

DEVIL'S DYKE AND THE SLAD, WHEATHAMPSTEAD

It was full house at the January seminar to discuss Mike Smith's 'albatross' – the supposed 'Belgic oppidum' at Wheathampstead (see *Newsletter* 230), where a plaque announces to the world that this was the 'British city' where Julius Caesar defeated Cassivellaunus in 54 BC. This grand idea derives from Wheeler's excavation in 1932. But the Wheathampstead History Society has its doubts, and rightly so.

We considered Wheeler's argument (for the sources, see the Wheathampstead History Society website – <https://bit.ly/3w0QuFn>). This was, of course, embedded in ideas of the time; and he has in part been misinterpreted. Debate on whether the two earthworks are natural or not is, basically, pointless. Wheeler himself thought them natural, 'shallow hillside gullies' that had been artificially enhanced.

So what about Caesar and Cassivellaunus? Wheeler found pottery which appeared to be earlier in date than that from his excavations at Prae Wood. To Wheeler this early pottery and the massive earthworks meant that 'we are carried back...towards the unrestful epoch of Cassivellaunus and



Devil's Dyke during Wheeler's excavations, 1932
(SAHAAS *Transactions*, 1937, p. 95)

his kind', the mid-1st century BC. He makes the connection with Caesar's account of his campaign in 54 BC on the grounds that Cassivellaunus's stronghold must have been in Hertfordshire, and that 'there is, at present, no serious claimant other than the Wheathampstead site'. Neither of these arguments is sustainable, but Wheeler's clear prose is always persuasive. However, note that he never claimed that this was certainly the stronghold of Cassivellaunus.

Wheeler left few records, and the finds are not all in Verulamium Museum. Many years ago, when a PhD student

at the Institute of Archaeology in London, I discovered published and unpublished pottery from the excavation, given by Wheeler himself as a teaching collection. It seemed that on the plateau between the two earthworks he dug at least three exploratory trenches, and a slightly larger area. This investigation covered only a small part of the plateau, and revealed only a few shallow ditches. These tell us little, but the finds assemblage is domestic debris, largely pottery, which had been discarded into the ditches. This is not 'substantially of one date', as Wheeler claimed, but *some* is early to mid-1st century BC. More of it is later, running into the earlier 1st century AD. This means decades of activity here, both before and after Caesar although not necessarily continuous. Typically, little of this activity can be tied in with the earthworks. Wheeler dug one section across Devil's Dyke and on the bottom of the ditch found a 'hearth' with a single piece of pottery similar to that from the ditches. But this sherd doesn't date the earthwork.

The seminar has shown the necessity of going back to this site. It is a Scheduled Monument, but what is it? The archaeological dataset now available for this period is vast, but here nothing more has emerged since 1932. This was never

one of the major centres of late Iron Age Hertfordshire, but it is one of few sites with the early material which can illuminate their emergence. New information can only be gained using non-intrusive techniques, so Kris Lockyear is seeking permission for geophysics and perhaps fieldwalking, both on the plateau and outside the earthworks. Will there be plenty of new data showing widespread occupation, or a load of blank areas? Even knowing that would be a huge step forward.

Conclusions: The earthworks enhance natural gullies running down to the river Lea, and there is nothing to suggest a full circuit. Their artificial enhancement looks late Iron Age, but can't be dated and was not necessarily defensive. How this relates to the activity on the plateau is unclear.

Wheeler drew attention to the similarity between the Devil's Dyke and Beech Bottom Dyke in St Albans. Beech Bottom is comparable in form but is also of uncertain date and function, and there is no evidence of any association with the Wheathampstead site.

We need more data! And then another seminar to discuss the results.

Dr Isobel Thompson