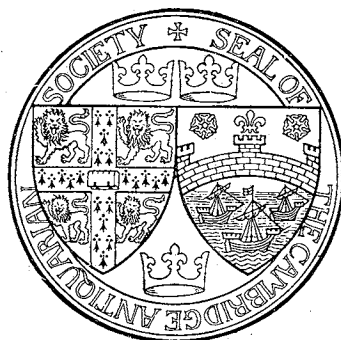


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EXCAVATIONS IN THE CAMBRIDGESHIRE DYKES.

VI. BRAN DITCH. SECOND REPORT¹.

By T. C. LETHBRIDGE, F.S.A. and
W. M. PALMER, M.D., F.S.A.

(Read 30 April, 1928.)

At the end of his report on the preliminary exploration of the Bran Ditch Dr Cyril Fox suggested that excavation at the crossing point of the ditch by the Icknield Way might yield valuable information. He also stressed the importance of further excavation at Black Peak. As no sections of the ditch had been made anywhere near the crossing we decided to begin there first. In the summer of 1925, therefore, we dug a section of the fosse beside the drift road which is the supposed line of the Icknield Way. At this point a road from Heydon Grange, raised some 4 ft. to 6 ft. above the surrounding country, is supposed to mark the site of the vallum and in fact to run along the top of it. Two sections were cut into this bank as far as the edge of the gravelled road.

The result of this excavation showed that the ditch was considerably larger here than at any point previously tested (8 ft. 10 in. deep with a flat floor, 6 ft. broad and an overall width of 33 ft.). (Fig. 1, A.) Horse-shoe nails and part of a horse-shoe, boot cleats, a hearth and a thin layer of gravel metalling at different depths in the filling showed that a track had crossed the ditch here. Although we cut far into the driftway we found no trace of the solid chalk causeway described by Beldam (*Archaeological Journal*, Vol. xxv, p. 36), and we came to the conclusion that he had been misled by the slight bend in the ditch here, and had dug down on to the solid ground off the alignment of the ditch. No pottery was found in the lower levels of the filling, with the exception of a very small abraded fragment which was too minute for

¹ The First Report (*Proc. C.A.S.* xxvii, 16) should be consulted, as this paper is not intended to be complete in itself.

identification. In the upper levels fragments of modern tiles were common. The step in the scarp which occurred in Dr Fox's sections A, B, E and F, and was constant in the Fleam Dyke, was found here also (*Proc. C.A.S.* xxvii, 16 *et seq.*).

The sections into the supposed vallum showed a chalk rubble capping above two layers of soil (Fig. 1, B and C). The probability is therefore that the bank is actually the original

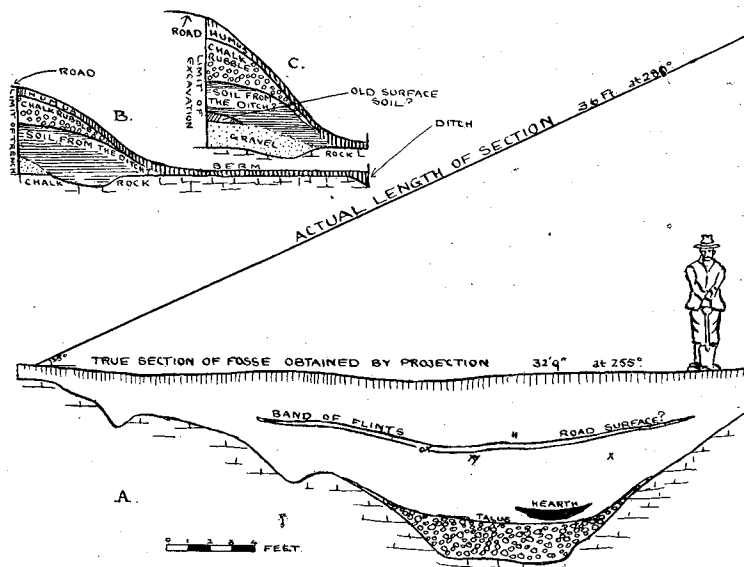


Fig. 1. A. Section of Bran Ditch Fosse at Icknield Way.

B and C. Partial sections of Bran Ditch Vallum between Icknield Way and Heydon Grange.

vallum. A space of 11 ft. separates the bank from the lip of the fosse, forming a wide berm. This berm was afterwards demonstrated near section D.

The 1925 excavations were a little disappointing and led us to question whether this was the crossing of the Icknield Way at all. A well-marked trackway can be seen in the corn some 200 yards nearer Heydon.

