

Commentary by Matthew Bell on 'Caesar in Kent' by Francis Vine, 1886.

Notes on Chapters V and VI.

The battle described by the author of 'Caesar in Kent' in pages 164/5 he believes to have taken place on the high ground extending from Garrington, by Adisham Hill, to Barham Downs, and there is nothing improbable in this conjecture; but when he goes on to say that the victorious Romans "drove the Britons into the woods"---"which to a considerable extent remain", and that "beyond them is the green spot now known as Patricbourne Hill" one is curious to learn to what woods the author can intend to refer. The whole of the high ground described above is now completely devoid of wood, except some modern plantations bounding Bifrons Park, and elsewhere; the only natural woods near are those about Woodlands and Ileden, and these would be in the rear of the advancing Roman army after they had routed the enemy, so the retreating Britons could hardly have been driven in that direction: a small party of the latter are said to have taken refuge in an "Oppidum" which the author believes he can identify in the small hollow in Bourne Park called "Old England's Hole", which, he adds, "has always been associated by local tradition with some gallant defence of the early inhabitants of the country against their invaders." I have lived in this place now for 45 years, and at an early period of my residence my curiosity was excited by the peculiar oddity of the name given to this hollow. I therefore made many enquiries respecting it from old people, farmers and labourers, who had lived all their lives on the spot, but I failed to obtain the slightest information as to the origin of the name, or the faintest trace of any such "local tradition" as the author speaks of. I well know the father of the informant referred to at page 168, and though I cannot recollect that I made any direct enquiry of him, yet it seems strange that he should have been apparently the only person retaining the tradition, and his son the only person to whom he transmitted it. Since reading this account I have carefully, and, I hope, impartially, examined "Old England's Hole": it is a slight hollow of very irregular shape, measuring roughly about 40 yards by 30 internally, situated about halfway down the slope of the hill, instead of on the summit where one would naturally expect to find a "stronghold", or place of refuge. I was unable to recognise anything resembling a regular "rampart", and there is certainly no trace of a "ditch" surrounding it. The ground adjoining has doubtless been downland ever since Caesar's time, and one would therefore expect that any earthworks, so strong as to seriously check the Roman soldiers, would be as clearly traceable now as those are on Barham Downs beyond Kingston, which are known to this day as "Caesar's Camp". One must notice also that this hollow is commanded by higher ground on the N.E. the side on which the advancing Romans would approach it, and before the cutting for present Dover road was made this higher ground would have so completely overlooked the "Oppidum" that the Romans (unless quite unprovided with missile weapons) could have poured in such volleys of slingstones etc as would have driven back the garrison without compelling the storming party to wait

under their "tortudo" while throwing up an "agger". I feel great hesitation therefore in accepting our Author's conclusion that this insignificant hollow is really the spot described in the quotation from Caesar p.164 as "the place in the woods excellently fortified both by nature and art." To an ordinary observer it appears to be merely an old chalk pit, disused for many years (as a few thorns and ash have grown up in it), though in point of fact several loads of chalk were taken from it when I altered the entrance to the Park at Bridge in 1857--the so-called "rampart" which exists in a very irregular form, would probably be the top soil thrown aside by the labourers employed to get the solid chalk below. I was quite unable to identify the "mound which still remains to prove the accuracy of Caesar's narrative".

In Chapter VI our Author speaks of "the heights of Garrington" as being artificially formed with several terraces to resist the attacks of the British chariots. These terraces seem to me only the natural geological formation of that part of the valley: but without venturing to speak so decisively as our Author does, either for, or against, the work of nature, one is struck by the fact that the side of the hill is here so "precipitous" naturally, that "chariots could not surmount it", and therefore the enormous labour of forming "four or five terraces succeeding one another" must have been wholly unnecessary.

With respect to the supposed traces of entrenchments in Bourne Park described on p.191 I have carefully examined "the brow of the hill" in search of the "two parallel lines of escarpments with others at their extremities at right angles", and must candidly say I can find nothing resembling them---except 1st the traces of the ditches enclosing a strip of land (perhaps the first enclosed portion of the Park) on each side of the great double avenue which formerly extended from the Dover road to the foot of the hill, corresponding with the existing avenue at the back of the mansion---and 2ndly the banks and ditches of the "Paddocks" mentioned by Hasted, enclosed at a later period by a succeeding proprietor. Perhaps however the Author does not intend to refer to either of these. He says his "escarpments" are "not easily discerned"--"which argues their great antiquity",---possibly an antiquity of a far earlier period than either Britons or Romans. The two hexagonal enclosures, p.191, surrounded by a bank, there is no "ditch", and supposed to be "outposts", are easily recognised: he says "they are known traditionally as The Forts": this is another instance of a tradition known to hardly anyone. I have never heard it mentioned. But, whatever else they may have been, they were certainly once plantations, as the trees (Scotch firs) still existed forty years ago in one of them, and a few stumps were visible in the other; the bank of the N.W. hexagon is still perfect, but after making ample allowance for the levelling effects of time and weather, it seems to me far too insignificant in its dimensions to have ever been the embankment of a Roman "outpost" while it is exactly what one might expect to find as a bank thrown up to assist in protecting a plantation made perhaps less than 100 years ago. "The deep depression a few yards distant", supposed to have been an "amphitheatre", I have been utterly unable to discover. Surely the Author

cannot have intended to refer to the old chalkpit just below adjoining the road which we partially filled up and planted some years ago! It is however the only " deep depression" I can find in that part of the Park. The spring, mentioned at page 193, possibly existed in Caesar's time: it has always been known as "The cold Bath", but the addition of "Roman's" must I think be due to the well known propensity of the Author, and his old friend.

