

## EARLY HISTORY OF TODDINGTON, BEDFORDSHIRE

The following notes were written by William Horley c. 1850 for a reading at the National School, Toddington at that time.

The earliest history of Toddington must necessarily be like the early history of most places in England, buried in obscurity; in fact the early history of England itself is very obscure, but we have good reason to believe that England was peopled very many centuries ago, for we learn from Julius Caesar who made a descent on the southern coasts of Britain in the autumn of the year 55 before the Christian era, that the country must have been very populous, for he informs us whilst the Roman soldiers of the 7th. Legion were cutting corn, the Britons who had been lying in ambush in the woods, attacked the Roman soldiers whilst so employed, and put them to flight. Now I think we have no reason to disbelieve his statements, but as occurrences took place and came under his observation he recorded them, and he appears to go into the minutiae of the matter for he says the whole of the harvest in that neighbourhood was gathered in but this one field, and that whilst the Roman Legion was dispersed in reaping, the Britons suddenly fell on them and slew a number and put the others to flight. Now I think this goes to show that the number of the Britons then in the neighbourhood must have been considerable, as a Roman Legion of the period would contain some 4000 to 5000 men, and it is a well known fact that this number of well armed and disciplined men would be more than a match for many times their number of those not properly armed and disciplined, which the Britons of this time must have been. A little after this affair Caesar speaks of the continual rains that followed for some days and which kept the Romans close in camp, and the Britons from attacking them. I merely mention this to show how minutely he appeared to observe things that occurred, and that the latter portion of the harvest in England even in Caesar's time, which would be about 2000 years ago, then as now was sometimes very wet. A little later he speaks of defeating the Britons in battle and of burning their houses and villages around his camp, which as I have before stated goes to show that the population of England at this early period must have been considerable and also at this time the country must have been prosperous to be able to keep 4000 chariots in the field merely to watch the motions of the Romans. Such Cassivelaunus was able to do, so Caesar informs us, after he himself was unable longer to keep the field and had disbanded the whole of his forces with the exception of these. Caesar also informs us that this Cassivelaunus was King of the Cassi, whose Kingdom lay north of the Thames extending into the now Midland counties, amongst which Bedfordshire is accounted a portion. Having said thus much of the Britain of this period, I will now turn to the then parish of Toddington, whose name at this early period is lost in the midst of obscurity if it then had one, but I make no doubt that the Toddington of this period was then inhabited and has been so long anterior to this, if we may read its records as left by its earliest inhabitants. The earth teems with them in the shape of fragments of coarse pottery, which the spade and the plough disclose at every furrow. Again, there are their weapons, which at intervals the earth reluctantly gives up, proving itself a first rate record keeper. Spear-heads, &c., of copper and bronze, have been dug up, and some of which, with the exception of sundry dents and scratches, no doubt given and received in the defence or offence of actual warfare, appeared as perfect and sharp in outline as if they had but then left the mould of the caster, although in all probability these had lain in the earth upwards of twenty centuries. Again, there are their roads running through the parish, which have not only been used by them, but since by Romans, by Saxons, and Normans, and portions of them are in constant use at this very day. I will merely take the line of one of these which is pretty well known to most of you, and that is the road leading from Milton to Luton, which at that time I make no doubt was the principal thoroughfare through the parish leading from the Watling Street to Fenny Stratford (in after times a Roman station) at Sheep lane. Following the track of the present Herne lanes to near the point where the hand gate leading to the Park opens into the road, it then diverged to the right into what was anciently called Lady Mary's lane, leaving the present town of Toddington on the left by crossing the Leighton road at Blind lane, the present Dunstable road at Hobbendens lane into the Luton road, and following the track of the present road to Fancott, where in all probability the Britons had pottery works at the spot where the present brickworks now are. At this point it threw off a branch to the left, which passed over a portion of the now Cow Bridge farm and passing thence in nearly a direct line to the villages of Sundon and Streatley, leaving the latter place a little to the left, it entered the Icknield way at a point near the Galley Hill. But to return to Fancott, where the Britons not only had pottery works, but I have pretty good evidence that they did also casting in metal; as recently the men employed in digging clay for brick making have dug up lumps of copper in a pure state, the soil where these were found being mixed with wood, charcoal, bones, ashes, &c. The copper in nearly every instance lay on the solid clay, which had apparently been the bottom of the pit, and through the great number of years these had been buried each lump had given to the clay under it a very green tinge, and I make no doubt but that many articles in copper and bronze were cast here, especially two fine spear heads found some years since on the Cow Bridge farm, where the said ancient track crossed the old brook.

