

“The Six Hills,” Stebenage.—Read Aug. 6th, 1891.

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These artificial mounds have attracted the attention of enquiring minds for many generations. The old antiquaries have noted them, and recorded their conjectures about their origin, and the county historians have written their opinions, but I have not been able to meet with any archæological paper of authority written in recent times.

The reason for the deficiency is probably this—No scientific excavations have been made here during the last half century, and no detailed record exists of earlier explorations. Thus the only evidence on which modern antiquaries rely for dating such works is wanting.

Mr. Thomas Wright, one of the highest authorities, states in his well-known book ‘The Celt, the Roman, and the Saxon,’—“Such mounds must be judged by their contents.” It may be noted also that he takes no notice of mounds raised for any other purpose than that of sepulture. In 1869 he conducted the exploration of a barrow at Knebworth, a mile and a half from this place, and that was found to be sepulchral—I will allude to it again presently.

I have first to mention that the old name of these hills is “The Six Boroughs.” This we learn from the will of the ecclesiastic, Stephen Hellard, whose brass we have seen in the church. He assigned in 1501 for the endowment of the Hospital, “All Souls House,” certain rents in this parish; amongst them one arising from a piece of land called “Six Borough Field,” (Chauncy quotes the document). It is ascertained that this lies on the west side of the road, adjoining these hills. It is now cut off by the railroad. The field clearly is named from the “Six Boroughs,” or Barrows, the medieval appellation of these hills. The word Barrow is a modification of the old English ‘*Borough*’ (*Burrow*), from the Anglo-Saxon *Beorg*, signifying a mound.

The Hospital or Almshouse was situated in “Deadmen’s lane,” about half a mile off (to N.E.) at a place now called Bedewell Plash, which signifies “*The pool of the prayer well or chantry well.*” (There was a chantry.) “Deadmen’s Lane” has, I believe, nothing to do with sepulchral Barrows; it may be connected with burials consequent upon some medieval visitation of pestilence.

We will now look at the hills. They lie on the remnant of an ancient common. The land on the west referred to as "Six Borough Field," was also called "Six Borough Common" (as Mr. Jowitt has kindly informed me). Adjoining it on the south was "Monks-bottom Common." The common was probably once of considerable extent. A tracing from the Ordnance Map, which I have here, shows the position of the hills. We see they are arranged in a straight line, north and south, close to the high road. This, Clutterbuck identifies with the Roman road known as the 'White Way,' which led from Verulamium through Stevenage and Baldock due north to the Roman Station at Sandy in Beds.

The hills may be described as middle-sized Barrows; they are conical, with flattened tops; they are almost uniform in size; they have been somewhat diminished by paring off the turf.

