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by W. St. C. Baddeley
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THE BATTLE OF DYRHAM A.D. 577

by St. Clair Baddeley

THERE can be no doubt that the fierce struggles between the West Saxon and Angles for possession in the South Midlands when these culminated A.D. 560 in the supremacy of Ceawlin as king of Wessex formed the solid preliminary to his and Cynric's combined victory over the Britons at Bedcanford in 571. Tactical and other experiences thus profitably gained, forthwith enabled him to shape West Saxon ambitions in a far-reaching determinate manner, especially in regard to the upper Thames and the obviously rich possessions of the old British towns of Severn-land, beyond. For that victory not merely had ruled out the Britons at Bedcanford (a powerful centre evidently), but at Ailesbury, Bensington, and Eynsham, dominating Berkshire and Oxfordshire territories. As the West Saxons a little earlier had already seized Old Sarum, and from that place had captured Beranbury, or Barbury camp, upon the stern downland toward Swindon, there could now follow a vital linking-up of forces and communications so as thoroughly to foreshadow their long dreamed of western objective.

Probably, from British outlaws, prisoners, professional spies or scouts, and speculative Saxon colonists, sound information henceforward poured in giving details as to the state of the ancient roads, the comparative population and conditions of Bath, of Glevum, and Corinium; and also of the rivalries of their respective Celtic kings.

Of these towns we may premise a few facts. Bath, though protected by late walling and strong outposts upon its North-Stoke and Sulisbury sides, was by much the smaller of the three. Corinium, which, owing to Roman

mastery of the flooding-powers of the river Corin or Churn, had been the largest by far of them, had shrunk (owing to loss of that official control), up on to the securer high ground now represented by the northwestern half of Cirencester, centred by the parish church. Its population, in case the available defenders should temporarily be drawn far away out of it, would be at the mercy of the victor in case of defeat. With Glevum (or Gloucester), the case was certainly different. The population may even have been large and fairly thriving. Cattle, fish, timber and minerals gave it natural superiority. But it lay far away down on the Severn-side.

We can, however, even thus but dimly guess at the quality of the information that was available as to these British centres and their post-Roman reversion to local Celtic kinglets bearing suspiciously Hibernian-sounding names—by noticing how more and more decided and uninterrupted must have become the West-Saxon trend westward toward them along what was to prove the highway of Conquest. The turn of those yet unencountered little Severn-kingdoms was obviously well-nigh at hand. We need not doubt that they were fully aware of it. Their proven coalition, so obviously un-Celtic, and so equally obviously due to an unextinguished Roman tradition—points to such a conclusion, and it forms a very notable historic feature.

If the host of Saxon Ceawlin counted upon their lack of unity, or upon one or other of the three keeping behind its camp walls and ditches, it was committing a blunder. But it would not have been warrantable to take this for granted. What, no doubt, the Saxon leaders did count reasonably upon was a far simpler feature of the probabilities.

Those three once-Romanized Celtic towns were topographically so variously situated as to form an elongated triangle having a northwest narrow base-line of but sixteen miles from Glevum up to Corinium: while the

two long sides of it, extended from these upon Bath of the Hot-springs at respectively 34 and 27 miles across very different country.

Apparently, the decision at Beranbury amounted to this :—Capture and occupy some reliable stronghold upon the neighbouring escarpment of the Severn-vale defensible against necessarily-neighbouring Bath, while cutting off her forces from their northern allies, and thus compelling them respectively to throw a British victory entirely upon the hazard of the latter effecting a punctual and well-timed union of all their three armies in the neighbourhood of what proves to have been Hinton-Dyrham. For, it is to be inferred that nothing save such a masterly manoeuvre on the part of those of Glevum could effect this; and even if it was actually so carried through they would face an uphill battle at the end of their trying march.