1927 EXCAVATIONS.

I. *At Black Peak.* The generosity of one of our members, who wishes to remain anonymous, led to a continuous six months' effort in the summer of 1927. Again following the suggestion of Dr Cyril Fox we began at Black Peak. After a month's work examining the filling of the fosse at his section A we came to the conclusion that the Romano-British potsherds, which occurred sparingly on the floor, were due to the dyke being dug through the debris of settlement of that period and had not been dropped there by the builders of the dyke or its defenders. The potsherds were almost invariably abraded and seemed to be, as often as not, vertical in a sticky dark chalky deposit which we took to be rainwash from the newly dug sides of the ditch. It was also discovered that the ditch ran right down to the edge of the present watercress beds and had probably been dug into boggy ground, which may account for the blackness of the floor deposit near section A.

Having come to the conclusion that digging at Black Peak was unlikely to yield much more information, we decided that our best hope of success was to try to solve the riddle of the human burials found by Dr Fox in sections C and D. It seemed that it was little short of miraculous that he should have stumbled on these skeletons in his two narrow trenches unless there were numerous others there also. The theory that these two men had been hanged and then buried more than three hundred yards apart did not seem very convincing either. Since hunting for skeletons in the filling of the ditch at section C was likely to prove a laborious and expensive process, we turned our attention to section D, near the known crossing of the ditch by pre-enclosure trackways, including the "Fowlmere Path."

II. *At Section D.* Dr Fox had made repeated attempts to find the chalk vallum between Black Peak and Heydon Grange, and his failure to do so had given rise to much speculation. It is known that levelling has been done in recent times; but as there was no trace of the rubble in the

filling of the ditch, it was obvious that it had not been thrown back into it. A few yards to the south-east of section D there is every appearance of a bank parallel to the present hedge and running as far as the Cambridge-Royston road. The state of the crops had not allowed Dr Fox to test this. The plough clearly shows the top of this bank to be composed of chalk rubble, and in spite of pessimistic comments from several friends we were almost certain that this was the missing vallum. Supposing it to be the vallum it was clear that any skeletons on its line must have either been there before its construction or have been buried in graves cut through it. In the latter event we felt sure that they would be visible when the surface of the rubble was exposed. We therefore dug several short trenches between the crest of the bank and the hedge, 3 ft. apart and parallel to the hedge. They ran for some 5 or 6 yards from the south-east toward section D, which terminated them. Each trench showed the chalk rubble to be hard, white and so closely compacted that no one would have guessed that it was other than undisturbed chalk rock. It was now clear, therefore, that if any skeletons occurred beneath the rubble they had been put there before the vallum was thrown up.

We next opened up Dr Fox's old trench (section D) and proceeded to remove the soil and rubble on either side of his skeleton No. 2 down to chalk rock. Skeletons were at once found on either side of it in shallow graves in the chalk rock. It was clear that two at least on either side of skeleton 2 were either wholly or in part under the chalk vallum. After that, however, as a glance at the plan will show, the vallum swung out a little from the hedge as if to avoid them.

It was clearly of the greatest importance to try to fix a date for these burials. While it was certain that they were older than the vallum, yet their presence seemed to be known to the builders, who had apparently tried to avoid them. Although two sections were cut through the vallum (Plate I) to give us the overall dimensions of the work, our main object henceforward was to try to learn as much as we could about the skeletons. To this end we followed them in a southerly direction between the vallum and the hedge; only two were

found to the north of Dr Fox's skeleton 2 (Plate II). We estimate that we found about fifty bodies in all. It was, however, a matter of the greatest difficulty to decide what comprised one body; for while many were wanting their heads, numerous skulls and loose bones occurred also. It was discovered that on either side of the skeletons who, with two exceptions, were carefully oriented with their feet to the east, were ditches running more or less parallel with the main fosse. These two ditches, which were each about 6 ft. wide, were apparently continuous for a considerable distance. They are obviously earlier than the main ditch, for the outer one, called on the plan Back Ditch, is beneath the vallum. Since the inner (Mid Ditch) is rather erratic in its course, lengths of its western lip are frequently removed by the main fosse, and in extreme cases the step frequently noticed in the scarp of the latter is thus formed. Some 12 ft. to the north-west of the first skeleton in the row (No. 4) is a large pit 6 ft. deep, which extends from the eastern lip of the Mid Ditch to the middle of the Back Ditch. It was found impossible either to clear this out or to form a proper estimate of its size, but it extends for at least 40 ft. in a northerly direction and is probably responsible for the change in the course of the main ditch hereabouts.

Evidence obtained from the burials.

