

# Surrey Collections.

---

## THUNDERFIELD CASTLE.

BY

HENRY ELLIOT MALDEN, M.A.

---

THIS curiously elaborated work, of earthen banks and wet ditches, has never been adequately described, nor, so far as I know, properly explored by excavation. The following account is based solely upon an examination of the visible features, and upon what slight documentary evidence exists about it. It lies about a mile east of Horley, close to the house called Harrowsley in part of Horne parish, in Tandridge Hundred, isolated between Burstow and Horley, parishes in Reigate Hundred.

A small stream, a tributary of the Mole, running from south to north, has been skilfully diverted into a series of concentric wet ditches connected with each other by pipes beneath the banks. The central area, c, is flat with no appearance of a mound. It is oval in shape, about 175 feet from north-west to south-east, and about 125 feet from south-west to north-east. It is now approached by a modern wooden bridge on the south-west. In the old maps there is a causeway across the ditch to the north-east now demolished. This was perhaps not ancient. The probable original entrance would be a wooden bridge on the north-west behind the covering demi-lune, a. This lunette has an entrance by



branch from this ditch on the west, with a bank behind it, forming a third line of defence on that side. To the north-west the outer ditch makes a considerable outward curve inclosing an irregular space, D, of about 225 feet by 175 feet outside the demi-lune. Outside this again there seems to have been a pool, still a swamp in wet weather, by the side of which was the approach from the north. There may have been another ditch outside to the south-east, now dry. The whole work within the outer edges of the present ditches is about 550 feet by 325 feet, north-west and south-east and north-east and south-west respectively. The plan will more adequately describe the rather complex style of fortification.

The northern demi-lune, A A, is some 9 or 10 feet above the present water level of the ditch, in a wet summer; the southern bank, B B, is some 9 feet above it. The centre, C, is not so high as these two covering works. Yet the centre is no doubt the original citadel of the fortress. It probably contained a building, the upper part of which would dominate the outworks. This was probably of wood, like the usual house on a burh, protected against fire by raw hides. If so the protection was perhaps ineffectual. Manning and Bray say that in the neighbouring farm-house half burnt timbers, found in the ditches, used to be preserved. But until excavation has disclosed the existence or non-existence of foundations, it is impossible to deny that a stone keep may have existed here. In a country where building stone was hard to get any masonry above the ground may have been taken away for the building of houses or churches in the neighbourhood; just as at Eaton Socon for instance, where in similar circumstances all the visible stones have disappeared from the earthworks, though a stone castle certainly once stood upon them. From the north a green lane leads up to Thunderfield and bends round the west side of it, turning off towards the modern Brighton road near Horley.

What is at once apparent is that the works have nothing in common with the normal type of British hill fortresses; nothing in common with the rectangular

Roman camps. They are not of the ordinary type of Anglo-Saxon burh, a mound with a base court, nor like the ordinary Norman *mota*, which is only the common Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian burh elaborated and enlarged. Nor is it the remains of a mere moated house; it is too elaborate. It is of course impossible to assert that a place was not inhabited, or occupied, in an early age; but Britons and Romans have left no marks of occupation at Thunderfield. The early heathen Anglo-Saxons have left a record, nearly certainly, in the name. The place seems to preserve the name of the god *Dunor*.<sup>1</sup>

It seems certain that there was a sacred place here in the centuries before the eighth, when Christianity was finally established in England, even in out of the way places. Perhaps the place was not so very far out of the way after all. It certainly was in the forest district, right in the Weald, on the clay, where settlements were scarce in 1086. But Horley, close by, was inhabited and had a church near it in the twelfth century, though it is not named in *Domesday*; and probably a road through the forest, from north to south, ran close by Horley and Thunderfield, as it does to-day. The lines of communication in England are very constant in their general direction. People did not want to go from London to Brighton in early ages, but they wanted to go from the Thames valley and the inhabited parts of Surrey to ports on the Sussex coast, Shoreham, or other ports on the Shoreham river or on the Sussex Ouse or Cuckmere haven. The "gate" of Reigate may be a cross country road, but Gatwick, and further south Anstey Cross, *i. e.* the Highway Cross, indicate a road through the Weald; the latter indicates two roads crossing, pointing rather north-east and north-west respectively. Thunderfield was not far off the line of the former. It was royal land in Alfred's time apparently, for it may be fairly

<sup>1</sup> Harrowsley, close by, has been supposed to indicate by its name a sacred enclosure. But the earliest form of the name is Herewoldse. It has nothing to do with *herge*, nor with Harold, nor with Hereward, with whom fancy has connected it.

identified with the Thunderfield which he bequeathed to his nephew Aedelme, the land *aet Ðunresfelda*.<sup>1</sup> In the Latin version<sup>2</sup> it was "Aedelmo fratris mei filio villam de Ðunresfelde." The name occurs in a grant by Eadred in 947,<sup>3</sup> where the pool at Thunderfield is the boundary of land granted to his servant Oswig. It seems to have reverted to the Crown, for Athelstan held a Witan here, at an uncertain date.<sup>4</sup> He held another meeting at a similar place, Ockley; an obscure place, but like Thunderfield near a road through the forest. But Athelstan granted the place to Chertsey Abbey, on December 15th, 933.<sup>5</sup> He then granted, or confirmed, to Chertsey, "Suttone cum Ðunthresfelda Silvatica." Eadgar in 967<sup>6</sup> confirmed the grant of land "in Suttone cum cubilibus porcorum quæ illuc pertinent, scilicet in Ðunresfelda, x x x mansas." No house, or fortress, is mentioned, but a lair of pigs in the forest. Sutton is, of course, the well-known place near Ewell and Epsom which belonged to Chertsey till the dissolution. The connexion of some place in the Weald with a geographically separate manor on the higher ground is common enough in Surrey records. Land in Leigh, for instance, was attached to the manor of Banstead, and, a longer separation still, land in Burstow belonged to Wimbledon. The thirty *mansæ* of Eadgar's charter must have included more than Thunderfield and Harrowsley, and have extended over Horley too probably. Chertsey kept Horley, but, as we shall see, their right to Thunderfield was successfully contested.

