

# A Romano-British (?) barrow cemetery and the origins of Lewes

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with a contribution by  
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*This article brings together evidence relating to the early history of Lewes, much of which has been 'lost' for well over 100 years. It forms the basis for a re-assessment of the origins of the town.*

Lewes is located on a spur of the Downs that borders the valley of the River Ouse on the north and east and that of the Winterbourne on the south. Detailed study of the alluvial deposits in the Ouse Valley suggests that inundation has been a regular feature for millennia<sup>1</sup> and, for all the attempts at control since the later Middle Ages, has continued well within living memory.<sup>2</sup>

The site of the old town was, therefore, a promontory jutting out into a constantly marshy and regularly inundated river valley. The land bridge to the promontory is on the west where, it has been suggested, 'a defence of earthworks, probably of Saxon date, can still be traced each side of the site of the medieval West Gate'.<sup>3</sup> This readily defensible site almost certainly was the location of the Anglo-Saxon burh recorded at Lewes in the Burghal Hidage of c. AD 900.<sup>4</sup>

The site was further fortified by the de Warennes after the Norman Conquest. Their castle was unusual in that it had two mottes, both of which survive as major landscape features of the promontory today. The 'twin mounds of loyal Lewes', Brack Mount and the castle mound, occupy respectively the north-east and south-west corners of the castle precinct. The castle mound rises to about 50 metres O.D. and 21 metres above the level of the High Street at Castle Gate, and is about 6 metres higher than Brack Mount.<sup>5</sup> The castle precinct itself, about four acres in extent, occupies the highest part of the promontory.

The history of the site prior to its presumed fortification around 900 is obscure. According to scholarly opinion in 1940 there did not appear to have been 'any settlement on the site of the later town in prehistoric times' and furthermore, 'no evidence of occupation by the Romans, despite the proved proximity of Roman roads and the general suitability of the site for defence against Saxon

raids'.<sup>6</sup> Research undertaken since that assessment was made has tended only to confirm the apparent lack of activity on the site before the mid- to later Anglo-Saxon period.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the 19th century, however, local historians were in no doubt that Lewes had a Roman past. For Dunvan there was 'a strong probability that Lewes was the first Roman station on Erming-street'.<sup>8</sup> In 1818, the short-lived *Provincial Magazine* noted that the claims of Lewes 'to a Roman station are indisputable, for numerous vestiges of the fortifications, military weapons, urns, etc. of that enterprising and ingenious nation, present themselves to the notice of the Antiquary'. A 'particular account of the Roman Antiquities discovered in and near Lewes' was promised for a future issue of the magazine, but it failed to materialize.<sup>9</sup> Only four years earlier Gideon Mantell had discovered a Roman ritual deposit at the bottom of his garden (site 8: the site number refers to the gazetteer (below) and the map (Fig. 1)) — no doubt it acted as a reminder and a confirmation of that past.

In his guide to Lewes in 1909 William Heneage Legge, a much respected local historian who had contributed the article on forestry to the recently founded *Victoria County History*, confidently reiterated the town's past as a Roman military station and noted:

The various relics of the Roman period of the history of Lewes which have come to light are represented by numerous urns, and other fictile objects, fibulae, and rings, together with many coins, dating from Trajans to Constans; but of the remains of consular or military buildings, nothing survives, overlaid, as they doubtless were, by subsequent walls and castellations of the Saxon and Norman masters of Lewes.<sup>10</sup>

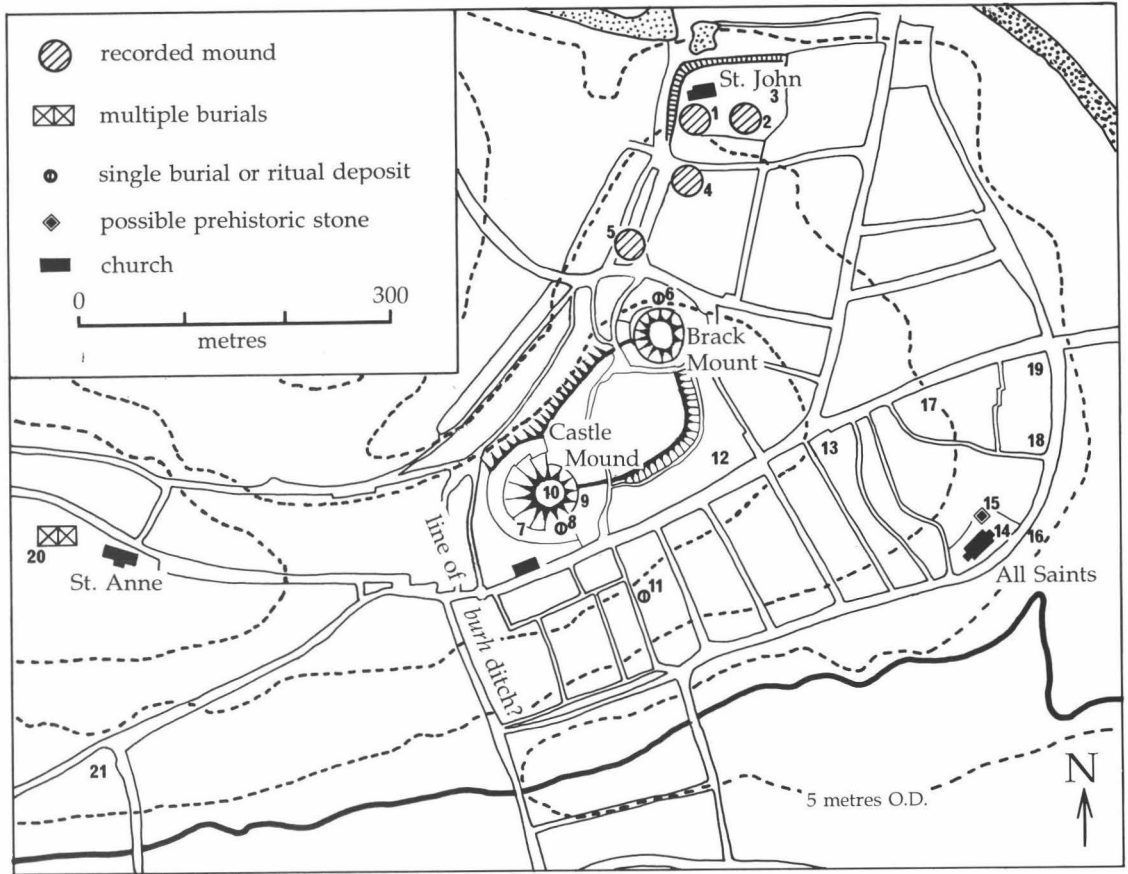


Fig. 1. Lewes and its western approaches. Contours at 10-metre intervals.