1. Only one of the skeletons had apparently been clothed at the time of burial. At its right hip was an iron knife of typical Anglo-Saxon shape (Plate III and Plate IV, No. 1); under the left femur and near the head of it was a small iron clip* (Plate IV, No. 2). The body (No. 7) had in fact been buried with its belt on. All the others had, it seems, been stripped before burial.

2. Fragments of Anglo-Saxon pottery occurred in the filling of several of the graves; one fragment is of interest as it has thumb-nail ornamentation on the lip, a survival of Early Iron Age decoration; in one place the perforated "bung" foot of a late Romano-British beaker was found under the chalk rubble.

* See note at end, p. 93.

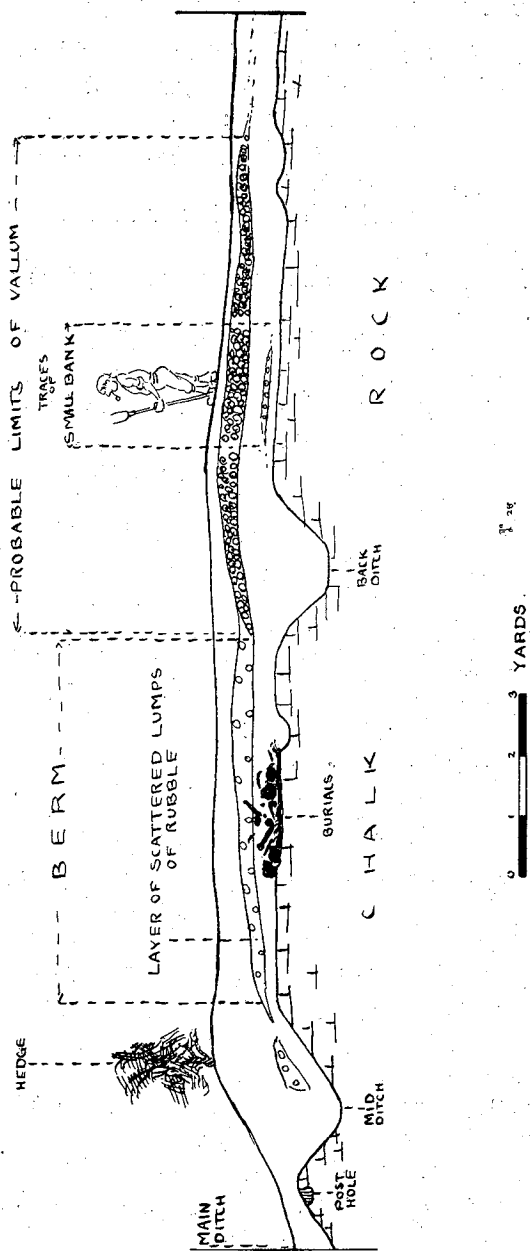


Plate I. Section of Bran Ditch Vallum 6 yards to south-east of Fox's section D.

3. There was in our opinion unmistakable evidence that many of the bodies had been decapitated, while others suggest violent death in different forms, e.g.:

No. 4. Body carefully arranged but head bent back at an angle suggesting a cut throat.

No. 7. Body much twisted, head thrown back and both hands clasping neck.

No. 13. No skull, and no room for skull against end of chalk grave.

No. 14. No skull, but two loose skulls and necks in same grave (Nos. 15 and 16).

No. 19. No skull, neck ends at 5th vertebra (Plate III). Loose bones and three skulls with it. Skull 21, which was placed against 19's right tibia, had three neck vertebrae still with it. The third vertebra had been cut through horizontally and a slice had been sheared off the bottom of the right ramus of the lower jaw. This skull had apparently been buried with the flesh on it at the same time as skeleton 19. Most of the other skulls and bones in the grave must have been put in without flesh, except skull 17 which, though loose and above the body, had some of the neck vertebrae with it. The face of this skull was entirely smashed; a blow from some sharp instrument had shorn off all the teeth on the right side of the lower jaw and possibly the top of the left ramus also.

No. 26. Loose skull (possibly belonging to 29); base cut away.

No. 29. Body curiously hunched and twisted. No head. Last vertebra on column (4th cervical) cut through horizontally.

No. 30. Vertebrae missing from lower dorsals upwards. Skull arranged at place where head should be has two vertebrae attached and is upside down with no lower jaw.

