

Old England's Hole

This is most probably an old quarry, cut into the side of the old road to Dover out of Bridge at about the lowest practicable point of the hill where chalk is available. It is however also a source of much romantic speculation. The theory that it is the site of an encounter between Britons and Romans is of relatively recent (early 19th century) origin. The following account is almost wholly fanciful (Caesar died of course in 44 BC. His second British expedition was in 54 BC. Nero was Emperor in AD 56).

'At the summit of the... rise out of Bridge, the road, running exactly on the site of the Roman Watling Street, comes to that bleak and elevated table-land known as Barham Downs, the scene of Caesar's great battle with the Britons on July 23rd, AD 56.

Twenty-seven thousand Roman soldiers, horse and foot, met the wild rush of the Britons, who, with the usual undisciplined and untaught courage of uncivilised races, flung themselves upon the invaders and were thrown back by the impenetrable wall of the serried phalanxes. Recoiling dismayed from this reception, they were instantly pursued by the Roman cavalry and cut up into isolated bands, who fought courageously all that fatal day in the dense woodlands. Protected by mounds and trenches defended with palisades of stakes cunningly interwoven with brushwood, they prolonged the hopeless contest until nightfall, and then fell back. Caesar, describing these woodland forts as *oppida*, gives especial attention to one troublesome stronghold. "Being repulsed," he writes, "they withdrew themselves into the woods and reached a place which they had prepared before, having closed all approaches to it by felled timber." This retreat was captured by soldiers of the Seventh Legion, who, throwing up a mound against it, advanced, holding their shields over their heads in the military formation known as "the tortoise," and drove out the defenders at the sword's point.

This, the last place to hold out, is, despite the eighteen and a half centuries that have passed, still to be seen in Bourne Park, on the summit of Bridge Hill, and is familiarly known in the neighbourhood as "Old England's Hole." "Never forget," the old countryfolk have been wont to impress their children - "never forget that this is Old England's Hole, and that on this spot a last stand for freedom was made by your British forefathers."

Every one in the neighbourhood knows Old England's Hole. It is seen beside the road, on the right hand, just where the cutting through the crest of the hill, made in 1829, to ease the pull-up for the coach-horses, begins. At that same time the course of the road was very slightly diverted, and, instead of actually impinging on this ancient historic landmark, as before, was made to run a few feet away. Now the spot is seen across the fence of the park, the old course of the road still traceable beside it as a slightly depressed green track, plentifully dotted with thistles. The stronghold consists of a crater-like hollow, encircled by earthen banks, still high and steep. A great number of ash-trees and thorns, some very old, gnarled and decayed, grow on these banks, and cast a dense shade upon the interior.'

(CG Harper: The Ingoldsby Country, 1904, pp63-6)

In 1846, during excavation for a lake in Bourne Park, Samian pottery and other articles were found at a depth of 10-13ft. Also, nearby, Roman interments, including a large urn containing ashes at the same depth. Also three skeletons with large nails near the shoulders, hands and feet. A few Roman coins. Faussett in 1771 mentions over 100 tumuli on Hanging Hill, in front of and between Bourne Place, Bishopsbourne and the Roman road; others had been ploughed down. These were Saxon. (Wright).