



ST ALBANS & HERTFORDSHIRE  
Architectural & Archaeological Society

We are grateful to the Society of Antiquaries for their permission to re-publish the photographs of the Devil's Dyke excavations.

[www.stalbanshistory.org](http://www.stalbanshistory.org)

May 2015



THE DEVIL'S DYKE, WHEATHAMPSTEAD



[By permission of the Socy. of Antiqs. of London.  
INNER OR EASTERN SLOPE OF THE WHEATHAMPSTEAD *oppidum*.  
The three men mark the foot, middle and top of the slope

## The Devil's Dyke, Wheathampstead

BY R. E. M. WHEELER, D.Lit., V.P.S.A.

**I**N 1937, to commemorate the Coronation, Lord Brocket dedicated as an open space in perpetuity that part of his property which includes and separates the Devil's Dyke and the Slad, two lines of entrenchment overlooking the River Lea at Wheathampstead, Herts. In doing so, he was performing a service of more than local importance; he was preserving a substantial fragment of our national history. For whether these earthworks are or are not the vestiges of that stronghold where Julius Caesar won the final conflict in his invasion of 54 B.C.—and there is at present no rival claimant to this distinction—there is no doubt as to the prime importance of the site in or shortly after Caesar's time. Let us glance at the known facts.

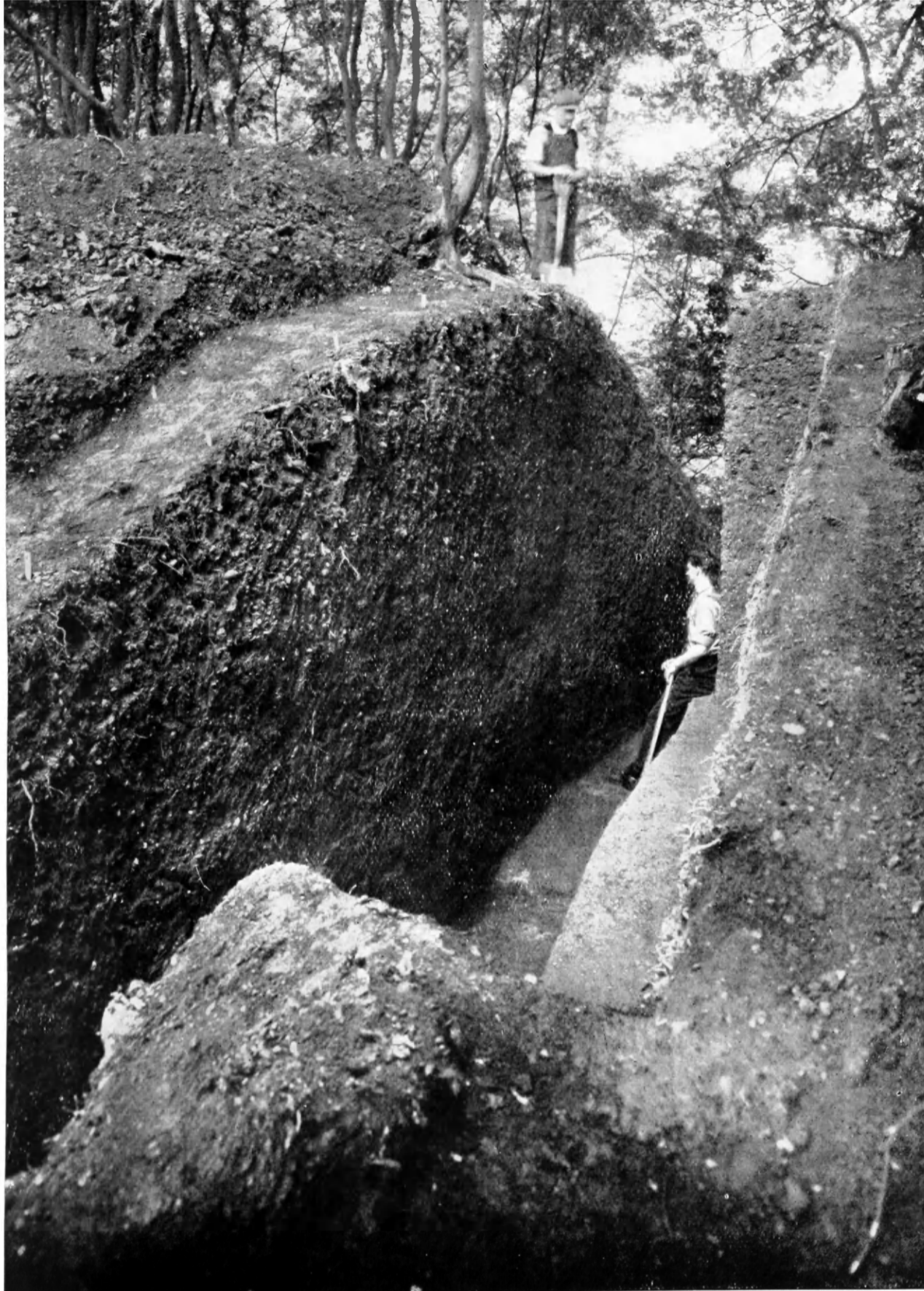
The Wheathampstead Devil's Dyke and the Slad (i.e., ditch or dyke), with a combined length of about 1,300 yards, partially enclose an area of about ninety acres at a point where the plateau flanking the Lea begins to drop to an ancient ford, beside Marford Farm. Whether the enclosure was at one time completely framed by ditch and rampart, or whether the Slad and the Devil's Dyke were formerly linked and extended by living forest and marsh, can only be determined by excavation; but a combination of natural with artificial obstacles would accord with Caesar's own description of the British towns which he encountered, and is here not unlikely. The two existing lines of entrenchment themselves owe something to nature, since, at their most expansive points, they represent the deepening of shallow valleys. Even so, they are constructionally on a large scale. The Devil's Dyke, in particular, owes the greater part of its 120-foot breadth and 40-foot depth to the work of man. It is flanked on both sides by ramparts, but the eastern, 50 feet wide, is the larger and leaves no doubt as to which way the dyke was designed to face.