To judge by the objects to which Legge refers, the gazetteer presented here lacks some Roman finds known to him; there is no record of fibulae or rings from identifiable sites in Lewes. That said, however, in 1955 the Society was presented with a Romano-British brooch in the form of a duck which is supposed to have been found in Lewes.<sup>11</sup> In addition, some drawings were exhibited at the British Archaeological Association in 1848 of 'Roman fibulae discovered at Lewes, forwarded by Mr Ade, of Milton Court Farm'.<sup>12</sup> No more information is available regarding the provenance of those items, and their attribution to Lewes must be treated with caution. We may note in passing that a Roman coin is amongst the finds recorded from the site of Mr Ade's house at 34 High Street (site 13).

The gazetteer lists 21 sites, 19 of them (sites 1–19) on the promontory, and 2 (sites 20 & 21) on the

immediate western approaches (Fig. 1). It may be noted that much of the information contained in the gazetteer is drawn from sources — early newspapers and guidebooks — which are not often referred to in current archaeological research. Yet in the case of Lewes, where urban development over the last 200 years has destroyed much of the prehistoric and later archaeological record, they provide unique information which is crucial to an understanding of the early history of the promontory. Also, a number of finds from recent excavations in Lewes which may not have been accorded the significance they deserve are noted in the gazetteer.

There is ample evidence in the gazetteer to support the view that there was Roman and possibly earlier activity on the promontory and its western approaches. Much of this activity appears to have been of a ritual nature, and it is apparent that there



Fig. 2. South view of St John sub Castro and part of St John's Mount (site 1). (Published by Rouse, 1825.)

were a number of mounds, at least two of which were barrows, ranged along the north-west edge of the promontory (sites 1, 2, 4 & 5).

Brack Mount and the castle mound also respect that alignment, and given the juxtaposition of the castle mound to a Roman ritual deposit (site 8) and of Brack Mount to a human burial (site 6), the question of the origin of the 'twin mounds of loyal Lewes' is raised. Were they constructed from ground level originally as castle mottes, or did they utilize mounds, albeit perhaps smaller ones, which were already on site? With the latter possibility in mind it is interesting to note, firstly, that amongst the pottery discovered during the excavation on the castle mound in the mid-1980s were a sherd of East Sussex ware and one of Samian (site 10) and, secondly, that the keep of the Norman castles at Chichester and Canterbury, founded at the same time as the castle at Lewes, appear to have been built on Roman tumuli.<sup>13</sup>

Two close parallels for the arrangement of the mounds at Lewes are to be found at Bartlow Hills in Ashdon (Ess), and Treyford (WSx). At Bartlow, four steep-sided, conical-shaped burial mounds dated to

the late 1st and early 2nd centuries survive in alignment in what appears to have been originally a group of eight.<sup>14</sup> The Devil's Jumps on Monkton Down in Treyford comprise six Bronze Age barrows in alignment, the largest being recorded by Curwen 40 years ago as 'the highest barrow in the county' at 16 feet.<sup>15</sup> According to the view by Rouse (Fig. 2), the barrow in St John's churchyard (site 1) was of a comparable height. The possible significance of the mounds on the promontory for the place-name 'Lewes' is discussed below (see Appendix A).

There is persuasive evidence that the church of St John sub Castro occupies an earlier ritual site, and intriguing possibilities in this respect at All Saints and St Martin's. The Anglo-Saxon church of St John's was sited next to a non-Christian burial mound (site 1), within an enclosure containing evidence of Roman activity (site 3) and another mound of unknown use (site 2). It may be noted also that manorial courts were held in the churchyard in the later Middle Ages,<sup>16</sup> a fact which suggests, perhaps, that this was a traditional meeting-place — the scatter of Roman coins would not be inconsistent with such a use. A recent article has

identified two churches in Sussex, Berwick and Brighton, which occupy earlier ritual sites — St John sub Castro should be added to their number.<sup>17</sup> At All Saints, three ingredients (well, mound and monolith) for a pagan ritual site are to be found (sites 14–16), whilst the proximity of a Roman ritual deposit (site 11) to the probable location of St Martin's Church in St Martin's Lane reminds us that some churches dedicated to this Roman soldier-saint are known to overlie pagan sites.<sup>18</sup>

This article raises as many questions as it supplies answers — but it rediscovers part of the early history of Lewes and confirms what the readers of the *Provincial Magazine* could see with their own eyes and discover from their own gardens: that there had been significant activity on the promontory and its immediate western approaches before the Anglo-Saxon settlement of the site.

#### GAZETTEER

##### 1. NGR: TQ 4147 1040

A mound was located in the south-west corner of the churchyard of St John sub Castro, and may be identified as the 'mount' from which Lambert sketched for his watercolour of the town, 'View of Lewes Castle, with part of the town from the Mount in St John's churchyard, 1778'. William Figg describes it as having been 'a mound of considerable height', and it is named as St John's Mount on Marchant's map of Lewes published in 1824.<sup>19</sup>

Mantell describes it as conical<sup>20</sup> and Rouse's view (Fig. 2) shows it to have been flat-topped.

