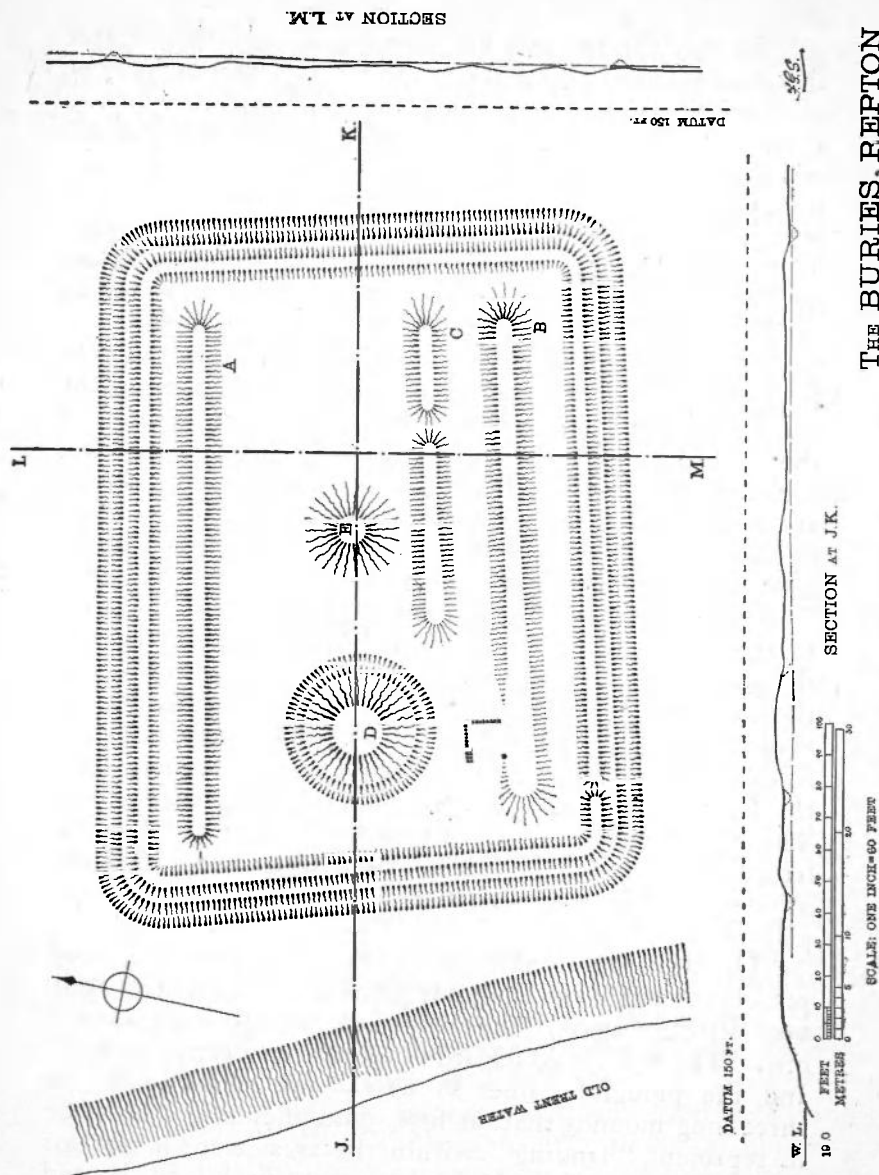
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This earthwork, on which excavations were conducted by the writers in 1910, is situated on level grass-land about 200 yards east of the river Trent and 140 yards below Willington bridge. The south-west angle is within 30 feet of the Old Trent Water, as the former course of the river at that point is named. The ground-level is not more than 10 feet above the average water-level, and the fields are flooded from time to time. The site (fig. 1) consists of a continuous outer ditch with a mound on its inner edge. This outwork is in the form of a slightly irregular oblong, the sides of which are straight and the angles very slightly rounded. The outwork encloses five distinct mounds, two of which are nearly circular and three long and straight.

