

Notes and News

THE BURGHAL HIDAGE FORT OF EORPEBURNAN: A SUGGESTED IDENTIFICATION (FIGS. 34-5)

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that in the year 892 the Great Host of the Danes 'came up into the estuary of the Limen with two hundred and fifty ships'. They rowed their ships upstream as far as the edge of the forest, 'and there they stormed a fortress in the fen; inside were a few peasants, and it was only half-made'.¹ Perhaps a generation later, the document (or set of documents) known as the Burghal Hidage began its survey of the defensive network of Wessex with a fort at Eorpeburnan.² The purpose of this note is to reiterate a suggestion by N. P. Brooks³ that these two sites may have been the same, and to put forward the claim of an earthwork at Newenden in Kent to be that site.

The few topographical details of the fort of 892 all derive from the *Chronicle*. The estuary of the Limen was 'in East Kent at the east end of that great wood which we call Andraed . . . The river, of which we spoke before, comes out of the Weald. They rowed their ships up the river as far as the Weald, four miles from the mouth of the estuary.' From this it is clear that the fort lay in Kent and was sited at the junction of the forest and the fen, close to the banks of the Limen (the Lympne or Rother) some four miles from open water. The actual site of the fort has long been in doubt, however, since both river and shore-line have changed considerably since the 9th century. An older generation of antiquaries favoured Appledore, since it was here (according to the *Chronicle*) that the same army that had stormed the half-finished Saxon defences subsequently built a fort of their own. The terminology of the *Chronicle* is sufficiently elastic to allow of such an interpretation. No remains, however, of any such works survive at Appledore, and by the middle of the 17th century R. Kilburne was able to note a tradition that there had once stood at Newenden, on the western edge of Romney Marsh, a work 'destroyed by the Danes in the year 892 . . . Only the memory of the same is preserved, by a place there, still called Castle Toll.'⁴

The Castle Toll at Newenden was relegated to Class X—Unclassified Earthworks—in the *Victoria History of the County of Kent*, though the writer (I. Chalkley Gould) commented that the site could not be viewed 'without feeling it probable that the work is due either to Danish marauders, who came here by water and made this the base for raids on the rich lowlands, or to the Saxons who reared it as a preventive station to check such inroads'. The Castle Toll itself, however, lies within a larger enclosure unnoticed by Gould and his local correspondent, the Rev. E. A. Dowman, and it is this larger work which should perhaps be attributed to the events of A.D. 892.

In 1964 Brooks discussed the hitherto unidentified Burghal Hidage fort of Eorpeburnan in some detail,³ suggesting that it might represent a replacement (or possibly even a refortification) of the fort on the edge of the marsh mentioned in the *Chronicle* in 892. At the same time he reviewed the topographical implications of the *Chronicle* entry, and made a number of valuable comments on the evidence of local charters: he did not, however, feel able to suggest any specific location for the fort.

The earthworks at Newenden (TQ 852284) occupy the hooked end of a mile-long peninsula jutting ENE. into Romney Marsh (FIG. 34). The main channel of the Limen

¹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Revised Translation* (ed. D. Whitelock, with D. C. Douglas and S. I. Tucker, 1961), 54, following the A, E and F versions.

² D. Hill, 'The Burghal Hidage: the establishment of a text', *Med. Archaeol.*, XIII (1969), 84-92.

³ Nicholas Brooks, 'The unidentified forts of the Burghal Hidage', *Med. Archaeol.*, VIII (1964), 81-6.

⁴ R. Kilburne, *Topographie, or Survey of the County of Kent* (1659).

or Rother flows past some 900 m. to the S., while a tributary (in its present form known as the Hexden Channel) flows roughly parallel 100 m. to the N. of the site. The entire end of the peninsula seems to have been enclosed, the defences surviving for the most part merely as a low scarp. Only to the W., along the neck of the peninsula, is the approach easy, and here the defences are more marked. Even so, the total relief is not more than 1 m. and ploughing has completely obliterated part of the work. Set within this large enclosure (FIG. 35) is a smaller, but much stronger, work, the rampart of which stands to a height of 2 to 3 m. This, the Castle Toll proper, is subrectangular in plan, with a low motte-like mound at the NE. corner.

