

Thetford Castle Hill.

COMMUNICATED BY

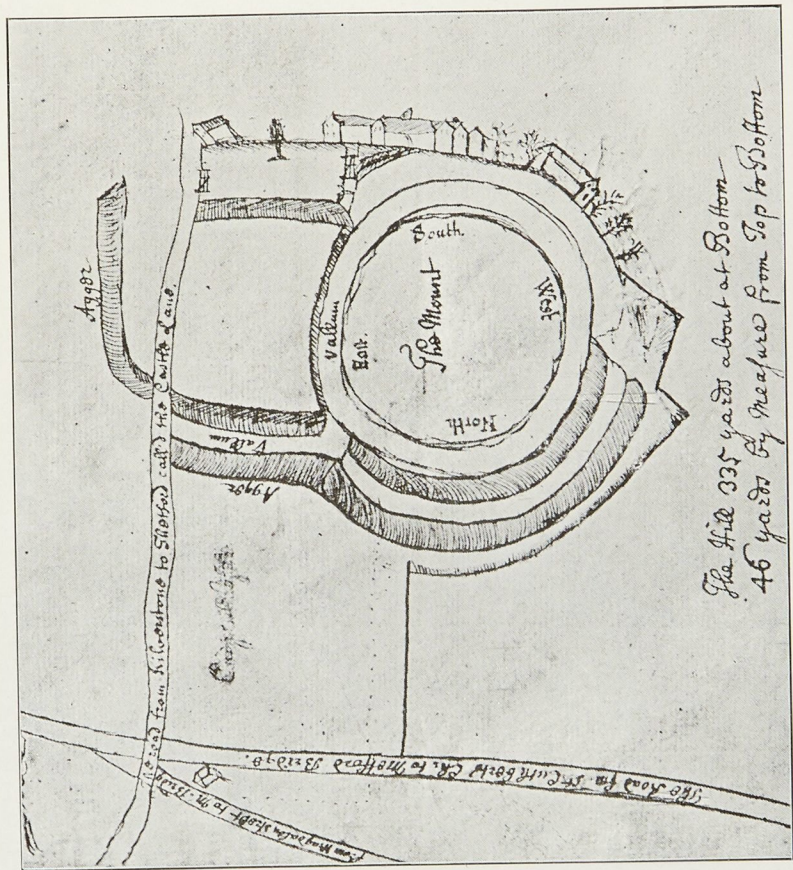
W. G. CLARKE.

IN the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* the Castle Hill at Thetford was described as "the largest Celtic earthwork in England." The Rev. J. Wilkinson, in the preface to his *Architectural Remains of Thetford*, considered it to be "the most extensive encampment of the kind now remaining in this, or perhaps any other, kingdom." Without making any such claims, it is indisputable that these earthworks are among the largest and best preserved in East Anglia. At the present time they consist of a large mound and a double line of ramparts and ditches on the north, but until 1772 there was an eastern rampart parallel with Castle Lane, and the evidence of ancient maps and documents seems to prove that these ramparts and ditches were originally continued round the hill, forming a horseshoe-shaped ballium or bailey. Blomefield says that the entrenchments when complete contained about twenty-four acres; their area is now very much less. The central mound is termed by the townspeople the "High Castle Hill," and the ascent may be made by various paths, two of which are called the "running path" and "the steps." One of the ramparts is called the "wooded hill," and the others are known as the "little hills." Though the



THETFORD CASTLE HILL.
Black lens by Messrs. Boughton & Sons, Thetford.