Measured from the centre line of the outer mound the length of the north side is 194 feet 9 inches, and that of the south 189 feet. The east and west sides measure 134 feet 6 inches and 143 feet 4 inches respectively, the area within the crest of the mound being about 2 roods 17 poles. The area of the whole site including the ditch is 3 roods 13 poles. The only break in the outer mound is a narrow gap in the south side, about 20 feet from the south-west angle, but this is certainly not an entrance. It may have been made to drain the interior: more probably it is one of the trenches dug during the earlier excavations. The long mounds are nearly parallel to the longer sides of the outwork. Two run nearly the full length of the interior, the first (A in fig. 1) being about 17 feet from the outer mound on the north, and the second (B) about 23 feet from the south side. The third long mound (C) is about 25 feet north of the second. It is, however, only 95 feet long, two-thirds the length of the others, the continuation to the west being impossible on account of the position of the west circular mound (D).

THE BURIES, REPTON

FIG. I. PLAN AND SECTIONS OF THE SITE.



The long mounds do not join the outwork, but end abruptly 15 to 20 feet from it.

The circular mounds are of unequal size, that nearer the west side (D) being the greater. It is about 35 feet in diameter at the base, and 15 feet at the top, which is a fairly level platform about 3 feet above the general surface. Excavation showed that this mound is surrounded by a shallow ditch. The centre of the mound is approximately 80 feet from both north-west and south-west angles of the outer mound. The second circular mound (E) is much lower than the first, its diameter at the base being about 30 feet. The centre is 103 feet from the north-east angle of the outer mound and 110 feet from the south-east angle. These measurements from the angles show that the circular mounds are practically on the centre line of the whole work, and the reasonable conclusion seems to be that the several parts were planned at one and the same time, and that the work must be looked upon as wholly belonging to one date. It will be seen that, had the space between the north long mound (A) and the lesser circular mound (E) been occupied by one corresponding to the shortened mound (C) described above, the plan of the whole work would have been symmetrical. A plan of the site is given on the twenty-five-inch Ordnance Survey map of Derbyshire, sheet 72, no. 2, which differs slightly from the survey made during the excavation, showing a third circular mound to the north-east of the second. The surface of the area eastward is certainly somewhat irregular, but nothing can be fairly described as a third mound, nor is one indicated on Bigsby's and Hipkins' plans.¹

The feature of the site is the sharpness and good preservation of the mounds generally. This fact tells very strongly against the view that the site is an ancient one. The field in which it is situated has been "landed," and the ploughing lines so nearly correspond with the three long mounds that, at first sight, they might be taken to represent "landing" within the area, were it not for the careful way in which the outer ditch and mound

¹ Bigsby, *History of Repton* (1854), p. 259; Hipkins, *Repton and its neighbourhood* (1899), p. 3.

have been preserved. The subsoil of the site is gravel, covered with a thin layer of sandy soil. The gravel bed is about 18 inches below the surface at the south and east, and slightly deeper towards the north and west. Considering the nature of the subsoil, the site must have been obliterated long ago if it had been ploughed with the rest of the field. A large tree has stood just within the south-west angle.

Before describing the recent excavations it would be well to mention previous references to the site.

PREVIOUS REFERENCES TO THE SITE.

Robert Bigsby, F.R.S. F.S.A.¹ records its supposed Roman origin, and refers to other theories ascribing its construction to the Danes or the Saxons. Mr. Bateman, the author of *The Sepulchral Usages of Derbyshire*, whom he consulted on the subject, considered the enclosure too confined for a camp, and suggested that it might have been cast up as a protection or boundary of the area surrounding tumuli. Mr. Bigsby also consulted Mr. C. Roach Smith, and ultimately pronounced in favour of the view that the Buries was probably a small camp, "one of the *aestiva*, or summer camps, or perhaps only an agrarian one, erected for the defence of cattle. If not a camp, its origin was probably . . . sepulchral."²

Thomas Bateman made a meagre examination of the two circular mounds and the embankment which surrounded them.³ The results were negative, and showed that the mounds covered no sepulchral remains. The mounds were found to have been made of very compact earth, which appeared to have been tempered with water when it was cast up, the natural pebbly gravel mixed with clear sand being found about six feet from the summit. The presence in the larger mound of a few pieces of coarse kiln-baked pottery, similar to that often met with among Romano-British remains, appeared to be quite accidental.

¹ *History of Repton* (1854), pp. 3, 259.

² *ibid.*, p. 259.

³ *Ten Years' Digging*, p. 93.

The next investigation was made by Mr. W. Molyneux in 1869.¹ He found a flint flake on the margin of the river channel, but nothing more.