The earthworks of the Castle Toll were ploughed for the first time in 1965. A trial excavation carried out by the present writer for the (then) Ministry of Public Building and Works in the same year showed that there had been two periods of construction, attributable to the early and middle 13th century, and the site was provisionally interpreted as a military post intended to block French raids up the Rother, much as Bodiam Castle (a few miles upstream) was intended to do in the 14th century.

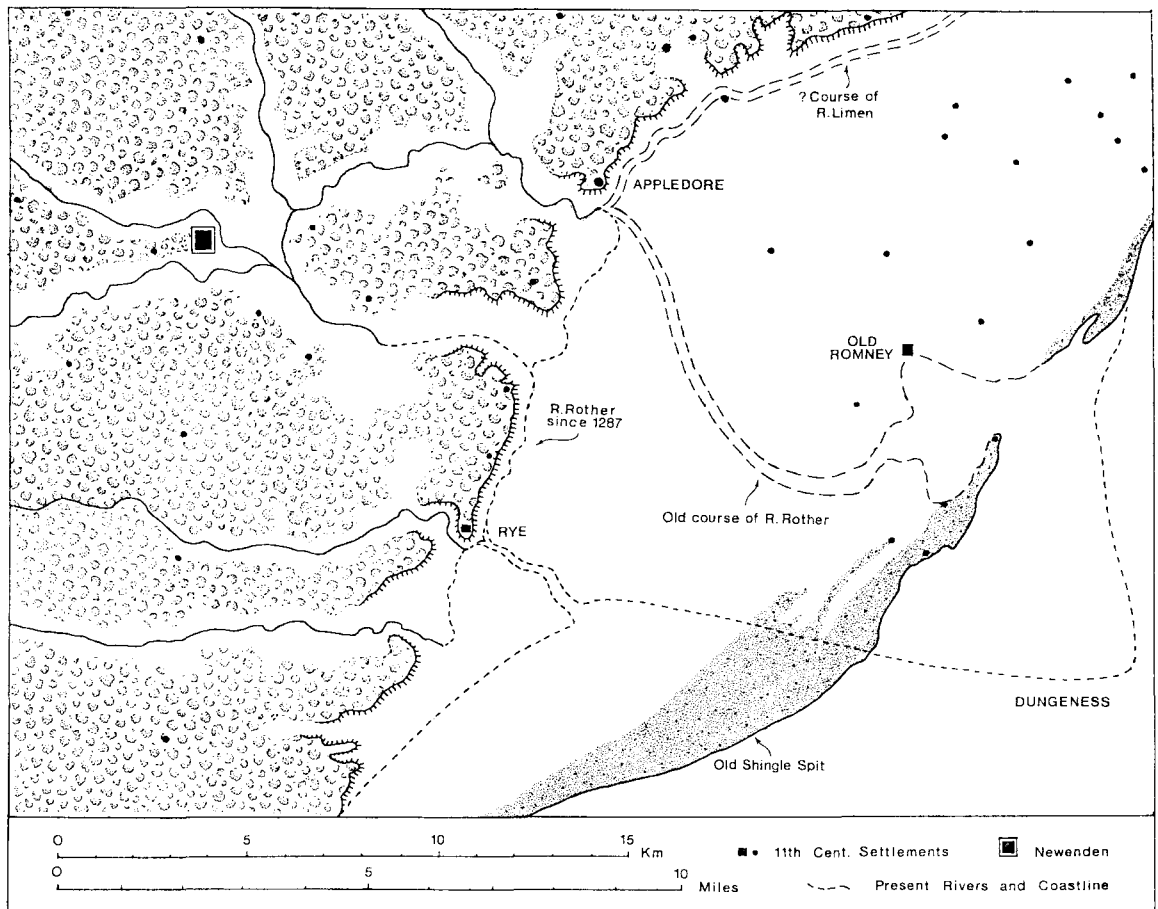


FIG. 34

SKETCH-MAP SHOWING POSITION OF NEWENDEN, KENT,
and changes in the coast-line in the neighbourhood of Romney Marsh since Saxon times (pp. 123 f., 126)

