

THE BATTLE OF WHEATHAMPSTEAD

by ILID ANTHONY

If any such battle had taken place during the Mediaeval period or in modern times we would not lack the exact date, details of the disposition of troops and tactics employed by the opposing armies. Unlike many battles between the native Britons and the Romans, we do have some literary sources for the event, even if they are only brief sentences from the despatch-like accounts of Julius Caesar. They may be biased in favour of one side, but they give the main outlines of the campaign. Cicero's brother, Atticus, was one of the officers who had accompanied Caesar and letters were exchanged between the brothers which gave some information. The archaeological evidence exists for the native fort, but where is the evidence for the arrival of the invading force? Where is the camp for the leather tents which the attackers may have occupied in their brief campaign? Are we looking in the right area for this siege? This is still the subject for debate, which may continue until the spade provides the final answer.

In 55 B.C. Gn. Julius Caesar⁽¹⁾ had already led an expedition to Britain and had only penetrated into the centre of Kent. Since he lacked knowledge of the tides, his ships had been severely damaged. For the second expedition on July 6th in 54 B.C. he set out from the French coast with eight legions and 4,000 Gallic cavalry, as well as regiments of slingers and archers, with the firm intention of conquering south-eastern Britain and of quartering his troops there the following Winter. His main strategy was to be speed of attack and drive. This he could achieve because of the discipline and training of his legionaries and the bravery of the cavalry. His troops responded to his excellent leadership and judicious praise. Having established a naval base near Walmer, he pressed forward without delay towards the valley of the Stour. So anxious was he on speed of attack and surprise that for the second time he left his fleet riding at anchor and did not beach them properly. For the second time extensive damage was caused by storm, for though the beach here sloped more gently than the spot where he landed the previous year, and the moon was new, not full, it was the season for high and dangerous tides.

1. Caesar De Bello Gallico, Bk. V.2.

He had to return from the main line of attack and organise the repair work with the help of shipwrights and supplies from Gaul. The restoration of the fleet was completed in ten days. But with this delay he had given the native tribes time to settle their differences and to elect Cassivellaunus, the leader of the Catuvellauni, as their chief commander in the field. Their territory lay north of the Thames and this would obviously have included Hertfordshire.

The Trinovantes were the tribe who occupied Essex and the territory north-east of the Thames. Caesar had, under his protection, one of their princes called Mandubracus. He must have received a deputation from this tribe soon after landing, asking that he should send their leader back to them and promising their support. He exacted the promise of hostages and grain supplies for his troops when he reached the territory north of the Thames. This brief sentence in his narrative is significant if final identification of Wheathampstead as the stronghold of Cassivellaunus is not forthcoming. Caesar's route was planned to lead to the east when he had negotiated the Thames, so that he could make contact with his allies.

The route from the valley of the Stour to the Thames was not easy for the Romans. They were constantly harried by guerilla warfare and surprise attacks by intermittent bands of native warriors in light chariots caused grievous loss among the heavily armed and weighted infantry. These exacted heavy casualties until the Romans learnt to guard their marching columns more adequately and the natives, ever volatle, became reckless.

When the Romans arrived at the crossing of the Thames, in all probability near modern Brentford, the natives had placed wooden stakes beneath the water to prevent landing on the north bank. Caesar ordered the cavalry to attack on the wings while the infantry took up the stakes under cover of fire from the archers and slingers. The defence on the north bank was soon routed. The Roman legions carried out a systematic programme of laying waste the countryside as they penetrated into Catuvellaunian territory. This indicates cultivated territory with farmsteads and herds. Corn was one of the major exports from Britain to the Continent during the first century B.C.

Cassivellaunus warned the farmers on Caesar's route into the territory and encouraged them to take their herds and hide them deep in the woodlands. He further encouraged the native chiefs in Kent to attack the garrison of 3,000 infantry and 300 cavalry which had been left to guard the ships.

