

# THE CHICHESTER DYKES— A DISSENTING JUDGMENT

BY RICHARD BRADLEY

“*By turf and thunder but its not allover yet*”

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

“The combination of excavation with ... fieldwork and ... documentary evidence ... has shown beyond doubt that these earthworks were medieval deer fences.” Readers of our previous volume will recognise this as the conclusion of a paper by Mr. John Holmes upon the Chichester dykes.<sup>1</sup> This writer's doubts may seem churlish beside Mr. Holmes' confidence; but perhaps they should be set at rest.

Like Mr. Holmes I have been engaged upon a reassessment of the dykes since 1966 and my own interpretation will appear as an extended paper in the forthcoming report on the excavation at Fishbourne. The present review was written to accompany this account<sup>2</sup> and is repeated here by kind permission of Professor B. W. Cunliffe. In this article I intend merely to draw attention to a few points where for me Mr. Holmes' paper fails to carry conviction. The smoothness of his style might otherwise ease the reader past confusions of thought which reduce his conclusion to a guess and return his subject to the marshes of controversy.

Mr. Holmes' arguments for a medieval date for the dykes owe much to his misgivings at their interpretation by Miss K. M. E. Murray<sup>3</sup> and others as Iron Age linear earthworks. These doubts may be briefly allayed. In the first place he hints that he shares Williams Freeman's instinct that the straightness of the dykes was ‘most un-British behaviour in a linear earthwork.’ This is mistaken and could as well be directed against the Catuvellaunian dykes about Colchester.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, he argues that if the city of Chichester were preceded by a fort of Claudian date the site could not have been occupied in the late Iron Age. This is strangely illogical and as an argument could be turned against Hod Hill. Certainly it in no way justifies his next proposition that ‘the supposedly Belgic dykes have been left with nowhere to defend’; for Mr. Holmes leaves them the oppidum at Selsey. Since this is never mentioned it is never dismissed.

<sup>1</sup> J. R. Holmes, ‘The Chichester Dykes’, *Sussex Archaeological Collections* (hereafter *S.A.C.*), vol. 106 (1968) pp. 63-72.

<sup>2</sup> This paper will be found in the second volume of the excavation report. These will be published as Research Reports of the Society of Antiquaries.

<sup>3</sup> K. M. E. Murray, ‘The Chichester Earthworks’, *S.A.C.*, vol. 94 (1956) pp. 139-143.

<sup>4</sup> C. F. C. Hawkes and M. R. Hull, *Camulodunum* (1947), pp. 8-16.

Without further discussion Mr. Holmes turns his hand to providing a medieval date. This he bases largely upon the results of an excavation at the probable junction of the Devil's Ditch and Stane Street. In Mr. Holmes' view this proved that the dyke had been cut through the side ditch of the Roman road. In my submission the result of the excavation is indeterminate and Mr. Holmes' report of little assistance to the argument.

At the outset the reader must make a choice between Mr. Holmes' two plans of his excavation. The first of these seems to show the 'side ditch' crossing part of the dyke, while his isometric drawing might suggest that the dyke had been cut through the ditch. The sections included in the latter drawing contradict the text at two cardinal points, where Mr. Holmes insists that spoil from the dyke had sealed the filling of the 'side ditch' and where he argues that his two sherds of medieval pottery were directly associated with the dyke. In any case no real evidence emerges to justify Mr. Holmes' belief in the 'Roman side ditch'; his justification is by faith alone. In his site plan it runs barely parallel to the assumed line of Stane Street and the only indication of its age is that it predates one of two post holes omitted from both his site plans. We are given to understand that these two features may be correlated with an 18th century park pale; but for this writer at least two post holes are less versatile.

On the other hand it is instructive to assume that the main points of his account are justified and to consider whether they would really prove a post Roman date for the dyke. Three ambiguities still remain and call insistently for a discussion which is never offered. Firstly, could the dyke have been re-cut, as field evidence might suggest? Mr. Holmes' tiny excavation on the lip of the ditch was not designed to answer this question but if the dyke were of two phases all his evidence would be without value. Secondly, could the dyke have been open on the cutting of the side ditch? If any such earthwork were open on its line the latter would end to either side and drain into it. Indeed, unless the dyke were wholly levelled on the construction of the road the shallow side ditch could not easily cut through its filling. If the dyke were of the late Iron Age date which Mr. Holmes denounces this might well be the case. Thirdly, to offer the opposite possibility, could the dyke between the agger and the 'side ditch' have been deliberately filled on the making of the road? Mr. Holmes' site plan suggests this as a strong possibility but it is never discussed. This is the more curious since Mr. Holmes makes reference to the dimensions of Stane Street on The Gumber near Bignor. Here the Roman road is carried across a Bronze Age boundary ditch and the earlier earthwork is levelled in just this way.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. and E. C. Curwen, 'Covered Ways on the Sussex Downs', *S.A.C.*, vol. 59 (1918), pl. III facing p. 42. It is to be argued by the writer in a forthcoming paper that the interpretation of cross ridge dykes as 'covered ways' can no longer stand.