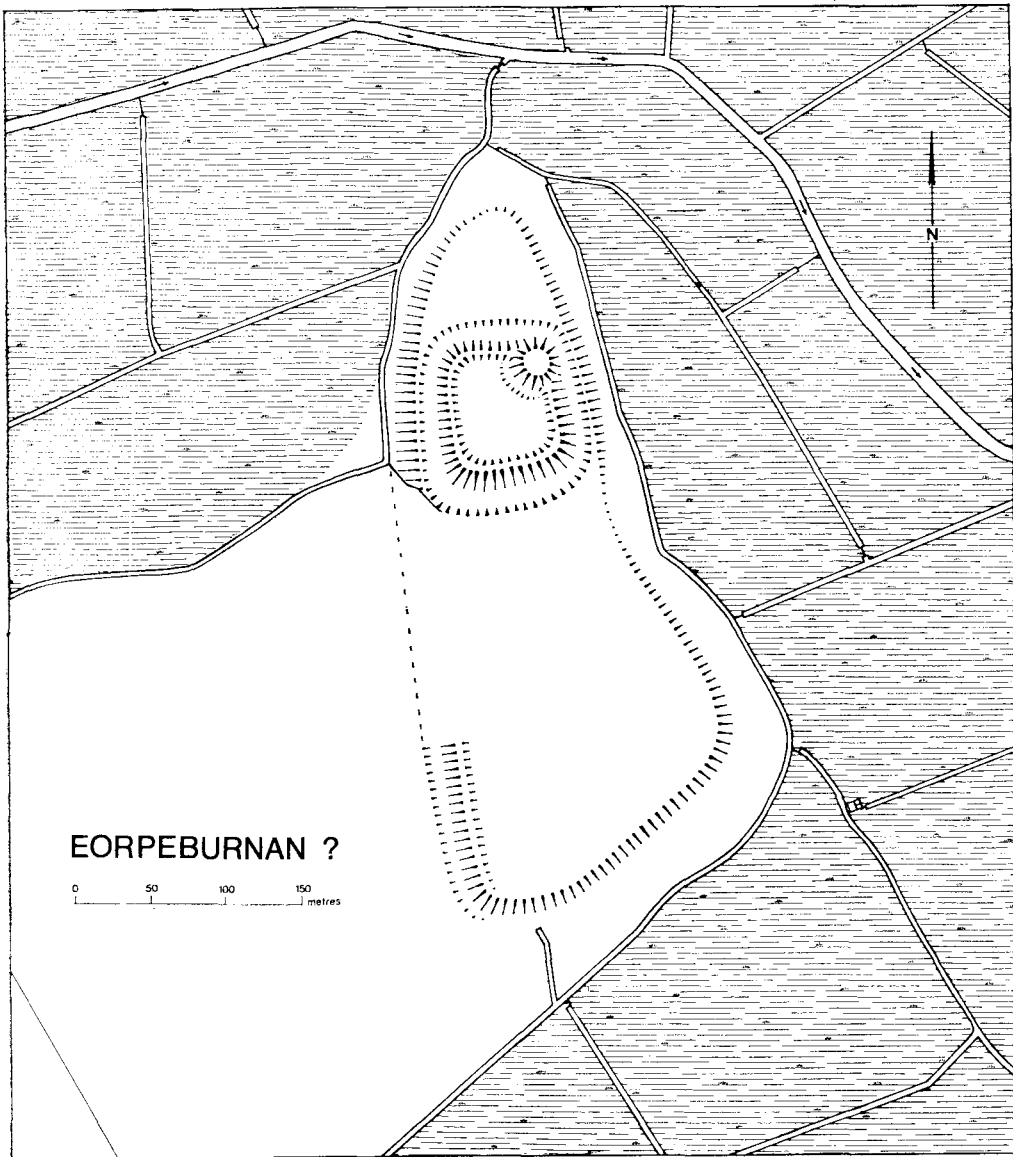


FIG. 35

PLAN OF THE EARTHWORKS AT NEWENDEN, KENT,
the possible site of the Burghal Hidage fort of Eorpeburnan (p. 124)