It was also Cassivellaunus' tactics to draw the Roman army further into his own territory in order to weaken their communica-

tion with their coastal base. Caesar was informed that he was near Cassivellaunus' stronghold, which was protected by forests and marshes. This sentence would fit the fortified site of The Aubreys near Redbourn on the river Lea more readily than Wheathampstead, though the latter, being in Lea valley, may have been marshier at that time. In such an emergency the tribe would have concentrated their forces on the fort. Caesar says that he attacked the fort on two sides and successfully took it by storm. His words are:—

“He marched to the place with his legions, and found that it was of great natural strength and excellently fortified. Nevertheless, he proceeded to assault it on two sides. After a short time the enemy proved unable to resist the violent attack of the legions, and rushed out of the fortress on another side. A quantity of cattle was found there, and many of the fugitives were captured or killed.”

From a reference in a letter from Atticus to Marcus Cicero it is sometimes thought that Caesar was forced to make a swift journey to the coast, perhaps to restore order after the rearguard action of the Kentish chiefs. He also heard that the situation in Gaul was not stable and that his presence was required in that country. At the same time, it would appear that the resistance of the Catuvellauni collapsed, and ambassadors were sent to Caesar's camp to negotiate a peace. Caesar imposed a tribute to be paid by the tribes and received their formal submission and hostages.

This is the account that appears from the written sources. The trouble in Gaul came as a convenient excuse for Caesar to return to the Continent instead of leaving his troops here in Winter quarters. The sudden collapse of the native resistance is less easy to explain; a century later guerilla warfare under Caratacus was to continue for a far longer period. Volatile and easily discouraged as the natives were on occasion, there is a possibility that Caesar may have assessed their powers, did not wish to continue the war and decided not to linger too long in their territory. This is where the account gives the most favourable aspect to the Roman side; we have no real evidence for the native position and strength. It may even have been Caesar who negotiated the peace treaty.

An assessment of the Belgic stronghold at Wheathampstead was carried out by the then Dr. and the late Mrs. Wheeler in 1932. A section cut through the earthworks known locally as the Devil's Dyke, showed it to be a ditch 130ft. wide from lip to lip and the bank 40ft. high on the inner side, though some of the earth was thrown beyond the ditch as a counter-scarp. A hearth, perhaps lit by the actual builders of the fort, was found in the ditch. The bank would have been reinforced by a timber revetment. Inside there

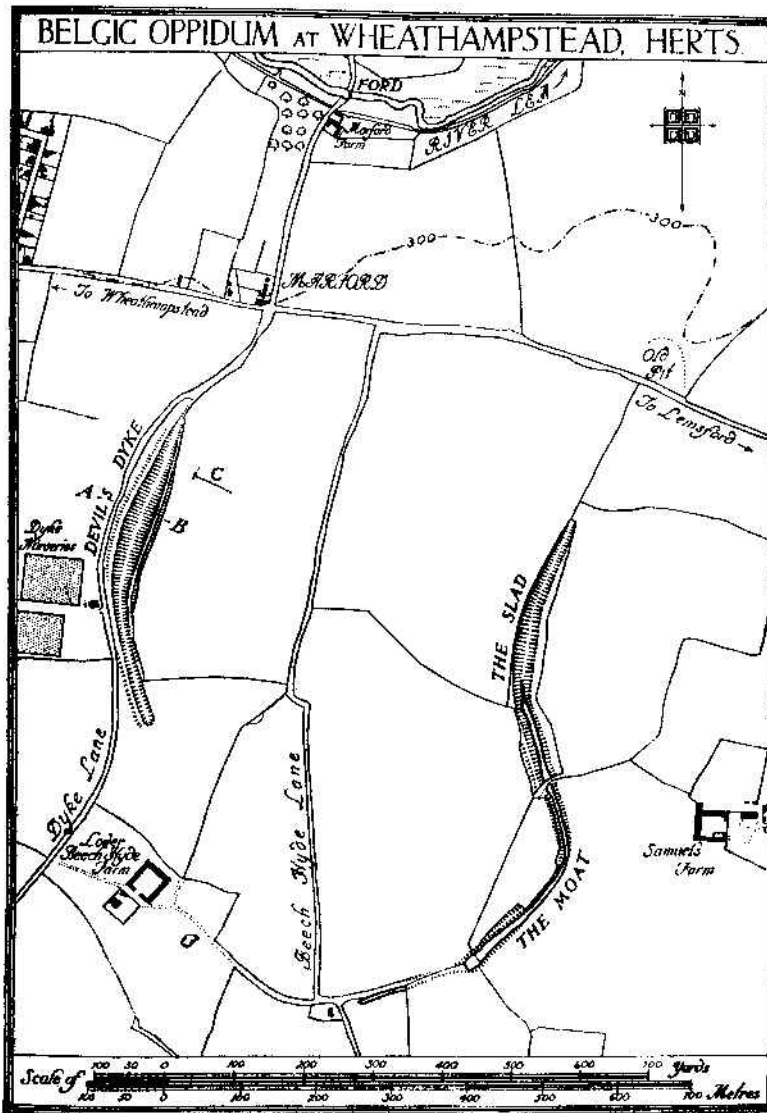
were traces of two shallow ditches and in these sherds of the thick native Iron Age pottery were discovered. No sherd of the imported wine jars or the thin butt beakers found on sites such as Prae Wood near Verulamium and Camulodunum was found. The latter were the urban settlements of the Belgic tribes, the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes that gradually increased and flourished after Caesar's departure. The invasion opened up the market between Britain and the Continent. The temporary inhabitants of Wheathampstead had serviceable pottery, but not the sophisticated variety. This, together with the iron knife, the bronze tweezers and the bronze brooch firmly places Wheathampstead as an early stronghold of the Belgae, the kind of settlement that would be constructed by invaders first penetrating north of the Thames.

