

EPPING FOREST AND ITS ANCIENT CAMPS.



ONCE upon a time—that is, many centuries ago—the county of Essex was almost covered with a forest, the origin of which is lost in the mists of antiquity. This forest was the home of birds, game, and other wild animals, which haunted its thickets or sported in its open spaces without much interference on the part of men. The scanty population, doubtless, cultivated some spots, and hunted the deer as their inclination or their necessity prompted them; but they made few encroachments upon the forest. As time rolled on, however, and men multiplied, the area occupied by woods and thickets diminished, until a great and permanent change passed over the scene. In comparatively modern, and in quite recent periods, the process of clearance went on with increasing rapidity, until it became apparent that unless decisive steps were taken, Epping Forest, as it had come to be called, would be improved off the face of the earth. To prevent this calamity a movement was set on foot by the Corporation of London and others, and after appeals to courts of law and to the legislature, a stop was put to the process of destruction. The consequence is that some thousands of acres are sure to be retained as a recreation-ground for our fellow-citizens, who will henceforth be free to range through the glades and groves, to explore their beauties and to find healthy and cheap enjoyment.

Although so near the metropolis and so easy of access, although so full of varied attractions, and so well known by name, Epping Forest is not so much frequented as it deserves to be, and will be when it is better understood. Our teeming population includes myriads who would realise new pleasures in the wild and untrodden paths of the great wood, where they would behold nature in its primitive condition. The botanist, the

entomologist, and the ornithologist might discover rare and interesting forms of life, while the mere excursionist might secure for himself a change of scene as complete as if he travelled many miles to escape from the din and discomforts of mighty London. Every season of the revolving year offers new features of interest, although it must be owned that, except for special purposes, the forest is not either the most pleasant or the most attractive rendezvous during the winter months. The zealous students of nature, and hunters after novelties, need scarcely be told that they will meet with much to reward them whenever they go. On these generalities, however, it is not our purpose now to dwell, and we only mention them as introductory to the less popular topic of the present paper.

We speak of our topic as "less popular" than some others, but we do not forget the strange fascination which ancient remains of some kinds have over the public mind. Visitors to London go to the Tower and to Westminster Abbey, and look with curiosity and awe upon them, not merely on account of their magnitudo, but as relics of the distant past. Of the multitudes who run over to Epping Forest, there are many who, when at Chingford, hie away to its ancient and deserted church, or who carefully inspect the old house which, according to tradition, was the hunting-lodge of Queen Elizabeth. Such facts indicate a tendency which deserves to be encouraged, and this is why we are about to talk of the antiquities of the forest. Our antiquities are much older than any of those which we have referred to, and if not so fitted to strike the eye, they have an interest which is altogether their own. They tell us of a time and of a condition of things so different from what we are familiar with, that they teach us at once how vast a transformation has been effected in England in the course of ages.

We learn from ancient Greek and Latin writers that the Britons were very rude in their manners, and simple in their lives. The works they executed were not less remarkable for the little skill they display than for their durability. Those with which we are familiar are often mere enclosures formed by digging a ditch and throwing up the earth by the side of it as an embankment. Such is the first of those which are now to occupy our attention.

It was on a bright summer's day in 1872 that the writer of this took a ticket to Loughton for a ramble in the forest, which thereabouts is exceptionally attractive. After crossing a streamlet he ascended a prominent and elevated hill, commanding a prospect of remarkable beauty and extent. As he wandered on his attention was diverted from the natural charms of this lovely spot, by what past experience suggested might be an ancient moat or ditch. A few minutes' examination produced the conviction that here was one of those renowned earthworks of which examples are scattered over the country. That the work was that of human hands, and not modern, could not be doubted, but it was not likely that such a venerable relic was quite unknown. After only a partial investigation, and a mental resolve to make inquiry, other

explorations were made, and the supposed earthwork was left, but not forgotten. Inquiry subsequently failed to show that any such monument of antiquity was known, so in 1875 it was determined that the question should be settled. On the first visit the place was found with no small difficulty, owing to the density of the forest and the luxuriant undergrowth of vegetation. However, it was found, and still further examined. Subsequent visits followed, and at last the general outline was ascertained; not only so—the camp, as we may call it, was surveyed, and a plan of it executed by Mr. D'Oyley, of Loughton. This plan—of which we give a reduced copy, by the surveyor's permission—is now suspended in the Library of the Corporation of London at Guildhall. Before describing the ancient camp itself, it may be useful to give a clue to its whereabouts.