If the excavation was more truly inconclusive does Mr. Holmes' documentary evidence carry the day? He speaks of a record of 1283 of the building of the very length of earthwork investigated at Halnaker but like the excavation itself it is but poor evidence when we remove the surround of optimism. It speaks of an accretion of 60 acres to 'Halfnaked' (*sic*) 'Park' and its enclosure by 'a dyke and hedge' but Mr. Holmes takes this as the full explanation of a surviving length of 3,000 yards of dyke. If he is to be believed we must accept that a totally new dyke of this length, itself 20 yards wide, was constructed to enclose a strip of land only 76 yards deep. The building of such a dyke would involve an input of roughly 142,800 man hours. Surely it is clear that the dyke referred to was either a shorter length of largely new work or a mere remodelling of a substantial existing feature.

Mr. Holmes' claims to the dykes west of the Lavant are entirely documentary. He quotes us a lengthy document of 1225 which sets out woodland boundaries in the area north of Chichester by reference to the lines of certain of the dykes. Unfortunately the crucial synthesis, like M. Godot, never comes. Having given us the document Mr. Holmes seems not to know what to do with it. Passing over the burden of proof to the reader he tells us simply that it "seems to explain everything."

In fact it explains very little. There is no indication why any of the dykes should have been newly built at that time, least of all the Devil's Ditch at Mid Lavant, referred to in Mr. Holmes' own version as 'a certain *old dyke*', nor is it at once apparent which dykes are being referred to. What is clear is that only four dykes are mentioned altogether which leaves Mr. Holmes a further five to explain on another occasion. In the same way it must be pointed out that the dyke given in the document as extending 'from Fishbourne to the north' is for some reason left out of Mr. Holmes' own map of the system and that a number of other dykes, notably that in Lye Wood, are outside the area of the forest which Mr. Holmes insists that they were built to enclose. In any case Mr. Holmes' conclusion that the dykes were all 'medieval deer fences' cannot be reconciled with his own account of the nature of such an earthwork. He explains that their interior ditches would allow deer to cross into a piece of enclosed ground and would inhibit them from jumping out again but, having said this, he offers us a series of enclosures to the west of the Lavant all of which have their ditches on the outside. On a strict reading all Mr. Holmes' deer will escape and will be prevented from ever returning to captivity.

The remainder of Mr. Holmes' arguments seem to assume the point at issue and like all partisan literature they proceed by a series of significant omissions. Thus he concedes the Iron Age date

suggested by Miss Murray<sup>1</sup> for the Devil's Ditch at West Lavant but thereafter he continues with his argument as if her excavation had never taken place. With similar boldness he denounces other lengths of this earthwork as 'old lanes' or 'copse banks' but for no better reason than that their presence is inimical to his master plan of parks and forests. Despite his avowed adherence to Williams Freeman's (inaccurate) survey of 1934<sup>2</sup> other dykes are abandoned without any explanation at all. Why, for instance, does he omit EW3? His final argument that the Devil's Ditch must be medieval because it "fits so well into . . . [the] pattern of this piece of country" is symbolic of his method throughout. It is a method born of conviction but one which cannot carry conviction.

This is not the occasion to set out my own interpretation of the dykes. A brief discussion of some linear earthworks has already appeared under my name<sup>3</sup> and an extended paper on the dykes based upon field work, excavation and documentary sources is in the press. It may be helpful to the reader of this ripose to anticipate this discussion in one detail only. In 1967 excavation on a length of the Devil's Ditch assailed by Mr. Holmes as 'the remains of an old lane' showed that its rampart had sealed two sherds of the late pre Roman Iron Age and had been cut away by two ditches dateable to the second century A.D. The Devil's Ditch is the same earthwork as Mr. Holmes excavated at Halnaker. When the time comes the reader must make his choice.

<sup>1</sup> K. M. E. Murray, 'The Chichester Earthworks', *S.A.C.*, vol. 94 (1956) p.p. 139-143.

<sup>2</sup> J. P. Williams Freeman, 'The Chichester Entrenchments', *S.A.C.*, vol. 75 (1934) pp. 65-106.

<sup>3</sup> R. J. Bradley, 'The South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch and its Significance', *Oxoniensia* 33 (1968).