

RAVENSBURGH CASTLE: An Ancient Earthwork

by Chas. H. Cooke

HERTFORDSHIRE is not rich in prehistoric remains or ancient earthworks, but the hill-fort known as Ravensburgh Castle is of considerable interest to archaeologists.

This ancient earthwork is on a spur of the Barton Hills, about a mile south-west of Hexton, and occupies the western half of a plateau surrounded by deep combes on three sides and just above the 500ft. contour.

This fine example of a hill-fort compares favourably with similar earthworks in other counties famous for such remains.

Ravensburg Castle consists of a large, almost oval, enclosure, covering just over sixteen acres, and with its defences twenty-two acres.

According to the *Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Hertfordshire*, published in 1910 by H.M.S.O., the greatest length of this earthwork from north to south is 1,435 feet and the width from east to west 695. The condition of the remains at that time was stated to be good, but a warning was given that the trees which had recently been planted would probably have a damaging effect in the future.

"A very perfect entrenchment"

The following passage is taken from Clutterbuck's *History and Antiquities of Hertfordshire*, published in 1817.

"At the south-west part of the parish, at the distance of about one mile from the village of Hexton, there is a very perfect entrenchment called Ravensburgh Castle, which occupies the centre summit of a hill of an oblong shape, and contains in superficial measure about twelve acres. On its north, south and west sides it rises abruptly from a deep ravine or valley, on the east side it slopes with gentle inclination to the plane. On the east, south and west sides it is defended by a double, and on the north by a triple vallum; it appears to be furnished with a gate of entrance at the north-west angle, defended by a keep or mound of earth now planted with trees. There appears also to have been a kind of footway from the central part of the eastern trench leading to the spring that supplies the camp with water; and, on the hill above the spring, to have been a guard station as well, to prevent it being disturbed or poisoned by the enemy. Mr. Leman is of the opinion that, notwithstanding the name of Ravensburgh, which seems to have an allusion to the raven, the standard of the Danes, and the proximity of this earthwork to a piece of

Several interesting explanations of the origin of Ravensburgh Castle, near Hexton, have been advanced. This hill summit was probably first entrenched by the aboriginal inhabitants of the island, but Roman, Saxon and Danish warriors doubtless saw service on its ramparts. Today the green-clad mounds are a reminder that history is on everybody's doorstep—if they care to look for it.

land in this parish called Danes' Furlong, it is to be attributed rather to the aboriginal inhabitants of the island than to the Danes, from its bearing little resemblance to the works of that people throughout England. To the circumstances to which Mr. Leman has alluded may be added that in the year 914 the Danes sustained a signal defeat in these parts, so favourable from their natural strength to the purposes of warfare; and that the feast of Hoc-day, originally instituted in commemoration of the kingdom having been freed by the death of Hardicanute from the Danish yoke, was observed to a very late period in this parish, which renders it probable that, although the Danes might not have been the original fortifiers of this earthwork, they occupied it for purposes of defence, and harassed and oppressed the inhabitants of these parts so greatly as to render their liberation from their aggressions a matter of permanent rejoicing."

AMUCH earlier reference to this ancient earthwork is contained in a manuscript history of the village of Hexton by F. Taverner which is in the British Museum. This author was a native of the village, so his remarks are an indication of what the contemporary views were regarding it.

The following quotation is taken from *Hexton: A Parish Survey*, published in 1936:

"OF RAVENSBURYE CASTLE"

"The Common people are of opinion, that here hath stood a Castle, but if that had byn soe then some Remaynes of the

foundations of brick, or stone, would have byn plowed up. And some Chronicle, or Record would have mentioned who were the builders, or at some tyme since, Lords thereof. But it is probable, that here hath auntiently byn a ffort of Earth, both in the tymes of the Romanes, Saxons and Danes, ffor Mr. Camden sayes, that the Romanes had such like Somer standing Campes. This had, like theirs, a treble rampire of earth, and it was neere like Militarie Romane way, ffor that famous highway called Ickle, is neere adjoyning to this place, which crosseth Watling Streete, as Mr. Camden observes at Dunstable, and soe leadeth from thence to Ickleford. . . .

"I have in my keeping a Copper pike, likely to be the pik of a Copper Targett, digged out of a pitt neer this Fort. (This, by the way is the only object ever to be found neer this particular earthwork, so far as my knowledge goes.)

"Yt contayneth about a Dozen Acres of ground within the Walls and many of there fforts were encompassed with such a proportion of ground.

Nature and art

"This ffort was strongly situate by nature, being almost rounded with exceeding deepe bottoms and mountaynes, which wee call Lynces, but noe question the upper walls were made by art.

"This ffort being upon the browe of the Hills, did over look the Vale Countrye, and did discover much ground neither is it improbable but that it might be watred by the Spring at Burwell, running at the foot of the Castell. . . .

"This is certene that the Danes were Lords of this Fort, and of this Towne, as before doth appear. And a place in our fields above the Towne is called Nordane furlong, that is, the Danes on the North side.