Those who would visit it from the high road which runs from London to Epping, should enter the forest half a mile beyond the "Robin Hood" public-house. At the point indicated there is a broad opening into the forest on the right, where the ground is but scantily covered with pollarded trees. The camp lies not far away, on a sort of headland overlooking a deep valley, and commanding a prospect of rare beauty. Here the scattered trees give place to a denser growth of forest, and buried in this lies the hold of, probably, a British host. The whole of the camp is covered with the wood, not only in the interior, but in the ditch, and on the embankment.

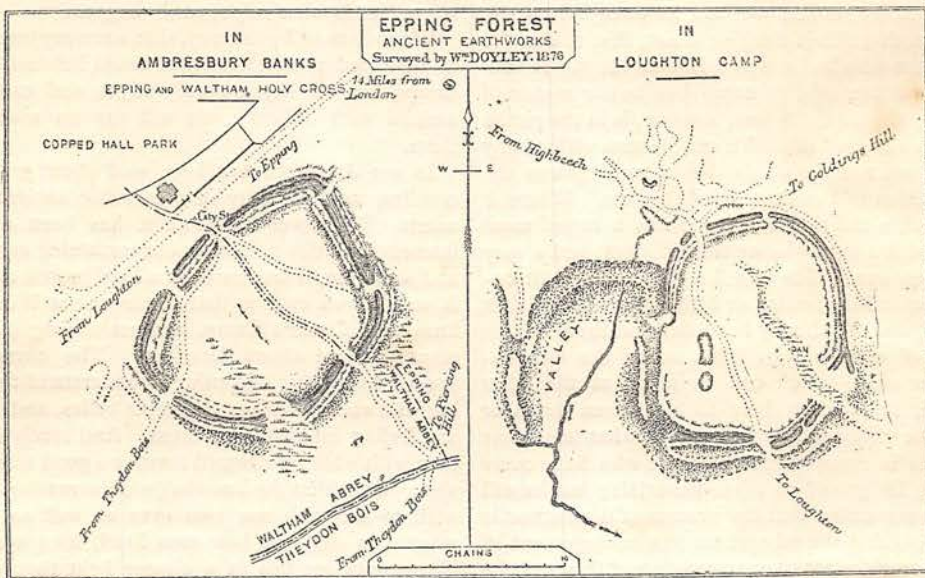
If the explorer prefers to reach the place from the Loughton side, he may follow the road which passes the "King's Head," where he may enter the forest if he likes, though, if a stranger without a guide, he may miss his destination. The better plan might be to go on almost to the "Forester's Arms," and pass into the forest at the eastern end of the broad avenue which reaches to the Epping road. We fear, however, that any mere verbal directions will be insufficient to make the path plain, and suggest that instruction should be sought in the neighbourhood. As the camp is not in any map except a new one prepared for the Corporation of London, it is almost useless to refer to maps.