In 1932, with the generous permission of the late

Lord Brocket, the Verulamium Excavation Committee carried out some trial-excavations in and adjoining the Dyke. It was led to do so by certain unexplained features of the Verulamium complex and, in particular, by the imposing stretch of entrenchment in Beech Bottom on the northern outskirts of St. Albans. The lucky discovery of a hoard of second-century Roman coins high up in the filling of this entrenchment combined with other factors to indicate a pre-Roman date for the work, and brought it into probable relationship with the pre-Roman (Belgic) earthworks then under examination at Verulamium itself. But between the Verulamium earthworks and the Beech Bottom dyke was one important difference—the great size of the latter (100 feet across). In this respect, and in its general design, the Beech Bottom dyke presented the same distinctive features as the Wheathampstead dykes some  $2\frac{3}{4}$  miles away—so much so that it was fair to assume that the builders of the one were also the builders of the others. Hence, as a by-product of the Verulamium excavations, it became necessary to ascertain the date and general character of the Wheathampstead group, and this, so far as the immediate problem was concerned, the excavations of 1932 proceeded to do.

The results of these excavations have been published in *Antiquity*, VII (1933), pp. 21 ff., and in the *Verulamium Report* (Society of Antiquaries of London, 1936), pp. 16 ff. A wide cutting across the Devil's Dyke itself revealed on the original bottom of the ditch, underneath the rapid silt, a hearth containing a sherd of prehistoric fabric, wheel-turned and therefore Belgic. This sherd from its position must have been dropped during or very shortly after the construction of the Dyke. On the other hand, the complete absence of any human material in either the internal or the external rampart suggested an absence of previous occupation on the site. Near the line of the Devil's Dyke and on the inner side of it, a series of exploratory trenches uncovered two small drainage-ditches of a kind familiar at Belgic Verulamium, Belgic Colchester and elsewhere. These ditches contained a mass of Belgic pottery, together with a La Tène III

THE DEVIL'S DYKE, WHEATHAMPSTEAD



[By permission of the Socy. of Antiqs. of London.  
CUTTING THROUGH THE INNER BANK OF THE WHEATHAMPSTEAD *oppidum*.



brooch and other minor objects. This mass of pottery—representing the very fragmentary vestiges of perhaps some 500 or 600 vessels—gives the clue to the date of the work.

By contrast with the Belgic pottery-groups both at Verulamium and at Colchester it was at once apparent that the Wheathampstead series was entirely lacking in one significant feature: namely, that admixture of imported Roman fabrics or of imitations of Roman types which is a notable feature of Belgic sites dating from the first half of the first century A.D. It is impossible at present to say precisely at what date this Classical "dilution" is to be expected in any particular area of Belgic Britain; but the Italic or Arretine forms which are a dominant factor in the "dilution" were evolved within the last quarter of the first century B.C., and their presence in north-western Europe is therefore to be expected at any time from the end of that century until they were replaced towards the middle of the first century A.D. At Wheathampstead it is at any rate reasonable to infer that the main occupation belongs to the first century B.C. rather than to the subsequent decades.

At present the Wheathampstead site is indeed the only extensive settlement in this country which has produced Belgic pottery of so consistently early a kind. This fact, combined with the unusually formidable character of the defences, may be taken to indicate that the *oppidum* was built during the early part of the Belgic occupation of south-eastern Britain, in or about the second quarter of the first century B.C., at a time when the Belgic invaders were still strangers in a strange land and were living under "active service" conditions. The later and comparatively insignificant fortifications of Belgic Verulamium illustrate the sequel—the comparatively peaceful environment of a population which by the time of kings Cassivelaunus and Cunobelin, in the first century A.D., had settled down in, and had become a part of, the English landscape.

Such is the outstanding position of the Wheathampstead site in the last phase of British prehistory. The



public-spirited action of Lord Brocket has raised the hope that the preliminary excavations of 1932 may before long be followed by a more adequate exploration of the site. Where (if this was the *oppidum* of Cassivelaunus in 54 B.C.) was the royal palace of Caesar's redoubtable opponent? Of what sort were the huts of his subjects? Was the whole of the great area between the dykes occupied by them? And what was their mode of life—as farmers, what was their equipment; as traders, what were the goods wherein they trafficked? These questions and others like them are of more than academic interest to those of us who are concerned with our heritage, and this note may therefore appropriately end upon a word of hopeful anticipation.