

TRACES OF AN OLD ROAD NEAR TOWNCREEP.

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SINCE writing my paper on Towncreep in Vol. XXXVIII. of the Sussex Archaeological Society's "Collections," I have discovered what I believe to be the approach to the old town from the southern or Ashburn valley.

In the map then published to illustrate the paper it will be seen that a forest road turns off the high road (H), a few yards below the Tower House (F), and crosses the stream. Immediately after crossing it takes two (and eventually three) directions; the first, a private carriage road (marked P) winds up the eastern valley; the second, after being cut six or eight feet deep through the lower part of the spur, divides into two (marked N and O respectively) the former track leading to Penhurst Cottages, the latter by a steep ascent to the plateau above. I have always thought (and have so indicated in the map) that the track O, until it reaches the top, must follow the old line of ascent to the town; and, without being confident, I suspected that the cutting through the spur was ancient, and not likely to have been made for a cart track. These conjectures are strongly supported by what I have now to describe.

The underwood at the foot of the spur has recently been cut, and this has disclosed the fact that, immediately opposite the road P, a shelf or platform about seven or eight feet wide—evidently artificial—has been made from the cutting above mentioned southwards along the side of the spur to its foot, a few feet above the stream. It is then carried round the spur, following the course of a small stream from the north-west (not marked in the map), which has just joined the other stream. On this

side of the spur, where there is a wider interval between it and the stream, the track assumes the character of a slightly elevated crest or vallum between two narrow platforms for about 80 to 100 yards, till it reaches a spot where a high ridge approaches the opposite side of the stream. At this point, evidently, the stream was crossed by a bridge, and the ground on the near side being marshy, with a mound in the middle, there was probably a double bridge. On the further or western side of the stream, which is now occupied by a small hop-garden in the angle between the two streams and the high ridge, the vallum assumes much larger proportions, being generally from five to six feet above the present level of the garden and seven or eight feet broad at the top. It now makes a sharp angle, turning southwards immediately under the above mentioned ridge for about 150 yards along the western side of the hop-garden; but here there are no lateral platforms—only a narrow ditch, a few inches deep, intervening between it and the hill-side. In this form it reaches the road H from Penhurst to Catsfield, near the foot of a steep ascent. On the further or southern side of this road is a grass field, in which the ridge is continued, and slopes steeply down almost to the banks of the main stream. In this field the vallum reappears, (showing that the road H was cut through it), but only for a few feet, after which the track assumes its original character of a shelf or platform, about seven or eight feet wide, cut in the side of the hill, and bearing to the south parallel with the stream. In this form it is plainly traceable for perhaps 250 yards—sometimes open, sometimes through old gorse and furze bushes—the whole length of the field, till it disappears at the further end, where it is crossed by a modern cart track leading down into the valley. It is difficult to decide whether it was carried further through a thicket on the right bank, or whether it was here possible for wayfarers to embark in boats on a deeper and broader stream; but I incline to the latter opinion.

If it be asked whether there are any signs of a modern path in the field, following the same direction, the answer

must be in the negative. There is a stile from the Penhurst road (H) leading into the field several yards below the end of the vallum, but there is no kind of track; and persons going in this direction would almost certainly follow the banks of the stream, instead of climbing the slope.

Other obvious questions are—why the track does not follow the main stream direct from the spur, instead of taking a somewhat circuitous course round two sides of the (present) hop-garden, and also why the vallum should be sometimes employed and sometimes discarded. On the last point the local people have an explanation of their own. They say that the vallum and ditch from the small stream southwards are the remains of an engineering experiment, by which a supply of water was drawn off to Ashburnham Forge nearly two miles away! This is clearly only an afterthought—and not a very ingenious one—to explain what they could not understand; for, not to speak of the numerous valleys that would have to be traversed, and hills to be pierced or “turned” for such a purpose, it is plain that its object would not be secured by the platform track, which is connected with the vallum. Moreover, that object would have been far more easily attained by drawing off the water of the main stream more than a mile lower down the valley. The mistake is no doubt due to the fact that there is already a water course for this purpose from another stream much nearer the forge.

My own answer to both the above questions from the first was, that the hop-garden was anciently an impassable morass; and this is strongly supported by what I have learnt from Mr. Bourner, the present occupier of the ground. He tells me that his father was the first to drain and cultivate the space now occupied by the hop-garden, and that even at that recent period, it was marshy and overgrown with osiers—in fact an osier-bed.

There is an interesting paper in “S.A.C.” Vol XI., pp. 127-146, by Mr. P. J. Martin on the traces of the Roman way, called Stane Street Causeway, north-eastwards from Chichester to the borders of the county.

He mentions that along the heights of the Downs above Bignor, the "way" assumes the triple form of a central vallum and narrow platforms on either side; and he discusses in a note (p. 132) the probable reasons for the adoption of this arrangement. He decides that, apart from the advantage of marking strongly the line of march in snow or fog, the central ridge was probably raised for a line of scouts to march in order, wherever the brushwood scrub was thick, and observation in consequence more difficult. These reasons would be obviously applicable, where the road wound round a deep swamp, overgrown with osiers, as in the case under notice.

Thus I think we may fairly claim that we can still detect, for more than a quarter of a mile, the approach to the ancient, (I had almost written Roman), town up the Ashburn valley from Pevensey Castle and the sea.