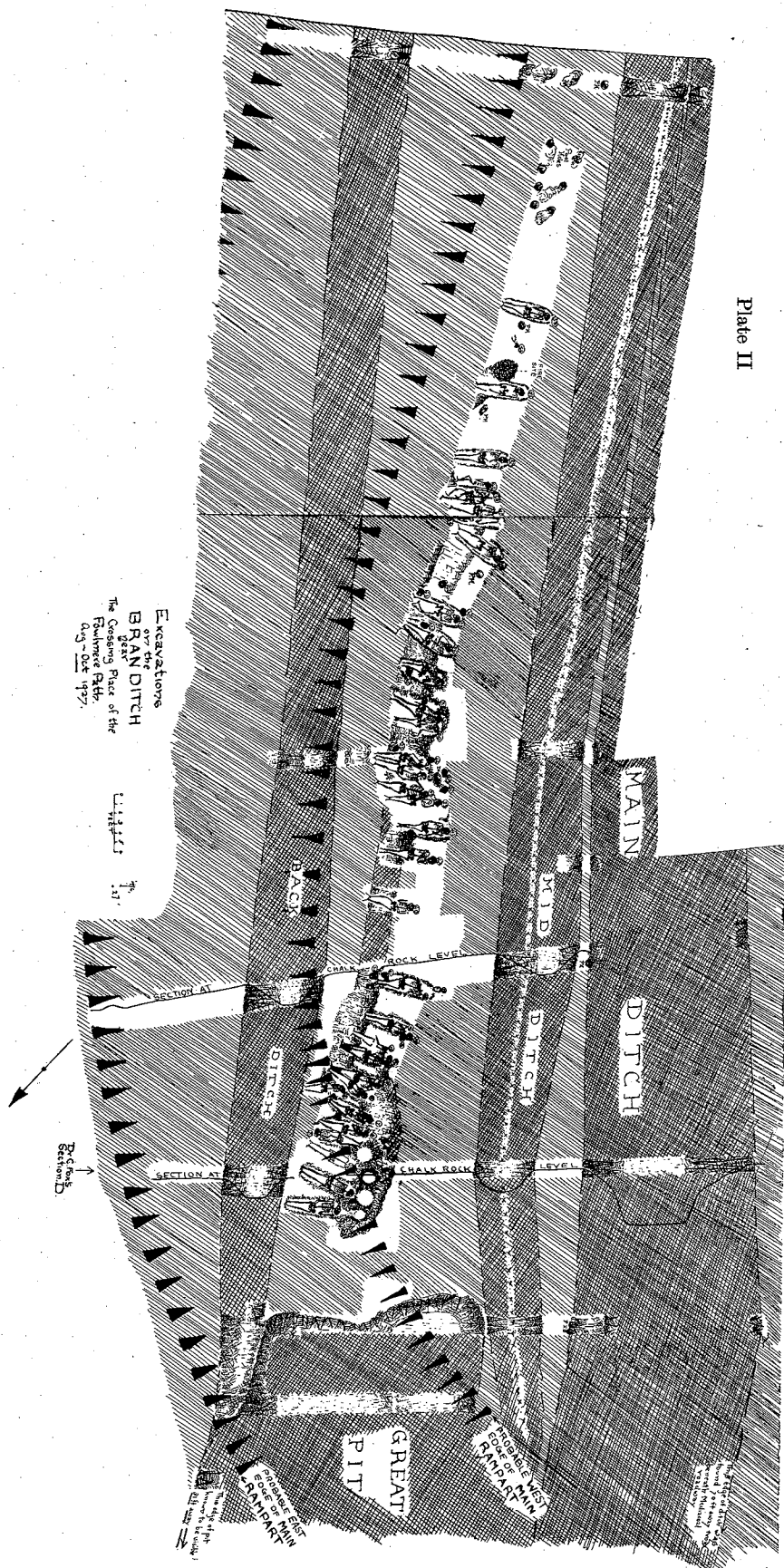
No. 31. Body apparently normal until taken up when there seemed to be 8 neck vertebrae, one of which was cut through horizontally and only half remained.

No. 32. A skull with stump of neck attached.

No. 36. Body carefully straightened (Plate III). Head separated from vertebral column by cut on 4th cervical.