For the sake of the general reader we will now try and show, in a few words, what sort of work it is which we wish to fix attention upon, as one of the most ancient remains to be found near the metropolis. As we have suggested, it is an enclosed space, and it is about 800 yards in circumference, and comprises some twelve acres. The northern half consists of an external broad ditch, with an interior embankment, and therefore it was intended for the protection of its occupants. The inner area is drained by means of a natural depression or small valley, which is dry in summer, but in winter forms a little water-course, having its exit on the south-east. It is interesting to observe how, with the aid of a bank across this valley, enough water might have been stored to last a considerable time; and, in all probability, this was one reason why it was included in the plan of the camp. The southern half of the enclosure runs round the

crest of the hill which slopes gradually down to the deep valley below. The defences here are, as far as the contour of the ground allows, similar to those of the other half; but where the hill is very steep, as on the western side, the embankment is scarcely perceptible. The principal valley on the south is a striking feature in the landscape. The valley on the west is but short, and rapidly descends to join the greater one. The slopes on the south and west show traces of a lower trench, which was continued round the head of the western valley; and this device would help materially to strengthen the position in case of attack. At one point on the western side, the defensive work is wholly destroyed, and we may fairly suppose that there the camp was at some time either assaulted or evacuated. A modern gravel-pit hard by must not be mistaken

which run into one another in such a way as to form a barrier that is impassable except by one single track, now serving as a driftway. That the pits are of an ancient date is proved by the trees which grow about them. They seem, indeed, to have been defensive outworks on the side most easily accessible, for the ground is there naturally almost level. Near the pits there are two old entrances to the enclosure, and one or two other entrances are found on the opposite side.

Who constructed this work is unknown, but there are reasons for believing that it was a stronghold of our British ancestors. Local tradition identifies Queen Boadicea with this district, and it is said that she confronted the Roman legions somewhere hereabouts 1,800 years ago. Whether she and her rude hosts, or others equally rude, fortified this hill, it



MAP OF THE ANCIENT EARTHWORKS.

for the demolition we have mentioned. As for the numerous small holes along the line of the works on this side, they are due to men who have been digging there for foxes, which have selected this solitary spot as their home. Thus it has come to pass, here as elsewhere, that the long-deserted haunts of men have been fixed on as a rendezvous by the beasts of the field.

It is to be regretted that, owing to the density of the vegetation, the whole of this curious place cannot be fairly examined in summer. During the severity of winter and the early spring, much more can be seen than at other seasons. Even in summer, however, enough remains to reward the intelligent observer, who will then also realise the wild beauty of the place better than when the forest is leafless and silent.

We cannot leave this venerable site without a word about the pits, which are so numerous. Within the camp itself there are two, but what they were intended for is merely matter of conjecture. Outside, on the north and north-east, the ground is covered with pits

is not in our power to say. Thus far no coin, no weapon, not even a broken piece of ancient pottery, has been certainly met with; but possibly exploration would result in finding something to enable us to identify the makers and occupants of this venerable earthwork. Often have we traversed it, musing upon the possible circumstances in which it originated; and the only conclusion we have been able to reach is, that it is the silent witness to a time of danger and of conflict in the far-off past, when the civilisation of England had scarcely commenced. It may reasonably be conjectured that it dates as far back as the martyrdom of St. Paul in the days of Nero, or the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. Its importance would be well understood by the little London of that age, though the great London of now has naturally forgotten it. Since its discovery many pleasure-parties have visited it, and its manifold charms as a place of rendezvous in summer will no doubt be appreciated by yearly increasing numbers. Whatever else may happen, the Loughton Camp will not be lost sight of

again, and it is gratifying to know that it runs no further risk of being enclosed or built upon.

