

A POSSIBLE DANISH SETTLEMENT AT STANSTEAD ABBOTTS

By Vic Roblett [1964]

Introduction by Stuart Moye

In 1964 Vic Roblett a local historian living in Ware at 67 Fanshawe Crescent, put forward his ideas concerning a Danish settlement on top of the hill above Chapelfields, Stanstead Abbots. He approached local historians and archaeologists with his ideas and an article appeared in the Hertfordshire Mercury at the time, which carried the headline "Amateur Historian Thinks He Has Found Danish Settlement". He thought that he had found what might be the Danish settlement mentioned in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle as being 20 miles north of London. Interest in his ideas soon faded having not found favour with those who were interested in the history of the area. He had typed out his ideas and kindly sent the writers Mother, whom he knew was interested in the history of the village, a copy. The original on foolscap sized paper is now faded and not easy to scan. It has therefore been necessary to re type Vic Roblett's article in order to digitise it for the internet age. His article is presented below over half a century after he wrote for the benefit of today's readers.

S. Moye Oct 2017

The Danes Fort Vic Roblett [Written in 1964]

Stanstead Abbots in Hertfordshire, lying on the North bank of the River Lea as it makes its curve from Hertford to its junction with the River Stort, appears to possess a largely undisturbed Saxon Burgh which is so far unrecorded.

This report, being my first incursion into archaeology, must, by the nature of things be incomplete as I have not touched the site at all, because it is far better to leave such things to the experts.

In saying that the site is undisturbed, I mean that it has been undisturbed by modern buildings, although a council estate has been built up to one side of the earth rampart on part of the west side and in doing so has destroyed what might have been an unrecorded saucer barrow. This inside of the Burgh has been farmed and when I last saw it about half was grass and half plough land, although all of it has been under the plough at various times.

The Burgh consists of an area of about 15 acres, roughly rectangular in shape comprising parts of the fields known as Trotters Gap, Garden field and Cross Path Field. It is on the top of the hill above the Lea at the rear of the Mill and School. On two sides and part of a third it is surrounded by an earth bank varying in height from 30 inches to 4 feet, on the remaining sides it has a steep slope made by the earth being brought in from outside in order to raise the ground level of the Burgh.

This earth appears to have been brought to the Burgh from another hill on the side of the Hunsdon Road in a field called the Clay pits... By digging away the side of the hill not only was

enough earth found to raise and level the site but in so doing a dominating hill was moved back and more or less level ground placed between them.

This hill and ditch is on the south east corner of the Burgh. The ditch, which so far as I know has no name, runs parallel between the Hunsdon road and the side of the Burgh, has been deepened and widened to form a moat like obstacle and in places is 20 feet deep with almost sheer faces on the burgh side with a more gentle slope along about three quarters of the height on the outside.

By the north-western side there is another small ditch between the site and another small hill. This is further away from the hill on which the burgh stands and has not been constructed to the same extent as on the south western side. There is another ditch on the northern side, but although this is dug to a depth of about four feet it is farther away and I do not think that this was relied on for protection to the same extent.

On the south western side, which faces the Lea valley, the natural slope, which is quite steep, is surmounted by a steep raised bank varying in height from three feet to about twenty feet in one part opposite the end of the present High street where there is a natural hollow. This bank faces the Lea valley appears to have extended on both sides of the burgh; no more than a few yards to the south -east but nearly a quarter of a mile on the north-west. On this die the bank is also higher, and this may have been as a measure of crop protection from river bourn raiders as the common is situated immediately behind this bank.

The north-western side facing, facing away from the River Lea appears to have less defences in depth than the other sides, seems to have had the highest earthwork, the remains standing about four feet high.

Entrances to the Burgh appear to have been on the west, North and eastern sides. Of these entrances the ones on the west-north entrances seem to have been the main ones. The western entrance overlooks the Lea Valley above the Mill and is known as Trotters Gap. It is about ten feet wide and between thirty and forty feet long running down from the level inside the inside of the burgh to about five feet deep where it goes through the earthwork bank.

Entrance on the eastern side is connected to the western entrance by a public footpath which changes into a bridle path halfway through the burgh, this appears to have been part of a track way running originally from Hertford Heath to Hunsdon.

The opening on the northern side is break in the earth bank about twelve feet wide. This may have been a gateway to the common land which was adjacent to this side, or may have been cut at a later date to facilitate the entry of farm wagons or implements into an adjoining field.