"By what names the Romanes did call this ffort, is to me altogether unknown. But certaine it is that the Saxons gave it a new name, as they did all townes and places where they came. And it is probable that it was a ffort of some esteemme with them because they called it by the name of a principale place in Saxonie that is Ravensburg, or Ravensborowe. And it is at this Day a parte of the Stile or Title of the Dukes Electors of Saxonie Earles or Counts of Ravensburg."

IN Cussans's *History of Hertfordshire*, published in the late nineteenth century, occurs the following description:

"Tradition ascribes the construction of Ravensburgh Castle to the Danes, but, though possibly occupied by them for a time, there can be little doubt but that the summit of the hill on which it stands was entrenched by the Britons and further strengthened by the Romans. What is known as the Castle is simply a mound standing on the northern extremity of an irregular ellipse of about fourteen acres in extent, which is surrounded by a rampart and ditch. Approach to this fortress was almost impossible on the northern, southern and western sides; and on the eastern side, where the hill is less precipitous, it was further secured by an additional line of entrenchment. The entrance seems to have been through a narrow natural gorge, on the northern side, protected by the castle immediately above it, and strengthened without by a triple vallum."

The *Victoria County History of Hertfordshire*, published 1902 to 1907, calls this earthwork a fine hill fortress on a summit of the Chilterns near their northern escarpment where deep ravines with tor-



Sarratt Church lych-gate is the subject of this prizewinning entry in our competition from Mr. Staniland Pugh.

The Balloon Stone

At Standon Green End, about half-way between Colliers End and High Cross, is the Balloon Stone, where Vincent Lunardi landed in a balloon in 1784.

Lunardi's experiments excited enormous enthusiasm in London, and he made his ascent from Moorfields, the drill ground of the Honourable Artillery Company. His balloon, 32 feet in circumference, was on view at the Lyceum in the Strand, and was inspected by 20,000 people. Lunardi ascended alone in the presence of the Prince of Wales and an enormous crowd of spectators. He took with him a dog, a pigeon and a cat. The balloon was provided with oars, by which it was intended to raise or lower it while in flight. Lunardi flew to South Mimms in an hour and a half. He descended here and landed the cat, which was suffering from the cold. He ascended again, and descended after three-quarters of an hour, this time at the spot where the Balloon Stone is now located.

This strange object descending from the sky thoroughly alarmed the villagers and the men working in the fields, and Lunardi had difficulty in reassuring them that he was no "visitor from Mars" but just a man trying out an invention. He required their assistance to make the balloon secure, and a young woman finally took hold of one of the cords, urging the men to follow her example, and so this breath-taking flight ended in Hertfordshire, today the home of the jet plane and machines which fly faster than sound.—"The Hertfordshire Mercury."

tuous course isolate the camp on three sides.

Various explanations have been advanced from time to time to account for the origin of this ancient earthwork. One theory, put forward by a Mr. W. H. Lane, was that it dates from the early Iron Age and was constructed during the fourth or fifth century B.C. at the earliest, and that it may have been an outpost of the Belgae, a race who conquered south-eastern England some fifty years prior to Caesar's invasions. Yet there are no records of any weapons or other remains being discovered near the fort, if we except the bronze shield boss recorded by Taverner in the seventeenth century. During the time of the Danish invasions it was no doubt used again as a defensive work, being conveniently situated on the border between Alfred's kingdom and the Danelagh.

Egyptian origin?

A curious explanation was put forward by Dr. Rendel Harris to account for the name Ravensburgh. He suggested that Britain was colonized in prehistoric times by the Egyptians, and, by the Egyptian derivation of place-names, traced one channel of their approach along the shores of the Mediterranean and up by Spain, Portugal and France to England. According to his theory, the Danes, an essentially maritime race, never constructed hilltop camps. The most they ever did in defensive works was in the form of water

camps by the sides of rivers where they could winter and moor their ships. So he disposes of Ravensburgh Castle as a Danish work. Yet no modern archaeologist would ascribe its building to the Danes—it is only conjectured that they may have used it as an existing fortified site for their operations.

Dr. Harris stated that the word "Ravensburgh" is one of earlier form with the Saxon "burgh" added. In Egypt, the mythical Bennu bird or Phoenix represented the sun-god Ra; the Bennu bird was the sun-god himself and was known as Ra-bennu, the soul of Ra. From this, by a natural softening of the "b," the "raven" of Ravensburgh resulted.

WHATEVER the origin of Ravensburgh Castle, it is a notable earthwork of considerable age, and a lasting reminder of the antiquity of our islands. As we stand looking at this ancient hill-fort, with the fresh breezes blowing over the Chiltern Hills, we can visualize those warriors of old, tramping over this fair countryside and fortifying this convenient eminence. We are, moreover, brought face to face with our ancient heritage, and this monument of antiquity left by the early inhabitants of our land provides a symbol for posterity, especially in this age of conflicting doubts and ideological theories. Our long and varied history is reflected in these ancient earthworks, which offer hope and inspiration for the future of our race.