He mentions the discovery on this site in the latter part of the eighteenth century of a small Roman sword, but this seems to be a myth. The story probably arose from the fact that in 1839 a two-edged sword, probably Danish, and a large quantity of human bones, were discovered during the construction of the bridge over the old Trent just below Repton church.

The latest published reference to the Buries was made by the Rev. F. C. Hipkins,² who mentions the results and opinions of some previous writers, and expressed his own view that it was raised and used by the Danes, who in A.D. 874 visited Repton and destroyed it before they left in A.D. 875.

GENERAL ACCOUNT OF THE EXCAVATIONS.

The excavation of the site occupied nine days, from 18th to 27th July, 1910. The first trench was carried from south to north across the whole site on the line of section L M. The work was then continued as follows. The area north-east of mound (E) was examined for traces of the third circular mound indicated on the Ordnance map, and the trench then extended across the north-east angle of the outwork. As the spaces within the angles of Roman camps are almost invariably occupied, in the absence of angle towers, by hearths or ovens, search was made at each angle for such remains. Wide trenches were carried more than half way through both circular mounds and down to the undisturbed gravel below. A series of diagonal trenches satisfactorily tested the level portions between the mounds. The outer ditch and mound were examined at five points. The only remains of stonework were located by the diagonal trenches in the south-west portion of the area.

The Outwork: The ditch is continuous around the

¹ *Hist. of Burton-on-Trent* (1869), pp. 22, 260; *Annual Report of the North Staffordshire Field Club*, 1878.

² *Repton and its Neighbourhood* (1899), p. 3.

whole site. Originally it has been from 7 to 8 feet wide at the lip and from 2 feet 6 inches to 3 feet deep. The bottom is rounded and unlike that of the sharp V-shaped ditch of a Roman "marching" camp. The rounded bottom might be accounted for by the looseness of the subsoil, for the gravel was cut through to a depth of 1 foot 6 inches on the south and east sides and about 6 inches on the north. There was, however, practically no deposit of dark material at the bottom in any section. This fact, though it may also be accounted for to some extent by the nature of the subsoil, must be a strong argument against the antiquity of the work. The radius of the centre line of the ditch at the angles is about 16 feet.

The whole of the upcast from the ditch appears to have been used in the mound, the centre line of which is from 9 to 10 feet within that of the ditch. Where the mound is best preserved, along the south side and near the north-west angle, its height is about 2 feet above the general level. As already stated, there is no break in the mound which could indicate an entrance. The angles are very slightly rounded, the radius at the centre line being not more than 6 feet. This fact is a further argument against the Roman date of the work, for ramparts even of the smaller Roman "marching" camps are invariably boldly rounded at the angles, the radius generally exceeding 20 feet, or more than that of the ditch in this instance. On the other hand, the angles of mediaeval earthworks generally approximate to a sharp corner. A fragment of yellow glazed pottery, of obviously mediaeval date, was found 2 feet below the surface on the outer slope of the mound at the north-east angle. There were no traces of hearths within the angles.

The Long Mounds: The first trench (section L M) showed that they were constructed in a similar manner to the outer mound. Shallow trenches on both sides, which cannot be called ditches like that of the outwork, provided the material for the mound. Between the outwork and mound (B), and to some extent between (B) and (C), some gravel was removed from the bottom of the hollows. It was found at the top of the mounds, making clear the method of construction. No burnt matter, pottery fragments, or other objects, were found on the

old surface below these mounds at any point, indicating strongly that the outwork was not an occupied site before they were constructed. A fragment of black ware, somewhat similar to "cooking-pot" ware of Roman date, but most probably mediaeval, was found 2 feet down in mound (A) at section L M. The only break in the line of the long mounds is about 30 feet from the east end of (c). Like that in the outer mound near the south-west angle, it may indicate the position of one of the earlier excavation trenches.

The Circular Mounds: Bateman's description of mound (D)¹ was fully borne out by the re-examination in a wide trench from the opposite side of the mound. Near the centre were found two fragments of thick pottery, or tile, of a yellowish clay, one over 2 feet, and the other 15 inches, below the surface. The gravel bed, which was 5 feet 6 inches below the top of the mound, showed no signs of disturbance. The mound is surrounded by a ditch, originally about 5 feet wide and 2 feet deep, which is now almost completely silted up. The ditch has evidently provided a considerable part of the material used in the mound. Fragments of bone and a number of teeth, all apparently of the ox, were found in the ditch, at the north-west side. The trench through mound (E) cut through the earlier trench. The gravel was 3 feet 9 inches below the top of the mound; it again showed no signs of disturbance. As in (D), the material forming the mound is the clean sandy soil of the site. A nail was found lying on the side of the mound, and a fragment of tile and another of brick about 12 to 15 inches below the surface, near the centre. There was no ditch round this mound.