In conclusion , we can readily agree with the Author that an important engagement between Caesar's army and the Britons may have taken place on the high plateau adjoining Barham Downs, the whole of which was probably open down land--that the Britons, being defeated, were driven across the stream in the valley, and took refuge in the extensive woods covering the summits of the hills beyond, of which Gorsley-Atchester, and The Covert etc are the existing remains, and in which their "Oppidum, fortified by nature and art" was situated, but we may be permitted to doubt the accuracy of the identification of particular localities such as "Old England's Hole" etc , which was no doubt prompted by the worthy gentleman whose researches and suggestions are admitted to have inspired the writer of the work, but whose intense enthusiasm, and vivid imagination, have perhaps sometimes impelled him to form rather too hasty conclusions. The "local traditions" our Author relies upon as corroborating his views can scarcely be said to have that general currency in the locality which would alone entitle them to the weight he apparently attaches to them

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Bourne Park. October 1886.

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the stream where, after their twelve miles' night-march, they could obtain water for the horses. After the victory of the Roman army on Barham Downs, the greater portion of the left wing was no doubt quartered within the lines of one of the great camps on the downs; but an examination of the declivity between Barham Downs and the river opposite Charlton reveals the traces of three lines of earthworks, each of the length of about three furlongs. Probably Cæsar here quartered his cavalry, in consequence of the proximity to the river. These lines of fortification were perhaps originally thrown up in earlier British wars, but even if they were so, they would doubtless be used by the Romans as an outer line of defence for the camp. It may be noticed also that on the opposite hill, beyond the river, there is a double line of entrenchments, as if of an opposing army. These corresponding entrenchments on each side of the river extend, with greater or less prominence, as far as Kingston Church.

Before quitting Barham Downs and their neighbourhood, it will be well to notice one or

two other features, which are corroborative as to their having been the site of Cæsar's camp.

On the brow of the hill, in Bourne Park, there are what appear to be the remains of two outposts, 400 yards apart, surrounded each by a ditch. They are of the same dimensions, and form almost perfect hexagons, each side being about 50 feet in length. They are situated in commanding positions on a hill, called locally "Star Hill," and would afford excellent stations for the guards placed before the gates of the camp, whence they could view the position and movements of the enemy. They are known traditionally as "the Forts." They are now bare of trees, but have the appearance of having been planted at some comparatively recent period.¹

A deep depression a few yards distant from one

¹ I imagine that these outposts were at first thrown up for stations outside the camp formed by Cæsar after the taking of "the oppidum"; but that afterwards, when the camp was extended during Cæsar's absence at the coast, they, and the oppidum itself, were included within the lines of the encampment, the ground of Bourne Park having been cleared of trees by the Roman soldiers for the purpose of this extension of their camp.

of these forts may possibly have been one of those extemporized amphitheatres with which we know Cæsar sought amusement for his soldiers, when not in actual combat. While Cæsar was ten days absent repairing his vessels, such entertainments would doubtless be resorted to by his soldiery who remained, as we shall hereafter notice, at the camps.

A very formidable stronghold, pointed out by the Ordnance Surveyors on their map as "Roman camp," may be seen at the eastern extremity of the Downs. It is not of Roman but British construction, but may very likely have been used by Cæsar's army as an outpost for the defence of his camp on the extreme left. The deep ditches by which it is surrounded, meeting one another at acute angles, would afford protection to several hundred men. There appears also to have been a very great mound or tumulus near the south-east corner of the Downs.

On the south-west of Bourne Park there is a noted spring, which is still called "The Roman's Cold Bath." This may have had its origin in Cæsar's time, or subsequently; but we may

remark that such a spring, if available, would be much sought for by the soldiers of Cæsar's army while quartered for ten days on Barham Downs.

With these remarks upon the vestiges still remaining of Cæsar's camp, which, though necessarily imperfect, corroborate, so far as they go, the traditional site on Barham Downs, we pass on to his narrative of the events of the day following his first night of encampment. "Early the day after that day he sent foot soldiers and cavalry in three divisions on an expedition for the purpose of following up those who had fled." This pursuing force corresponded with the three divisions of Cæsar's army, each probably furnishing a contingent, so as not materially to weaken any one division. Three very ancient roads by which they doubtless pursued the retreating Britons may all be seen from Patrixbourne Hill, the left and central ones in particular being visible at the present day for more than a mile and a half. It is true that in Cæsar's time the country was more thickly wooded than it is now, but these roads passing over chalky soil, and being on rising ground, and converging towards Patrixbourne

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