

ANTIQUARIAN DISCOVERIES IN BIERTON.

Early in January this year, certain excavations were commenced in a pightel belonging to Mr. JAMES BONHAM, situated eighty-five paces eastward of the Church, and abutting the road; in this little field the remains of sepulture of at least two distinct generations of men, separated from each other by long intervals of time, were found. The total number of skeletons discovered was eight, lying in the positions shown in the accompanying plan.

The bones of skeleton No. 6 were carefully collected and conveyed to an eminent comparative anatomist, who decided them to be those of a man about 5 ft. 6 in. in height, and, from the wearing down of the teeth, of upwards of 50 years old at the time of death—he had lost an arm. The large quantity of acid or superphosphate of lime in these bones, compared with the common phosphate in more recent bones, leads to the conclusion that they may have been at least two centuries in the ground.

An experienced Military Officer who has been for some months resident here, says, that it is very likely these skeletons were the remains of men wounded in some engagement, and that the whole of the field is admirably adapted for cavalry manœuvres. It is worthy of remark, as strengthening this idea, that the pond and field opposite is called “Sturricks,” but which I consider is not quite correct, as “Sturt” is an old English word, implying, “to straggle,” therefore, “Sturticks,” is the proper word, but for the sake of euphony, the “t” has been changed into “r.” This idea derives additional force from the fact that the field Sturricks runs due north, within eighty paces of Old Orchard Piece, where certain relics of a warlike nature were discovered, which have

been already described in the Second Volume of the RECORDS of this Society, page 162.

The skeletons, Nos. 3, 4, and 6, three feet below the surface, appear to have been buried in a hurried manner. The first of these was on its left side; the next face downwards; and the last seems to have suffered mutilation before death. The remains of two horses have also been found, one close to No. 6, and one at some distance from it, towards the south-west side of the field; and, along with this last, a rowel spur, such as was used a few years back, by some regiments of the Artillery; from its lightness and superior finish, it was evidently not the spur of a common trooper; it is in good preservation, and is now in the Cabinet of our Society.

There was no trace of any coffin in either case, nor any kind of covering whatever; and it is a well known fact that the dead soldier is often stript to furnish the living with clothes.

Nos. 1, 2, and 8 were lying somewhat deeper than the last three; these I am inclined to look upon as the remains of gipsies, a race of men who seem to have made their first appearance in England about the year 1512, and became sufficiently numerous in this parish to give names to two fields, one still known as Tinker's Piece, the other Pedlar's Close, trades which persons of that description follow, and which were at that time almost exclusively confined to them. Some few entries, as the following, occur in the register respecting them.

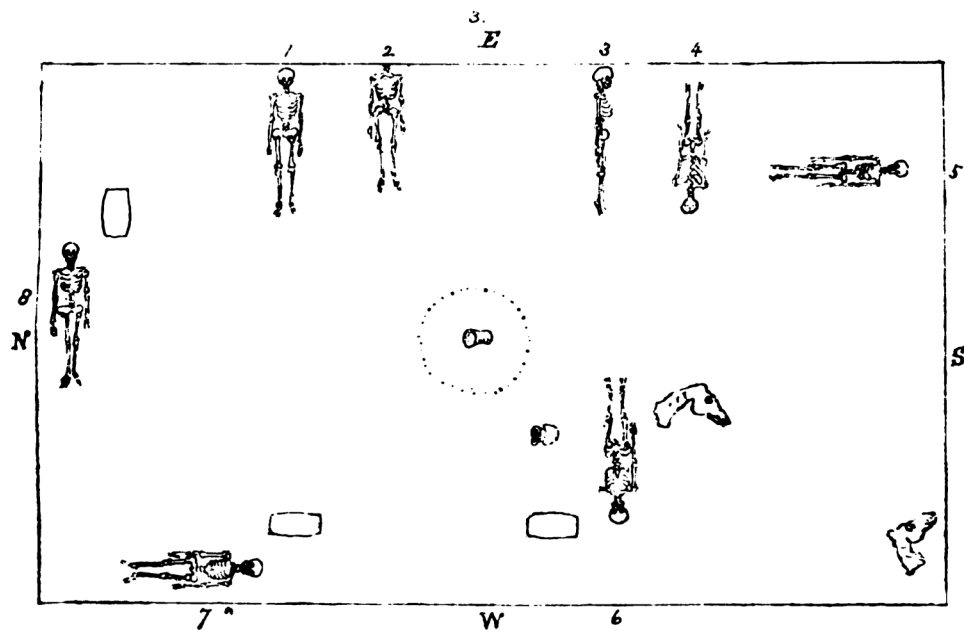
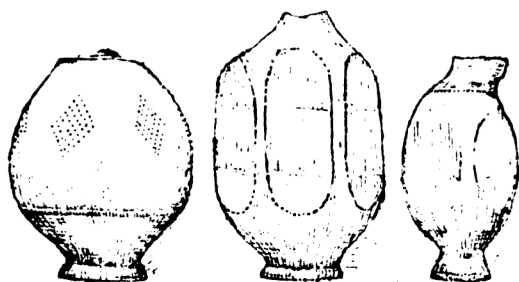
1598. EDWARD CARTON, a beggar's child, born at Broughton Farm, was baptized in June.