The site of the mound is now occupied by the new church, built in 1839. Prior to the church being built, of course, the ground had to be prepared. A local newspaper of the day reported as follows on the destruction of the mound:

There is no doubt that Lewes was a place of importance, even ages before the Romans made it a station. At the time the tank near to St Ann's Church was constructed for the water-works, many evidences were brought to light, proving that long before the Saxons erected that sacred building, its vicinity had been used as a burial-place, for several barrows were discovered, evidently of a remote age, and it was conjectured at the time that this scite was the original burial-place of the inhabitants (site 20). Upon removing the mount last week on the south side of St John's Church for the scite of the intended new building, the excavators

brought to light similar evidence to that discovered in St Ann's. As the subject is doubtless interesting to many of our readers it may be mentioned that the workmen on the southward side first exhumed a number of human skeletons about three feet below the surface which were all of modern date; as they advanced to the centre they came to large piles of chalk, so arranged as to afford spaces or cists for a human skeleton each, which were protected by a wall of chalk and filled up with ditch clay, taken no doubt from the levels in the neighbourhood; presently they came to what the workmen termed an 'oven', or a rude construction of a steined vault; and when they reached the centre of the crown of the Mount they exposed a circle of burnt earth, of two rods in diameter, around the sides of which were a few burnt human bones and a large quantity of boars and other animal bones also burnt. On the east side an urn of baked clay was found, and also a spear head or iron weapon; showing that the Mount was an ancient British barrow, and that long before christianity was introduced into England, Saint John's church yard was a scite for Druidical sepulchres.<sup>21</sup>

##### 2. NGR: (?)TQ 4150 1040

There was another mound in the churchyard, though very little is known of it beyond the fact that it was destroyed in 1779. In noting the restoration of the church in that year, Thomas Wakeham records that 'the church pavement was also raised three feet higher with the soil dug from the east mount in the Churchyard; and the hollow of the old prostrate Chancell filled up'.<sup>22</sup>

Dunvan, Rouse and Horsfield record only that there had been another mound in the churchyard besides St John's mount.<sup>23</sup> Gideon Mantell, born in Lewes in 1790 and writing in the mid-1840s, describes the churchyard as 'in former times . . . an oblong encampment, having within the works two conical mounds, one at the west angle, and the other at the east'.<sup>24</sup> He would have been familiar, no doubt, with St John's mount in the west angle, but the mount in the east angle had been destroyed 11 years before he was born. His source for the shape of this mound is not known.

Neither is it known whether anything was found in the mount when it was destroyed, and no pictorial representation of it has yet been found.

**3. NGR: TQ 4150 1045**

Lower attests to several Roman coins having been found in St John sub Castro's churchyard.<sup>25</sup> Later in the 19th century the Sussex Archaeological Society received a gift from B. C. Scammel Esq. of various artefacts, including a 'Roman First Brass' from St John's churchyard.<sup>26</sup> In his description of St John's church and churchyard published in 1846, Mantell recalls that 'in the sloping ground on the south, which was formerly used as a garden, I found several Roman imperial coins'.<sup>27</sup> Mantell is referring, perhaps, to that plot of land on which now stands the terrace of houses called The Fosse, the back yards of which abut a bank forming the southern boundary of the churchyard.

**4. NGR: TQ 4147 1037**

The only known surviving references to this mound are from the pen of Mark Anthony Lower, one of the early luminaries of the Sussex Archaeological Society.

... On enquiry, I find that within the memory of man, the site of Mr Barratt's premises was covered with an immense tumulus, similar to one the removal of which I still remember, and which was within fifty yards of the same spot.<sup>28</sup>

And:

In levelling the ground for the erection of this church (St John sub Castro), a large artificial mound was removed, and another tumulus of colossal dimensions formerly occupied the site of Mr Barratt's new house. On the latter spot several singular interments and various remnants of antient pottery have been discovered.<sup>29</sup>

Mr Barratt's 'new house' can be identified as what is now called Abinger House, known as Milton House in the later 19th century. Indeed, the third edition of Lower's guide to the town refers to the 'site of Milton House' rather than the 'site of Mr Barratt's new house', the phrase used in the first and second editions.<sup>30</sup> St John sub Castro church, which is built on the site of the other mound (site 1) referred to in the extracts from Lower, stands across the road and no more than 50 yards distant.

No further record has been found of the interments mentioned in the second extract, nor is there any known corpus of 'antient pottery' associated with the site. The latter may be the same as item 39, 'some ancient pottery found near St John's Church, Lewes (presented by Mr Barratt)', recorded by Lower in his catalogue of antiquities

preserved in the museum of Lewes Castle, compiled in March 1866.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, this pottery cannot now be identified within the Society's collection.

Regarding the finds from this site, it may be noted that there was disagreement between Lower and the committee of the British Archaeological Association as to their probable date. Lower had written to the committee regarding 'some remains discovered in excavating cellars for Mr Barratt's house near St John's Church'. The committee considered them to be medieval, an opinion to which Lower 'could not then subscribe'. He was of the definite opinion that the remains were 'either British or Roman'.<sup>32</sup> No other record regarding these remains has survived with the British Archaeological Association.<sup>33</sup>

**5. NGR: TQ 4143 1030**

A mound is clearly marked here on Edwards' maps of Lewes published in 1799 and 1817.<sup>34</sup> It is located about 30 yards north of Brack Mount and approximately on the site of the present Elephant and Castle public house. Both maps show it as a smaller version of the flat-topped, conical Brack Mount (named Castle Mount by Edwards).

The foundation stone of the Elephant and Castle was laid on Saturday, 22 September, 1838.<sup>35</sup> No trace of the mound survives nor has any reference to its destruction been found. No finds are known from the site. Local tradition asserts that the Elephant and Castle was built on the site of the town gallows.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps it is, therefore, a gallows-mound that is shown in Edwards' maps. The site in question is located at the southern end of an embankment known as Gallows Bank, and overlooks a plot of land called Hangman's Acre, a place-name extant in 1690.<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that the reuse of barrows as gallows mounds is well attested from other parts of the south-east.<sup>38</sup>

**6. NGR: (?)TQ 4145 1026**

The *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* of 3 September 1838 reported a news item as follows:

One day last week some workmen in digging away the earth in a yard at the north side of the Brack Mount discovered, at the depth of 13 feet from the surface, in the solid chalk, a perfect human skeleton, deposited in a light mould intermixed with portions of charcoal, and on the left side of it the bones of a large boar's head also perfect. The skull of the skeleton is in the possession of a gentleman

residing at Lewes.

The gentleman has maintained his anonymity, and nothing more is known of the finds.