Internal Buildings: The diagonal trenches revealed no traces of buildings of wood, or stone, in the level spaces north and east of the circular mounds. The area between mound (D) and the south-west angle was the last portion to be trenched. A greater quantity of pottery and fragments of tile was met with in these trenches than elsewhere, and finally the only remains of stonework were discovered (figs. 1 and 2). They are quite close to the present surface.

¹ *Ten Years' Digging*, p. 93.

The north-east corner of the stonework is 40 feet from the south side, and 42 feet from the west side, of the outer mound, to which the two lines of stones are respectively parallel. The length of the north side, or arm, is 12 feet, and that of the east 10 feet 6 inches. The faces of the stones forming the east arm are in line on the west side, and might be part of a foundation-course, the other face of which has been removed, but the stones of the north arm are so small and irregular that such an explanation



FIG. 2. REMAINS OF STONEWORK, LOOKING EAST.

is improbable. At the west end of the latter there is a double line of stones for about 4 feet. Each arm ends in a single large stone, that at the west end being about 2 feet 6 inches by 12 inches by 8 inches. The stone is roughly dressed, and appears to be a re-used stone from some earlier structure. Further excavation failed to reveal any traces of further stonework, except a single large stone to the south-west equidistant about 11 feet from the ends of both arms. The stonework is of later date than the long mound (B) for, as shown in the plan,

the latter is almost obliterated at that point. Its purpose is uncertain. At first the large number of fragments of tile found in close proximity to it seemed to suggest a structure with a tiled roof. Further examination of the tiles and other remains, however, suggests that they represent rubbish deposited on the spot and having no reference to the stonework or to the site generally.

Signs of permanent occupation of the site, such as hearths, burnt matter, etc. were entirely wanting, nor were any food-bones found; for those in the ditch surrounding the mound (D) could not be described as such. Except in the neighbourhood of the stonework, very little pottery was found. Over the level portions of the site, the fragments were generally from 9 to 12 inches below the

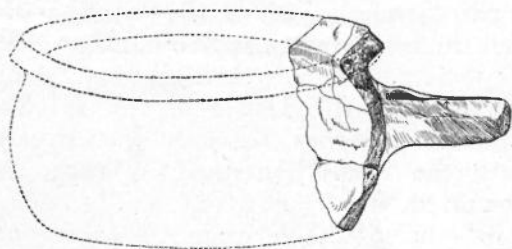


FIG. 3. PORRINGER (4).

surface. It is unnecessary to describe the provenance of other than the more important fragments and objects. A halfpenny of Charles II was found about 5 feet north of mound (E), 10 inches below the surface. The fragments of the porringer (fig. 3) came from the south-west angle just within the mound, among the roots of the tree referred to above, and those of two large dark-glazed bowls from the outer ditch on the north side, about 30 feet west of section L M. Some pieces of material having the appearance of slag were found between the outwork and mound (A), about 60 feet from the south-west angle, but nothing else appeared to connect them with the spot. The neck of a large jug and a flat-rimmed bowl of mauve-coloured clay and glaze were found, with many fragments of

tiles and the two inlays near the remains of the stonework.

Two trenches, cut as far as possible into the bed of the old river-course, yielded nothing except a fragment of a glazed brick of no very great antiquity.

THE DATE OF THE SITE.

Several rival theories have been put forward as to the date and purpose of the different parts of the work. The circular mounds were looked upon as probably prehistoric, while the outwork was considered to be of Roman date, because of its plan and the straightness of the sides. These theories, however, did not explain the presence of the other parts of the work, as for instance, what connexion the long inner mounds and the outwork had to do with two "tumuli," or, on the other hand, what could have been the purpose of the five mounds inside a Roman temporary camp. The site had also been connected with the operations of the Danes in the neighbourhood of Repton. The trenches through the circular mounds, confirming the results obtained in 1855, showed satisfactorily that they were not "tumuli."