No. 38. Head apparently severed at 2nd cervical and

Plate II

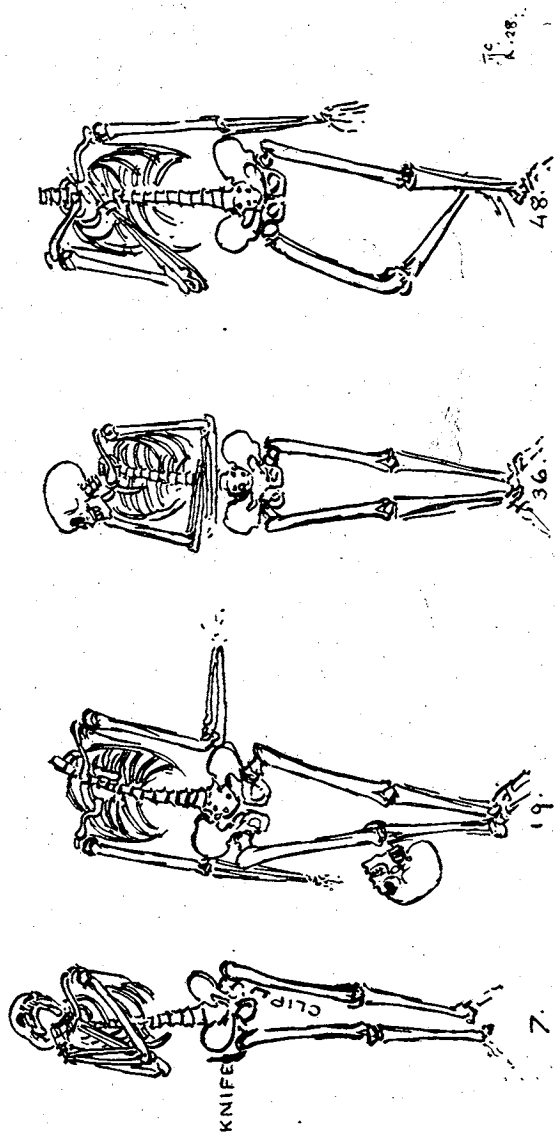


Excavations
of the
BRAN DITCH
The Great Pit of the
Bran Ditch
as of 1872.

1872

Section A
Section B

THE GREAT PIT
OF THE
BRAN DITCH
AS OF 1872



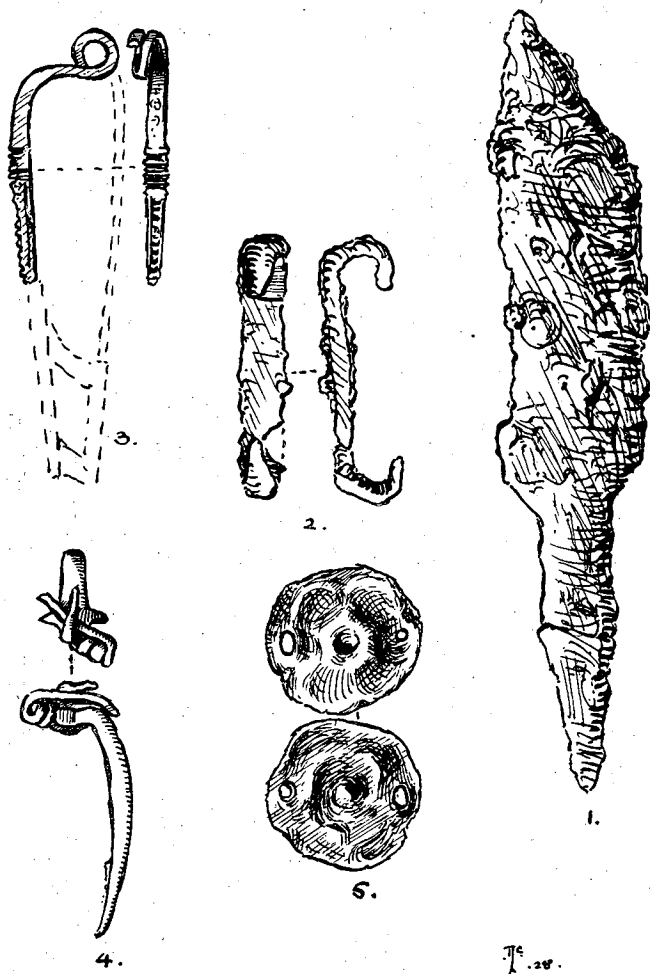


Plate IV

1, Iron Knife, and 2, Iron Clip. from Grave 7: 3 and 4, Bronze Brooches from Great Pit. 5, Bronze Ornament from Mediaeval Roadway in Fosse.

replaced on trunk at burial. Loose skull (39) and loose lower jaw (? 39) with deep cut from the back on left ramus.

No. 41. Head apparently cut off at 6th cervical and replaced with trunk at burial.

No. 45. Projection of axis vertebra cut off, doubtful if head was completely severed from trunk.

No. 47. Headless. Vertebral column ends with half of 4th cervical, which is cut through.

No. 48. Headless (Plate III). Vertebral column ends with a cut fragment of the 3rd cervical.