**7. NGR: (?) TQ 4132 1005**

Coins of the emperors Domitian (AD 81–96) and Antoninus Pius (138–161) have been found in a garden which formed part of the ditch on the south-west side of the mound of the castle keep.<sup>39</sup> The long garden of 159 High Street, a few yards west of Mantell's (site 8) would fit this locational description far better than any other in the vicinity, but no such discoveries are known from that site.<sup>40</sup>

**8. NGR: TQ 4137 1005**

In the summer of 1814 Gideon Mantell built an arbour at the bottom of the garden of his house in the High Street (currently no. 166). The garden abutted on to the mound of the castle keep.

To prevent the constant falling down of rubbish from the mouldering walls above into the garden below, it was necessary to erect a wall; and in cutting down the side of the bank, a section of the earth-work was exposed. It was thus ascertained that the natural undisturbed chalk-rock extends to the height of twelve feet above the garden, and that all above is artificial, being a compound of chalk rubble, mould, rubbish, etc. In the chalk-rock an artificial excavation was laid bare; it was four feet in diameter at the top, and two at the bottom, and six feet in depth. This pit was filled up with a dark looking mould, consisting chiefly of ashes, charcoal, and lime. At the bottom of the pit I discovered an urn of dark brown unglazed pottery, coarsely rayed on the surface, and about thirty inches in circumference; the lower end terminating in a point. This urn contained the greater portion of the bones of a cock; the leg bones, with the spurs, were perfect. Above the urn were bones and teeth of a boar, and horse; and a considerable quantity of mussel and oyster shells. The excavation could not be pursued further, from the risk of loosening the foundation of the old tower, or other Roman relics would doubtless have been found.<sup>41</sup>

A plan of the strata within the pit and a drawing of the urn have been published.<sup>42</sup> Some of the bones from the pit are at the British Museum (B.M. registration no. 1839, 10–29, 47). The broken remains of the urn, also, are at the British Museum

(reg. no. not known on enquiry in 1994) and were described by Catherine Johns in 1972 as follows:

The vessel is large and is hand-made, not wheel-thrown, in a hard, coarse, dark grey fabric. While shewing many Iron Age characteristics, I would . . . regard it as Roman in date, though it would not be easy to date it closely.<sup>43</sup>

**9. NGR: (?) TQ 4139 1007**

Writing on the Roman antiquities found in and around Lewes Castle prior to 1860, William Figg records that 'lately in clearing away the buildings within the precincts, a very good specimen of the lower stone of a Roman quern was found'.<sup>44</sup>

Though Figg does not locate the precise findspot, it can probably be identified with the Gun Garden, previously known as the Castle Yard, located at the bottom of the east-facing slope of the keep mound. In 1850 the Society became the tenant of Lewes Castle, and was granted the liberty to pull down any of the buildings in the Gun Garden which were not needed.<sup>45</sup> The site was cleared, and in 1853 the society's committee resolved 'that the Castle Yard be levelled and covered with turf'.<sup>46</sup> The quernstone is described as being '17 1/2 inches in diameter, and very perfect, and has an orifice at the side for the escape of the meal from between the stones', and by 1861 was on display in the Society's Museum in the Castle.<sup>47</sup> Unless it be either of the unprovenanced quernstones (items 29 & 30), it does not appear in Lower's informative descriptive catalogue of the exhibits in the museum compiled in March 1866.<sup>48</sup> The quernstone cannot now be identified in the Society's collections.

**10. NGR: TQ 4135 1008**

During excavations at Lewes Castle 1985–88, one sherd of Samian and one of East Sussex ware were found in the keep on the castle mound.<sup>49</sup>

**11. NGR: (?) TQ 4144 0995**

The *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* of 3 September 1838 contained the following report:

On Friday last as some men were making an excavation for the purpose of sinking a cesspool on the property of Mr S. Smart in St Martin's Lane, midway between the Castle and the southern boundary of the town wall, they discovered a Roman urn, containing the remains of a cock, the bones of which are very perfect and resemble in every respect a skeleton found in a similar manner by Dr

Mantell some years back at the base of the Castle Mound.

In 1812, one William Smart was occupying property on the east side of St Martin's Lane (nos 4 & 5) and at the north-west corner of St Martin's Lane with the High Street (nos 74 & 75 High Street).<sup>50</sup> In 1839 S. H. Smart, miller, occupied 75 High Street.<sup>51</sup>

It is not known whether the finds have survived.

**12. NGR: TQ 4153 1012**

During the building of an extension to the then County Hall (now the Crown Courts) at the end of the 19th century, two iron weapons were discovered. One was a throwing axe datable to the late 5th or early 6th centuries, and the other was a long seax probably of the late 7th or 8th centuries. The latter is a rare weapon in England.<sup>52</sup> The weapons were acquired by the Sussex Archaeological Society in 1899.<sup>53</sup>

**13. NGR: TQ 4163 1015**

In a list published in 1824 of Roman coins 'that have been found within a few years in Lewes and the immediate environs', Horsfield records one of the emperor Tiberius (AD 14–37) found with two tusks of a boar at Baxter's and Ade's on School Hill (currently 34–7 High Street).<sup>54</sup>

**14. NGR: TQ 4179 1005**

A burial register of the parish of All Saints, Lewes, records the following interment in September 1619:

The xth day was buried Robert Ashley, a bachelor, a Grocer, dwelling with Mr Meade in the Cliffe, he lyeth in the Churchyard upon the hill behind the East gate. A Noble was payd downe first for breaking the ground, for a straunger and dubble dutye.<sup>55</sup>

Nothing more is heard of the 'hill behind the East gate' of All Saints' churchyard, though the eye of faith might believe that the view of the church from the south-east published by Rouse in the mid-1820s was taken from just such a vantage point.<sup>56</sup> More likely, perhaps, the 'hill' refers to the slope of the churchyard down towards its south-east corner, which can be seen in a woodcut of the church dated about 1800.<sup>57</sup>

**15. NGR: TQ 4179 1005**

A burial register of All Saints parish records in the churchyard 'ye ould great stone' (24 Aug. 1677), 'ye great sandstone' (20 May 1678 and 16 Oct. 1681), and 'ye great sand Tombestone at ye east side of ye

church' (3 May 1682).<sup>58</sup>

**16. NGR: TQ 4182 1005**

The site of Pinwell was described in the mid-19th century as 'a perennial spring, that bursts out from the adjacent chalk-ridge, and rushes into the neighbouring brooks . . . in former times (it) enjoyed some celebrity'.<sup>59</sup> The name occurs in the late 13th century when Agnes de Pinewell quit claims to the prior and convent of Lewes property in Pinewellestrete in All Saints parish.<sup>60</sup>