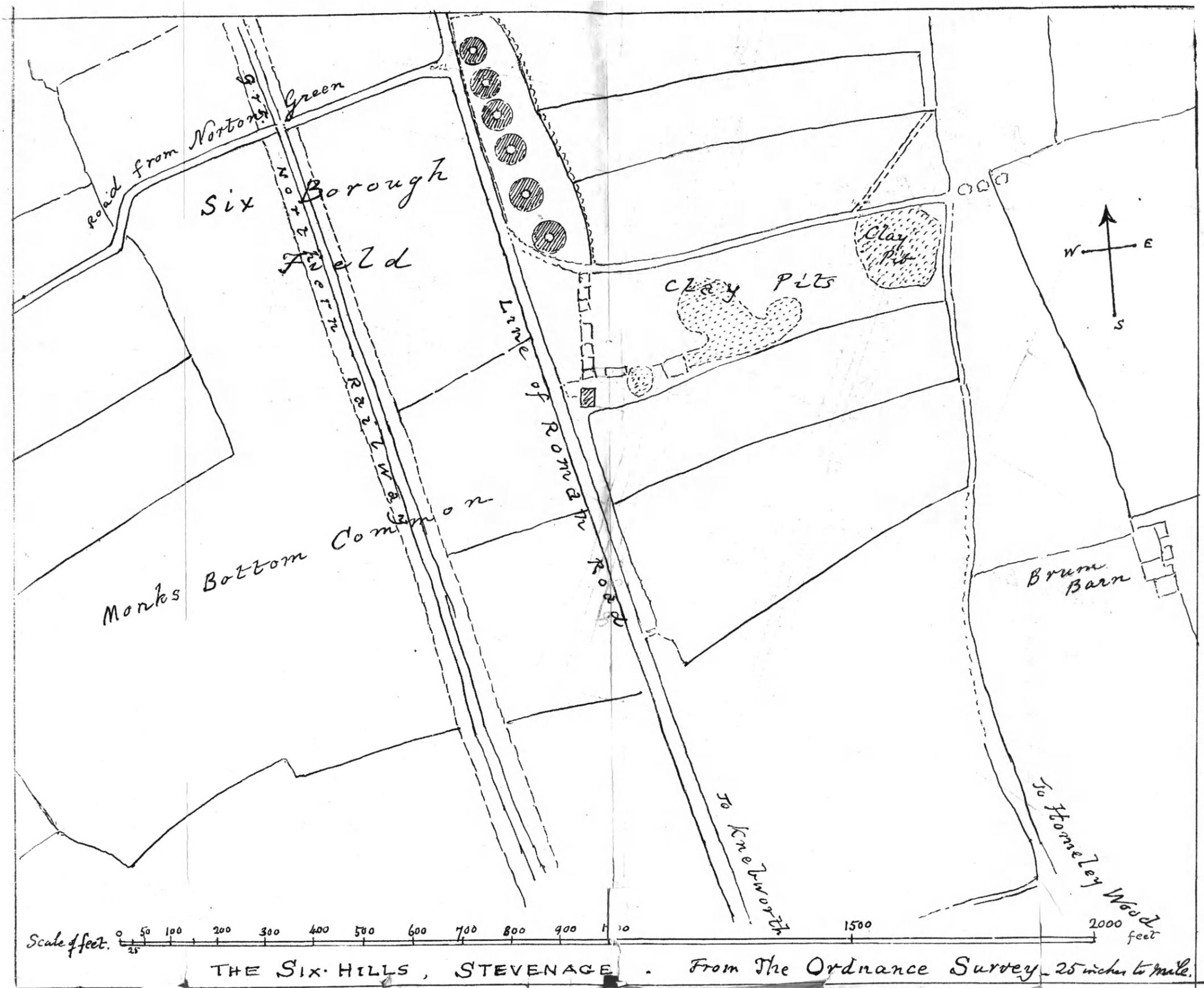
The third hill (reckoning from the north), I have roughly measured. It is about eleven feet in height, and 170 feet in circumference; so the diameter is about 55 feet. It happens to be of nearly the same size as the 'tumulus' at Youngsbury, which we saw last summer. The height of that is 12 feet, and the diameter 60 feet (by Dr. Evans' measurement).

These mounds are not equidistant as they have been stated to be; the space between the 4th and 5th is nearly twice that between the 2nd and 3rd—23 feet and 12 feet. Five of the hills bear traces of having been opened. In the 1st, 2nd, and 4th a shaft seems to have been sunk from the top, where there is a slight depression. The 5th mound has been cut into on the west side, the 6th from the top to the base on the east. The mound (the 3rd) on which we stand is smooth and even: it probably is intact.

The material of the mounds has been proved to be gravel and fine clay. The hollows from which it was dug are not traceable. We are tempted to look towards the clay pits, now filled in, lying near at hand to the south-east, but I am informed they are comparatively modern.

The current report amongst the country people is that the hills were dug out of trenches in Homeley Wood; that is about half a mile to the south-east, on high





THE SIX HILLS, STEVENAGE. From The Ordnance Survey 25 inches to mile.

ground. I had the curiosity to visit the place, having obtained permission. In the wood is a round plot of land, surrounded by a moat, which is full of water. My guide was an intelligent labourer, who has worked on the manor for half a century. He informs me this island is four poles, or about 70 feet, in diameter. He pointed out the site of flint foundations, three or four feet thick, outside the ditch. Bricks of a strange fashion had also being dug up. The place is now covered with a dense growth of horn-beam underwood, which is almost impenetrable. This seems to be the site of some ancient habitation; perhaps a Manor house. The memory of it has been lost. Homeley means, the home pasture. It is the name of an ancient manor (as we learn from Mr. Cussans). In 1309 there was an Ivo de Homlie, who held 140 acres here. He perhaps lived in the island homestead. The manor now belongs to Lord Lytton. The circular moat is a curious matter, but I see nothing to connect it with the Six Hills.

