

Grimes Graves, Meeting.

COMMUNICATED BY

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HONORARY SECRETARY.

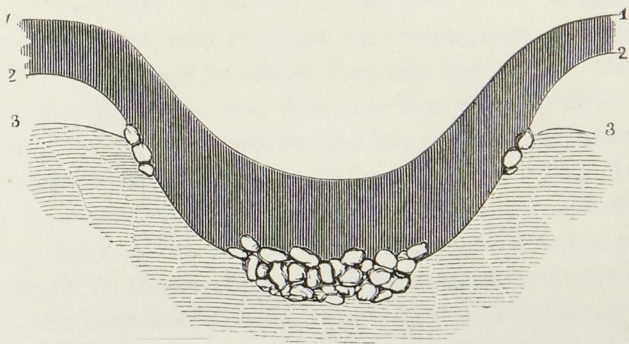
To offer to this Society a paper on so remarkable a place as "Grimes Graves," is a task which I did not expect to be called upon to fulfil. I have long been anxious that the members should visit it, and I always hoped that it might be at a time when it would be convenient to Dr. Guest, the learned Master of Caius College, to be present, and to give us his opinion upon it. I am very sorry to say that Dr. Guest is detained by other engagements, and cannot be here to-day,¹ but I hope at some future time he will come and examine a place which has a double interest to him, as being one of a class upon which he is perhaps better qualified than any one else to give an opinion, and also as being situated in a parish connected with the college of which he is the master.

All that I can do is to state what facts I have ascertained about it, and to *suggest* to others some points from which their better opportunities and experience may enable them to draw their own conclusions. Any contribution to our knowledge of a place which we must certainly regard as one of the most curious in the county, or even in the kingdom, will not be without use; and this must be my apology for reading to you my notes upon it to-day.

¹ This paper was read on the spot, 5th July, 1866.

We are now at the eastern boundary of the parish of Weeting; and this spot consists of about twelve acres of ground, now in a wood, covered closely with a very large collection of pits, of different sizes and depth, the whole forming an irregular parallelogram, skirted on the north and east by banks. These banks are the boundaries of the parishes of Weeting, Lynford, and Santon, the field in which the pits are being a corner of Weeting, jutting out from the rest:—the banks extend far beyond this wood, and it is common in this neighbourhood to find such earthen divisions between parishes and between warrens. Outside the wood, on the south-east, is a large gravel-pit, where there seems to have been a mound, and perhaps two others, surrounding a spring which rises in the pit. At the northern end of the eastern side is also a large mound, looking towards Thetford, five or six miles distant. We all remember Mr. Harrod's valuable Paper, in the third volume of our publications, on the "Weybourne Pits," and there can be no doubt that the present spot is a similar collection of British dwellings. I need not repeat his remarks; but these pits are, in many cases, much larger than those at Weybourne and the neighbourhood.² I will only say, by way of reminder to some who may be present, that antiquaries are generally agreed that such pits were dwelling-places of the early inhabitants of this country: they collected together in this way for mutual protection. Each pit would have its conical or beehive-shaped covering of trees, wattles, or thatch, with an entrance at the side, and a hole at the top to let out the smoke of the fire, which burnt on the hearth at the bottom of the pit. The sections cut through the pits will shew that they have been *paved* with flints in a bowl-shape. Some of them are as much as forty feet across, and about twelve feet in

² The illustrations of the Weyborne pits are here repeated from vol. iii, and will convey a good idea of those at Weeting, the general appearance and section being very much the same.



SKETCH OF THE WEYBOURNE PITS.

depth. Those at the sides of the place are smaller than the more central ones. Some are double pits, being connected by a short trench, and, in places, the trench seems quite continuous. The wood in which they are was planted about fifty years ago, and at that time they were partially filled up by throwing the earth from the top into the pits; and the accumulation of debris is about eighteen inches in depth. It is very clear from their careful construction, paving, and fire-places, that they were intended for permanent habitation, and not merely for the temporary shelter of an army on the march. The place is, in fact, a British town—a fortified settlement of the Iceni; probably of a date anterior to the arrival of the Romans. We know from Cæsar that the ancient Britons lived in such a manner, and very similar habitations are used to this day in uncivilized countries, and even, I believe, in some of the islands on the coast of Ireland. Besides the examples I have mentioned at Weybourne, which number about 1000, Mr. Harrod mentions as many as 2000 more at Aylmerton Heath, called the "Shrieking Pits," from a superstitution of voices heard there; others called "hills and holes," at Beeston, Edgefield, Marsham, Mousehold Heath, and Eaton, all in Norfolk. There are many other examples in Yorkshire, Derbyshire, and Wiltshire, the latter described by Sir Richard Colt Hoare, in his "Ancient Wiltshire." In none of these, as far as I can learn, have any implements ever been found, although excavations for the purpose have been carefully made.³

In Feb. 1852 I obtained permission to examine some of the pits in "Grimes Graves;"—a trench was dug through several of them, and in each case, about three feet below the lowest point at the bottom, we came upon a small oval wall of flints, evidently a fire-place, containing numerous bones of

³ A flint, apparently worked for a celt, was picked up in the wood of Grimes Graves by Mr. Prigg, of Bury, on the day of the visit of the Suffolk Archaeological Society from Thetford, Sept. 28th, 1866.

oxen, but no implements. By the kind permission of Mr. Angerstein, excavations have again been made this week for our inspection-day, and with the same result, although in the pits now opened the fire-places are not so distinctly preserved.