**17. NGR: TQ 4171 1015**

One sherd of Roman pottery was found during excavations towards the western end of Brooman's Lane in 1979.<sup>61</sup>

**18. NGR: TQ 4182 1015**

Three fragments of Roman tile were amongst the finds of an excavation on the corner of Brooman's Lane and Friars Walk in 1989.<sup>62</sup>

**19. NGR: TQ 4182 1018**

Four sherds of Roman pottery were found during excavations in Friars Walk in 1976.<sup>63</sup>

**20. NGR: TQ 4085 1005**

In the autumn of 1834 a tank was being sunk for the recently formed Lewes Waterworks Company on a site about 100 yards west of St Anne's Church. The two following reports from the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* detail the discoveries made whilst the site was being prepared.

1 September, 1834

Last week as some workmen were employed in excavating some ground in a field in Saint Ann's, for the formation of a tank for the Lewes Waterworks Company, they discovered a variety of ancient British vases, and human skeletons, at the head and feet of which were placed what the antiquaries term drinking cups, of the barrel form, supposed to have contained food for the dead. There were also several sepulchral or funeral urns, containing the calcined ashes of human bones. One of these urns having an ornamented handle, was evidently moulded by hand, and decorated with some pointed instrument. Two of these relics were discovered at an unusual depth from the surface of the earth (at least 14 feet) embedded in the solid chalk rock, and placed

at right angles; surrounding these were the bones of various animals, such as sheep, hogs, calves, cats, birds, boars' tusks, etc. etc. The whole of the vases were of rude workmanship, and composed of the usual coarse black earth: they were unfortunately broken by the tools of the workmen, and indeed some of them appeared as if they had been partly demolished at the time they were deposited. There are two or three other sepulchral markings at the bottom of the tank, which have not yet been explored; but they evidently contain similar deposits.

#### 8 September 1834

During the past week, the workmen employed in forming the tank for the Water Works Company, at the western entrance of this town, have opened three more of the early British sepulchres, in addition to those mentioned in our last publication, all of which contained various remains of beasts, birds, fishes, etc. very similar to those we then enumerated; but one tomb was found to contain a most extraordinary sacrifice, that of a vast quantity of snail shells, deposited over and next to the urns and ashes, and those which were placed next to the latter, appeared also to have calcined. The last tomb explored was much larger and deeper than the rest, measuring in diameter six feet at the top, and about five feet at the bottom, and was excavated to the unusual depth of twenty feet through the chalk rock. On the workmen reaching within a few feet of the bottom, the chalk was of a much finer texture, and at about two feet from the bottom, immediately under the chalk, they discovered the ashes and burnt remains of the body, which were of a rich brown colour, exhibiting a beautiful contrast to the pure white rock; on removing these they found a richly cut glass ornament, diamond shaped, and about three quarters of an inch in width. At the north-east side of the tomb was an urn containing ashes, placed in a dish or pan, and on the opposite side, there was another vase also containing ashes. The vases were all more or less broken. About mid-way between the two urns was discovered a short sword or dirk, resembling a carving knife, the blade measuring 9½ inches in length, and the

shaft about 4 inches. The handle was perished, and the dirk very much corroded.

Part of the first report in the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* appeared in the next month's *Gentleman's Magazine*.<sup>64</sup> The discoveries are described, also, in a contemporary guidebook to the county, and by William Figg, who however interprets the site as one of habitation rather than burial.

The high antiquity of Lewes, may be inferred from the circumstance that, towards the close of last August, some excavators, who were digging a tank for the water-works company, in a field near the town, disintered a variety of ancient British vases, together with several human skeletons, the spot having evidently been used as a place of sepulchre. The whole of these vessels were composed of coarse black clay, and but rudely moulded. Some of them, known to antiquaries by their barrel form, and supposed to contain food for the dead, were placed at the head and feet of the skeletons referred to. A few sepulchral urns were also found, and the cavity which had been cut to the depth of fourteen feet through a solid mass of chalk, was strewn with the bones of sheep and many other animals.<sup>65</sup>

. . . in the year 1834, during the excavation for a reservoir for the Lewes Waterworks, about 200 feet to the west of the Church of St Mary Westout (aka St Anne), several singular pits were discovered, which had evidently been sunk in the chalk for, and used as, habitations. They were about twelve or fourteen feet in depth and eight or nine in diameter; they had been filled up with earth and rubbish, but when cleared out the floors were covered with remains of various animals, amongst which were several boars' tusks of a large size, together with oyster and snail shells; the sides were blackened by the smoke of the fires which had been kindled there, of which the ashes and portions of charcoal remained in considerable quantities.<sup>66</sup>

In a footnote on the snail shells found on the site, Figg identifies them not as 'the common snail, but the "*Helix pornatia*" . . . This species was a favourite dish with the Romans, and is still used as food in many parts of Europe during Lent'.<sup>67</sup> Figg's observations regarding the snail, *Helix Pomatia*, ('pornatia' is perhaps a misreading by the printer of



Figg's handwriting) is supported by modern scholarship. It is recorded from Roman levels, and there is 'no conclusive evidence to prove wrong the popular belief that it was deliberately introduced by the Romans for food'.<sup>68</sup>

In 1850 the excavation was brought to the notice of the Society of Antiquaries. At the Society's meeting on Thursday 7th February a letter from William Durrant Cooper was read, which contained 'a statement of particulars relating to the opening of several Barrows in the autumn of 1834, by the late Mr Stewart Warren Lee, Dr Mantell, Mr Cooper, and several other gentlemen, situated at the western entrance of the town of Lewes, immediately above St Anne's Church, upon the spot now occupied by the reservoir of the water-works'. The printed notice goes on to mention 'some cists . . . at the depth of fourteen feet . . . situated in a cluster at right angles, and six or seven were opened, which were found to contain the usual deposit of stones and broken pieces of pottery with the bones of various animals. A vast number of shells of the snail, called *Helix pomatia*, were found; a discovery which induces Mr Cooper to infer, contrary to popular belief, that this

species of snail was indigenous, and used as an article of food in remote times'.<sup>69</sup>

No doubt the printed notice is only an abstract of Cooper's letter. Unfortunately, the Society of Antiquaries has no record of the letter in its archive.

