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Hut Sites on Selsley Common near Stroud

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HUT SITES ON SELSLEY COMMON, NEAR STROUD

by H. S. GRACIE

REPORT ON THE MEDIEVAL POTTERY

by G. C. DUNNING, F.S.A.

SELSLEY Common is a nearly level plain of about 100 acres lying above the 600 ft. contour and bounded on all sides by steep slopes except for a narrow neck which connects it with the higher land to the south. It is about 2 miles sw. of Stroud and 10 miles s. of Gloucester.¹ An earthwork consisting of a low bank and ditch straggles across it, and to the north of this there were a number of the familiar bunkers formerly thought to be pit-dwellings. The Toots Long Barrow dominates the scene, and from it there is an uninterrupted view westwards to the Severn.

In the autumn of 1942 the County War Agricultural Executive Committee began to cultivate as much of the Common as had been left by the quarrymen. The plough was first taken over the earthwork, tipping the turf into the ditch. A like office was then performed for the bunkers, after which the whole area was ploughed normally. At this stage the writer was able to spend three weeks in the district and undertook a hurried survey. It is feared that the only traces left of the earthwork will be cropmarks and these should not be confused with those created by a number of anti-aircraft ditches dating from 1940. The Long Barrow fortunately escaped damage.

Examination of the surface showed that the area to the south of the earthwork had been cultivated before, with the exception of a small patch at the sw. corner. The remainder, previously undisturbed, was very rough and stony. A number of patches

¹ 6-inch o.s. Gloucestershire, Sheet 49 N.W. and N.E. National Grid Reference, 32/827030.

of charcoal were revealed, each about 30 ft. in diameter and generally circular, though a few were distinctly oval. These were obviously the sites of huts or shelters. Extra heavily burnt patches indicated hearths, usually placed rather to one side, one, or occasionally two, in each hut. Every hut yielded potsherds, which in some cases could be pieced together into quite large portions of the original pots. Mr G. C. Dunning, F.S.A., has very kindly drawn and described the pottery and his report forms the second part of this paper. All the pots are local types confined to the area between Oxford and Bristol and can be dated to the middle of the 13th century by a coin found in association at Stratton St. Margaret, Wiltshire. Other finds from within the huts were a pebble $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. in diameter from No. 3, a stone hone, hollowed on both sides, from No. 20 and a few scraps of burnt bone. There were also three flints which were assumed to date from an earlier period, the plough having passed just under the floors. Very little pottery was found in the area between the huts.

Thirty-one huts are shown on the map (FIG. 1). These include only the very definite ones. Slight traces of charcoal here and there may indicate others and there may have been many more across the earthwork and to the north; all traces of which have been destroyed by the former cultivation or by quarrying. If the whole area had been occupied there might have been 70 or 80 huts in all, sufficient to accommodate a thousand men. Nos. 10, 11 and 12 are on the edge of the ploughed land and only partly disturbed. It is hoped that one of these may be excavated at a future date. No. 8, lying in a slight dip, has been covered to some extent by silt and may not have suffered so much destruction as the others.

The extraordinary lack of finds in the camp, other than the remains of cooking-pots, can only mean a very short occupation. The quantity of charcoal therefore must have arisen from the destruction of the huts themselves by fire. Only in two cases are the sites less than 30 yards apart so it seems probable that this destruction was deliberate, rather than an accidental conflagration. The evacuation also must have been deliberate