Many interesting questions arise as we try to re-people the scene before us with its original inhabitants. How was it possible for them to protect themselves from the weather? How were so wide pits roofed across? Had they regular mud-built domes? or were the poles or wattles set some way down the pit, so as nearly to be hidden from sight from the outside?

Why are so many of the larger pits in the centre, and the smaller ones at the sides? Did they dig fresh ones as the numbers of the inhabitants increased, or were they so made that, if driven to the centre by attacks of enemies, there might be room for all?

Why is there no bank apparently on the western side? Had the people possession of the country on that side, and sought only to protect themselves on the north and east?

Whence did they get water for daily use? There is a spring in the large gravel-pit on the east side, which is now never dry, and this may have been formerly much more copious. There also appears to be a way along the bank down to the river, about a mile off. Are the mounds near the spring original, and did they serve to protect it?

Where did they bury their dead? An extensive cemetery ought to be discoverable near at hand. I am told since I have been here, that on the Suffolk side of the river, opposite this place, skeletons are found in great numbers. Is that likely to have been the cemetery?

Where did they throw away their refuse? For only a few bones of animals are found in the pits.

What was the purpose of the mound at the eastern side? Was it a look-out or "speculatorium"?

Once more, what is the meaning of the name, "Grimes Graves?" This point I must endeavour to give an answer to. The Saxons must have found these works here, and called them "Grimes Graves." "Graves" of course means pits or trenches; we only use the word now to mean a pit *for burial*, but it is properly a place *dug out*, and we retain the old meaning in the word "engrave," &c. In the *Promptorium Parvulorum* we have "*Gravyn*, or grubbyn yn pe erthe, fodio." I find also that Camden, or rather his editor Gibson, calls the ditches of an earthwork (Vandlebury, *Gogmagog Hills*) by the term "graffs," as a word then in use, "graffs between the rampires." We all remember a verse in the Prayer-Book translation of the Psalms, "they have graven and digged up a pit;" and the Geneva Bible has another text, "he that graveth an habitation for himself in a rock." "Greaves," as pits, occurs once in Layamon (*Gent. Mag.*, July, 1866, p. 73). Graves, therefore, means the pits, or the "diggings."

The word "Grim," or "Grimes," is much less certain in its interpretation. It occurs very frequently in connection with earthworks, and is found denoting them in Saxon charters. A "Grimsdyke," or "Grimsditch," runs from Great Berkhamstead, Herts, to Bradenham, Bucks; there is another large one in Wiltshire, south of Salisbury; another in the parish of Saffron Walden, Essex; another near Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire; another near Ewelme, in the same county,—I do not mean merely a dyke, but one called *Grimsdyke*. The Roman wall between the Firths of Forth and Clyde has the name of "Græmes dyke." In the present case the pits are called *Grimes Graves*, and the Hundred Grimeshoe; but I am not aware that the Dyke, or Devil's Ditch, which runs along the western boundary of the parish by Wilton is ever termed Grimsdyke. Blomefield, whose opinion on such a point we shall not be bound to follow, says the name has its origin in Grime, whom he supposes to have been a person, a "leader or general, probably of the Danes in

this quarter, and if he was not the *Præsitus Comitatus* or *Viccomes*, that is, the Shire-greeve or Sheriff, he was undoubtedly the *Centuriæ Prepositus*, that is, the Hundred-Greeve, and as such gave the name to it, which it retains at this day." He did not perceive that although the *name* might have been given by the Saxons, the earthworks were here long before their arrival. He speaks of Grimes Graves as "a very curious Danish encampment," containing "great numbers of large deep pits, joined in a regular manner, one near to another, in form of a quincunx, the largest seeming to be in the centre, where probably the general's or commander's tent was."