The whereabouts of the finds is not known.

An Iron Age coin of Commius, King of the Atrebates (c. 45–30 BC) was found during recent excavations at the nearby site of the medieval hospital of St Nicholas.<sup>70</sup>

## 21. NGR: Withheld

During the last two years five Roman coins have been found in a garden on the south side of Rotten Row. Four of them date from the 4th century AD, and one from the 2nd century.<sup>71</sup>

## Acknowledgements

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> R. D. Lake *et al.*, *Geology of the Country Around Lewes* (British Geological Survey, 1987), 84–5. For the extent of the alluvium see sheet 319 'Lewes' of the 1:50,000 map series published by the Institute of Geological Sciences in 1978 as part of the geological survey of Great Britain. For water and land levels as they relate to the Ouse valley, see A. Ballard, 'The Sussex coast line', *Sussex Archaeological Collections* (hereafter SAC) **53** (1910), 6 (map), 12–13.

<sup>2</sup> For the history of attempts to drain the Levels since the 15th century see P. Brandon, 'The origin of Newhaven and the drainage of the Lewes and Laughton levels', SAC **110** (1972), 44–60. For a vivid description of how the inundation would have appeared to an Anglo-Saxon observer, see A. H. Allcroft, *Downland Pathways*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1924), 4; and for a description from the late 18th century, P. Dunvan, *Ancient and Modern History of Lewes and Brighthelmston* (Lewes, 1795), 355.

<sup>3</sup> *Victoria County History of Sussex* (hereafter VCHSx) **7** (1940), 7.

<sup>4</sup> D. Hill & A. Rumble (eds), *The Defence of Wessex: the Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 207–8.

<sup>5</sup> According to VCHSx **7**, 21, n. 84, the phrase 'twin mounds . . .' is from Freeman, *William Rufus*, i. 59. G. T. Clark, 'The castle of Lewes', SAC **34** (1882), engraved plan facing 57.

<sup>6</sup> VCHSx **7**, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Most recently, see D. Rudling, 'The archaeology of Lewes:

some recent research', SAC **121** (1983), 45–6; P. Drewett, D. Rudling & M. Gardiner, *The South East to AD 1000* (London: Longman, 1988), 326.

<sup>8</sup> Dunvan, 9.

<sup>9</sup> *The Provincial Magazine* **1**, no. 1 (August) (Lewes, 1818), 10 and fn.

<sup>10</sup> W. H. Legge, *A New Guide to Lewes . . .* (Lewes: Southern Publishing Company, 1909), 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> SAC **93** (1955), lvi (Museum Acc. No. 1955/20).

<sup>12</sup> *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* (hereafter JBA) **1** (1846), 238.

<sup>13</sup> T. J. McCann, 'Thomas King's excavation at Greyfriars, Chichester, in 1835', SAC **134** (1996), 238–9; D. F. Renn, 'Canterbury Castle in the early Middle Ages', in P. Bennett, S. Frere & S. Stow (eds), *Excavations at Canterbury Castle 1* (Maidstone: Canterbury Archaeological Trust, 1982), 70–71.

<sup>14</sup> *Victoria County History of Essex* **3** (1963), 39–44.

<sup>15</sup> L. V. Grinsell, 'Sussex barrows', SAC **75** (1934), 223; E. C. Curwen, *The Archaeology of Sussex*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1954), 144.

<sup>16</sup> Legge, 23, probably referring to Lambeth Palace Library, court roll 1081.

<sup>17</sup> L. V. Grinsell, 'The Christianisation of prehistoric and other pagan sites', *Landscape History* **8** (1986), 27–37. For further discussion of christianization see R. Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), xi; R. Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (London: Dent, 1989), 73–84, 258. For the

