



News and events

- **Our next meeting** is on **19 July** when Elizabeth Eastwood will talk about **Scandals, slander and gossip** among the great and the not-so-good of Hertfordshire, including tales of bigamy, infatuation, kidnapping, elopement, fire and flood.
- **A Medieval Summer.** St Albans Cathedral will celebrate their medieval heritage in June and July, including a medieval fair, a mystery play, talks and tours.
<https://www.stalbanscathedral.org/pages/events/category/a-medieval-summer>

Devil's Dyke



“British city”, “probably”, and “British king”. These words on the plaque at the entrance to Devil's Dyke would not be used if the plaque were erected today. The debate about the origins of the Dyke and its place in history has continued ever since Sir Mortimer Wheeler published his conclusions from excavations he made in and near the Dyke in 1932, reinforced by post-war Ordnance Survey maps describing the site as a “Belgic Oppidum”.

First, there was no “British” city or king in the first century BCE. “Britannia” was a term used by the Romans to describe what is now Britain but at that time was made up of a number of tribal territories – Caesar never used “rex”, the Latin for “king”, in this context. Second, the word “city”, translated from Caesar's use of the Latin “oppidum”, in this context means a fortified settlement of which the tribes probably had several. Even Wheeler first calls it a “defensive enclosure” before switching to “a great Belgic oppidum or city”.

It is the “probably” that causes the real debate. Wheeler himself was cautious: “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 BC — and there is at present no rival claimant to this distinction —...” is a far from dogmatic assertion.

Many commentators have suggested that both The Slad and Devil's Dyke originated as natural watercourses and that Devil's Dyke has been

enlarged by human agency. The debate has had two foci: (1) what kind of Iron Age settlement, if any, was located between Devil's Dyke and the Slad and (2) whether this was the site of the battle between Cassivellaunus and Caesar.

In 1969, St Albans historian Ildid Anthony suggested that The Aubreys, near Redbourn, is a more likely site for the battle, or possibly Wallbury Camp near Bishops Stortford (of which more later). Dyer (1976) suggested Ravensburgh Castle, near Hexton as the site and argued that the Wheathampstead site may not be an Iron Age settlement at all.

Excavations on the route of the Wheathampstead bypass in the late 1970s (Saunders et al. 1979) produced evidence of a substantial Iron Age settlement in that area in the first century CE but “no [other] traces of occupation have been found between Devil's Dyke and The Slad either by fieldwalking or aerial survey”.

Isobel Thompson revisited the Wheathampstead debate in 1979. She is politely sceptical of Wheeler's conclusions about his findings, saying that “Wheathampstead's chief chronological interest is not whether it was the stronghold of Cassivellaunus for there is nothing specific to indicate whether it was or not” and calls for more research.

More recently, LiDAR has shown evidence of chalk pits in the area between the Dyke and The Slad but no evidence of any other structures. It has also reinforced the idea that the two features are originally natural watercourses.

Most recently, Fitzpatrick and Haselgrove of the University of Leicester have produced powerful evidence that Caesar landed at Pegwell Bay in Kent, further east than previously thought, in 54 BCE, crossed the Thames, marched north and fought his battle with Cassivellaunus at Wallbury Camp. Fitzpatrick's lecture about this is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfFTM5_WcQE