In *Domesday*, after the account of the holding of Chertsey in Sutton, comes a fresh heading, "In Tandridge Hundred," and beneath it a nameless place described as follows:—"The Abbey itself holds two

<sup>1</sup> Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus* 314, Vol. 2, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> Kemble, *C. D.* 1067, Vol. 5, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Kemble, *C. D.* 413, Vol. 2, p. 271.

<sup>4</sup> Thorpe, I, 217.

<sup>5</sup> Kemble, *C. D.* 363, Vol. 2, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> Kemble, *C. D.* 532, Vol. 3, p. 6.

“ hides of land, and William holds of the Abbey. But the men testify that it was the demesne land of Alwin in the time of King Edward, and that he could put it under the protection of whom he would (*et quo voluit ire potuit*). Then it was assessed at two hides, now at nothing. There is one bordar and one serf. In the time of King Edward it was worth twenty shillings, afterwards five shillings, now ten shillings.” In the margin is, “In the same hundred the Abbey itself holds “three virgates.” In the annotated translation of *Domesday*, in the *Victoria History of Surrey*, I identified this nameless land with Horley, a Chertsey manor not named otherwise, where there was a church belonging to Chertsey. But Thunderfield and Harrowsley are now in Tandridge Hundred, forming a detached portion of Horne parish, and I believe now that this entry refers to them only, and that the rest of the thirty hides (*mansæ*) of Eadgar’s charter, which became known as Horley, were intentionally or accidentally omitted in *Domesday*. There is clearly a doubt about the ownership of the land. Herewoldsley, the name included Thunderfield, and as the inhabited place after Thunderfield was ruined superseded it, was held subsequently by the De Clares, Earls of Gloucester and Hertford. In *Testa de Nevill* it is held of that family for a quarter of a knight’s fee. Gilbert de Clare, killed at Bannockburn, died seised of it. Hugh Audley, one of the heirs of the Clare inheritance, was seised of it under Edward III. It seems possible to follow the process by which it went from Chertsey to the De Clares. The men of *Domesday* swore that it used to be Alwin’s land. There may have been several Alwins, but an Alwin was a considerable landholder in Surrey in Edward the Confessor’s time, and Richard de Tonbridge, ancestor of the Clares, held a good deal of an Alwin’s land, at Blechingley, Walton-on-the-Hill and Talworth, for instance. If this place was held by the same Alwin who had held Blechingley in the same hundred, and whom Richard had superseded there, it is extremely probable that Richard thought

that he should also succeed him here. He had a grant of his land, and was in his own eyes Alwin's residuary legatee everywhere. Clearly he or his heirs did oust Chertsey from the land somehow; I suggest as grantees of Alwin's land.

But when once land, including the site of Thunderfield Castle, is connected with the De Clares, we seem to see some light thrown on the origin of the castle. The family was powerful and turbulent. They were constantly engaged in civil wars, constantly upon the opposite side to the De Warennes, who had their castle of Reigate close by, and their castle of Lewes at the other end of the roads through the forest to the coast. One function of the two families was each to be a nuisance to the other. At Ockley, which belonged to the De Clares, and was also upon a forest road, there was a small castle, defended by wet ditches, though not so elaborately as Thunderfield, from which all trace of stone-work is also absent now. *Magnis componere parva*, the wet ditches and the pool at Thunderfield are on a much smaller scale, not unlike the great waterworks of the magnificent castle of the De Clares at Caerphilly in South Wales. The elaborate defences of Thunderfield are something more than what we should expect from our early English ancestors; something different from what can be certainly ascribed to them. They suggest the greater skill and contrivance of Norman engineers availing themselves of the only natural means of defence of the place, wet ditches and an inundation backed by earth banks and wooden stockades. Even if there ever was a stone wall in the central island, it is extremely unlikely that any of the outworks were guarded by anything but wood, earth and water.

But when we find a small, strong, ingeniously fortified place, which is so unlike normal British, Roman, or Anglo-Saxon work that we are almost forced to ascribe it to the more resourceful and adaptive Normans, who certainly knew how to use water and earth elsewhere in their fortresses; when we see no licence for its erection, no notice of its demolition, and no story connected with

its existence, then we naturally refer to the period when no licence was asked for building castles, when their number was so great that the want of mention of any one is natural, when the subsequent demolition was so wholesale that a particular demolition escaped notice, and when the number of demolitions, whether 375 only or 1,115, shows that the dismantled places cannot all have been stone keeps. Stephen's reign is the probable period of the fortification of Thunderfield; Gilbert de Clare, who fought alternately for Stephen and the Empress and who died in 1152, is the probable fortifier of it; the beginning of Henry the Second's reign, when the adulterine castles were dismantled, the probable period of the burning of the stockades and the cutting of the dam which kept up the inundation at the north end. The banks and ditches remained; useful as a place of refuge in times of trouble, no doubt, but the tenant henceforth lived at Harrowsley, and this became the name of the fief, the importance of the castle becoming almost as forgotten a story as the former honour of the God Thunor had become.