

A ROMANO-BRITISH SITE AT GREAT MISSENDEN

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THIS site was first observed some thirty-five years ago by the late Mr. G. E. H. Rawlins while laying-out the grounds of his newly erected house on the east side of the upper part of King's Lane in Great Missenden parish (Fig. 1). The land had previously been used for agriculture, and Mr. Rawlins gave no name to his property, which was (and still is) the only building in the lane. Mr. Rawlins made no systematic excavations, but, in 1961, was kind enough to draw my attention to the various finds that he, and his family, had collected over a long period in the course of their shrub-planting and other gardening activities.¹ He was also kind enough to permit me to submit the finds to the late Dr. Philip Corder, whose comments are printed below. It will be seen that Dr. Corder infers continual habitation of the site from the first century A.D. to the fourth century.

King's Lane forms the north-western boundary of Great Missenden parish, separating it from Great Hampden parish until it reaches our site, where the Great Missenden boundary abruptly leaves the lane and, turning in a north-easterly direction, serves to divide the parish from that of Wendover. (Fig. 1.)

Among Mr. Rawlins's finds were portions of iron slag which, in 1931, he himself submitted to Mr. W. R. Schoeller, of Great Missenden, for analysis. Mr. Schoeller's report will also be seen below. The exact amount of slag recovered, or the extent of the deposit, is now unfortunately not known, but Mr. Rawlins formed the opinion that the site was primarily that of a Roman iron bloomery. He felt supported in this view by its siting: above the valley, on the brow of the hill at some 650 ft. O.D., exposed to, and facing, the prevailing south-westerly wind. Certainly, the other known Romano-British occupation sites in the Chilterns are, almost without exception, situated on valley floors, close to running water. And if, as is generally thought, the clay-capped Chiltern hill-tops (such as that of our site) were heavily forested in early times, fuel for furnaces would be readily and abundantly available. In this connexion, it is of interest to recall the evidence for early iron-working on a hill at Dundridge,² also at an approximate height of 650 ft. O.D., some three miles distant from our site.

With regard to Mr. Rawlins's other finds, these seem mainly to have been found scattered throughout the subsoil of the area between his house and the

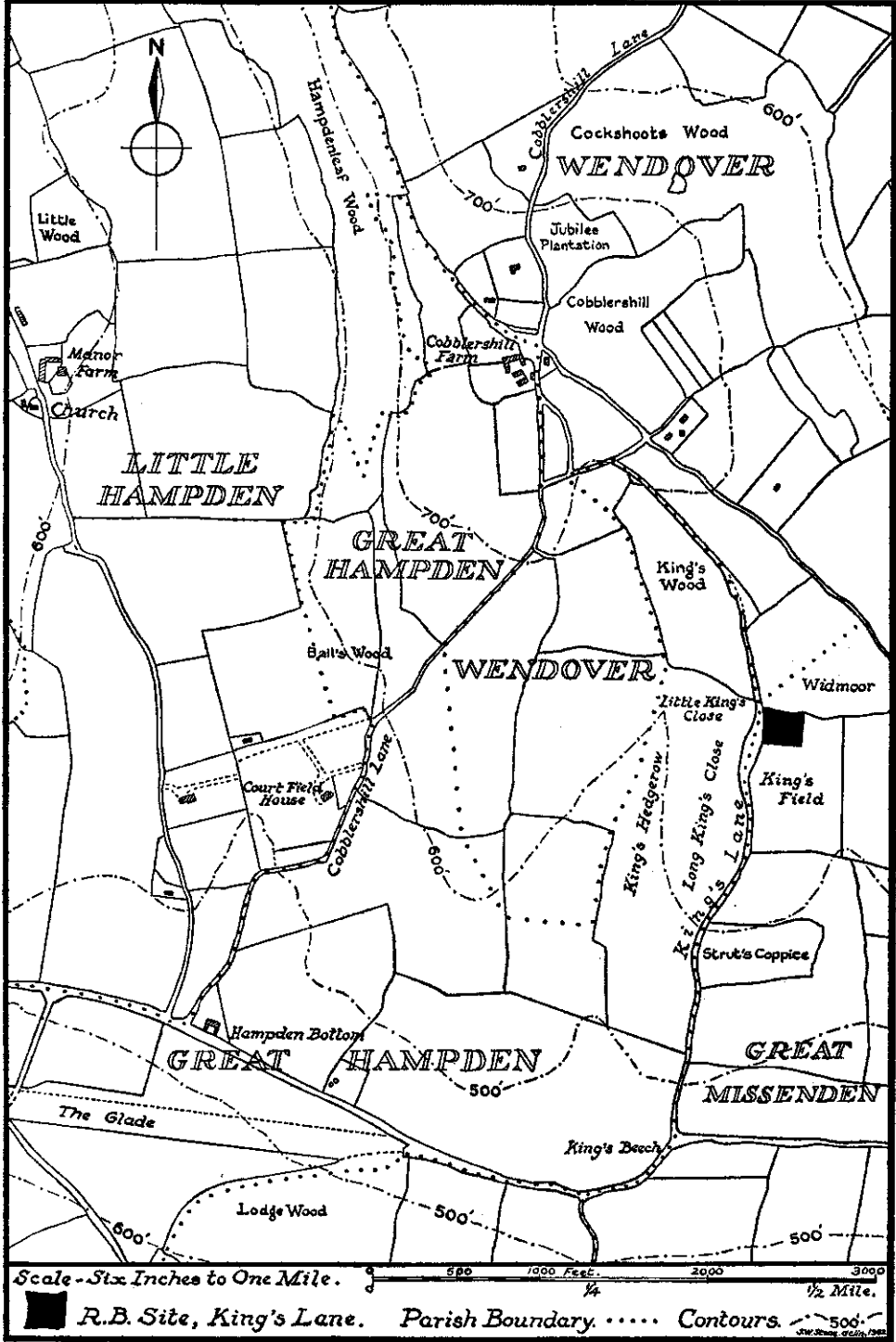


FIG. 1

hedge and fence which form his southern boundary. Several shards and portions of iron slag were recovered from excavations made to receive the gateposts at the King's Lane entrance to his drive.

