

# HOLMBURY HILL AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD.

THE SUBSTANCE OF AN ADDRESS GIVEN AT THE  
ANNUAL EXCURSION OF THE  
SURREY ARCHÆOLOGICAL SOCIETY ON JULY 17, 1901.

BY

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THE camp, or fortress, on Holmbury Hill, in the parish of Ockley, is one of the best preserved fortifications of its kind in Surrey. It lies on the southern brow of one of the summits of the Greensand range, overlooking the Weald, at a general height of over 800 feet above the sea. The summit is 857 feet. The hill has never been cultivated, being barren sand covered with heather and fern, and is not overgrown by trees such as hide so much of the form of the fortifications of Anstiebury and Hascombe on the same soil. The natural waste, however, from rain and frost, has lowered the sandy banks and filled the ditches more than is usually the case in works upon the chalk; and some digging for sand and stone on the southern face has also interfered with the original state of the hill.

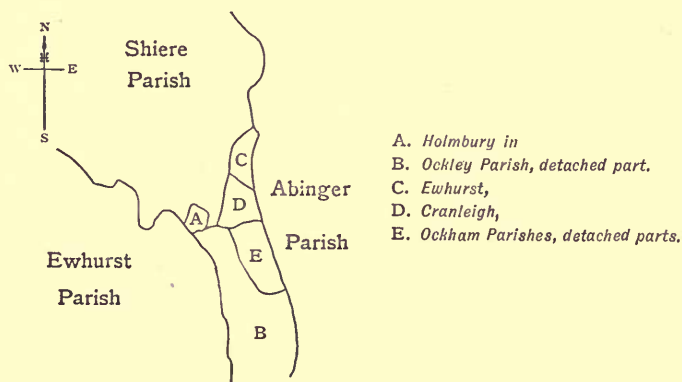
The four sides of the work are nearly opposite the cardinal points. The western, northern and eastern ditches make nearly three sides of a square, though the north-east angle is slightly acute, the north-west angle slightly obtuse, but the southern line follows the natural irregular contour of the hill. There are double banks and ditches on the north and west; double or treble scarped banks on the south, with no outside ditch, but with something like a ditch between them; and an inner bank, with a ditch outside it, and an outer scarped

bank with no outside ditch on the east. The, probably original, entrance is by a causeway across the ditches near the north end of the west side, close to the north-west angle, the banks of which are raised to command the entrance from the flank. The length of the north, west and east sides is each about 220 yards; so that if the parallelogram were completed in a regular manner, instead of the south side being carried out in an angle following the contour of the hill, the area would have been almost exactly ten acres. As it is it is rather more. There is a cross slope on the hill from west to east, and towards the east side there is now a poor water supply, where by care a surface well or pool of rain water might have been made for the occupants. There is a better water supply, outside the works, a little way down the hill.

The character of the work is that of the British camp of refuge, calculated to hold a considerable number of non-combatants and cattle in case of war. It is not like a regular Roman fortification. At the same time, the apparent attempt to make a rectangular work on three of the sides, suggests acquaintance with Roman engineering, as does the work of Hascombe too, and it may be that the fortress was made after the evacuation of Britain by the Roman legions, when the East Saxons, West Saxons or Jutes were threatening Surrey on three sides, and when the South Saxons were on the shores of the English Channel beyond the forest which the hill overlooked. No remains, so far as I know, have been found in it; but a fine polished stone axe-head was found on the hill not very far away in 1901, and was exhibited to the excursion of this Society that year.

Flint arrow-heads have been found in and near the nearly circular British Camp on Anstiebury. I am not aware of their having been found here, though that does not prove that there are none. But possibly Anstiebury is a præ-Roman British fortress, Holmbury a post Roman work. A possibility of continued occupation of Holmbury as a fortress by our English ancestors

points in the same direction, as if the works were more recent, and in better order, when the English conquest was completed, than those of Anstiebury were. The latter was the stronger position naturally, with a steep slope on all sides but one, and very high treble banks on that side; whereas at Holmbury the ground outside to the north and north-west is a very little lower than the ground inside the works, and actually higher than the ground inside on the east side. Yet the slight indication of continued occupation at Holmbury is not found at Anstiebury.



