

Walk Awhile

Briefing Paper 17

Bigbury (Bigberry) Camp - Iron Age Fort

Introduction

Bigbury Camp or fort lies about one mile due south west of the village of Harbledown on the Chartham Hatch Road at grid reference TR 117576. Access to the site can be gained from the North Downs Way, which intersects the defensive ditches on the north and east boundaries of the camp. The Sites and Monument Record TR 15 NW 33 - KE 4844 states that the hill fort is Iron Age and dates from 800 BC to 42 AD.

It is most notable, in the words of Pilgrims Way commentator Christopher John Wright, as the "scene of Caesar's victory over the native forces which opposed his second landing in Kent in 54 BC".¹

Excavations undertaken by Frank Jenkins in 1962-63 found two large post holes, which led archaeologists to conclude that there was a strong palisade in the bottom of the ditch. The site covers an area of 25 acres and included a cattle compound or annex to the north, through which the North Downs Way runs. It would have been used as a place of safety for local farmers and their animals in times of danger. The Scheduled Ancient Monument Report describes Bigbury as a hill fort in a strong position, "with its northern portion defended by a double bank and ditch of considerable strength while the southern portion is naturally defended by a steeply sloping natural bank".²

Origins of the Camp

The camp has been described as "most likely thrown up against the attacks of the Belgae, invaders from Northern France who managed to settle in Kent"³. Frank Jessop states that the "Belgae brought with them new skills and technical innovations, including wheel turned

¹ Christopher John Wright, *A Guide to the Pilgrims Way and North Downs Way* 4th edition 1993 page 290.

² Heritage Records Office Scheduled Ancient Monument Report No 21016 County Kent No.51.

³ Christopher John Wright, *ibid* page 290.

pottery and a heavy plough that could deal with stiff clay soils which earlier ploughs were not strong enough to break up, and the war chariot." ⁴ Jessop suggests that the Belgae took over the hill-fort at Bigbury and that frequent inter-tribal war provided a plentiful supply of captives to be sold as slaves. Excavations undertaken by the archaeologists RF Jessop and NC Cook in 1932-33 found a slave gang chain that was 18 feet long, made up of a series of neck collars.

The Romans and Bigbury

In 54 BC Caesar made his second expedition to Britain landing on the Kent coast somewhere between Walmer and Thanet. He marched the Seventh Legion 12 miles inland until the chariots and cavalry of the Britons met them. Caesar's description of the battle at Bigbury is as follows:

“We marched by night (*from Deal*) for about 12 miles before coming in sight of the enemy forces. They had moved with their cavalry and chariots down from the higher ground (*Bigbury*) to a river (*the Stour near Tonford*) and were trying to stop our progress and engage us in battle. When our cavalry drove them back they hid in the wood where they enjoyed a position with extremely good man made defences for some war between themselves because many trees had been cut down and used to block entrances to it. The Britons came out of the woods in small groups to fight and tried to stop our men penetrating their defences. But the men of the Seventh Legion holding up their shields to form a protective shell piled up earth against the fortifications and captured the place... I forbade them to pursue far because I was unfamiliar with the terrain." ⁵

The fort, which some argue was the tribal capital prior to the establishment of Durovernum or Canterbury was abandoned following the British defeat. Today many of the archaeological finds from the 1932-33, 1962-63, 1978-80 and 1981 excavations are under the care of the Museums in Canterbury and Maidstone.

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⁴ Frank W Jessop Kent Illustrated History Page 15

⁵ Julius Caesar, The Gallic Wars: Book 5 taken from www.canterbury.co.uk