No. 50. Back of skull smashed and driven in. Possibly due to pressure. Vertebral column much curved and dislocated in the middle.

4. Most of the skeletons appeared to be those of men. Some were, however, young persons of 12 years of age or so upwards. The occurrence of a foetus or newly-born child at the south end of the row may not have any connection with the others, and may be a foundation sacrifice, as it was beside a post-hole.

5. Many of the bodies had been buried when decomposition was far advanced. Above the remains of 19 were the bones of a young and also of an old man, and four skulls. These could not have been displaced from a single grave cut in the chalk and must have been collected off the down in a disintegrated state and put in with the more complete body. This was noticed in several other places. The bodies seem often to have come apart at the waist (? when being carried). Nos. 9, 13, 30 and 33 (perhaps top and bottom halves of the same body), 46, 50 and 51 are instances of this. The last was evidently so decayed that the left tibia, right fibula, and all the bones of the feet, seem to have fallen off as it was being buried. The tibia was replaced wrong way up, the fibula was in the right place but had slid down behind the heel, some of the toes were on or near the pelvis. All the vertebrae are missing from the lumbar upwards, although ribs, clavicles, scapulae, etc., are in their right places. There cannot have been any disturbance by a subsequent burial, for the nearest grave is 4 feet away. This remarkable absence of vertebrae seems difficult to account for: it occurs in Nos. 30 and 46 also. One wonders

whether a "blood-eagled" Viking captive would lose these vertebrae if he were left lying out for some time and then picked up for burial.

6. At the head of graves 2, 3 and 4 and at the foot of 5 the chalk rock had been moulded into round bosses some 2 ft. or less in diameter. We can do no more than note this, for we know of no explanation nor of any other case of the practice.

To sum up, then, we have in our opinion evidence of a massacre, probably of the defenders of the barrier formed by the two little ditches. The victims, it seems, were either Anglo-Saxons or perhaps Danes. At a date some months (?) after the massacre the corpses were collected and given such decent (conceivably Christian) burial as was possible. We rather fancy that the Sextons were unable to decide with certainty in many cases which head belonged to which body. It is also likely that some of the bodies were not found and brought in until long after the others. Perhaps there were only one or two men on the job and they did not hurry themselves. Later still the whole work was reconstructed with one wide ditch, a berm, and a single bank. The berm was wider at the burial ground, presumably so that the graves should not be obscured by the vallum. Through carelessness, however, those at the north end were wholly or partially covered by it. The reconstruction probably took place within a generation or so of the massacre, otherwise no one would have noticed or troubled about the graves.

Dimensions and character of the Dyke.

(See Fig. 1 and Plate I.)

At the southern end of the grave-yard a section was cut through the bank as far as the lip of the main fosse. The vallum was found to be 28 ft. broad and 2 ft. 3 in. above the original ground level at its thickest. (It is doubtful whether it was ever much higher than this.) Under the centre of the vallum at this point was the Back Ditch, 6 ft. broad, with a filling of loam. Between the inner edge of the vallum and the lip of the main fosse was a berm some 16 ft. wide, in which were several holes apparently for posts. The Mid Ditch had had part of its south-west side cut off by the construction of

the main fosse. Assuming that this main fosse was about 18 ft. broad, which is in agreement with the results obtained by Dr Fox at sections D and E, we have an overall width of over 60 ft. This is consistent with Beldam's statement that the work was 80 ft. broad at the Icknield Way crossing, for there the fosse is considerably larger. A vestige of the vallum of the Mid Ditch still remained on the berm but had been levelled off. From the fact that some of the post-holes were covered by the main vallum, it was assumed that they once held palisading forming part of the original work, i.e. the two little ditches, and had no connection with the remodelled fortifications. Certain trial holes on the lip of the main fosse on the north-west side (scarp) showed that post-holes existed here also. The main work, therefore, consisted of a ditch some 18 ft. broad and 7 ft. deep, with palisading to hinder people climbing out of it, while the berm, 16 ft. broad, enabled the defenders on the vallum to throw spears at the attackers as they climbed up, without being within such short range of other enemies on the far bank. It is very unlikely that any of the main vallum had been carted away from here, whatever may have occurred on the Black Peak sector, the wastage in height of the bank being certainly due to the plough, which touches the chalk rubble all along it from here to the Cambridge road. There can be no doubt that the step, observed in some of Dr Fox's sections on the scarp, is just the floor of the Mid Ditch cut into by the main fosse, and is no evidence of Roman influence.

The Great Pit.