- re-use of ritual and other high-status sites over time by different cultural groups see R. Bradley, *Altering the Earth: the Origins of Monuments in Britain and Continental Europe* (Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 1993), 113–29, and J. Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon pagan shrines and their prototypes', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* **8** (1995), 1–28.
- <sup>18</sup> C. Donaldson, *Martin of Tours: Parish Priest, Mystic and Exorcist* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 140; Morris, 50, 71.
- <sup>19</sup> W. Figg, 'Some memorials of old Lewes', *SAC* **13** (1861), 12; copy of Marchant's map in Sussex Archaeological Society (hereafter SAS) Library at Barbican House, ref. LM 8.
- <sup>20</sup> G. Mantell, *A Day's Ramble In and About . . . Lewes* (Lewes, 1846), 117.
- <sup>21</sup> *Sussex Agricultural Express*, 25 May 1839.
- <sup>22</sup> East Sussex Record Office (hereafter ESRO) ABE/D560/1. Further details of the improvements to the church mentioned by Wakeham can be found in the minutes of a vestry meeting of St John's parish. ESRO PAR 412/1/1/5, ff. 31–2. The 'church pavement' was probably the floor of the nave, which was seven steps below the level at which one entered the church. R. Gilbert, 'The Old Church of St John-sub-Castro' (unpub. typescript, SAS Library at Barbican House, 1969), 23–4.
- <sup>23</sup> Dunvan, 342; J. Rouse, *The Beauties and Antiquities of . . . Sussex* (1825), 157; T. W. Horsfield, *History and Antiquities of Lewes . . . I* (Lewes, 1824), 271.
- <sup>24</sup> Mantell, 117.
- <sup>25</sup> M. A. Lower, *A Hand-Book for Lewes . . .*, 1st edn (Lewes, n.d.), 61, fn.
- <sup>26</sup> 'Additions to Museum during year 1891', *SAC* **39** (1887), xxiv.
- <sup>27</sup> Mantell, 117, fn.
- <sup>28</sup> *JBA* **1** (1846), 258.
- <sup>29</sup> Lower, *Hand-Book*, 1st edn, 62. The 'improved' second edition of Lower's *Hand-Book* (1852), 75–6, repeats these observations word for word.
- <sup>30</sup> Lower, *Hand-Book*, 3rd edn (n.d.), 62. I am grateful to Alexander Franklin of Abinger Place, who kindly provided me with his research notes relating to the development of the street. Mr Barratt was the local road-surveyor and, according to Lower, he was an early supporter of the Society. The Society 'is under considerable obligations for his friendly efforts to secure all objects of antiquarian interest met with in the various excavations of which he has the superintendence'. M. A. Lower, 'On miscellaneous antiquities, discovered in, and relating to, the county of Sussex', *SAC* **5** (1852), 199, fn.2.
- <sup>31</sup> M. A. Lower, 'The antiquities preserved in the museum of Lewes Castle', *SAC* **18** (1866), 64.
- <sup>32</sup> *JBA* **1**, 257–8.
- <sup>33</sup> Martin Henig, hon. editor of the *JBA*, and Bernard Nurse, librarian to the Society of Antiquaries of London (pers. comms).
- <sup>34</sup> 1799: C. Brent, *Historic Lewes* (Lewes: Lewes Town Council, 1985), 26–7; 1817: Copy in SAS library at Barbican House, Lewes, ref. LM 17.
- <sup>35</sup> *Sussex Agricultural Express*, 29 Sept. 1838.
- <sup>36</sup> W. H. Godfrey (ed.), *The Official Guide to Lewes* (Lewes: Lewes Town Council et al., c. 1933), 46. But Horsfield, 316, notes that the execution of criminals is said formerly to have taken place within Hangman's Acre itself, about 100 yards south-west of the site of the Elephant and Castle.
- <sup>37</sup> L. F. Salzman (ed.), *The Town Book of Lewes 1542–1701*, Sussex Record Society **48** (1945–6), 111.
- <sup>38</sup> L. Grinsell, *Ancient Burial Mounds of England*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1953), 66.
- <sup>39</sup> Figg, 19; Rev. E. Turner, 'The ancient merchant guild of Lewes . . .', *SAC* **21** (1869), 91.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ex inf.* Mr Thomas Reeves, the present occupier of the property. It may be noted that the Reeves family have occupied the site since 1858. It may be noted, also, that amongst the Reeves' family memorabilia there are a few Roman coins. They include one of Domitian described as having been found in the Paddock, Lewes, and an Antoninus Pius for which there is no provenance. Likewise, there is no provenance for the other Roman coins in the collection, though there is evidence to suggest that some of them, including the Antoninus Pius, were bought from other collectors or coin dealers.
- <sup>41</sup> Mantell, 109.
- <sup>42</sup> Horsfield, 75.
- <sup>43</sup> Correspondence between S. Medcalf, University of Sussex, and Miss C. Johns, Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities at the British Museum, 1972. I am grateful to Stephen Medcalf for providing me with a copy of this correspondence. Enquiries made in 1994 of Stuart Needham in the same department at the British Museum were responded to fully but elicited no further information.
- <sup>44</sup> Figg, 19.
- <sup>45</sup> L. F. Salzman, 'A history of the Sussex Archaeological Society', *SAC* **85** (1946), 27.
- <sup>46</sup> Salzman, *SAC* **85**, 28.
- <sup>47</sup> Figg, 20.
- <sup>48</sup> Lower, *SAC* **18**, 60–73.
- <sup>49</sup> P. Drewett, 'Excavations at Lewes Castle, East Sussex 1985–1988', *SAC* **130** (1992), 85.
- <sup>50</sup> J. Houghton, 'Property and Land Ownership in Lewes: a study of land and building in the pre-incorporation Borough' 3 (unpub. typescript, SAS Library at Barbican House, 1989), unpaginated.
- <sup>51</sup> W. Robson, *Commercial Directory of London and the Six Home Counties . . .*, 19th edn (1839), 79 (sv 'Sussex'). Unfortunately this source does not list the occupants in St Martin's Lane.
- <sup>52</sup> *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London* (hereafter *PSAL*) 2nd s. **18** (1899–1901), 28–9; M. Welch, *Early Anglo-Saxon Sussex*, British Archaeological Report **112** (1983), 124–6; M. Welch, 'Lewes and its region in the Anglo-Saxon period', in M. J. Allen et al. (eds), *Aspects of Archaeology in the Lewes Area* (Lewes: Lewes Archaeological Group, 1987), 29.
- <sup>53</sup> *SAC* **43** (1891), xix, where they are described as 'a Saxon Axe Head and Sword'.
- <sup>54</sup> Horsfield, 69.
- <sup>55</sup> ESRO PAR 410/1/1/2; printed in *Sussex Notes and Queries* **8** (1940–41), 27. I am grateful to Colin Brent for bringing this reference to my attention.
- <sup>56</sup> Rouse, plate 73; 'this view, taken in the year 1781, was copied from a drawing in the Burrell Collection'. Rouse, 181.
- <sup>57</sup> Horsfield, 283.
- <sup>58</sup> ESRO PAR 410/1/1/2.
- <sup>59</sup> Mantell, 26–7.
- <sup>60</sup> L. F. Salzman (ed.), *The Chartulary of the Priory of St. Pancras of Lewes 2*, Sussex Record Society **40** (1934), 23.

<sup>61</sup> D. Rudling, 'Trial excavations in Brooman's Lane, Lewes, 1979', in D. Rudling 'The archaeology of Lewes: some recent research', *SAC* **121** (1983), 56.

<sup>62</sup> M. Russell, 'Excavations in Friars Walk, Lewes, 1989', *SAC* **128** (1990), 154.

<sup>63</sup> D. Freke, 'Excavations in Friar's Walk, Lewes, 1976', *SAC* **116** (1978), 195.

<sup>64</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine* new s. 2, pt 2 (1834), 418; reprinted in G. L. Gomme, *The Gentleman's Magazine Library: Archaeology* **1** (1886), 147-8.

<sup>65</sup> E. Bellchambers (ed.), *Excursions in the County of Sussex* . . . ,

'new edition' (1835), 64.

<sup>66</sup> Figg, 2-3.

<sup>67</sup> Figg, 3, fn.1.

<sup>68</sup> M. P. Kerney, 'Snails and Man in Britain', *Journal of Conchology* **26** (1966), 3-14, quoted in J. G. Evans, *Land Snails in Archaeology* (London & New York: Seminar Press, 1972), 176.