enclosure in which the earthworks stand is now termed the Castle Meadow, that title was formerly restricted to the low-lying portion (now Friars' Close), east of Castle Lane, and the level portion adjoining the mound was the Castle Yard. It is evident that these earthworks were similar in form to others in Norfolk with mounds and base-courts (sometimes termed "mote castles") at New Buckenham, Castleacre, Castle Rising, Denton, Earsham, Horsford, Horningtoft, Mileham, Narborough, North Elmham, Norwich, and Wormegay. That it exceeds most of them in size is evident from the following measurements, taken in the autumn of 1902 by the Rev. E. A. Downman. The vertical height of the hill itself is 81 feet on the east and 80 feet on the north; measured up the slope, it is about 100 feet. At Castle Rising the greatest vertical height of any part of the earthworks is 43 feet; at Castleacre, Norwich, and New Buckenham, 40 feet; at North Elmham 33, Mileham 30, and Caistor 25 feet; the others in Norfolk being under 20 feet. It will thus be seen that in vertical height from the bottom of the adjoining ditch, this hill is practically twice as high as the next highest earthwork in Norfolk, though this comparison probably does not apply to the respective portions of artificial construction. To the north of the Castle Hill the first rampart has a vertical height of 30 feet, and the second 35 feet, above the level of the inner ditch. The "wooded hill" is 35 feet above the adjoining ditch, and the outer rampart 19 feet above. From east to west the length of the ramparts is now about 840 feet. On the summit of the Castle Hill there is a strange depression from 8 to 10 feet below the surrounding ramparts, and in this five elms were planted in 1823 and still flourish. There are similar depressions in the mounds at Castleacre and Old Sarum. Almost every person who visits this hill



The Hill 335 yards about at Bottom
46 yards by measure from Top to Bottom

THETFORD "CASTLE HILL" ABOUT 1740

(FROM A DRAWING BY TOM MARTIN IN THE POSSESSION OF MR. WALTER RYE.)

after a lapse of years is convinced that the depression at the top has been greatly lowered in the interval, but for this there appears to be no foundation in fact. In one respect the earthworks appear to be unique in Great Britain, and that is in having a double line of ramparts guarding the mound itself. Hereabouts the subsoil is chalk, and of this the earthworks are almost solely constructed. It has been supposed that the ballast from the ditches would not have sufficed to build up the ramparts and mound—the latter alone being nearly 1,000 feet in circumference at the base—and local tradition says that the big Gallows' Pits a few hundred yards away were partly excavated for this purpose.

Tradition throws little light upon the possible origin of the Castle Hill. It is said that after the devil completed the long dykes at Narborough and Newmarket—both are mentioned—he jumped to Thetford, swirled round on one foot and made the earthworks. He is still alleged to haunt a depression—sometimes a muddy pool—in the moat north-east of the wooded hill, and will appear if one walks round seven times at midnight. One tradition states that there was formerly a splendid royal castle on the site of the hill. It was filled with treasures, which at some period were in danger owing to the raid of a neighbouring tribe. The king, therefore, assembled his mighty men, and by their united efforts the castle and treasure were hidden beneath this huge mound of earth. Tradition, unfortunately, does not state why they were left there. Perhaps, however, the most general belief concerning the hill is that beneath it are seven silver bells, brought thither from the church of the Cluniac Priory, a tradition implicitly accepted by many inhabitants of the town.

Antiquaries whose opinions are entitled to respect if not to acquiescence, have variously assigned these earthworks

to the Kelts, Romans, Saxons, Danes, and Normans. There is no historical evidence to guide us, and any conclusion must be based on analogy with similar earthworks and established facts concerning them. No traces of the erection of any masonry on the hill have ever been found, although in an indenture between the Duke of Norfolk and Sir Richard Fulmerston, in 1558, the Castle Yard was said to be enclosed with stone walls. The earliest reference to the Castle Hill seems to be soon after the Norman Conquest, when the manor was granted to the first Earl Warren, who in later documents (*vide* Thetford Corporation Records) is referred to as "Lord of the Town and Castle of Thetford," titles subsequently held by Henry I. and Henry, Duke of Lancaster. The latter, in 1387, built a monastery of the Friars Augustine under the shelter of the southern ramparts, and in 1392 granted the Prior of the Cluniac monks a "toft called castle-yard." When Sir Richard Fulmerston died, in 1567, the rights of the manor included Castle Yard and Castle Meadow, with a tithe of the hay from the latter; and in 1572 a number of witnesses, examined by the Jury of the Leet, asserted that all the meadows except "Hallwick Meadow" and "Castell Meadow" were common, according to custom, from Lammas until Palm Sunday. The Castle Meadow was allotted by the Enclosure Act of 1806, but the Castle Yard (now the Castle Meadow) went with the lordship of the Manor of Thetford-cum-Halwick until 1869, when the present Lord Amherst of Hackney, upon the sale of his estates in the neighbourhood, separated this from the remainder of the Manor, and still retains it in his private possession. The public, however, have always had the right of entry.