Having shown that the inhabitants of this parish had roads, manufactures, &c., at this early period of time, it is but reasonable to suppose they had houses and other comforts, and I make no doubt but they had for Caesar informs us that the then houses of the Britons were like those of the Gauls, and we know that this people had some sumptuous ones. I think I shall not be premising too much in saying that the Britons who then inhabited the now Toddington had comfortable homes and plenty of good things that make homes comfortable, for Caesar also informs us that the Britons had abundance of cattle, poultry, &c; and that they grew corn as we have before seen; and also that they had some of the luxuries as well as the necessaries of life. I think it pretty evident from the number of chariots the Britons were able to bring into the field. There must have been at least 8000 horses belonging to those left to watch the Romans, from what Caesar states it would show that these horses were trained for such purposes, for these drivers, he says, were able to stop them when at the height of their speed, and in the most steep and difficult places to turn and wheel them in what manner they pleased. If such numbers were trained and set apart for martial purposes, there is no doubt there were many kept also for the chase and for pleasure, and I think it not presuming too much to say that the inhabitants of Toddington would not be behind the other portions of the kingdom, when the extent of their meadows and woodlands is taken into consideration. And from what has been stated I have no reason to believe that the inhabitants of Britain of 2000 years ago were the wretched and miserable beings as represented by some writers, shivering in their nakedness and faint to fill their bellies with acorns or roots and any wild fruit, and to hide their heads in such caves or hollow trees that nature presented to them. Now Caesar, in his second descent in Britain, which would be about 54 years before Christ, informs us that he took the city of Cassibelaunus, which was very strong by nature and art, that he attacked it in two places, that its defenders were forced at last to give way, that vast numbers of cattle were found in the city and that many of the Britons were either killed or made prisoners. This place is considered to be the present St. Albans. Now Cassibelaunus being driven into great straits, so Caesar informs us, sent into Kent for succour, which was then governed by four Kings; and from this it would seem that Cassibelaunus must have used up his own subjects or he would not have sent into Kent for aid when in the midst of his own territories. In the absence of any written record this plainly shows us that many a British mother had to mourn the loss of a husband or son and in many instances perhaps both, either slain or taken captive in the defence of Verulam, and in all probability the then Toddington mothers came in for a fair share of the loss; but be this as it may, it would seem that Caesar, too, had had pretty well enough of Britain, for as he tells us, the summer was getting far spent, he moved his legions to the coast and put the vessels in order, embarked his men and plunder, and turned the prows of the ships towards Gaul, and for the next 100 years the inhabitants of this island were not troubled by the Romans. There is one thing I had almost forgotten to state, that the appearance of the then parish of Toddington must have been very different from what it is now. The parish at this present time as is well known contains upwards of 5000 acres, and at the period we are speaking of I should say that one half at least was forest or marsh, and I make no doubt but that there are still remaining small portions of this primeval forest in this and the adjoining parishes of Chalgrave and Harlington as it existed at that day, which was then peopled with many species of wild and ferocious animals that we now have scarcely any conception of, and barely know by name. Caesar