The evidence of the very slight rounding of the angles, of the absence of an entrance of any kind through the outwork, of hearths, and above all of pottery of Roman date, appears clearly to disprove its Roman origin.

The survey made during the excavations clearly indicated that the work must be looked upon as a whole, as belonging to one period.

None of the objects found can be associated with Saxon or Danish times. On the other hand, it seems possible to include all the pottery, the tiles, and the coin in a period of about 300 years ending not more than two centuries ago. The depth below the surface at which the majority of the fragments were found, from 9 to 12 inches, appears to be considerable for such a short period, but may be accounted for by the looseness of the surface soil. The three or four fragments found at a depth of about 2 feet, however, can hardly be classed with the rest, but surely give some indication of the period when the whole work was constructed.

Nothing appeared during the course of the work which gave any reasonable clue to the meaning and purpose of the earthwork, which, to the excavators at least, still remains more or less a mystery. The hypothesis which commended itself was that the earthwork was raised as a refuge for cattle during flood-time. The whole of the low-lying meadows on the right bank of the river are still liable to flooding, and before the construction of

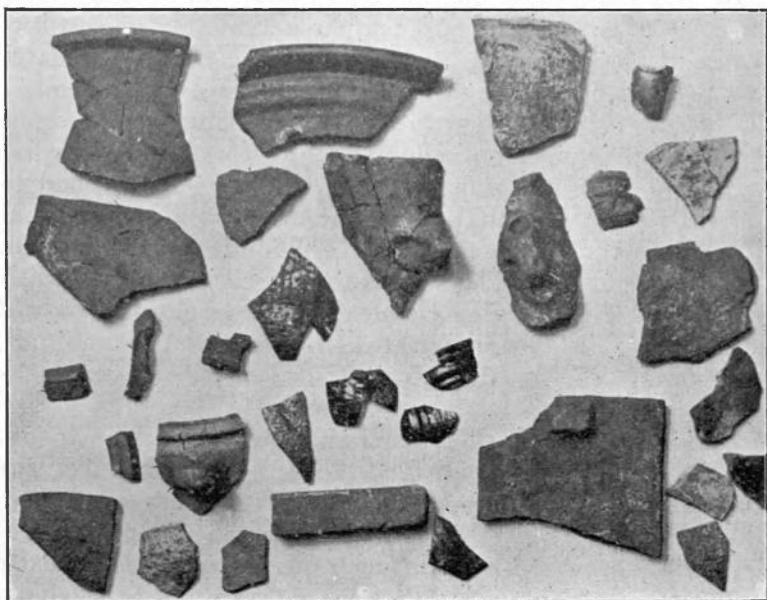


FIG. 4. POTTERY AND TILES.

the Repton-Willington road, which acts as a protective dam, the cattle in the meadows must have been exposed to considerable danger during floods.

REPORT ON THE POTTERY DISCOVERED DURING THE
EXCAVATIONS.

Mr. P. Entwistle, of the Liverpool Museum, has kindly examined the fragments of mediaeval pottery (fig. 4), and reports that they consist of parts of tiles of various classes,

roofing and floor, which suggests the probable site of a roofed habitation. The finding of several small curved

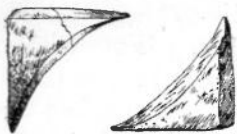


FIG. 5. INLAYS FOR
TILES ($\frac{1}{2}$).

pieces showing a finished edge (fig. 5), seems to indicate that the site of manufacture was not far distant, as these are very characteristic of mediaeval pattern-tiles built up by inserting such pieces into the still soft body of unbaked tiles.¹ If these fragments were really made close to the earthwork, it, to a large extent, substantiates the idea that

the whole structure was for trade purposes. The presence of a fragment of glazed slag may indicate the burning of such vessels on the spot, although there is not sufficient material to warrant an absolute statement to that effect. The association of so many fragments of varying bodies and glazes is not an uncommon occurrence. The fragments of pottery appear to date from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century.

The presence of neolithic flakes does not help to establish the possible age, or use of the site, as they are frequently found in soil in various parts of England.

¹ During levelling operations in the "Paddock" of Repton school, which lies within the priory wall, a mediaeval tile kiln

was found, and it appears that numbers of ornamental floor-tiles were made here : cf. *The Reliquary* (Ll. Jewitt), Jan., 1868.