Each generation has judged the age of these earthworks from the available evidence, and at various times proofs of its prehistoric, Saxon and Danish origin have seemed

fairly convincing. At the present day the majority of these mounds with base-courts are considered to have been constructed by the Normans, and the facts adduced in support thereof are in many cases overwhelming. While such proof is not available for Thetford, various items tend to the same conclusion. Firstly, it may be noted that though Thetford is frequently mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and always in connection with warfare, no reference is made to any fortification in the town. The earliest mention of the castle is after the Norman Conquest; the nobleman to whom one of the manors was first granted was called "lord of the town and castle"; the district in which it is situated was known as Bailey End, and there was a Bailey Street close by. Similar survivals have been noted at Durham, Norwich, and Castle Hedingham; while that portion of Peddar's Way within the earthworks at Castleacre is still called Bailey Street.

From its position it is improbable that, as a fortification, Thetford Castle Hill was ever intended to overawe the town. From the beginning of the historic period until the thirteenth century much of the town was in Suffolk, and the entrenchments are in Norfolk. It appears primarily to have been erected to control the Ickniel Way and the adjacent fords of the Thet and Little Ouse, the Castle Hill occupying almost exactly the same position with regard to the latter as does the mound at Castleacre with regard to the ford by which Peddar's Way crossed the Nar. Undoubtedly, the Ickniel Way was one of the few important routes into Norfolk, and its entry into the county at Thetford gained for it in Saxon times its distinction as "*The ford*" ("Thæt-ford"). As at Castleacre, the earthworks were constructed on each side of the ancient Way, which, at this point, they absolutely commanded. Were there at any time a building

on the mound, it was probably only of wood, as a newly thrown up hill would not bear the weight of a stone fortress until the earth had consolidated. On the rampart which surrounds the summit it is possible that a strong barricade was erected, protecting an inner fort of wood, the destruction of which would naturally leave no trace. It may be conjectured that the earthworks were thrown up subsequent to 1080 A.D., for no mention of them is made in Domesday book. If they owed their origin to Earl Warren, who was Lord of the Manor of Thetford, their erection must have been before 1090, for in that year he died. Halwick Manor, in Thetford, was held by Roger Bigot, but as it now seems impossible accurately to determine the ancient manorial boundaries, the help which might have been obtained from a knowledge of the manor of which the Castle Hill formed part, is lacking. Halwick Manor was certainly east of the town, and the evidence for Roger Bigot has been thus summed up by the Rev. W. Hudson, in a letter to the writer. He says:—"Until Earl Ralph's rebellion in 1075 Norwich was clearly the principal East Anglian centre, at least from Edward the Confessor's time. The hill there was, I believe, thrown up by William Fitz Osbern, and Earl Ralph seems to have lived there. Yet almost at the time of his rebellion the East Anglian See is removed to Thetford as the principal place. It is thought that the removal of Episcopal Sees to the principal place in their dioceses by order of the Council of London in 1075, was part of the Conqueror's policy to bring together the civil and ecclesiastical governors, both usually Normans. This would imply, in this case, that the civil governor at the time of the removal was at Thetford, and, if so, Roger Bigot most likely held that position. As Norwich was in disgrace and greatly ruined by Earl Ralph's rebellion, Roger may have seized the opportunity to set up a

rival castle at Thetford. On the other hand, it seems strange that it should not be mentioned in Domesday Book in 1086, and that, with the active support of Roger himself, the See should in 1094 have been moved again, to Norwich." The strongest evidence in favour of Earl Warren seems to be the fact that he was called "lord of the town and castle," and in his case the absence of any stonework might be explained by his erecting such a fortress at Castleacre. This also might possibly account for some of the analogies between the two castles.

In conclusion, it may safely be asserted that whatever our opinions as to the origin of these earthworks, it is still as true as when written in 1801 by the author of *Gleanings in England*, that "the hill itself will well repay your passing half-an-hour in a more active and animated survey of it; in the book of nature, in the very leaf which is now left for your inspection, without any elucidations or darkenings of its commentators."