One of the theories suggested by the antiquaries of the last century is that the Hills were territorial boundaries. My remarks on this must be very brief. Little is known about the limits of the Celtic tribes and petty kingdoms previous to the Roman Conquest, but at one period this tract of land lay in the dominion of the Catyeuclani, or Cassii. If such dominions had visible boundaries they would probably be fortified lines, consisting of earthworks and ditches. The Devil's Dyke at Wheathampstead may be taken as a type of such works, or Grime's Dyke, near Berkhamstead. In the Roman period this part of the county was in the province of Flavia Caesariensis, and far away from any of its boundaries. After the Saxon occupation the marches of Mercia were, no doubt, at one time, somewhere in this neighbourhood. I can say nothing about Saxon Boundary Mounds, except that they are ignored by modern antiquaries. We have an authentic specimen of a Saxon military boundary in Offa's Dyke, the line of enormous earthworks and ditches which marked the western limits of his kingdom towards the Walas, or Welsh. With regard to the borders of the Danish territory, these were continually shifting until Alfred the Great established the boundary of the Danish Law by the Peace of Wedmore. This, as is well known, was the river Lea and

Watling-street. The line, therefore, was not here. Because the Hills happen to be ranged in a straight line, it by no means follows that they were intended for boundaries.

I now come to the question: Are these mounds Celtic? As far as their appearance is concerned, I believe they might be. Numerous Celtic Barrows of various heights and sizes have been explored, in Wiltshire for instance by Sir Richard Colt Hoare. They are frequently found in groups; I am not sure that any have been met with arranged in a straight line. However this may be, here we can apply a practical test. The presence of fragments of iron in a barrow may be taken as an indication that it is later than the "Bronze Age," as the period preceding the Roman occupation has been denominated. In an excavation made here in the year 1741 a piece of iron was turned up; this then seems to exclude a Celtic origin. I am taking it for granted that the iron belonged to an original deposit, which is the most probable supposition.

We will now deviate from chronological order and ask: Are they Saxon? The answer I have to suggest is: They are excluded from being Saxon by their height. Those who have read the interesting work, "Inventorium Sepulchrale," edited by Mr Roach Smith, may have noticed that none of the numerous Saxon tumuli explored by Mr. Bryan Faucett, the great pioneer in these matters, exceeded six feet in height. The Saxon barrows, illustrated by Douglas in his celebrated *Nenia Britannica*, are described by him as "Small Barrows in clusters." A few larger Barrows authenticated as Saxon have been met with, but these, we learn from Mr. T. Wright, are isolated mounds and placed on high ground, as some on the Peak of Derbyshire.

Another consideration has occurred to me. The primitive Saxon settlement here was probably on the top of the hill, where the Church of S. Nicholas now is. The church marks the position of the early Christian village, and so of the pagan village which preceded it. I am assuming there was a Saxon church on the same site as the present structure. The heathen cemetery would be close to the settlement, and consequently at some distance from here. I should guess that Lechmore Green, about half a mile to the north, is the site of the

pagan burial ground. The name means, I believe, the "corpse moor." The word *lech* is that which we have in *lich* gate, the *corpse gate*, from the A. Saxon *lic*, a dead body.

The etymology of Stevenage, I believe, throws no light on our subject. *Stigenhught* or *Stigenhaga* means the enclosure by the high road; *stig* is a path, or rather an ascending path; *haga*, a haugh, hedge, or enclosure. Gough's conjecture that the place is named from the Six Hills appears to be founded on false etymology.

Next: are the Hills Danish? I have no remark to offer but this. I have not been able to meet with any Danish Barrows identified as such by modern authorities. They appear to be ignored, as non-existent.