SKETCH PLAN OF THE PARISHES ROUND HOLMBURY.

This indication, such as it is, is given by the curious grouping of parts of several parishes round Holmbury. The work itself is in an outlying portion of the parish of Ockley, which runs up the hill from the south and is bounded by the banks and ditches. Outside, to the north and north-west, is the parish of Shiere. A few yards to the south-west is the parish of Ewhurst. On the east, within a stone's throw, are three small detached portions of the parishes of Ewhurst, Cranleigh, and of Ockham in Woking Hundred, in that order from north to south. Just outside these, to the east, there is the parish of Abinger. An archer standing in Ockley parish, on the bank of the fortification, could put arrows

into five other parishes.<sup>1</sup> The three little detached portions of Ewhurst, Cranleigh, and Ockham, are on habitable ground, with wood and water, down the slope of the hill. It looks very much as if something analogous to "castle-ward" were contemplated, and that detachments from various parishes had each their own little settlement hard by the castle. Parishes were certainly, in Surrey, old settlements before they were ecclesiastical parishes. The grouping can hardly be fortuitous, whether the suggested explanation be correct or not.

The neighbourhood of Holmbury was till recently very wild, and out of the way of such civilization as existed elsewhere in Surrey. The population were "Heathers," a name still used as a surname in Surrey—men of the heaths, who lived by broom making, charcoal burning, turf cutting, smuggling, poaching and stealing, as much as by agriculture. Early in the nineteenth century I have heard of a case of a sheep being stolen from a farm of Serjeant Heath's at Kitlands, in Capel, and of the robbers being traced to these hills. When once they were located here the search was given up, it being known that all the inhabitants would hold together to evade or to violently resist further search. The wild country was turned to account by smugglers, when the contraband trade still paid. Cargoes of silk and brandy were landed on the Sussex coast, and were conveyed on horseback to these hills, not only to Holmbury, but to the whole line of hills from the Holmwood Common, past Leith Hill to Ewhurst, and also to the chalk range, and were concealed here before being taken on to London or elsewhere. Below Holmbury Hill is a cottage, with very large cellars running under the hill, which is reported to have been a storehouse for smuggled goods. It is not an unique example either. In the fields below Leith Hill a naval cutlass was picked up some twenty-five years ago, a possible relic of a

<sup>1</sup> These are the old parishes. Modern Local Government Acts have consolidated parishes and changed the boundaries.



smuggling affray. It was in the possession of J. Lee Jardine, Esq., of Capel. An old track-way which runs up from Forest Green past Tanhurst, over the back of Leith Hill, near Parkhurst, was known as the Smuggler's Way. I had the good fortune to know an old man, a native of Coldharbour, a remarkably shrewd and intelligent man—he is not likely to read these *Collections*, but his family are well to do and highly respectable people, and it is scarcely fair to publish his name—who in a communicative mood gave me some anecdotes of smuggling days. If he survives to the Michaelmas day of the current year, he will have completed his hundredth year.<sup>1</sup> He is now, I am sorry to say, bedridden. A few years ago he told me that he had not been confined to his bed since 1814, when he had small pox, in the hard winter when the Thames was frozen. In his conversation with me he indicated this and that respectable neighbour. Well, he said, his grandfather, and *his* grandfather, and so on, knew something about the smuggling. He of course had done nothing in that way, but he remembered his father holding open the gate at the end of Crocker's Lane, Coldharbour, for a body of men on horseback, each with a keg of brandy behind him, to ride through. A man with whom he had worked told him how he was witness of a scene when a bold gatekeeper refused to open his turnpike gate to a body of armed men on horseback, who, after threatening him in vain, turned aside across the fields. Living memory, as he spoke, seemed to carry me back at a step to the pages of *Guy Mannering*. The same old man was a witness of the desperate "Swing" riots in the autumn of 1830, when the magistrates were beset by a mob in the "Red Lion" at Dorking, but he was reticent on these matters. The subject is not immediately connected with the survey of a British camp of refuge, but the condition of the neighbourhood a century ago was really in some respects more like its condition when Holmbury was fortified than it was to its present state.

<sup>1</sup> This is now an accomplished fact. Oct., 1902.