1612. JOYCE CUTHBERT, the daughter of a pedlar, was baptized the 6th of April.

1617. JANE BARTON, a beggar's child, was baptized.

1636. DORATHY PARKER, the child of a beggar, was buried.

The Bartons were certainly gipsies, and married into the Buckland family, Timothy Buckland taking Ann Barton for his first wife; and Cuthbert's trade is mentioned. So that I think it is beyond dispute that gipsy families took up their camping ground here, and probably in good numbers. Now the piece of land in question was little better than waste land till within the memory of many still living, and formed the quoit-ground to the



1. Urns found at Birtton.
2. Section shewing rectangular excavations in the Chalk
3. Plan shewing the position of the Skeletons Graves &c. discovered at Birtton in Jan^y. 1861.

Valiant Yeoman public-house opposite. It is not at all unlikely that gipsies dying in the neighbourhood might be there buried, as the Romani tribe are known to bury by the road-side, in fields, or shady lanes. As an evidence of this we find in Old Mursley-lane, by the side of Stukely Dean allotment gardens, a gipsy's grave. A similar one is by the road-side, between Fenny Stratford and Simpson, and is reported to have been in good order in Feb., 1860. Another is in Carter-lane, near Quainton, by the road-side, and marked by an upright stone with the date 1641 rudely cut, and underneath some letters much defaced, which tradition affirms is the spot where the remains of a gipsy king has been interred. And I cannot help thinking that those fields in this parish, known as "High Hades," "Lower Hades," and Hades in the Cow-mead, are also spots where similar remains might be found, one of the meanings to the word Hades being form, or figure.

These remains, like the others, afford no trace of coffin, a circumstance I am not surprised at, as I am informed by one who states that he was an eye-witness to the interment of Joseph and Roger Buckland, about forty years ago, in Towersey field, who were wrapped up in Witney blankets to be buried. I have no means of ascertaining the truth of this, but from the credibility of the witness, I see no reason to disbelieve it. Accepting this as true it simplifies the matter a great deal.

In the *Archæological Journal*, vol. I., page 256, occurs the following:—"Three graves which lay nearly north and south were opened, the heads towards the south, as was the case with many of those opened in the last century by Douglas, and described in his *Nenia*, the variations being only such as might be expected from the rude means possessed by the Early Saxon invaders for ascertaining the exact point of the compass."

I think this idea, taken together with the inequalities of the surface of the ground, point to a different era for the remaining two skeletons 5 and 7, which were nearly in a line taken obliquely, and about an equal distance from the tumulus occupying the centre, and on the same level. Taking these three interments in connection, they appear to have been in strict accordance with the usages of the times, and not the mere result of accident. The

tumulus is certainly much older than the graves under consideration, as the custom of burning the body had been prohibited from the time of the two Antonines, while in the tumulus the body had been reduced to ashes.

Lastly, three rectangular excavations were discovered. These also I consider to have been graves, as a quantity of ashes were found in them. They were about five feet below the surface, eighteen inches in depth, and about the same in length; and, on a level with these, were undoubted remains of a Romano British interment. In the centre was a circular excavation, one foot nine inches in depth, and about the same in diameter; this had a large sepulchral urn, fitted to it, of lead, with a rim two inches wide, spreading outwards. It was a quarter of an inch thick, but fell to pieces on being taken out. In a circle at a radius of three feet from this urn, a number of mortuary urns of a very common description were found; though common, they were probably amongst the most valuable articles the deceased possessed, and were therefore deemed most worthy to accompany his remains.