tells us in his time there were in the German forests (and I should say in all probability there was here also) a large kind of wild ox called Uras, and he says that these Un were little inferior to elephants in stature and like bulls in colour, appearance and shape, having immense power and great swiftness, spared neither man nor beast, and their horns differed much from other oxen. We also know that long after this period the wolf, the bear, and the wild boar roamed at will in the English forests, and at this time no doubt they did also in those of Toddington. We learn from history, many years after this period one of our own Saxon Kings (Edgar) remitted the taxes or tributes of the principality of Wales to 300 wolves heads annually, and we have it also on record that 1000 years after the time we are now speaking of a wild boar at Brill, in Buckinghamshire, which is not many miles distant, and these being historical facts I think it will not be assuming too much to say there were wolves and wild boars in Toddington woods at the time under review. If proofs were wanted I have only to name that a piece of unreclaimed sedgy moor near the present National Schools from where I am now speaking, is known by the name of "Wolves," and has been so known for many generations. Again, what number of the smaller kinds of wild animals these woods must have sheltered, such as badgers, foxes, martens, pole-cats, stoats, weasels, squirrels, and many others, many species of which are now become quite extinct, or so rare, that we only know them by report. Again, look at the vast number of birds these woods and marshes must have provided food for, many of which have not only forsaken the parish, but the county also. Where are the ravens and carrion crows; where are the buzzards, the kites, the numerous species of hawks, falcons, owls, and many others which were birds of the woods? Again, where are the marshes, and the birds of the marshes, the geese, the ducks, the teal, the widgeon, the crane, the heron, the solitary bittern, the flocks of various species of plovers, and a host of other water and sedge birds that we have now no conception of; but the woods and marshes having succumbed to the labours of the husbandmen it is no wonder that their denizens have succumbed also. Picture to your mind's eye a Briton, an inhabitant of Toddington of that day, taking his staff mayhap tipped with a spear head of bronze, in attendance a hound or so, preparing to take a stroll out, say on the line of the present footpath leading to Harlington or Sundon; time, the evening of a fine summer's day; say he has arrived at the brow of the first hill, and is overlooking the intervening space lying between the Sundon hills, which the western sun is now gilding, would be the now meadows of the Old Park and Cow Bridge farms, but then one heavy mass of forest or watery sedge, the latter particularly where the old crooked brook silently and sluggishly rolled along its ancient primary course; mark as he leaves the cultivated land and the song of the lark, and nears the borders of the forest, the strings of wild birds floating overhead, the splash of the wild duck in the sedgy pools; listen to the booming of the bittern, which superstitious hearts of later times have quailed before, the screeching of various kinds of waterfowl, the hoarse croak of the raven, the chattering of the magpie and jay, whilst species of the present songsters of the woods join in the chorus. As he advances further into the forest, hearken to the howl of the wolf, the bark of the fox, the grunt of the wild boar, the bellowing and lowing of some distant herd of wild cattle, whilst here and there a stag or hind trips across the path, and the little brown squirrel skips and dances joyously from branch to branch of the huge and overhanging oak. Such, I think, without much overcharging, would have been the picture of the time we have been considering, and such, I think, also was the picture of the Toddington of the Britons.

