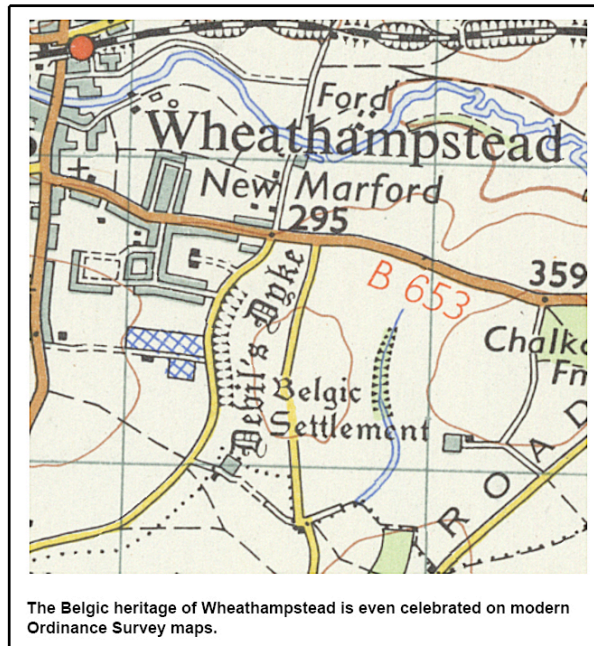


What have the Belgians ever done for us?

An Iron Age mystery

Up until recently many accounts of the history of Wheathampstead confidently stated that the first settlers came from Belgium. *"Sometime after 100B.C. a sophisticated group of invaders from the continent moved up the rivers Thames and Lea. They came from the area which is today Belgium. These Belgae made the first permanent settlements in the area."* (WEA 1973, p12).



Who were these mysterious and 'sophisticated' Belgians who founded Wheathampstead? An equally interesting question is why have references to Belgic invaders largely disappeared from recent history books?

Solving the puzzle

The Belgic invasion theory emerged in the late nineteenth century as a solution to a puzzle. Why was there a lack of middle Iron Age archaeological finds in southeast Britain? While there was evidence of earlier occupation the absence of archaeological finds suggested

that southeast Britain had been unsettled in the mid Iron Age up to around 150BC. After this date Victorian archaeologists were able to identify a great deal of evidence of intensive activity and occupation, including the building of hill forts in the southeast and locally the Devil's Dyke in Wheathampstead. What prompted this dramatic change?

A dig in Kent

An archaeological excavation in 1890 provided a strong clue. This dig was carried out by Arthur Evans who would later become world famous for excavating the Palace of Knossos on Crete. Evans investigated a late Iron Age cemetery at Aylesford in Kent and he pointed out that the finds were strikingly similar to Belgic cemeteries on the continent. Amongst the most significant finds were wheel-turned 'grog fired' pottery¹ and distinctive metalwork. These finds were associated with the 'La Tene' culture of Gaul and central Europe and Evans dated them to 150BC. The significance of this discovery was that 'La Tene' artifacts had not been seen in Britain as early as this before. There were similar finds at nearby Swarling in Kent and they became collectively known as 'Aylesford-Swarling culture'. Arthur Evans

¹ The 'grog fired' method is to mix in finely crushed fired pottery into wet clay before it is formed into a pot. This creates a stronger pot.

suggested that the finds were there because the Belgae had crossed the Channel to Kent and spread out into the southeast, settling there and bringing new technology and culture with them (Cunliffe 2005, p6,7).

Why the Belgae?

Arthur Evans was confident about identifying the Belgae because his finds at Aylesford were corroborated by a contemporary account. In 54BC Julius Caesar described the population of Britain in his book 'The Gallic War': "*The interior portion of Britain is inhabited by those of whom they say that it is handed down by tradition that they were born in the island itself: the maritime portion by those who had passed over from the country of the Belgae for the purpose of plunder and making war; and having waged war, continued there and began to cultivate the lands.*" (Julius Caesar, tr. McDevitte & Bohn 1869). So according to Caesar the Belgae had crossed the channel to raid and plunder and had decided to stop and settle, much like the Vikings did a thousand years later.