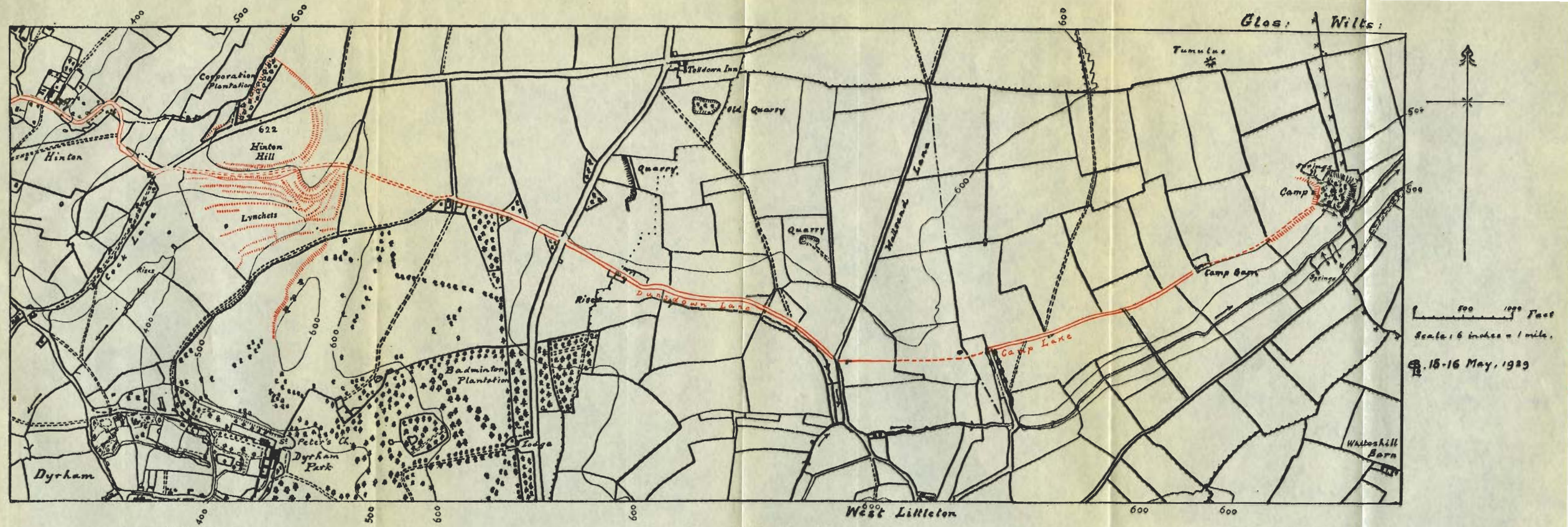
To recapitulate, then. Ceawlin's choice of Hinton camp above Dyrham upon the 600 ft. escarpment was evidently no haphazard venture, but a well matured decision. From various points of view it could not have been bettered. There, then, crossing the Foss-way, and capturing the valuable springs northeast of West Littleton, on the way, the great Saxon challenge was given by the occupation of an ancient (possibly ill-guarded) stronghold at Hinton. Consequently, granted that this offensive became responded to by a united British attack, it followed that the Bath contingent and its leader would have to wait behind their defences, while that of Corinium would soon be tramping the Rodmarton-Chavenage, Badminton and Doddington uplands for close upon thirty miles. The Glevum commander or king, however, would of necessity cope with a far more difficult task. He and his army would have to thread the vale forests, cross its streams, avoid its marshes, for more than even that distance, and finally have to give war to the death to an enemy of unknown strength elated with successive bloody victories over their British kindred tribesmen out eastward.

It is highly to their credit and honour that, from the enemy's own account—brief as that is—all three forces of the British seem to have fulfilled at all costs their own concerted design; albeit, for some reason only to be guessed at, it most terribly failed.

Let us, therefore, remark here that this camp (or *position*, rather than camp) at Hinton, at 621 ft. above the sea, happens to command not merely a magnificent extent of Severn and Avon territory, but actually rules the watershed, including the copious springs of tributaries both of the Boyd and Avon. These two sets of springs, but a mile or more apart, an ancient war-path (known as Dunsdown-lane today) passing directly from the Wiltshire boundary above West Littleton to Hinton village and Pucklechurch (skirting round the south flank of this camp), purposely connects. Their waters were already sufficiently of value in those days to be guarded by a special outpost; traces of which are indeed seen, though not quite where the O.S. has placed them. The said springs beyond Littleton are marked upon it as a camp, whereas they lie just east adjoining the camp or outpost. They ultimately flow to the Box brook and so to Avon. Now, beside them and that former camp the visitor cannot fail to mark a singular straight and ancient stream-bed sheltering only sloping pastures, and today exceedingly lonely.

An armed force of men from the Swindon hills could, by keeping to this treeless stream-bed, escape easy notice, and pass westward for some distance direct toward Dyrham or Hinton camp. It might mask a whole battalion bent upon such an objective as surprising an ill-guarded camp on the neighbouring escarpment of the Cotteswolds.

