

A CROSS-VALLEY DYKE ON THE SURREY-KENT BORDER

BY

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FOLLOWING the main A25 road south of the North Downs, one crosses the border between Surrey and Kent just after the Grasshopper roadhouse, half a mile west of Westerham. Here the county signboards proudly face each other and the legend "Invicta" on the Kentish sign is particularly apt because not only has Kent resisted more successfully than Surrey the spread of monuments of modern taste like the Grasshopper, but the sign stands upon the very bank of a substantial cross-valley dyke clearly designed to block or control eastbound traffic on this route. A stream, one of the headwaters of the Darent, rises only a little to the west, and the road here enters its incipient valley to follow it for several miles. At the border, hill-slopes shoulder close to the stream and road on either side, providing an obvious bottleneck with a commanding crest line for the earthwork on both sides of the road.

The dyke is 1,050 feet long and at its best, on the southern slope, still has an overall width of 80 feet and a vertical height from rampart crest to ditch bottom of 14 feet (see Fig. 1), dimensions similar to those of the great Wiltshire Wansdyke. North of the road the bank is very prominent, petering out as the top of the hill is reached, but the ditch is very shallow, probably because of ploughing. South of the road there is first a 15 yard gap, perhaps where the road originally passed through; then a rather poorly preserved stretch for the few yards to the stream. Beyond the stream there is a pond in the ditch and then the earthwork climbs, magnificent but rather obscured by undergrowth, to the level ground at the north-east corner of the grounds of Moor House, where it abruptly ceases. The boundary fence is always upon the top of the bank.

What of the date of this barrier? The county boundary makes no detour to follow it, rather does the earthwork fall in with the boundary, so one can assume that its construction took place after the establishment of the boundary. Although Surrey changed hands often, first possibly from the Middle Saxons to Kent, then to Wessex, and later was twice wrested from Wessex by Mercia for short periods, Kent maintained its independence from the primary post-Roman settlement dated precisely by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle to A.D. 449, until the unification of southern England under Egbert of Wessex in A.D. 823, and the dyke could have been built at any

time during this period except for the occupation by Kent, of unknown duration, that culminated in the Wessex victory over Ethelbert at Wibbandun in 568. Indeed, the dyke could well have been built by Ethelbert after he had been driven back behind his own frontier: this is the one event recorded in the Chronicle that

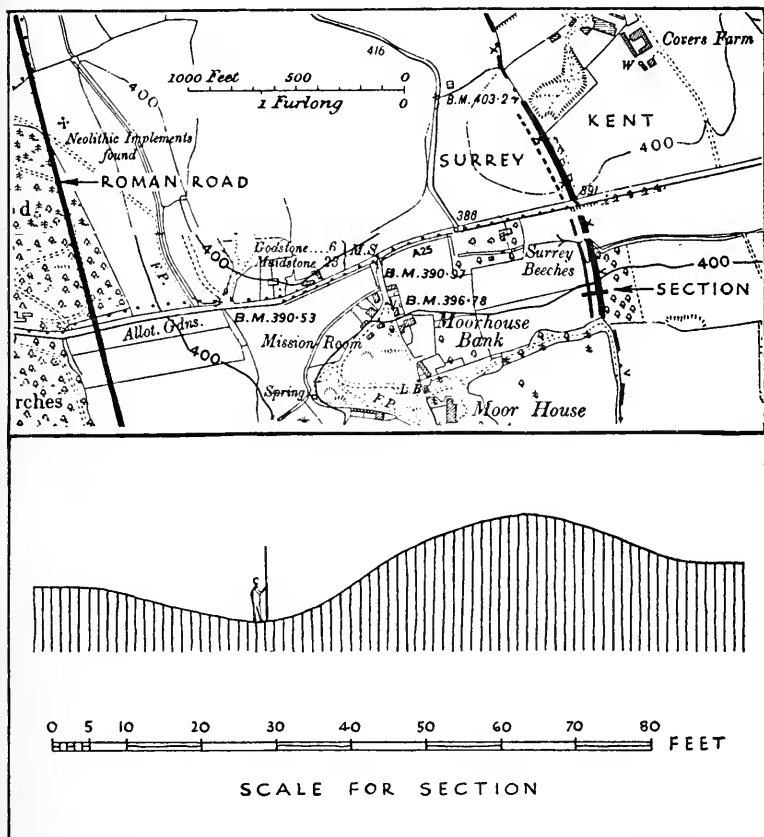


FIG. 1.—A CROSS-VALLEY DYKE ON THE SURREY-KENT BORDER

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could possibly have any relevance to this border, and it is intriguing that it produced a situation that would have demanded just such a defensive work.

Such an earthwork of Dark Age character, falling in so naturally with the Surrey-Kent boundary, confirms the great age of the boundary which is also implied by its coincidence for $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles to the north with an almost totally lost stretch of the Roman road from London to Lewes. Indeed, the boundary is just under half a mile from, and almost precisely parallel with, the road over a two-mile

sector containing the earthwork under discussion (see map, Fig. 1) and it may have been determined in relation to the road. Thus there seems little doubt that the present county boundary is, to some extent at least, identical with that between the Cantware and the Saxons of Suthrige.

This discovery also implies a very respectable antiquity for the road straddled by the earthwork: and, if no other routes across the county border are found to be similarly blocked, we may assume that this was the important route between Surrey and Kent in the Dark Ages; at least more important than the North Downs ridgeway, for no earthwork dignifies the boundary line there. Where convenient, the route is a ridgeway, for instance between Reigate and Bletchingley, following the Greensand ridge south of the chalk Downs; but the sand is much more irregular than the chalk, and the road has to pick its way as best it can: east of Limpsfield the ridge becomes very high and remote from water, so the users of the road chose to follow instead the dry gravel margin of the upper Darent. The route seems to me to be the logical extension of the Greensand ridgeway traced by Mr. Margary¹ south of the Hog's Back. Coming eastward, Mr. Margary takes this track only as far as Weston Wood, Albury, where he links it to the main Downs ridgeway and does not admit of its existence further to the east except as a local track. But from Shere to Abinger Hammer it (the modern road again) reproduces the behaviour of our road into Kent by following the bank of the upper Tillingbourne, then becomes a ridgeway again for three miles before Dorking. In this extraordinarily difficult business of tracing unaligned ancient roads, we should perhaps concede more adaptability to the men who blazed the trails, and be more ready to entertain the possibility that a ridgeway was not necessarily abandoned if they found no ridge to follow here and there. English vales have never been filled with steaming African jungle. The road across which the earthwork lies could, of course, simply be a Saxon development, a track to link the settlements of Holmesdale under the Downs, but it is at least in part a ridgeway and I suggest that it should be regarded as a continuation of the Greensand ridgeway, going back at least to the Roman period, when occupation of the vale seems to have been considerable, and probably to prehistoric times.

It seems opportune to mention here that Roman pottery, a samian dish and a perfectly preserved coarse buff-ware flagon of the first-century type with stepped ridges under the rim, has just been found at the Moorhouse sandpit, shown on the map (Fig. 1) just west of the milestone, and has been deposited in Guildford Museum.

I am most grateful to Mr. C. W. Munday for his help in surveying the surface section of the cross-valley dyke.

¹ *Sy.A.C.* LII, p. 30; *Arch. J.* CIX, p. 44.