All the urns were broken, but the fragments of at least nine were carefully collected; the most perfect of which have been photographed and engraved as an illustration for this paper.

The smallest is six inches high, and square, the side of which is $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide, being hollow in the centre, the mouth circular, $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches in diameter. It has three rows of marking indentures, a quarter of an inch in length, which appear to have been made by the hand. It has a circular base $1\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch in diameter, a small neck intervening between the body and foot. It is brown ware, glaze of leaden hue, burnt.

The second is $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches high, heptagonal and fluted; it has also three rows of indents evidently made by the hand, and similar to the last, the diameter of the body is $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches, and not more than one-eighth of an inch in thickness; this also had a circular base, $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter. It is brown ware, burnt and glazed, and contained a quantity of glittering dust which the workmen threw away. The two next exhibit a greater amount of finish in their manufacture. One is oval, rising from a circular base about six inches in height, and the circumference 15 inches; it is very thin and of a bluish-black or slate colour, which

according to Mr. ARTIS was imparted to the pottery by suffocating the fire when its contents had reached a proper state of heat, so as to ensure a uniform colour. The sides are ornamented with seven lozenge shaped figures, the acute angles pointing in a line from the base to the top of the urn; each lozenge being composed of a number of dots pricked up with some pointed instrument.

The other is more circular, and is much broken, but has been ornamented with bars and scrolls alternating with each other, which have evidently been made in a mould, and attached to the urn. Marks of the lathe are visible in the interior. This urn was probably not of native manufacture, but an importation from the Continent.

At a distance of ten feet from the circle was another urn, somewhat in the form of a cullender; every effort was made to take it out entire, but without success. The whole group were on the south side of a branch of the Icknield way which runs by only a few paces distant.

I am happy to add that Mr. JAMES BONHAM and his son have commissioned me to present these urns to our Society.

I will close my account of the relics by briefly noticing a few of the coins that have been found, for the presence of which I account from the fact, that the spot had been used as a recreation ground, and they had probably been lost in various games of chance.

The earliest of these are the Rechen Pfenning or Nuremburgh counters, manufactured by Hanns Kravinckel, whose name appears on the reverse.

Obv: The Reichsapfel, or mound of Sovereignty within a trefoil interlaced with a triangle.

Rev: Hanns Kravinckel in NVR. three fleur-de-lis and three crowns alternately in a circle round a rose.

Legend:—GOTTES SEGÉN MACHT REICH.

There were some others also whose general features were the same, but varied in the legend. Some idea of their antiquity may be gathered from the fact, that in 1346 the Commons petitioned the Crown against the introduction of Luxemburgh coins, which are so pithily mentioned by PIERS PLOUGHMAN; and also CHAUCER, in his Prologue to the Monk's tale, recounts the fraudulent use of the

“Lusheburghes in Venus paymentes.”

These tokens though now of little value, either as works of art or for weight of metal, yet the very quaintness of their inscriptions makes them interesting;—"To-day red (alive) to-morrow dead, &c.;" and almost insists upon our drawing a comparison between the active and wealthy Nuremburgh merchant, who by issuing his tokens with such an inscription as the foregoing, or "God's gifts shall we praise," proves that he had thoughts which reached to something beyond his trade, his gains, or his gold, and the modern man of business, who is so frequently too much absorbed in his speculations, in his race after wealth, in his often futile attempts to grasp great riches, to remember, much less to send forth to the world as his motto,—

GOTTES SEGEN MACHT REICH.

(God's blessing alone maketh rich).

A shilling of Henry VIII., or as it was then called a testoon, from teste, as the French word tête was then spelt, the head of the King being on the obverse side of it.—The reverse has a double cross with a shield, charged with the arms of England and France, and so placed that it might be broken in the midst or into four quarters, and there is no reasonable doubt, that the custom of breaking love money as a pledge of fidelity, originated in the public practice:—

"The half of silver shilling broken
Twixt youth and maids a true love token."

A halfpenny much worn, containing a bust of James II., the reverse does not appear to have had anything on it. A halfpenny of GVLIELMVS TERTIVS, date 1701. The features of William are very fine.

A small brass token commemorative of the accession of the Elector of Hanover to the crown of Britain

Legend GEORGE RULES BRITANNIA.

A halfpenny of George the II., bearing date 1740.

C. LAMBORN.

OCT. 10th, 1861.