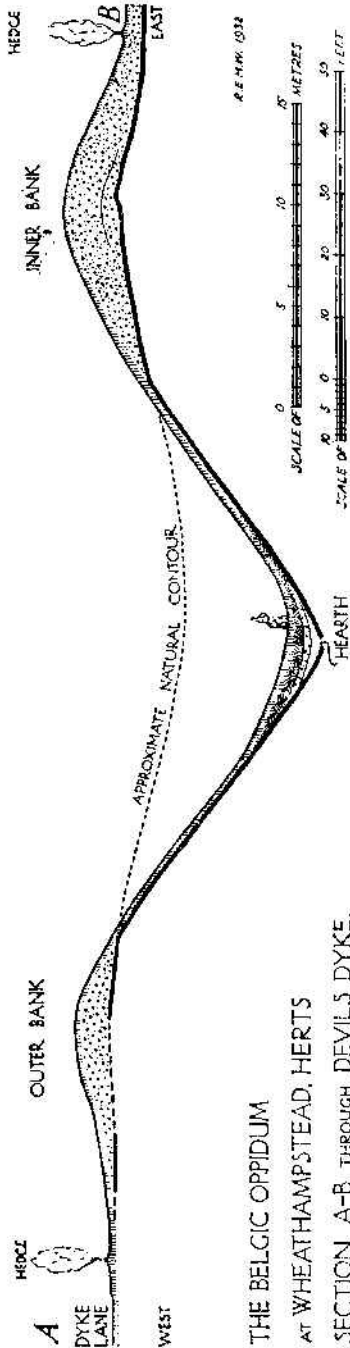
The site has been extensively damaged by modern ploughing and today only two lengths of defence survive. "The Slad" is on the eastern side corresponding to the western section "The Devil's Dyke". Both on a plan (p. 6) would seem to enclose a kidney-shaped 100 acre plateau of boulder clay cleared of trees, $1\frac{1}{2}$ m. east of the modern village, guarding a ford and consequently a strategic track to the north. The entrances, if the fort was never completed — and only excavation in the area where agriculture has now damaged the earthwork will give the answer — would be on the north and south, perhaps guarded with strong wooden towers.

Whether vague traces of the encampment of the Roman army will ever be detected is doubtful, because they would only have been ditches, rectangular in plan, with some form of cover as protection to the entrances. Here, within the wooden palisade fence, the leather tents would be set on the same planned formation as one finds in a military fort later. Modern deep ploughing will have obliterated these traces, small bronze or iron objects from the equipment of this army are the only possibility, and though the Roman soldier on the march looked like a pack-horse, I doubt if much tangible evidence will survive.