This was and still is a puzzle. Such limited investigation as we were able to make showed that it was some 6 ft. deep with a flat floor 18 ft. and more broad at a section near its southern end, where it had an overall breadth of 25 ft. The lip was found in a trial hole 40 ft. away to the northward. It had been in part filled in with loamy soil, probably by human agency. The vallum ran over this filling, which therefore antedated it. Under the vallum brooches were found at two points (Plate IV, Nos. 3 and 4), one being Romano-British, the other belonging to the last phase of the Early Iron Age. Potsherds were very scarce and of Romano-British types.

A piece of imitation Samian ware was noted. An iron knife with parallel sides but with point missing was found on the floor; it may be Anglo-Saxon.

The vallum cannot have been a very satisfactory obstacle at this point, as the pit was by no means completely filled when it was thrown up. We were unable to determine whether the pit was later than the small ditches or not. Judging by the lack of evidences of occupation on the floor and by the large size of the pit we all inclined to think that the pit has no warlike significance and may be regarded as an ancient chalk-pit and nothing more. On the whole it seems probable that it was dug in the Roman Period; at any rate it was in existence before the main vallum was constructed, and was probably filled in then. The weight of the vallum on the loose filling would cause settlement and form a gap in the bank visible at a distance. This accounts for the spot being chosen as a crossing point for mediaeval trackways.

Section of Fosse at crossing point of Fowlmere Path.

A section was made of the filling of the fosse at the meeting of the three hedges 45 yards from section D. This was the traditional point of crossing of the united trackways forming the Fowlmere Path. The section showed a hard gravel metalling 3 in. thick just under the surface of the ground (part of a late mediaeval jug rim and a bronze disc (Plate IV, No. 5) were beneath this); numerous horse-shoe nails were found in this stratum, which was clearly a road. Beneath the metalling the filling was uniformly barren right down to the floor of the ditch. The path was in fact of no great antiquity.

Saxon Pottery in the Fosse.

A few trial holes were sunk in the fosse in the neighbourhood of Dr Fox's section C. In one of these large fragments of a pot similar in paste and form to unornamented examples from the local pagan Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, and from the Anglo-Saxon huts at Waterbeach (see *Antiquaries' Journal*, Vol. VII, No. 2) were found. These sherds, which were unabraded, had been left in the filling of the ditch 1 ft. above the floor and 7 ft. from the surface. It is probable therefore that the ditch was silted up to that level when they were dropped there.

Summary.

We have now obtained more information about the Bran Ditch (and in fact about all the ditches) than could have been believed possible a few years ago. We have seen that the feeble boundary of two small ditches with palisading between was superseded by a work on a much larger and more elaborate scale. At a time when men were wearing knives of Anglo-Saxon form and when pots sherds of Anglo-Saxon and late Romano-British types were lying on the surface of the ground there was a massacre at the little ditches. A few weeks or months later the plundered corpses of the victims were collected and buried, some being so decayed that they fell to pieces in the process. Later, when the graves were still remembered, the vallum of the new work was apparently bent slightly so that they should not be covered up and forgotten. It seems that the skeletons were those of defenders of the barrier; but it seems equally sure that many of them must have been beheaded in cold blood and not buried for some considerable time after the barrier was carried by the enemy. The whole evidence of the massacre reminds one forcibly of the treatment of the captured Jomsburg Vikings by Earl Hakon, as described in the *Jomsvikingasaga* and the *Heimskringla*. A quotation from the former as translated by du Chaillu may not be out of place:

... Then the jarl had Vagn and his men led up on land, and their hands were tied behind their backs, and they were bound with one rope, one at the other's side, not loosely. The jarl and his men took their food, and sat down to eat; he wanted to have them all beheaded leisurely and in no hurry that day.

Before they sat down to eat, the ships and property of the Jomsvikings were taken ashore, and carried to the poles. Hakon and his men divided among themselves all the property and the weapons; they thought they had won a great victory as they had got all the property captured from the Jomsvikings, and they boasted very much. When they had eaten enough, they walked out of the war-booths to the captives, and it is said that Thorkel Leira was appointed to behead them all. First they talked to the Jomsvikings, and asked whether they were as hardy men as was said; but it is not told that the Jomsvikings gave them any answer.

It is next stated that some sorely wounded men were untied from the rope; Skopti Kark and other thralls had hold of it and guarded them. When they were untied the thralls twisted sticks in their hair; first three wounded men were led forward in that way, and Thorkel went to them and cut off

each head; then he asked his own companions if they had seen him shudder at the work, "for it is told," said he, "that any man shudders if he beheads three men one after the other." Hakon answered, "We do not see that thou hast shuddered at this, though it seemed so to me before thou didst it."