But there is now another point of importance to notice. It is this. Both the aforesaid outpost next the springs and the main position at Hinton, have been purposely fashioned by their makers facing against the south east-and-west, that is, against any attack from Bath. But it



24 miles due east to Barbury
4 " " " Foss-way

Presumed 'war-path' (shown in red) from eastward

Based upon the Ordnance Survey Map, with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office

John Bellows, Gloucester

facing p. 98

was *not*, we think, the West-Saxon who thus (out of apprehension) made either of these 'positions' or entrenchments. They antedate him. They must, however, have served his needs admirably.

Next, we have but to look down and across the wide combe or gully between the Hinton camp and the Park-wall of Dyrham for about three hundred yards to recognize (as our maps show) that it abounds in long lynchets (or cultivation-terraces) that must have taken generations of ploughing to establish there. But there is more than that. By the slanting light of afternoon or of early morning, will easily be detected regular, large, rectangular enclosures of a specially Celtic type, in no wise related to later Saxon furlongs or plough-strips.

All this surely informs us that other folk long before the West-Saxons lived here, knew the merits of this position, and, indeed, must have fully farmed and defended it. It belongs, at least, to the Iron Age. The camp, above, when complete, included 21 of our acres, and its mound (or *vallum*), until two centuries ago, continued across the present road from Toll-down into yonder field, where it has been deliberately ploughed out, leaving, however, still surviving the sharp bottom-edge of its single ditch; while beyond that, the vallum has been pulled down and strewn about so as to accommodate the Bristol Plantation along the escarpment.

But the reinforcing of the fine position did not stop there! If we come to close quarters with the 500 ft. escarpment we shall notice that its first natural drop of (about) 20 ft. has been artificially sharpened all the way along northward for a space. If, therefore, we take the contour of the whole terminal plateau towards Bath we shall find, without doubt, that the entire *terrain* of Hinton-Dyrham and the defended springs aforesaid, has been 'engineered' so as to maintain the plateau both north and west against (not *for*) the people of the Avon and Severn valleys—*i.e.*, to southeast and southwest.

Consequently, the West-Saxons of A.D. 577 were, we hold, readily aware of the valuable nature of the stronghold and springs which they seized and occupied around and above Dyrham. They may have repaired the mounds and ditch, but they did not *create* them: they possibly may have found them feebly garrisoned by agriculturists and farmers who probably, for the most part, fled to tell the tale of terror at Bath and down in the wooded vale. Their cattle were perhaps the first prey of the spoilers.

There will consequently have ensued some serious if brief interval utilized by the British chiefs in devising that certainly non-Celtic and obviously traditional Roman manner of meeting such a crisis—namely, by uniting in one simultaneous overwhelming attack upon the invader and driving him out, and, if possible, annihilating him—that is to say, cooperative, whole-heartedly, in a common task of skilled Victory. That means (as was before hinted), Cirencester would come down to meet Bath and Gloucester would come across the Severn vale for the same purpose, avoiding bogs, swollen streams, and denser forests.

To the Celtic mind such a fine (even heroic) scheme of patriotism would have had much to commend it; but, quite apart from this, it was the only thing to be done! At any cost, saving desperate defeat, the enemy must be expelled!

On the other hand, except for sanguinary local tiffs with rival tribesmen, the kings of Glevum and Bath were probably unused to very critical warfare; far less were they tuned to the ardours of successive triumphs as was their fierce West-Saxon enemy. But there were two especial points of peril in this risky situation. The numbers of the Saxon host, presumably, were unknown, while a synchronistic combination by the three British forces was an absolute necessity, however hardly it was to be achieved. Anything like the accidental delay of a day on the part of the Gloucester (or Glevum) force in arrival there would wreck the chances of British success, or at least cause

tragical trouble. The brunt of the fray had to be borne, and, in some manner we cannot precisely know how, it *was* borne by all three sections, whether united or piecemeal.

What, then, happened? With a brevity born of complete satisfaction, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* merely states: 'Cuthwine and Ceawlin fought with the Brettas. Three kings were slain, Commagil, Condidan, and Farinmagil, at the place called Deorham, and three cities were taken, Gloucester, Cirencester, and Bath-Chester'.

Thus, at the one historic blow delivered here, the south-western Britons became severed once-for-all from Cambria, or Wales, saving by sea: even as but a little later (A.D. 613) the Northumbrian capture of Chester separated Cumbria:—or the two western limbs from the Celtic body. From the Severn to Kent the Saxon now became lord, although the mining Mendips and the Forest of Dene remained British for many generations to come. This is what Dyrham decided.