At the same time the suggestion was put forward that the larger enclosure might represent an earlier attempt at river defence.⁵ The siting seemed to indicate a strategic as well as a tactical choice and (setting aside local preferences for a Roman date) it

⁵ B. K. Davison, *Archaeol. Cantiana*, LXXX (1965), p. liii. This suggestion has since been repeated, though without further discussion, by D. Hill, *op. cit.* in note 2, 84, note 3.

seemed on the whole unlikely that the area could have supported an iron-age population large enough to warrant the building of a hill-fort in such a position. An identification with the 'missing' fort of 892 seemed inherently more likely.

In 1971 the opportunity was taken to examine the defences of the larger enclosure at the SW. side. The low relief at this point was assumed to be the result of several centuries of ploughing. In fact it became clear that the defences had not been completed in the form intended, the 15-m.-wide ditch never having been dug deeper than 0.3 m. Instead a smaller ditch, 9 m. wide, had been dug to a depth of 2 m. on the line of the larger work, and the spoil piled on top of that from the uncompleted first phase. No traces of timbering survived, nor was any material found to suggest a date for either phase. That the two were not long separated in time, however, was indicated by the absence of any visible weathering of the primary 'rampart'. It would be rash to assume that these results lend any real weight to the suggested identification of the site with the unfinished Saxon fort of 892. Nevertheless, the matter is worth considering further.

The position of Newenden is shown in FIG. 34. The topography of the area at the end of the 9th century is hard to establish. A well-defined line of inland cliffs marks the prehistoric shore-line, enclosing a wide bay. Subsequently, a shingle spit formed across the mouth of this bay; behind this spit sediment built up, and by the end of the 11th century there were a number of settlements in the marsh which now lay between the spit and the old shore-line.⁶ The main channel of the Limen seems originally to have flowed through the cliffs at Appledore (described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in 893 as being 'on the estuary of the Limen'), thereafter turning NE. to break through the shingle near Hythe. A second channel, the Rother, may have reached the sea near Old Romney, and was almost certainly the main one by the 11th century, though a water course on the old line was still known as the Limen as late as 946.⁷ Major changes in the coast-line, culminating in the formation of Dungeness, eventually blocked the old Rother channel at Romney, and from 1287 the Rother flowed SW. from Appledore, past Rye. What is not clear is the extent to which these channels through the coastal marshes were considered as estuaries in the 9th century. Where, in other words, was 'the mouth of the estuary' of the Limen?

A number of charters survive which indicate that estates were being granted in the N. part of the marsh in the 9th century. In the S. part, on the other hand, very few early settlements are known, and even the 11th-century settlements cling to the shingle. That some part of this area was dry ground at the date in question is indicated by a late 8th or early 9th-century reference to an estate near Agney, on the S. side of the Old Rother channel.⁸ Much of the area, however, must still have been mud-flats at this time, and subject to periodic flooding. It is thus possible that in the 9th century the S. part of the marsh was still seen as being in some sense a large bay bounded by the cliffs of the old shore-line, and that the low-lying saltings were not yet fully accepted as 'land' in the normal sense of the word. The 'mouth of the estuary' mentioned in the *Chronicle* would in that case be the break in the cliffs at Appledore. Six miles upstream from Appledore towards the forest lie the earthworks of Newenden.

The large uncompleted earthwork at Newenden, then, may well have been the 'half-finished fort' stormed by the Danes in 892. But could it also have been Eorpeburnan? Unfortunately, we have no contemporary topographical references to enable us to identify the Burghal Hidage fort. It must have lain some distance east of Hastings, close to the Sussex-Kent border, and the use of a pre-existing earthwork is not unlikely. The figure of 324 hides given in the Burghal Hidage as 'belonging' to Eorpeburnan indicates a defensive line of just under 410 m. This figure is so small as to suggest that Eorpeburnan may have had natural defences on three sides, the 410 m. being the

⁶ J. A. Steers, *The Coastline of England and Wales* (Cambridge, 1964), 318-31. H. G. Darby and E. M. J. Campbell, *The Domesday Geography of South-East England* (Cambridge, 1962), 497-501, 559.