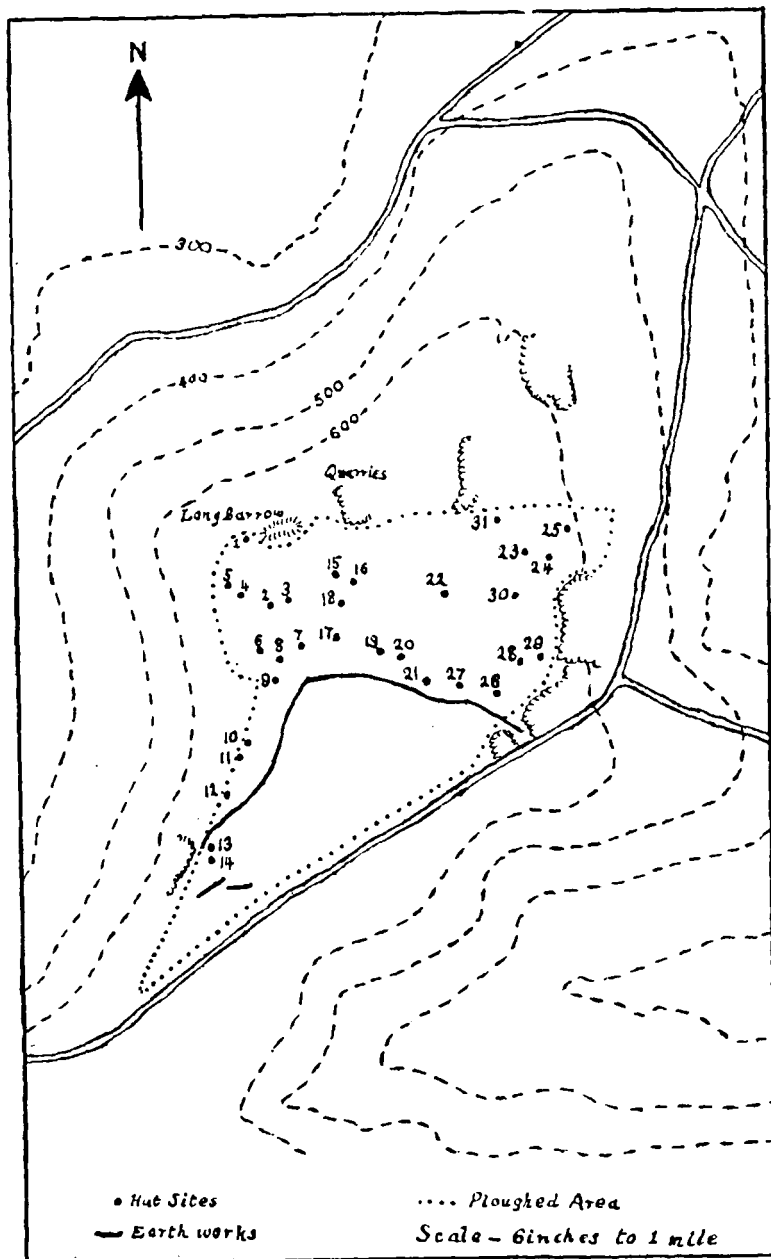


Fig. 1. Slesley Common—Medieval Hut Sites

and not a hurried departure on the arrival of an enemy. The woody nature of the charcoal suggests that the huts were made of the branches of trees.

Without further material from excavation it is not possible to say with certainty what was the purpose of this temporary camp. War with the Welsh Marchers was carried on sporadically throughout the 13th century, but we read of concentrations of troops in the Gloucester district in 1233 against Pembroke and again in 1265 during the Barons' War. Another possibility is that the camp was set up by refugees from the unusually severe floods in the Severn valley in 1257. The careless handling of crockery and its discarding within instead of without the dwellings together with the destruction by fire point to the soldier rather than the housewife. The year 1233 would seem to be rather early for the type of pottery and the orderly withdrawal suggests the victors. It is therefore probable that we have here the remains of a temporary bivouac used by the troops of Prince Edward in the summer of 1265 before the battle of Evesham.

The part of the campaign that concerns us begins with the escape of Prince Edward on 28th May, 1265, from Hereford where he and the King were being held by Simon de Montfort. Edward joined the Earl of Gloucester at Ludlow and immediately seized all the bridges over the Severn above Gloucester. They reached Gloucester on 14th June and quickly took the town though the castle held out until the 29th. There followed much manoeuvring west of the river in which the Royalists, though unable to bring de Montfort to battle, were successful in preventing his crossing the Severn. By 20th July they were back in Worcester and holding the whole line of the Severn. Early in August Prince Edward made a quick dash to Kenilworth to defeat Simon's son, but, on his return, found that Simon himself had crossed the river at Kempsey in his absence. He marched at once and on 4th August defeated the Barons utterly at Evesham. A fuller account of the campaign is given by Professor F. M. Powicke in 'King Henry III and the Lord Edward.'

Edward's strategy seems to have been to prevent de Montfort's joining his son and to defeat them separately. By holding the Severn crossings he kept the father to the west and when the son approached from the east was able to defeat him. The final battle followed two days later. It was vital that the Severn should be held throughout its length and we know that Edward held all the bridges. He also had two or three war galleys which patrolled the lower reaches and successfully prevented the men of Bristol from sending vessels to ferry the troops across. The stretch between Gloucester and the naval patrol area would have been guarded by troops since the river is fordable at low water at Frampton and possibly elsewhere between there and Gloucester. No doubt sentries would be posted at various points along the river and Selsley Common is an ideal base for the supporting force. It lies on the lateral line of communication along the hill road from Gloucester to Bristol and is at the head of a gravel ridge providing a good route from the escarpment to the Severn at Frampton six miles away.¹ In fact this is the only continuous gravel path below Gloucester across the clay of the valley. A piece of identical pottery from Frampton suggests a connection between an outpost here and the reserves at Selsley. If the camp were used for this purpose the maximum period of occupation would be from 14th June to 4th August—a short enough period to conform with the lack of finds other than pottery. A further connection between the pottery and the Barons' War is to be found at Faringdon Clump which Mr Bruce Mitford suggests could belong to the campaign of 1265.²

Professor R. F. Treharne, who was good enough to comment on the problem of the camp, agrees that this is the most probable solution. He informs me that there is no official written evidence, but points out that none could be expected as the Chancery were at that time taking orders from de Montfort. Edward was technically a rebel and his written orders would find no place in the Royal archives. Historical

¹ C. I. Gardiner, *Proc. C.N.F.C.*, vol. xxvi, 1938, p. 271.