The stamped Samian base and the fragment of bronze earring came from flower-beds midway between the house and the southern boundary hedge. Mr. Rawlins informed me that a complete pot was recovered from beneath this hedgerow, but unfortunately it has now disappeared.³

In July, 1961, the writer made, from a point 30 yards east of the south-west corner of Mr. Rawlins's boundary fences and due northwards from the southern hedge, a 10 ft. × 3 ft. trial cutting. No finds of any description were recovered, and no indication of any previous disturbance could be observed. In section, the cutting revealed 4 in. of fine darkish topsoil imposed upon 6 in. of brown clayey subsoil incorporating small angular flints and waterworn pebbles, which, in turn, rested upon a 9 in. layer of clay with large scattered flints. Beneath this was clean, compact clay of a deep yellow and reddish hue, devoid of flints or other rock.

An interesting feature, perhaps of significance, is the presence of two large hollows situated on either grass verge of King's Lane, adjoining Mr. Rawlins's property. Both have their outer limits immediately bounded by the hedgerows of King's Lane. Their broken and ill-defined edges slope down to silted-up floors, and conspire with the dense and rank surrounding vegetation to defeat any attempt, without excavation, at precise measurement. In plan, they appear to be irregularly elliptical with main north and south axes. The western hollow is approximately 60 ft. long and 40 ft. wide, and its silted-up central floor—covered with stagnant water—lies probably some 5 ft. below the surrounding turf level.

The hollow on the east side of King's Lane, 36 ft. south of the south-west corner of Mr. Rawlins's boundary fences (and a short distance from his gateposts where slag was found), is approximately 47 ft. long and 40 ft. wide—its maximum depth appears to be 3 ft. It is encroached upon by the existing hedgerow, and it may at one time have extended a little into the adjoining field.

King's Lane, as it breasts the steep hillside, averages 19 ft. in width, but as it approaches our hollows the confining hedgerows widen their course just sufficiently enough to enclose these depressions, thereby increasing the width of the lane to its maximum of 106 ft. Then, having skirted the hollows, the hedgerows draw together again, so that the lane, after a tapering stretch of 55 yards, resumes its former average width of 19 ft.

It seems clear, therefore, that, in this section of its route, the diversion and disproportionate widening of the lane have been dictated by the presence of these hollows, which raises the question of whether they might not be contemporary, and connected, with our site. The widening of the lane at this point appears in the tithe maps of Great Missenden and Great Hampden (1839), and is presumably a feature of at least some antiquity.⁴ Should roadside excavation or pipe-laying become necessary in the future in this section of King's Lane, it is to be hoped that the Authorities concerned will give the Bucks. Archaeological Society adequate prior notice of their intentions, in order that a watching brief may be arranged.

REPORT ON THE FINDS

by

Dr. Philip Corder, 24th March, 1961

The collection represents exactly what one might expect to find on a long-occupied habitation site. Evidence that there was a house near with a centrally heated room is represented by a fragment of box tile, as well as the piece of roofing tile. The iron slag is interesting and has already been dealt with in the report that is enclosed. The pottery fragments cover a long period. The earliest is a sherd from a rilled cooking pot of Belgic type that must belong to the first century. A carinated bowl is of late first or early second century date. Second-century occupation is represented by the stamp of the samian potter, Banvillus, on the worn base of a form 33, and there are two sherds at least which I should place in the fourth century. Further detailed study is really not justified because it represents the debris of a neighbouring house that was occupied apparently for centuries. The bit of a bronze earring is quite an interesting small object and confirms the view that it was a habitation site.

REPORT ON THE SLAG

by

W. R. Schoeller, 26th December, 1931

Herewith the result of my analysis of the material which you believe to be Roman slag. The lumps as received were coarsely broken and the clean slag particles separated from earthy material. One-half of the picked specimen was finely powdered for analysis; the other half I return herewith for purposes of identification.

The analysis was carried out by Mr. W. L. Matthews under my supervision. The major constituents were determined, with the following results:

Silica	(SiO ₂)	18.30	per cent
Ferrous oxide	(FeO)	70.08	„ „
Manganous oxide	(MnO)	5.25	„ „
Alumina	(Al ₂ O ₃)	4.46	„ „
Lime	(CaO)	1.50	„ „
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		99.59	„ „

The analysis leaves no doubt as to the nature of the material. It is a very basic silicate of iron such as is obtained in the extraction of iron from its ores by the primitive smelting process still in use here and there (the Catalan forge). The ore is smelted with charcoal; I understand that you have found particles of charcoal together with the slag.

¹ Mr. Rawlins, shortly before his death, presented these finds to the Bucks. County Museum at Aylesbury.

² J. F. Head, *Early Man in South Buckinghamshire*, pp. 65-6, Fig. 22. The field below is known locally as "Cindery Bottom".

³ It may have been given by Mr. Rawlins to the late Mr. F. Colmer, of High Wycombe, who visited the site in the 1930s at Mr. Rawlins's request.

⁴ King's Lane is, *prima facie*, the "Romerelane" of the thirteenth-century Little Hampden charter: "*ad viam regalem que vocatur Romerelane*", *vide* Bucks. Record Soc. (Vol. 3), *Early Bucks. Charters*, p. 23. The first element of the name may be the OE *rum*, "roomy, spacious", as cited by Ekwall in Romiley (Cheshire), "the spacious leah".