Two miles north of the camp over which we have so long lingered, and near the fourteenth milestone on the road from London to Epping, there is another ancient earthwork, of which also we must say a few words. We refer to what is popularly called Ambresbury Banks, though we have heard it styled Queen Boadicea's Camp. This lies not far from the high road on the right, and is very accessible. It occupies a far less interesting and romantic site than the other, but some parts of the work are more massive and striking. The area is about the same as that at Loughton, but the plan is essentially different, as it is evidently an attempt at a quadrangle. The longest side, which is on the west, is curved, the other three sides are nearly straight. From what we know of Roman military works, we are at once led to the supposition that this is one; or if not, that it was the work of men who had adopted Roman ideas. A considerable portion of this camp lies in the manor of Waltham; the northern part, however, is in the parish of Epping. A good deal of it can be seen without any difficulty, but not the whole, for in some places the work is hidden in the densest of thickets. Where it is most visible and perfect it comprises a broad moat or ditch, with a strong inner embankment, and a very slight outer one. Like the Loughton Camp, it encloses a natural depression or little valley, by which it is drained, and which may have been utilised for the purposes of water-supply. Instead of the four entrances, at most, which can be found at the other earthwork, there seem here to have been seven or eight. The visitor will be sorry to see what havoc has been made in recent times by those who have come here to dig for gravel or other materials; but he will be glad to remember that the process of destruction is stopped, and that the scheme for the management of the forest provides for the preservation of this and the other ancient remains within its limits. It is scarcely credible that people so near London should be so ignorant of the importance of such works, as to cart them away like so much rubbish. But they do; and, in fact, although Ambresbury Banks have been long known to the antiquary, men who have lived many years near the place may still be asked in vain to direct a stranger. The first time we went, we found two men loading timber a few hundred yards away, and they had never heard of the camp, although they well knew the saw-pit inside it. That saw-pit had been used for cutting up the trees which had once been the finest ornaments of the locality.

After the details of the similar work at Loughton, it will not be needful to enlarge our description of Ambresbury Banks, so we will add a word or two about its name. Ambresbury is another name for Amesbury, near Stonehenge, in Wiltshire, and the word is said to mean the same as Ambrose-bury, from a patriot called Ambrosius Aurelius, who lived about 500 years after Christ. It is impossible to say how Ambresbury or Amesbury Banks (for it has both names) came to be so called, but the fact is interesting on several

accounts. Ambrosius Aurelius is connected in legend with the romantic tales about Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, of which we have all heard so often. As Ambrose is also said to have been the real name of the famous magician Merlin, it is possible that at some time Ambresbury Banks were supposed to have been his work. We cannot tell; and yet, in any case, these circumstances will not diminish the attractions of our ancient camp. Ambrosius Aurelius may have occupied or constructed it, and if so, it is nearly 1,400 years old. But if the other name, Queen Boadicea's Camp, points to any historical fact, we are at liberty to guess that both this camp and the other were formed amid the struggles of 1,800 years ago. In that case we should regard this as the Roman camp of the general Suetonius, and the Loughton Camp as that of Boadicea. That her name was given to the wrong one is what might easily happen.

We may note, by the way, that some supposed traces of advanced posts exist in the forest between the two camps, but as they are only slight, and can be examined with difficulty, we will say no more about them.

In our day much has been said about pre-historic remains, and the duty of preserving ancient monuments. Whenever an attempt has been made by interested parties to destroy our remaining earthworks and such-like, there has been a loud protest against it. A well-known case is that of the one at Wimbledon, known as Cæsar's Camp, and resembling in several respects those above described. The circumstance proves that we are beginning to understand the meaning and value of these venerable relics, and that we are feeling interested in them. And surely the concern with which we regard them is a good and hopeful sign. Our thirst for knowledge is increasing, and we wish to see with our own eyes as well as possible what men did, and how men lived, long ages since. We cannot see this in a clearer light than when we take a pleasure-trip to Epping Forest, for example, and contemplate in their present wooded solitudes the primitive encampments of which we have been speaking.

To those who study the pages of Julius Cæsar and other early authors, the camps in the forest will serve as a singular commentary and proof of their accuracy. Only in the matter of religion our present subject lends us no assistance; and yet even there we cannot help recalling to mind the fact that in the forests our first ancestors found their temples, and that they worshipped beneath the oak and other trees.

Our labour will not be in vain if we can persuade any of the millions of the mighty metropolis to penetrate the thickets and explore the glades of Epping Forest. That such a scene of beauty lies so near great London, and that its ever-changing and countless attractions to the lover of nature are so easily accessible, are circumstances which cannot be represented in too many forms. We have spoken to the admirers of antiquity, but we have endeavoured to remember others, and to remind all of the charms which the forest holds out to them.

B. H. COWPER.