The fort or oppidum at Wheathampstead is not isolated. The agricultural area round it was certainly exploited. Scattered native homesteads will be found as field-work and detection improves. The wealth of pottery found scattered in the Mimram valley is an indication of what can be expected.⁽²⁾ The Beech Botton linear earthwork — still formidable at its junction with the St. Albans - Harpenden Road — is a ditch 30ft. deep with the earth also thrown up on both sides, chiefly on the southern side, where it survives to 7ft. and is 35ft. wide. The ditch is 130ft. wide from lip to lip, with

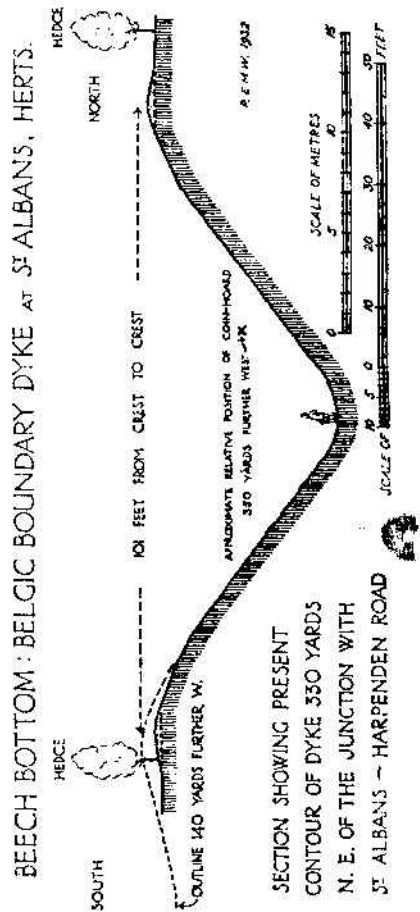
² Rook, A. G., *St. Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society Transactions*. Vol. II forthcoming.





THE BELGIC OPPIDUM
AT WHEATHAMPSTEAD, HERTS
SECTION A-B THROUGH DEVILS DYKE.

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BEECH BOTTOM: BELGIC BOUNDARY DYKE AT ST ALBANS, HERTS.
SECTION SHOWING PRESENT
CONTOUR OF DYKE 350 YARDS
N. E. OF THE JUNCTION WITH
ST ALBANS - HARPENDEN ROAD

Wheathampstead - St. Albans Road enters into the ditch until on No Man's Land Common, where the line is lost, but there is no doubt that it did continue until it reached the oppidum. To the west Beech Bottom continued until it reached the river Ver; its main purpose was to defend the open territory between the Ver and the Lea valleys. Behind Mayn's Farm, north of Verulamium, is another section of the same defence, known here as another Devil's Dyke, not to be confused with part of the fort. Here it becomes part of the complex banks, ditches and dykes of the pre-Roman settlement. No longer can one single enclosure be considered at Verulamium, between 54 B.C. and A.D. 43 the settlement was widely scattered in the valley. The discovery of a hoard of silver Roman denarii, dated to c.A.D. 130, was found by chance when a sewer trench was cut through the Beech Bottom section.⁽³⁾ This was 10ft. above the bottom of the ditch, which proves its pre-Roman date.

Such background evidence is sufficient proof of the intensive activity and occupation in the area during the first century B.C. This would accord with its being an important centre of the tribe, and Wheathampstead its stronghold. But a short distance north of the linear earthwork is The Aubreys with its double ditch — or if critics wish to lean more heavily on a more easterly fort, one nearer to the territory of the Trinovantes and therefore to Caesar's plan of campaign, there is Wallbury Camp, near Bishops Stortford, a much more worthy candidate for the site of the siege and attack. But as Sir Mortimer Wheeler wrote:—

“It is, however, unnecessary to insist upon the hypothetical identification in order to emphasise the interest of Wheathampstead and its environment.”

Wheathampstead is worthy of fuller excavation which will be most useful as an illustration Belgic culture in the area, even if it was never taken by storm by the illustrious Roman General, Julius Caesar.

3 Wheeler Verulamium, A Belgic and Two Roman Cities. P.16.