Another derivation of Grimes has much more probability to support it; and has been accepted by antiquaries until quite recently. It is that of Stukeley, who derives Grime from the Anglo-Saxon *grim*, a witch, so that Grimesdyke would be equivalent to "witches-work, for (he says) the vulgar generally think these extraordinary works made by help of the devil:" and Grimes Graves would be the devil's pits. It is not necessary to suppose, by this theory, that works such as these and the Grimesdikes were *made* by the Saxons, but that when they came hither and found great works of the kind, and knew not what people had constructed them, they attributed them to supernatural beings. This, we all know, is very commonly the case; an object of wonder in nature or art is constantly called by the name of the devil or fairies, such as the Devil's Bridge, Devil's Punchbowl, &c., and where Devil's Dyke occurs, no doubt this is the origin of the expression. But whether Grimesdyke is another form of the same word, is not so certain. Dr. Guest has put forth another derivation, and any opinion from such an authority may well be thought to settle the question. He says in his very valuable and learned paper on "The Early English Settlements in South Britain," printed in the Salisbury volume of the Archæological Institute, that "the Anglo-Saxon *grim-e*, a witch, forms its genitive in *an*, *grim-an*, while the phrase

which answers to Grimsditch is always *grimes dic*. This form of the genitive requires a masculine or a neuter substantive, *grim*. I once thought (he says) this word might be of English origin, but am now inclined to look upon it as connected with the *gruma* or *groma* of the Agrimensors. If this be so, Grimesdike may be equivalent to boundary-dike. Such an hypothesis agrees well with the circumstances under which the word *grim* occurs in Anglo-Saxon charters, and in our modern provincial dialects. I would suggest, therefore, (he adds) that the names *grim* and *grimesdike* may have been given to certain works which were known to our ancestors as having served the purposes of boundary lines." The Saxons, or whoever set out the boundaries of the parishes of Weeting, Lynford, and Santon, have made use of the banks of Grimes Graves; they may therefore have called these pits the boundary pits, or Grimes Graves.

We must remember that the Hundred is also named "Grimes-hoe," and Blomefield tells us that the Hundred Court was "*called*" at the large mound on the east side of the pits. I ventured to suggest to Dr. Guest that this hill might have given the name to the Hundred, as we know that "hoe" means hill, and this would therefore be the Grimes hill, or "Grimes hoe," and the whole Hundred might therefore be termed the Grimes-hoe Hundred. I am glad to say that Dr. Guest thinks this extremely probable. The mound, of course, being British, was there *before* it was made the Hundred Hill by the Saxons; but as they used it for that purpose, they may have called it by the same name as the pits. A trench was cut into it yesterday, but nothing found except a small stag's antler. It was probably not a tumulus, but a "look-out."

I should be completely satisfied with this derivation of "Grimes," were it not for the frequent occurrence of the term "Devil's ditch," which answers so completely to the older derivation of *grim*. The word *Grimes dic* occurs, as I

said, in Anglo-Saxon charters; but I am not aware whether the term "Devil's dyke" is one of very ancient use; perhaps it may be only a consequence of the supposed meaning of "Grime." Dr. Guest observes that grime, like "castle," and "street," and some other words, may have been in use among the Britons when our ancestors entered the island, and if so, he would be inclined to trace it to the Latin "grumus," a mound.

"The Ride" is a way leading through the wood from the south-west corner to the mount. This may have been an ancient way.

It is probable that an engagement with enemies, perhaps Romans, took place in the immediate neighbourhood of this fortified settlement. There are several tumuli on the heaths within a mile or two round; and to corroborate the age to which the earthworks belong, I found myself in 1853 an arrowhead of white flint thrown out of one of these tumuli at the mouth of a rabbit-hole. A hill on the north-western side, opposite the pits, is called "Whitecross Heath," and a hill or rising ground on the southern side, "the Bloody Knoll." Perhaps the name "Whitecross" has reference to some wayside cross of later date.

It is thought desirable that our Society should possess and publish a plan and sections of this curious place, before the accumulation of earth from the trees with which it is planted, or the improvements of modern times, makes it more difficult to investigate.

In another part of this parish are some remains of the same age, which it may be well to refer to now. On the opposite or western boundary, where the parish joins Wilton, is a "Foss-dyke," or "Devil's-ditch." It runs from the river, about two miles west of Brandon to Cranwich or Didington, where the river Stoke passes through a fen. Somewhat further from Beachamwell to Narborough is another line of ditch, also called "Devil's Dyke," I once thought

these might be a continuous dyke, but I am convinced they are not so. Writers on these subjects have often attempted to connect such lines of defence, as if they must necessarily form a complete unbroken wall and ditch. But in many cases the object of those who erected them was only to protect themselves and their cattle where nature had left them unprotected. Their dykes and banks were made across open country, but stopped where a marsh or a dense wood would answer the same purpose. The Devil's Dyke here, therefore, seems only to have passed from one fen to another, and the northern one to have done the same.

When the railway was being made, a large number of Roman tiles, earthenware, and human remains, was found on the Suffolk side of the river, opposite the termination of this dyke; and quite recently, a jar of Roman "minimi" has been found near the same place.