



Some Notes of Benson or Benzington.

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IN the year 1896 an account of the Primitive Antiquities in the parish of Benson was given in this Journal (II. 44-50, 73-76). The most remarkable was the Medlers Bank, as Dr. Plot tells us that it was called in his day ; and descriptions of it were cited from several old writers ; while its importance among the antiquities of the county was shown from the fact that it corresponded with the famous Danes Ditches at Medmenham at the opposite end of a boundary dyke which crossed from the Upper to the Lower Thames. It may therefore be worth while to supplement the account of it with some additional details which have been gathered from further observation and enquiry. In the first place Boydell's description of it in 1794 (*History of the River Thames*, I. 219) should be added. It states that " West of the Church is a bank and trench of a square form ; the north side still retains some of its original appearance ; to the west and south they are readily traced ; but to the east it requires a minute examination to discern them." From Brewer's account of it in 1813 (*Beauties of England and Wales*, XII. ij. 356) we learn that " three sides of the embankment are now much defaced ; but the part on the north retains considerable boldness." The site is now a quadrangular piece of land, much elongated towards the south-west, containing a meadow and a shrubbery and enclosed on all its sides with a hedge, outside which the roadways completely surround it. The older villagers remember it as waste ground from which gravel was dug, and at the present time all the northern and eastern portion is much below the level of the roads. Hearne, already cited, speaks of bones, spurs and weapons being dug up here. In the *Topographical and Statistical Description of the County of Oxford*, by G. A. Cooke, in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, it is said that " Some few years since, an urn full of Roman coins was found here," but it may be suspected that this is a confusion with the hoard found at Ewelme in 1722, noted in this Journal (iv. 16). A cannon-ball is the only object of which I have been able to get information as having been found here in the days

that are remembered. It appears from Boydeli's account that the eastern side of the bank had almost disappeared in his day; and in 1867 the roadway on this side, passing along the west end of the churchyard, was diverted for a few yards to enlarge the garden of the adjacent house. Of the north side, which retained "considerable boldness" in 1813, and the south side which was "readily traced" in 1794, no recollection survives. An old parishioner who was very observant of such matters can recall nothing of them. There is no doubt that they had been entirely cleared away in the gravel-digging before the enclosure of the ground about 1850. But the same parishioner has a very clear recollection of the western bank. It ran alongside the road-way, dividing this from a piece of waste ground which extends down to the river. Whatever may have been the case on the three other sides, the road-way on the western side ran within the bank, which was thus separated by it from the gravel-digging area and by this means was allowed to survive. But soon afterwards it was cut down to the level of the road, and all that remains of it is the lower part of the outer slope with a quick-set hedge planted along it. A general survey of the site suggests the inference that the road-way from east to west passed across the middle of the camp, for it was shown in the former notes that this is a primitive track, and it points direct to the horse-ferry where (unless the character of the river bank has greatly changed) the ancient ford must have been. Then the long western side of the present enclosure would represent the width of the camp, and all the south-eastern angle must have been cut away when the road was carried across it diagonally, for it is impossible to guess how far the traces of bank extended on the south at the date of Boydeli's description. In any case the sole relics of the Medlers Bank now existing are the quadrangular plot of ground which approximately marks its outline, and the bottom part of its western bank below the road-way next the river.

Another detail of Benson topography, though belonging to a later age, is worth recording. The village Pound, a walled enclosure, is remembered as standing on the northern part of the little green at the eastern end of Littleworth, its site being now crossed by the road which in those days made an angle in front of it. And the stocks stood near the western side of the Pound, but there is no recollection of the stocks being used.

In the seventeenth century the village is frequently described as "Benson otherwise Bensington otherwise Bensingborne." So it is

in a fine of 18 James I. cited in Pearman's *Manor of Bensington*, p. 137, and also in deeds of the same period in private hands. Thus the place bore an alternative name from the "burn" or brook, as well as from the "ton" of the Bensingas.