² *Oxoniensia*, vol. iv, 1939, pp. 143-4.

corroboration could only be obtained by the almost miraculous survival of a private document.

The earthwork is drawn on the 6-inch Ordnance map as a field boundary and is probably nothing more. It is not big enough for defence and has an unusual re-entrant angle; also part of it at the sw. end has its bank along the brow of the hill and its ditch above it. The stones in the bank are such as would have come from a depth of less than 2 feet, indicating only a shallow ditch. The earlier cultivation comes up to it but does not appear on the other side. Near the angle a weak hut site appears to pass under the bank, which would date its construction at some time after the 13th century. This, together with the siting of Nos. 13 and 14 south of the bank but in the small uncultivated patch, shows that it was not connected with the Medieval camp. In fact it was probably thrown up as a fence when it was decided to cultivate the SE. portion of the Common. Traces of a further earthwork at the neck of high land at the southern end of the Common are mentioned by Playne.¹ These were still visible in 1942 and are marked on the map (FIG. 1). They were not well enough defined for any conclusions to be drawn.

The bunker-like mounds and depressions were very numerous and the huts of the camp were fitted in between them, frequently touching but never covering them. Playne in the article cited above, mentions upwards of 130, all within (i.e. to the north and west of) the earthwork. He would have said 'outside' had he regarded the earthwork as the boundary of the southern field instead of that of a northern camp. Page² states that three of them were opened by Playne and himself and in each case they 'found enough charred wood and burnt stone to show that a fire had been made there, at the *end* of the depression' (my italics). These remains may well have belonged to the Medieval huts which often abut on the so-called pit-dwellings and they are the only ones ever revealed by excavation. Mrs

¹ *Proc. C.N.F.C.*, vol. v, p. 286.

² *Trans. B. and G.A.S.*, vol. v, p. 36.

E. M. Clifford¹ examined similar formations on Rodborough common and concluded that they were the work of nature, the result of solifluxion. Mr Thomas Hay² disputes the solifluxion theory and restates Canon Greenwell's tentative suggestion that they might be cemeteries of the prehistoric common man. The material in the exposed mounds on Selsley is quite different from that of the bank of the earthwork and from that of the cairns of the long and round barrows in the neighbourhood. It is much more solid and tightly packed giving strong indications of natural formation rather than human construction.

Witts refers to the whole complex of earthwork and bunkers as a British Camp (Camp 90); but he appears to base his conclusions on the evidence of Playne. A re-entrant angle is most unusual in such constructions and the arm of the earthwork running sw. along the brow of the hill would be useless for defence from the NW. and unnecessary if attack were expected from the SE. In any case, whatever the origin of the bunkers, they and the earthwork were certainly not contemporary, nor was the latter constructed in prehistoric times. The flints show that the area was occupied by Stone Age man; but so was all the high ground on the Cotswolds. Selsley, though occupied at that time, was not a defended camp.

Other finds from the surface between the huts included, as might be expected, a goodly number of undamaged flints. Most of them are patinated a dead white. A number of arrowheads range from the leaf-shaped Neolithic varieties to barbed and tanged specimens of the Bronze Age. There are also scrapers, knives, fabricators, fragments of polished axes and one broken pigmy. Cores are scarce. A dozen pieces of hard sandstone smoothed on one side may be the remains of querns—the stone was certainly imported from a distance. Coins of Edward III and George III have been given to the Stroud Museum.

To recapitulate: the evidence regarding the hut sites, together with the comments of Professor Treharne and Mr Dunning,

¹ *Trans. B. and G.A.S.*, vol. 59, p. 290.

² *Trans. B. and G.A.S.*, vol. 66, p. 233.

leads the writer to believe that they are the remains of a military camp set up by the troops of Prince Edward during the campaign of 1265 for the purpose of guarding the Severn crossings below Gloucester. This camp was constructed soon after the 14th June and deliberately destroyed by fire when it was no longer required about the 4th August, 1265. The earthwork was thrown up as a field boundary at a later date than the huts and enclosed the south eastern part of the Common, which was the only area ploughed before 1942: it formed no part of a pre-historic enclosed camp. The few flints indicate no more than the open occupation usual all over the high ground in the County.