⁷ G. Ward, 'The Saxon charters of Burmarsh', *Archaeol. Cantiana*, xlv (1933), 129.

⁸ *Op. cit.* in note 3, 84.

length of the defences necessary to protect the open fourth side, as at a number of other early *burhs*.⁹ A site at the edge of Romney Marsh, set on a tongue of land some 400 m. wide surrounded on three sides by water or swampy ground, must thus be sought. At Newenden the distance across the neck of the peninsula, at its narrowest point, is about 385 m.: at the point nearest to the defences the distance is nearer 450 m. The actual earthwork, however, is set back from the edge of the marsh on gently rising ground, and it is difficult at this remove to determine exactly which points of reference might have been used if the site were assessed for hidage in the early 10th century. The most that can be said at present is that the Newenden earthwork fulfils the requirements in terms of strategic position, tactical layout and size. It may be that an alternative site will one day be discovered on the alluvium of Romney Marsh. Until that time, however, the strong possibility must remain that the first fort of the Burghal Hidage list and the unfinished work of 892 are both represented by the earthwork on the Newenden peninsula, where just over three centuries later another, smaller garrison behind new earthwork defences again watched for the enemy from the sea.

B. K. DAVISON

A SAXO-NORMAN POTTERY-KILN PRODUCING STAMPED WARES AT MICHELMERSH, HANTS (FIGS. 36-7)

In his discussion of pottery from pit 37 at Portchester Castle¹⁰ Professor Barry Cunliffe drew attention to a small spouted pitcher with a diminutive loop strap-handle and decoration of applied reticular stamped strips. Cunliffe thought a non-British origin possible for this vessel, but unbeknown to him a S. Hampshire pottery-kiln had already been discovered which produced large numbers of such pitchers, identical in form if not exactly identical in fabric. Rabbit-workings had some years ago brought sherds to the surface in the garden of The Four Seasons, Michelmersh, near Romsey (FIG. 36). A very limited exploratory excavation, no more than a small hole dug into the rabbit-burrows, revealed large quantities of pottery, including cooking-pots, bowls, dishes, and a variety of stamped, spouted pitchers, including one complete, though spalled, example.

Michelmersh lies N. of Romsey on high ground overlooking the Test valley. The area is complex geologically. There is an abundance of fine clay in the near-by outcrop of the Reading beds; and there are sands, chalk and, farther down the valley slopes, gravel. Brick-kilns and brickearth pits in the area today utilize the clays of the Reading beds and similar outcrops elsewhere in S. Hampshire have given rise to pottery industries in Roman, medieval and recent times. The Michelmersh kiln-site is on fine brown sand, which gives way shortly to clay. Following the initial discovery a flux-gate magnetometer-survey was undertaken which located two major magnetic anomalies. One of these has now been excavated. A small kiln has been revealed, with circular firing-chamber some 1.5 m. in diameter, constructed of flints set in puddled chalk. The kiln was set at one end of an oval hole some 2 m. by 2.5 m., with the other end serving as stoke-pit. Large sherds of pottery were found in the stoke-hole, throat and firing-chamber, and it was clear that the complete pot previously recovered must have been within the kiln itself. Very large quantities of pottery were found in the stoke-pit, in the black ashy layers which lay around the kiln, and in the dark sands which lay above it.

While reconstruction of the pots and study of the wares will inevitably take some time, it has been thought worth while to publish a preliminary account of the distinctive stamped pottery, both for its intrinsic interest, and in the hope of its being recognized in other assemblages. All pottery from the kiln appears to have been thrown on a fast

⁹ A. J. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (1939), 495; Hill, *op. cit.* in note 2, 91.

¹⁰ B. Cunliffe, 'The Saxon culture-sequence at Portchester Castle', *Antiq. J.*, L (1970), 80, fig. 7, no. 10.