A most interesting cutting is on the south-western side where the perimeter of the burgh is marked by a short steep slope about eight feet high leading to the higher ground on the inside. On the outside of this slope the ground falls away in a more natural slope for about fifty yards leading to a sunken ditch previously mentioned.. This ditch has an almost sheer bank about fifteen feet deep on the burgh side and is about eight feet deep on the other side... Beyond this ditch is a small narrow field bordered by the modern Hunsdon Road... Bisecting this field from the ditch to the road is a cutting, bigger than Trotters Gap, about sixty feet long and twelve feet wide with sides about eight feet high. I cannot find a valid reason for the purpose of this cutting, I presume that originally it brought water from another small brook into the main ditch in order to raise the level of water and it may be that this ditch was cut to prevent any flanking move by attackers coming up the hill at Clay pits and the burgh.

In the site enclosed by the earthworks is a dewpond approximately in the centre. Although this is not fed by any streams and does not appear to be a spring I have never know this pond to dry up.

On the western side above the Lea valley is another hollow which has the appearance of being a moat. Between this hollow and Trotters gap is a grove of trees which may be a burial ground. It is against this western side that a council estate has been built and the saucer barrows were about 100 yards away from the burgh at this point.

The site is crossed by two public footpaths, both running west to east. One has already been mentioned the other running parallel to it further north about 100 yards away with a connecting path joining the two running diagonally across Path Field.

My interest in the village was first formed when I realised that it had, more public footpaths and bridleways than is usual. Many of the bridleways are very well made and appear to have been constructed as roads at some time.

The area above the village is also studded with dew ponds and the only conclusion I can find is that they were originally at or near the site of a prehistoric settlements and that the present footpaths are the remains of the old track ways which that joined them and connected them to the old ford near to the present river bridge.

As previously mentioned the southern footpath can be traced from the resent hill to Hunsdon and Widford and there are places on the route where it does resemble an old track way. Certainly just after the war a very definite resemblance could be seen where it crossed the meadow by Little Briggens Farm alongside the hedgerow. This hedgerow, has unfortunately, since then been uprooted and the two meadows made into one and ploughed so the evidence cannot now be proved.

It is perhaps significant that at the other end of the village a similar track and pathway carries on through St. Margarets and great Amwell to Hertford Heath where a known Belgic settlement was recently discovered.

A further point of interest is that The Holly Cross Road to Ware. This road is known to be an old track way and for much of its way through Ware is still on its original route. Through Stanstead Abbots, however it appears to occupy its third site. The original route appears to have left the present route by a chalk pit at the foot of Widbury Hill goes to the River Ash close to where the present railway bridge is reached. It then fords the river and continues by the side of the river for about 50 yards then climbs the hill and continues along the hill just below the summit and following the natural contours. This can be traced to the kitchen gardens at Easneye when it becomes possibly obliterated when Easneye was built during the C19. It is next traceable near the summit of the slope of Donkey Meadow and can be followed until it reaches the grounds of Warrax. Along this stretch is considerable earthworks previously mentioned as being near to common land. The trackway is traceable on the other side of Warrax at the rear of St. Andrews Church, again near the summit. It then crosses into the bank defences by the style and continues along the edge of the burgh until the Hunsdon road is reached. Here due to the considerable earthworks at Clay pits and later road building at Cats hill all traces have disappeared but it is next plainly visible at Stubbings fields where it continues near the summit and along the side of St. James Church into the farmyard by the spring.

At some time this road was moved to the level ground at the foot of the hill along the line of Thele Avenue coming out by the old Prince of Wales Public House in Cappel Lane. This I believe took place in the C13 when Cappel Lane is suddenly changed to New Road, in the old records. The present site of Cappel lane would appear to have been in use by the middle of the C16 when the Red Lion and the Clock House appear to have been built. It would appear that Roydon Road would have been in use at least as far as Netherfield Lane turning at about the same time as the Almshouses would have prevented road access to Thele Avenue. At this time of course the road would have continued to the rear of the Almshouses as Cats Hill is of later construction.

From the original track ways it can be seen that the village site or burgh was situated astride a crossroads and commanded a ford over a narrow neck in the Lea valley. It was perhaps the first ford in the valley above a possible one at Waltham.