The fourth man was led out of the rope, and a stick twisted in his hair, and he was led to where Thorkel beheaded them; he was much wounded. When he came Thorkel asked, before he struck, how he thought of his death. He answered, "Well think I of my death; it will be with me as with my father; I shall die." Thereupon Thorkel cut off that man's head, and thus his life ended. The fifth was untied from the rope and led thither; when he came, Thorkel said, "How likest thou to die?" He said, "I remember not the laws of the Jomsvikings if I am afraid of my death or speak a word of fear; once every man must die." Thorkel struck him. They wanted to ask every man before he was slain, and try whether they were as fearless as was told, and if no man spoke a word of fear they thought it proved. The sixth was led forward, and a stick twisted in his hair. Thorkel asked the same as before; the man said he liked well to die with a good fame, "while thou, Thorkel, wilt live with shame." He struck the blow. Then the seventh was led thither, and Thorkel asked the same. The man said, "I like very much to die, but strike me quickly; I have a belt knife in my hand. We Jomsvikings have often talked of whether a man knew anything after his head had been cut off very quickly; it shall be a sign that I will stretch forth the knife if I know anything, else it will fall down." Thorkel struck; the head flew off, but the knife fell down. The eighth was taken, and Thorkel asked the same. He said he liked it well, and when the death-blow was coming, he said: "Ram!" Thorkel stopped the blow, and asked why he said this. He answered: "There will not be too many rams for the ewes which you, the jarl's men, named yesterday when you got wounded." "Thou art the greatest wretch," said Thorkel, and dealt him the blow. The ninth was untied, Thorkel asked the same. He said: "I like well my death, as do all my companions; but I do not want to be beheaded like a sheep, and I will sit for the blow; strike me face to face, and look carefully whether I wince in any way, for we have often talked of that." This was done; he sat with his face to Thorkel, who walked to him and smote in his face; he did not wince, except that his eyelids sank down when death came over him. The tenth was led forward. Thorkel asked him the same. He said: "I should like thee to wait while I arrange my breeches." "I grant thee that," said Thorkel. When he had done, he said: "Many things do not go as one hoped; I thought I should get into the bed of Thora, Skagi's daughter, the jarl's wife." Hakon jarl said: "Behead that man as quickly as thou canst; he has long had bad intentions." Thorkel cut him....

We have also seen that the unabraded pottery of Anglo-Saxon type was left in the filling of the fosse when the ditch was by no means new. Thus it seems that the whole history of the dyke as a military work lies within the Anglo-Saxon Period. As Dr Fox stated in the IVth Report, when dealing

with the Fleam Dyke, we know that the Dykes were in existence in 905, for they are mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as being the limit of Edward the Elder's ravages. We must therefore look for a situation in the Period between the Anglo-Saxon Conquest and 905 which would cause dyke-building, massacre, renovation of dykes and so forth. There can be little doubt that the wars between East Anglia and Mercia in the VIIth century answer the purpose admirably. Twice the Mercian king, Penda, succeeded in routing the East Anglians and killing their king. The East Anglians are described as "finding themselves inferior to the Mercians in military affairs" (Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, chapt. XVIII), which would account for their anxiety to protect their frontier with such formidable obstacles as they could devise.

The evidence of the other two dykes is similar to that of the Bran Ditch. Romano-British debris is found under both, and weapons of the Anglo-Saxon Period are said to have been found in each. Could we find the spot in either dyke where these weapons (and skeletons, in the case of Fleam) were found we should no doubt unearth the bodies of Penda's men, killed while fighting on the winning side and therefore buried with all their arms and gear, instead of the plundered and mutilated corpses of his unfortunate East Anglian foes.

We are happy to take this opportunity of thanking the following:—Lord Braybrooke, Messrs Mailer, Jackson and Pepper, the owners and tenants of the land; Dr W. L. H. Duckworth, not only for his kindness in examining and reporting on the human remains but also for his taking the trouble to bicycle out to the site and uncover some of the bodies himself; and Dr Garrood, Messrs Louis C. G. Clarke, R. W. Hutchinson, C. F. Tebbutt and others whose occasional visits were encouraging and helpful.

Note to p. 82. Four clips of this form were found in Anglo-Saxon graves and urns at Little Wilbraham recently (*C.A.S. Proc.* vol. XXIX, p. 102, etc.). One of these was of iron and the rest bronze. Ten of bronze have already been recovered from graves in the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Mildenhall, which is being excavated at present.

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