<sup>69</sup> *PSAL* **2**, no.21 (1850), 50.

<sup>70</sup> David Rudling, pers. comm.

<sup>71</sup> SAS, Barbican House, Lewes, museum identification reports: 1994/84; 1996/2, 16, 40, 65.

## APPENDIX A: THE NAME OF LEWES

By Richard Coates

John Bleach's article demonstrates that one of the most distinctive features of the topography of Lewes in the transition to Saxon control is likely to have been a row of artificial mounds. This naturally invites a reappraisal of the already widely-accepted view that the name of Lewes derives from Old English (OE) *hlæwas* 'hills, mounds'.

Mawer and Stenton<sup>1</sup> believed that the name was in fact a singular, meaning 'hill', and explained it as denoting 'the prominent hill on which Lewes stands'. They proceeded to explain the modern plural-looking form as 'due to the fact that there are other hills just across the Ouse, at the very gates of Lewes, so to speak. It may have been re-inforced by a general and unexplained tendency in Norman times to turn names into the plural form [examples]'. Ekwall<sup>2</sup> laconically explained the name as 'the plural of OE *hlæw* "hill"', with no further discussion.

There has been great progress recently in understanding Old English vocabulary for landscape features. Gelling's work<sup>3</sup> has made it practically certain that in the South Country, including Sussex, OE *hlæw* and its relative *hlāw* only mean 'tumulus, artificial mound'. *Lewes* does not, therefore, mean 'hills'. An older tradition either held the name to mean 'tumuli' and did not offer any topographical account, or ascribed the name vaguely to unspecified barrows on the Downs around the town; the former is seen for instance in R. G. Roberts's older Sussex study, and the latter view is taken up in two recent general dictionaries.<sup>4</sup> Before Bleach's findings, one might have toyed with the idea that the name indeed meant 'tumuli' but that it denoted barrows at the actual site of Lewes which had been obliterated by Saxon and subsequent urban development. No-one had previously presented hard evidence to suggest that the castle mottes were, or

included, pre-Norman work, and no-one had noted the potential significance of any alignment with other recorded mounds in the town. The new findings appear to dovetail well with Gelling's thinking in promoting the idea that *Lewes* means 'tumuli'.

This solution appears instantly convincing. Unfortunately, the linguistic evidence is not so straightforward. It is discussed in detail elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> but the main points are as follows.

(1) Pre-Conquest spellings show no trace of the initial *h-* required for *hlæwas*, even in a document which preserves *h-* in another relevant name, the *Burghal Hidage*.<sup>6</sup> Loss of *h-* before a consonant shows up in spellings only from the 12th century onwards, and reaches Kent last of all; the absence of *h-* on all pre-Conquest coins and in both surviving pre-Conquest documentary mentions has to be respected.

(2) Some pre-Conquest spellings on coins do have an *h*, but in an unexpected place (e.g. *Læhwæa*).

(3) *Hlæwas* should not develop to a modern pronunciation with two syllables, but one.

(4) In established Sussex place-names containing the OE word for 'tumulus', the variant *hlāw* is otherwise general (Baldslow, Cudlow, Sedlow Wood, and probably Burlough Castle), though *hlæw* is found in descriptive expressions in charter boundaries.

(5) That charter-boundary evidence shows that *hlæw* was feminine in OE in this area, which makes it quite unclear how it would have inflected in the plural. (*Hlæwas* is historically a masculine/neuter form.)

On the basis of these five points, I argued that *Lewes* was from Brittonic \**Lexowiās* 'hillsides, -slopes' as a name for the district, rather than specifically for the

site of Lewes. The strongest formal objection to this is that \*\**Lewed* might be expected, for philological reasons explained fully in my article, but a parallel was found for this development's not occurring. Since my article was published, it has been suggested that Welsh *llechwedd* 'hillslope', of which I took \**lexowiā* to be the source, has a different origin;<sup>7</sup> but the alternative proposed, an expression meaning '(slate) rock-appearance, i.e. -face', poses semantic problems.

Of my original five points, (1) and (2) still strike me as solid reasons to reject an OE origin for *Lewes*, and (4) as supportive of (1) and (2) if not independently convincing. (3) may not be quite as secure as originally thought; there are traces (though remarkably few, it must be said) of a one-syllable pronunciation, e.g. in a letter from Elizabeth Chambers of Hastings to 'my friend Mr Harison at

his house in Lews', dated 26 March 1657. (This letter is currently slipped into the front of the Lewes Archdeaconry act-book, ESRO MS. W/B9, with which it has no connection.<sup>8</sup>) I have heard unsubstantiated reports of a similar obsolete local pronunciation in the present century. It is possible that such a pronunciation could have been deliberately avoided by the fastidious because of its similarity to *lewze* 'pigsty' (now a West-Country word but formerly much more widespread; cf. *Looes Barn* (Saltdean, Rottingdean)).

We are left with a strong material reason to believe that *Lewes* could be OE for 'tumuli', and serious linguistic reservations about this solution. Evidence in Bleach's article clearly suggests Roman-period activity at Lewes, and we need not be shy of believing a pre-Saxon name to have survived. The linguistic evidence must not be ignored.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A. H. Mawer & F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Sussex*, English Place-Name Society 6/7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929/30).

<sup>2</sup> Eilert Ekwall, *Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, 2nd edition (Chichester: Phillimore, 1988), 134–7; *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London: Dent, 1984), 162–3.

<sup>4</sup> R. G. Roberts, *The Place-Names of Sussex* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 102; John Field, *Place-Names of Great Britain and Ireland* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1980), s.n.; Adrian Room, *Dictionary of British Place-Names* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), 212.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Coates, 'The name of Lewes: some problems and possibilities', *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 23 (1990–91), 5–15.

<sup>6</sup> John McN. Dodgson, 'The Burghal Hidage place-names', in D. Hill & A. R. Rumble (eds), *The Defence of Wessex: the Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 98–127, esp. 100, regrettably does not make anything of the different treatment of Lewes and Lydford.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Schrijver, *Studies in British Celtic Historical Phonology* Leiden Studies in Indo-European 5. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), 285.

<sup>8</sup> Information kindly supplied by Christopher Whittick, East Sussex Record Office.