Nothing now remains but to compare these tumuli with examples known to be Roman. The characteristic features here are the arrangement in a straight line, north and south, and the proximity of a Roman road.

The nearest parallel I am able to quote is "The Bartlow Hills."—My information is derived from the *Archæologia*, vol. xxvi. These are in the adjoining county of Essex, close to the borders of Cambs. in the parish of Ashdon, some 30 miles from here, N.E. They consist of seven mounds, arranged in two parallel lines, pointing north and south. The four greater barrows are in one row, the three lesser in another, with an interval of 80 feet between the rows. I have here some diagrams, copied from those in the *Archæologia*. We see the three smaller barrows are uniform in size; they are about the same size as the hills here—ten feet high and 95 feet in diameter. Their height has been reduced by cultivation.

I will first say a word about the larger tumuli. They are truncated cones. The Great Barrow is 45 feet high and 144 feet in diameter. This is the most remarkable monument of the kind in England. The smallest is 18 feet high and 85 feet in diameter. There is a uniform interval of 14 feet between them. Camden had written about these hills.—"The country people say they were cast up after a battle with the Danes, for the dwarf elder hereabout goes by the name of 'Danes Blood,' in memory of the Danes slain here." This is much the same story as is current about the Six Hills, only the plant which yields Danes blood here, we are told, is the

Monk's-hood. [I am taking my information from the pamphlet of Mr. Methold, entitled "Notes on Stevenage and Baldock."]

Well, in 1835 these Barrows were scientifically explored by Viscount Maynard, the owner of the land, and proved to be Roman monuments. In the centre of each, at the ground level, was found a sepulchral deposit, a burial by cremation. Many beautiful sacrificial vessels and other objects were brought to light, among them an iron camp stool—all of Roman character. The tunnel excavated in the Great Barrow is shown in the plan. The exploration occupied ten days. It was found that the sepulchral vessels had been enclosed in a wooden chest, the shape of which was preserved by the clay around it. Some pieces of wood four inches thick remained. In another Barrow an oaken vessel was found entire, while its bronze hoops had almost perished. This survival of wood, buried for so many centuries is very remarkable. It is also to our purpose, because pieces of wood were found here in the mound excavated in 1741. The three smaller Barrows were explored in 1832. They all contained similar deposits of burials by cremation. The numerous objects found are beautifully illustrated in the *Archæologia*. They have since been destroyed by a fire which occurred at Lord Maynard's house. A coin of the Emperor Hadrian, supposed to be the offering for Charon, was taken out of a cinerary urn, from which circumstance the burial has been conjecturally dated, about the middle of the 2nd century. The material of the mound is chalk and clay; the huge pit from which this was dug exists still, close at hand. The road on the west of the cemetery is said to be on the track of a Roman way.

The analogies presented by the arrangement of these Roman monuments are worth considering.

I will now refer to the Roman example at Youngsbury in this county. This consists of two Barrows nearly similar in form and size to these hills. They lie in "Hilly Field," close to a road which Dr. Evans considers to be a branch of the Roman road leading from Ware to Braughin. It is known that it was the practice of the Romans to place their monuments beside a highway, probably for the purpose of their being seen. One of the Youngsbury Barrows was explored in 1829. Clutterbuck tells

us that Roman coins and pottery were found, which proved it to be of Roman origin. The other was scientifically examined, as we know, in June, 1889, by Dr. Evans. The sepulchral deposit was found in the centre of the mound at the ground level. A copy of Dr. Evans' account read before the Society of Antiquaries has been kindly sent to me by Mr. Giles Puller. It contains an excellent illustration of the sepulchral vessels. The urn, or olla, is the largest which has been found in England. The corroded pieces of iron formed the clamps of the wooden *cist* in which the vessels were enclosed. All the contents have been carefully analysed. The burial has been dated approximately about the end of the second century. Dr. Evans conjectures that the tumuli might commemorate a husband and wife. The habitation of this Roman gentleman was very near his monument, for vestiges of it are there still. Mr. Giles Puller has recently discovered foundations of the walls, and he is now engaged in tracing the plan of this Roman villa under the guidance of Dr. Evans.