I think that it can be assumed that the movement of the village from its site on the hill into its present position coincided with the movement of the roads and that the movement occurred in two stages. Also what at present seems a long straggling village of the worst "ribbon" type is in fact spread in a semi-circle round the perimeter of the original village.

In an effort to date this original burgh it is perhaps a pointer to remember that the trackway from Hertford Heath through the village to St. James Church follows roughly the line of the present A414 from St. Albans to Chelmsford and on to Colchester and Maldon, and that the main Belgic tribe, The Cantavellauni, built a new capital near Colchester and removed there from their old capital at St. Albans in the region of BC10 - AD 10. This trackway would have been in use before this time. This trackway would then have been an important link between the two places and would almost certainly have been occupied at this time.

Although the track way would have been in use before this time it would not have come into importance much before then due to the nearness of the Icknield way which would have been the main route. We must remember that this area was largely and not easily negotiated. The area of the Lea and Stort Valleys has always formed a boundary between tribal areas kingdoms and shires. We know that in 55BC Essex was occupied by the Trinovantes who received protection from Rome against the Catevellauni occupying Hertfordshire and at the time of the Claudian invasion in 43 AD the Catavellauni had occupied Essex and founded a new capital at Colchester.

After the Norman invasion and occupation the Roman Road system would have eliminated the importance of the site and track way by virtue of the Ermine Street running through Ware and the Stane Street running from Verulamium through Braughing, Bishops Stortford to Colchester. We must not suppose that Stanstead Abbots was neglected by Rome. St James Church has Roman brickwork to be seen in its walls today... This does not mean that the site is of Roman origin, Saxon builders have been known to carry materials great distances from Roman ruins to new sites and this may have occurred here although the site around St. James shows signs of having earthworks.

Another curious feature that appears to have been overlooked is the village mill. This is mentioned in Domesday Book 1086, there seems to be no other site except its present location, yet the Mill does not stand on any river. Water is brought to it by means of a canal nearly three quarters of a mile long and returned to the Lea by means of what be another canal.. This curious feature I have noticed at two other mills on the Lea, at Allenburys at Ware and at Ware Park. Since the provision of canals would require a degree of engineering skills and much labour it suggests another mill was sited elsewhere in 1086, or that it is of Roman origin as I cannot see the Saxons, being a more primitive people would have built the mill on the river.

Probably the reason is that the Romans made use of the Lea Valley for corn growing and the river Lea for the transportation of the product to London. The canals can be explained as useful for both drainage and keeping the main stream free for through barges. Loading and unloading being carried out on the canals. This would seem more probable when one considers the old cut by the Brickfields at Ware.

In the light of these remarks it may be found that the Romans drained the Lea valley in the same way as they drained and used the fens further north. It is believed that the Iceni were used to work the fens after the Boadicea revolt, may not the Trinovantes, who occupied Essex and joined in that revolt used to work the Lea Valley. It is hoped that if the proposed development of the Lea Valley materialises evidence may be forthcoming on that point.

Assuming then that the foregoing may be possible, it can be further assumed that valley drainage would have been neglected after Saxon occupation and that the river and channels would have silted up.

Local tradition has it, and earlier local historians have written that in 895 King Alfred observed that somewhere near to Waltham the river might be obstructed to prevent the Danish fleet getting out and in doing so drained the Le valley.

Might we then assume that what did happen was that the silted drainage ditches were cleared and that the overall river level was reduced? This together with the provision of sluices at Blackwall for holding back the tidal would have produced the desired effect.

In fact quite a few things which older historians have claimed and the modern ones have derided could be explained in this way. We must remember too that up to comparatively recently local populations were rather static and folk tales were passed down over the centuries. This brings one to wonder where the actual location of the Danish camp was in 895. On this point the Anglo-Saxon chronicle states "Before the Winter the Danes who abode in Mercia towed their ships up the Thames and then up the Lea. After the turn of the year {August}, the aforesaid army made a camp by the Lea twenty miles from London. No place name is given but it is significant that the site is said to be exactly twenty miles north of London. At times various places have been put forward as the site of the Danish camp, at present Widbury Hill, just to the east of Ware holds the honour. Widbury Hill is 22 miles from London whereas the burgh at Stanstead Abbots is twenty exactly.

Furthermore if we take Stanstead Abbots as the site of the fort, other geographical points raised by these earlier discredited historians fit into place. Let us take another look at the site of Stanstead Abbots. It will be noted that on three sides its borders are formed by rivers, The Stort, Lea and Ash. We can see that the whole of one side is bordered by the Lea and that at right angles to it is the Stort while the ash running in a half circle round Easneye leaves a relatively small area of high ground between it and the Stort unprotected by water.