Near the north-west angle of Benson parish we meet with an interesting example of local nomenclature which deserves to be noted. The high road near the river, just before entering the parish of Warborough, crosses a brook which runs from Roke. The spot bears the traditional name of Elm Birch, and the bridge is often called Elm Birch Bridge. In the year 1300 Edmund Earl of Cornwall "granted to William de Bereford and Margaret his wife a fishery in the Thames from Shillingford Bridge to the stream running from Yeldenebrigg between Bensyndon and Shillingford, which fishery was valued at half-a-mark yearly" (Hedges' *History of Wallingford*, i. 351*). In the Inquisition upon the Earl's death the same year it appears to be miswritten "Sildenebrugg" (Ibid, 352). Thus Yelden-brigg (or bridge) has become Elm Birch.

The Manor of Fifield in this parish, of which an account has been given in the Journal (IX. 23-28, with an additional note, p. 86), appears to have been known also by the odd alternative name of "Bensingborne Blank." To cite one instance: In 1740 Elizabeth widow of Thomas Cowslad conveyed to her son Thomas sixty-one acres "in Okeley otherwise Okely Great Ground in Benson alias Bensington alias Bensingborne Blank alias Fifield." It had seemed strange that this very ancient Manor should possess no woodland on the higher ground, but it now appears that Oakley Wood above the Icknield Way and in the south-eastern part of the parish formerly belonged to Fifield; and a map of the eighteenth century shows that the old track-way along the back of Fifield, now ending abruptly in the fields, was then carried on southward, crossing the London Road below Beggarbush Hill and ascending the rise to Oakley Wood. John Blacknall, of Abingdon, purchased the Manor of Fifield in 1623, and had already acquired the Manor of Crowmarsh Battle in the same parish in 1620, and eventually Oakley Wood, which had been bought with the former Manor, was sold with the latter.

At Fifield the "Bensing-burn" has been diverted from its original course, which was evidently on the further side of the road,

*Mr. Hedges' references on this page are confused. This is from Kennett, *Parochial Antiquities*, i. 485, where it is derived from the Boarstal Cartulary.

several yards northward. It now forms an ornamental stream along the north front of Fifield House, and beside it is a handsome fountain, which was erected in 1849. The diversion of the brook was mentioned in the former notes, but no reason for it was suggested. Plainly it was done to form a moat, and the eastern part of this moat, though levelled, is clearly traceable in a shrubbery which runs between the house and the orchard, but the southern and western parts are completely obliterated by the extension of the farm buildings.

At Crowmarsh Battle also there remains a portion of a large and deep moat at the foot of the garden on the west. A spring from the south supplies it with water, and then turns down to the river, following the line of a hollow along the north side of the grounds, which represents the moat in this part. On the east also there is a ditch, but all has been changed here by alterations both of the ditch and of the roadway. On the south the farm buildings have been extended, and all trace of the moat is lost. Crowmarsh Battle was a grange of Battle Abbey. Parts of the house are of some antiquity, and there is a good dovecot of brick dated 1684. The road from north to south at this point has been diverted from time immemorial to pass outside Howbery Park in the parish of Crowmarsh Gifford, but obviously in its primitive course it must have passed directly onward across Crowmarsh Battle field. Here a coin of considerable interest has lately been found. It is a small bronze denarius, or third-brass, of one of the Thirty Tyrants, the usurper Marius, who reigned a short time in Gaul in the time of Gallienus, and was put to death in 267. The obverse, which is clear and perfect, has the head with the legend IMP. C. M. AUR. MARIUS AUG. On the reverse is a defaced figure with the words VICTORIA AUG. just traceable. A Nuremberg token was also found. The Ordnance Map records the discovery of another Roman coin along the line of the same track; also Roman rowels and a British Celt. This last is described by Mr. Hedges (*History of Wallingford*, I. 148) as "a bronze celt, $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches long without the annulus." And upon the same line, north of the Swan Inn, a third brass coin of Constantine II. was found in 1882.