

## EXAMINATION OF AN ANCIENT CEMETERY

At Hempnall, Norfolk.

BY

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“When the funeral pyre was out, and the last valediction over, men took a lasting adieu of their interred friends, little expecting the curiosity of future ages should comment upon their ashes: and, having no old experience of the duration of their relics, held no opinion of such after considerations.”—SIR T. BROWNE.

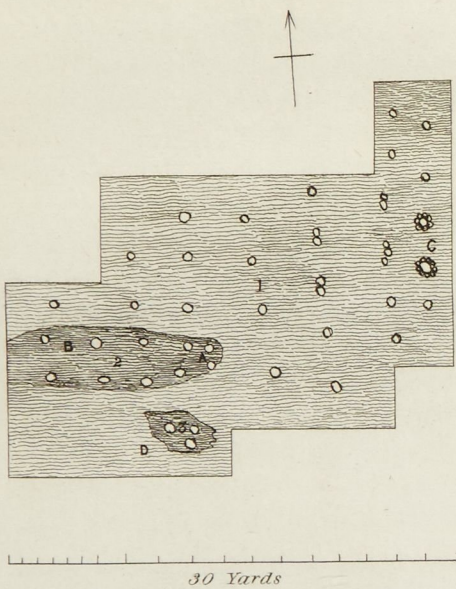
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AN accidental discovery in June, 1854, in a field to the East of the church at Hempnall in the Hundred of Depwade, of some fragments of pottery, or “crock,” as the labourers called them, led to a visit from some of the members of our Society to the spot, and they decided upon making some further examination of the ground, the proprietor of the field readily giving them permission to do so. The result was the discovery of an extensive burying ground of the British and Anglo-Roman period, with its cinerary urns, burnt bones, and ashes.

The accompanying sketch of the place will, I hope, render the few notes made on the spot more interesting and intelligible.

The site of these interments slopes towards the North, in which direction the gravel “crops” out from beneath a bed

- 1 Soil disturbed
- 2 Gravel Pit
- 3 Black earth, ashes &c.



*Plan of the ground explored at  
Hempnall.*

1854.



of clay and extends under it towards the South; and it was probably on account of the dryness of the soil, or, possibly, because a stream,\* which there is reason to think was then sufficient for the purposes of navigation, afforded an easy transport to the spot, that it was selected for burial.

The first urn was found before our visit, and was lying in a shallow hole out of which gravel was being cast (A). Other broken urns were found at regular intervals Eastward of it, and one more to the Northward than these last (B). They were all deposited about twelve or eighteen inches below the surface, and all were in a mouldering condition; the base only of the last and largest was entire, and measured about fourteen inches in diameter, and was filled with burnt bones, ashes, and black soil.

On our arrival a party of labourers were set to work, and the ground, as far as is marked in the plan, was carefully examined. Numerous portions of these cinerary urns, together with fragments of other pottery and ashes, were found scattered through a considerable extent, about thirty yards from East to West, and these deposits seem to have been originally made in regular rows from North to South. Two rows were especially distinct, but beyond the line marked on the map, the soil to the Eastward was undisturbed, and no remains were discoverable in it. Southward also of the line marked B the interments ceased, but Northward they again occurred until our researches were checked by the boundary of the growing crops.

The deposits seemed to have been made, as I have said, in order; at regular distances of ten or twelve feet in the parallel rows, and in some instances two pots of ashes were found together; an arrangement prompted, perhaps, by the

\* This flows at the foot of the slope and joins the Yare. It was called *Rucham River*, and the Abbot of Bury had a large watermill upon it here.  
—*Blomefield.*



same sort of respect for the best feelings and affections of our nature which influence ourselves under a purer faith and a stronger hope: "unsatisfied affections, conceiving some satisfaction to be neighbours in the grave, to lie urn by urn, and touch but in their manes."

I selected the best fragments as examples of the pottery, and exhibited them at our North Walsham meeting. With one exception they are of a most rude and coarse manufacture: some pieces seemed to have subsequently undergone the action of fire on the outside, and those which best retain their original form were found resting on smoothed floors of fine gravel, and we noted that all the shapes indicated a very inferior workmanship; the sides swelled unequally, and the mouths were finished with uneven flanges. On one urn we saw traces of ornament,—a rough indented border. With each urn were found ashes and calcined bones; and on some spots, on two especially where we also found circles of smooth stones much calcined and forming inclosures of about twenty inches (C), ashes and bones, without any urn, and the charcoal, which was often mixed with them throughout the search, appeared quite fresh to the eye.

A few feet outside the southern limit of the deposits of urns we came on a mass of black soil and ashes, about a yard and a half in diameter (D). In this there were no traces of the rude ill-baked urns already noticed, but a number of fragments of dark pottery of a superior character, some with a distinct flange and apparently turned. They were apparently Anglo-Roman. A few fragments of a similar kind were scattered on the surface; but it is remarkable that nowhere else but in this isolated spot were any remains of a similar pottery found.

The site of this discovery is known as the "Walls," which has a singular coincidence with the designation of a cemetery at Littlington in Cambridgeshire, which is called "Heaven's Walls." The fine collection of urns now in the possession

of Dr. Webb, the Master of Clare Hall, and preserved in the museum there, was discovered at the latter place.\*

If any tumuli were raised on or near this ground, all traces of them have disappeared, and in the absence of the discovery of any personal ornaments or arms we were led to infer that this was a common place of sepulture; but there was nothing to guide us to any conclusion as to the precise early period at which it was so used, or when it was abandoned.

Those who are disposed to inquire into the origin and practice of burning the body and placing the ashes in an urn, must be prepared for a very extensive search; but every isolated fact recorded from day to day in our various archaeological collections tends to lessen the difficulty of arriving at the true reason for the prevalence of this early and almost universal custom. "We would fain," says a Scotch antiquary, "reanimate the ashes in these long-buried urns, and interrogate the rude British patriarchs regarding a state of being which for centuries, perhaps for many ages, prevailed on these very spots where now our churches, palaces, and our dwellings are reared, but which seems almost as inconceivable to us as that other state of being to which we know the old Briton with all the seed of Adam has passed."

\* *Archæologia*, Vol. XXVI., p. 368. These remains are of the Roman period.