Victorian and Edwardian historians readily embraced the idea of Belgic invaders because it was based on a solid combination of archaeology and contemporary writing. It offered a convincing explanation for the dramatic increase of archaeological finds in southeast Britain from the late Iron Age, evidencing the arrival of energetic newcomers from across the Channel as they settled a largely deserted landscape.

During the first half of the twentieth century the theory became much more elaborated with the suggestion of a number of previous invasions from the continent, backed up by a raft of supporting evidence based on linguistics, coins and pottery. However in the 1960s this theoretical house of cards collapsed when the many flaws in the invasion hypothesis became clear.

Problems with Belgic invaders

Graham Clark effectively demolished the Belgic invasion theory in 1966 (Clark 1966, p172-189). He suggested that much of the evidence for the Belgic invasion (and other earlier invasions) was either weak or contradictory and could be attributed to trade rather than settlement. His main message was that invasions needed to be properly evidenced and not just assumed.

Was the southeast of Britain unoccupied?

A crucial element of the Belgic invasion theory was that the southeast of Britain was largely unoccupied in the middle Iron Age. Victorian archaeologists could find no evidence of settlement. This implied that the sudden expansion of Iron Age society could only be attributable to the arrival of foreign invaders. Modern archaeologists and historians no longer believe this. Farming and settlement in Hertfordshire is thought to date from around the fourth century BC, during the middle Iron Age (Williamson 2010 p23).

Nowadays archaeologists think that the lack of archaeological remains from the middle Iron Age is largely due to the difficulty of dating and distinguishing between early and middle Iron Age finds. Also a change in burial practices meant that less evidence survived from the middle Iron Age. In other words it was not the case that there was nobody living in Hertfordshire; rather that they did not leave remains that can be readily identified and dated (Thompson 2002, p2).

A problem with dates

The chronology that Evans discovered at Aylesford, dating the site to 150BC, was a perfect fit with the explosion of activity and settlement in the late Iron Age and suggested that the arrival of the Belgae had been the cause. This chronology was one of the persuasive elements of the Belgic migration theory. However, in the 120 years since Evans' excavations a great many 'Belgic' artifacts have been discovered around the country that do not fit this chronology. For example, Cunliffe points out that the Arras cemetery in eastern Yorkshire provided similar 'La Tene' finds but they dated to the 4th and 5th centuries BC, more than two to three hundred years before the Aylesford/ Swarling finds. The original dating of the Aylesford/ Swarling finds to 150BC is also questionable. Evans based the dating partially on the evidence of a distribution of Gallo-Belgic coins that is now disputed. Cunliffe suggests that there is nothing to indicate that the finds in Kent pre-date the Roman incursions of 55 and 54BC. This is 100 years after Evans' original dating of the Aylesford finds and therefore does not fit in with the first expansion of farming and settlement in the late Iron Age (Cunliffe 2005, p126/7). Many recent finds support the idea that there was demographic and cultural continuity through the Iron Age rather than episodes of mass migration and disruption (James 1999 p37-40).

What about Julius Caesar?

Is Caesar's quote a deal-breaker when it comes to re-assessing whether a Belgic invasion really happened? Although Caesar clearly stated that people from Belgic-Gaul had raided and then settled in 'maritime' Britain, it was a brief account and far from unambiguous (Cunliffe 2005, p127). Cunliffe points out that Caesar did not say where the Belgae settled. Their location in Kent is an assumption. Cunliffe points out that there may have been limited Belgic immigration, perhaps as a result of people fleeing Roman military expansionism, but that it was small and localised. He suggests a small population of Belgae settled in Hampshire on the south coast and the evidence for this is the Roman name for Winchester which was 'Venta Belgarum' or 'Market of the Belgae'. Cunliffe also cites Tacitus (with a quote from *Agricola*) that sums up the veracity of some ancient writers. "*Who the first inhabitants of Britain were, whether natives or immigrants, remains obscure; one must remember we are dealing with barbarians.*" (Cunliffe 2005, flyleaf).