On the OS map will be seen earthworks at Widbury, a tumuli at Easneye, there are known earthworks at Stanstead bury and moats at Olives Farm and in a field called Moat field Trefoil overlooking the River Ash where it ceases to be part of the parish boundary. In short there are earthworks of some description circling the village. It can be further noted that the moat above the Ash can be traced through a dew pond to the lake at Bonningtons. At the opposite end of this Lake is an outfall ditch which runs through to the lake at Briggens and from this to the Stort. It is this stream and not the Stort which runs almost parallel with it for a short distance that forms the parish boundary with Roydon. So it can be seen that the village at one time was protected all round by water.

The earthwork at Widbury Hill has been noted and is stated to be the site of the Danish Fort. I am inclined to think that the earthworks here should be regarded like the ones at Claypits with removal of material to build up the hill at Easneye. On the edge of the present wood at North park and along the crest of the hill to Watersplace and onto Mardocks where a trackway overlooking the River Ash runs along a built up embankment.

Further unrecorded earthworks are situated at Atkins field opposite Home farm on the Hunsdon Road. This could possibly be site of the house of the old Newgatelands estate, and it is adjacent to the Hunsdon Road and the old trackway to Hunsdon that ran through the burgh.

The evidence presented here will be enough, I think to suggest that at one time the village was an isolated fortification. This could be the result of purely Danish work at end of the C9 with the Saxons taking over in the early C10, but I do not think this is so. There are two reasons for this

firstly, the Danes were in occupation for not more than a year and although the Danish armies consisted of thousands rather than hundreds and were known to be prodigious workers, I cannot see that even thousands working with little more than bare hands could have completed the earthworks noted in the time, bearing in mind they would have to forage for food and beat off attacks by the Saxons and even king Alfred decided that blockading would be favourable to a direct assault.

Secondly, the Danes when foraging in Saxon England were in the habit of taking over existing fortifications repairing and extending them rather than building new.

However after the Danish troubles of 895/6 and after the death of Alfred we find another entry in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle stating that Edward the elder built a burgh on the north bank of the Lea at Hertford in 913 and later built another on the south bank where Hertford castle now stands. It has also been stated that the forts were to be at the northern end of a chain of forts. It has generally been accepted that the northern burgh was located at Old Cross of Hertford although no traces of it can be found. It must be admitted that the Old Cross area is very built up so that all traces have disappeared.

The Anglo Saxon Chronicle may have referred to Hertford as being the area of Hertford. A remote possibility exists that a stranger to the area mistook Stanstead Abbots for the ford at Hertford but it is only a remote possibility. Conversely if we take it that Stanstead Abbots was included in the area of Dane Law and was in the Mercian kingdom after being recaptured by the Saxons then the Burgh at Stanstead Abbots may have been commissioned not by Edward but by his sister who was Queen of Mercia who also built a range of burghs in collaboration with Edward.

One of the burghs so far undiscovered was called Weredburgh and it is perhaps just coincidence that the Danish camp was situated on Widbury Hill.

One misconception that I would like to correct is that of the village having originated around Stanstead bury and St James's church Although there may well have been a separate settlement here at some time , it is clear that the present village occupied the high ground behind the present site.

If this is so and if my theory of the two crossing track ways are correct then village occupation would have occurred before the Roman occupation of Britain and its close proximity to the common land clearly shows it was the village site in Saxon times.

In view of the circle of earthworks it may well be that the village was the site of a centre of resistance to the invading Saxons by the Romano British as it is well known that they held out for some time in this apart of Hertfordshire. A further point is that the Ermine street ford at ware would be a weak point in the communications to the north and would need to be defended to the last against river born attacks. It should be born in mind that the Ermine Street ford is visible from Trotters Gap and Trotters Gap also has a commanding view of the bend in the river lea valley. And any approaching ships would be visible as far away as Waltham Cross.

As far as I can remember however Hertford castle is not visible from Trotters gap owing to the view being obstructed by Chadwell hill which merely also points to the fact that the Danes and Saxons converted to their own use an existing fortification.

It is hoped that these observations will raise enough interest to mount a further detailed examination by experts and that such an examination will provide answers to the questions now posed.

V. E Roblett 9th December 1964