I have enquired in vain for any Roman vestiges, bricks, or *tesserae*, in this locality. I would suggest that the field on the east side of the road is the place where they should be sought.

I will now return to the Barrow at Knebworth, in the immediate vicinity of the Six Hills. This was opened at the meeting of the British Archæological Association in August, 1869. Mr. T. Wright superintended. The mound was pierced by an excavation from the side. In the centre, at the base level, was found a large mass of stones scattered over with burnt wood; among the ashes were found some human finger bones. (These are now in Lord Lytton's museum.) No urn was met with. It appeared that the Barrow had been raised over the funeral pyre.

Mr. Wright judged this heathen burial to be of the Roman period. The Barrow is of middle size. It is described by Mr. Cussans as a mound similar to the Six Hills. Mr. Cussans also states that it was opened with a negative result. We have seen that the result was positive evidence of a burial by cremation of the Roman era. My account is derived from the *Archæological Journal*, vol. xxvi.

Salmon's conjecture about the Youngsbury Mounds

was that they were "Danish works, set up for victory or terror." This is the same as one of his suggestions about the Six Hills. Of these he also says, "It is hard to make them Roman." We are tempted to remark that this hardness was overcome in the Youngsbury instance; it might possibly be overcome even in the case at Stevenage, if the test of excavation were scientifically applied to the third hill.

This brings me to notice the explorations which have already been made with barren results. The information obtainable seems very meagre. The one and only record, to which I have already alluded, has been often quoted. It is from Gough's edition of Camden's *Britannia* (1789). He says, "Dr. Ducarel and others, Sept. 30th, 1741, opened one of these Hills, which was 14ft. over and 15ft. deep, to the surface of the ground, but found only wood and a piece of iron. The substance was gravel and fine clay." He adds, "An old man in the town remembers the opening of the fourth, and finding nothing."

I have searched Dr. Ducarel's letters, edited by Nichols, for further particulars, in vain. The description of the mound is obscure. Does he mean that the flattened summit was 14ft. in diameter, and the height of the hill 15ft.? If so, the hill must have decreased in size since. The excavation is not described, so we are unable to answer the question—Was the centre of the mound reached at the ground level? Gough does not say which hill was tested. Dr. Ducarel was certainly an antiquary of note in manuscriptal matters, he was also a friend of the explorer, Bryan Fawcett; but 1741 seems too early a date for the scientific investigation of Barrows; it was 20 years before Fawcett commenced his explorations, and 40 years before the appearance of Douglas's "*Nenia Britannica*." In the absence of details it would not be safe to attach much importance to the negative results of his excavation.

The positive results, trifling as they appear, may have the significancy which I have indicated. Fragments of wood and iron are strongly suggestive of a sepulchral deposit. The deposit was not found. Was the failure due to the inefficiency of the excavators, or to the fact that the mound had been ransacked by earlier explorers or searchers for treasure?

With regard to other attempts, of which the mounds bear the traces, no date or names of the explorers seem to be forthcoming, with one exception. I have learnt from an agricultural labourer, who has lived by the Six Hills over 70 years, that cuttings were made in the northernmost mound about 60 years ago (say in 1830). He remembers the occurrence. According to his account the digging was not made for exploration, but for the purpose of widening the road. This hill is nearer the road than the others. However this may be, the work of mutilation was happily stopped, and the mound made up by the direction of Mr. Richard Whittington, an influential inhabitant of the town, and a vigilant parochial authority.

All who take an interest in the prehistoric national monuments will be grateful to him. These barrows, we are glad to learn, are now under the protection of the Local Board. They are in the manor of the Bishop of London, which once belonged to the Saxon kings. As far as I can ascertain, no excavations have been made since 1830, or about that date. Can we accept the statements of the county historians that these mounds have been proved to be non-sepulchral. The analogies which we have been considering point in the direction of their being sepulchral, and also Roman. I had formed this view before I applied to the President of the Society of Antiquaries for the favour of his opinion. Dr. Evans has most obligingly written to me in reply. He says: "Camden regards the Barrows as Roman, and I think rightly. There is little doubt they are sepulchral."

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