Should we be erasing 'Belgic' from our history books?

Isobel Thompson sums up the case against the Belgic invasion. 'The Belgae were a product of the heroic age of British field archaeology...constructed on a series of inferences and assumptions, the validity of which were unquestioned by the leading protagonists... despite the scarcity of the evidence.' (Thompson 1982, p2). The invasion theory largely reflected the concerns of the late nineteenth century about foreign threats, first by the French and later by the Germans; a preoccupation that increased during the twentieth century.

So should we be removing the Belgae from the history books? Surprisingly the answer is both yes and no. Modern historians may be

doubtful that any mass invasion took place but that does not mean the continental influence was not of major importance. Isobel Thompson notes that the 150 years before the Roman invasion was a fascinating period in southern Britain. '...a time of change in many aspects of life that brought oppida, coinage and a rich and tangible trade with continental Europe and the Mediterranean.' (Thompson 1982, p1).

Cunliffe suggests that a major cultural impact came from the expanding Roman world as it crossed the Alps and into Gaul at the end of the second century BC. He points out that Caesar hinted that Britons had served in the Gallic wars in the Roman army and there were close two-way political and commercial ties between Britain, Gaul and the Romans (Cunliffe 2005, p126/127). This influence was particularly marked in Hertfordshire and Essex where tribal kingdoms grew powerful because they controlled the



The Welwyn Garden City 'Chieftain' burial displayed in the British Museum.

import of prestige goods from the continent (Rowe & Williamson 2013, p13). New tribal groupings and powerful alliances began to emerge. These political developments, once seen as evidence of a Belgic invasion, are now regarded as the result of potent internal processes at work in southern Britain.

Five miles away from Wheathampstead, in Welwyn Garden City, an aristocratic 'chieftain' burial dated to 50-25 BC confirms the local emergence of Iron Age aristocrats with a taste

for continental luxury items. This find is one of a series of deep-pit burials in Essex and Hertfordshire where the dead man was provided with "considerable quantities of wine stored in amphorae together with the vessels and other equipment appropriate to its consumption." (Cunliffe, 2005 p559). A similar 'chieftain' burial was found nearby in the village of Welwyn, a couple of miles away.

Summary

Historians and archaeologists no longer need an epic invasion or other foreign intervention to explain how Britain developed and grew in the late Iron Age. Britain was far from a forbidding misty island, isolated from the mainland of Europe and populated by unsophisticated, woad-painted 'ancient Britons'. The finds made by Evans at Aylesford are now seen as an indicator of increasing trade and cultural links with the continent rather than invasion or mass migration.

Mike Smith

February 2016

References

Julius Caesar - 'The Gallic Wars' - Translated by W A McDevitte & W S Bohn
- 1869 - classics.mit.edu/Caesar/gallic.html - 14th January 2016

Graham Clark - 'The invasion hypothesis in British archaeology' - Antiquity 40
- 1966 - Cambridge University Press

Barry Cunliffe - 'Iron age communities in Britain' (4th ed.) - 2005 - Routledge

Ros Niblett & Isobel Thompson - 'Alban's buried towns' - 2005 - English Heritage

Anne Rowe and Tom Williamson - 'Hertfordshire: a landscape history' - 2013 - University of Hertfordshire Press

Isobel Thompson - 'Grog tempered Belgic pottery in south-eastern England' - BAR British series 108 -1982 - Archaeopress

Isobel Thompson - 'Wheathampstead & Harpenden extensive urban survey project assessment report' - 2002 - English Heritage

WEA - 'Wheathampstead and Harpenden vol 1, The settlement of Wheathampstead and Harpenden' - 1973 - WEA

Tom Williamson - 'The origins of Hertfordshire' - 2010 - University of Hertfordshire Press