Now a few words for the Toddington of the Romans. It would seem in the year 43 of the present era, Claudius then being Emperor of Rome, dispatched Aulus Plautius with a considerable body of forces to invade Britain, his lieutenants being the brothers Flavius Vespasian and Sabinus, the former being afterwards Emperor of Rome, and as a remarkable fact of a coin of this very Emperor was some few years since found when digging gravel in what is now called the Puzzle garden in Amphitt street, which I think goes to prove that the the Toddington must shortly after this invasion have fallen under the Roman rule; and we have the most unmistakable facts of their occupation of Toddington during the whole of the Roman period, if not permanently a greater a greater portion of it must have been so, when one considers the great number of coins which have been found and are still being found over nearly the whole length and breadth of the parish, and which give a range of nearly every reign during their occupation of Britain. They must also have had extensive pottery works at Fancott, where I have before shown the Britons had similar works also. I beg to call your attention to two urns belonging to the Rev. Mr. Cooper since that time deceased, and these urns are now in the possession of Major Cooper of Toddington Manor, his brother) recently dug up at Fancott, where I make no doubt many others could be found. Here too, is a piece of tile, and a portion of a handle of a large vessel; the former in all probability has been a portion of a perforated tile used in the construction of the floor of an hypocaust, which I need hardly tell you was the furnace whereby the Romans heated their extensive baths, an exercise these people were particularly fond of. The latter appears to have been a portion of the handle of a large porous vessel used by the ancients to cool liquids in very hot weather - perhaps their water, perhaps their wine. Near the same ancient track I have before described as branching off at Fancott, some few years since was dug up on the boundary line of the present parishes of Toddington and Sundon, a great quantity of broken Roman pottery, many pieces of elegant form and workmanship in Samian and coloured ware, a lady's bone hair pin, large headed nails, pieces of iron, oyster shells, bones and teeth of animals &c. In the absence of other evidence these matters plainly show us as plain as if we had written documents that Toddington in these remote times must have been a place of considerable importance, and that the Fancott road of that day was often crowded with Roman soldiers and that the bordering woods echoed and re-echoed with the tramp of the Roman legions. Here too are some Roman vessels and other antiquities kindly lent by Mr. Pearse of Hadington (now deceased also). These although not absolutely dug up in the parish of Toddington were close on the border, in Wick Herne, which is a field that many of you know well and is just within the parish of Harlington and which the footpath crosses leading from Toddington. The Pateras, which are of Samian ware and stamped with the maker's names, and were in all probability used in pouring out libations wine and other liquors in offerings to the gods at the deceased's interment, and were usually deposited with the ashes of the deceased, which undoubtedly was on the very spot where these were found, judging from the pieces of horn which were also found in the same deposit and which I do not hesitate to say are portions of the antlers of some kind of deer now extinct in this country, but which in all probability was sufficiently common in the then Toddington and Harlington. These relics would of course go to show that the deceased was a man of the chase rather than war, in the absence of any weapons of offence or defence being found. The other vessels were used for other kinds of offerings, it being usual to deposit with the ashes of the deceased; and from similar specimens coming under my notice I should say these vessels were not fabricated in this neighbourhood, but at Purfleet in Essex where I believe the Rev. Mr. Cooper, our respected Rector has an estate and where there appears to have been a most extensive manufacture of these kind of vessels - possibly a very Lane's end of that day, where large quantities of them have been found put up in stacks as if for sale, and in all probability it was so, as there is scarcely a known Roman station or an encampment but in which these kind of urns are found either perfect of fragmentary, which all goes to show their general use. Now these Romans, it would seem, were not very bad judges of the best spots of land in the parish in their day, if we are to judge by their remains as now found, for where a dry gravelly or sunny sandy spot is found, there, too, are found their remains, principally coins, commencing on Mr. Pedder's (now Mr. Godfrey's) farm at Herne, all the gravelly portion of the south side of the town extending to Fancott, on portions of the Cow Bridge and Old Park farms, on Long Lane farm, portion of the Lodge and Manor farms, and no doubt many other portions of the parish, but I am now speaking of what has more particularly come under my own observation. There is one thing I had almost forgotten, which I think is of the time of Roman Toddington, and that is the Conger Hill, a tumulus the most perfect of its kind in the county of Bedford and perhaps there are not many more in the whole length and breadth of England. Now "Congai" is the old word for uproar, strife, or commotion, which leads one to conjecture that the neighbourhood must have been the scene of a fierce and terrible conflict, in all probability betwixt the Britons and the Romans, and which must have occurred in the second invasion having been shown that Caesar in his descents did not penetrate further north than Verulam (St. Albans). But it is possible that Aulus Plautius might have come again with the Britons in their retreat here after he had defeated them at Ashenden; or it might have been in the time of Severus, for it appears he fought several stubbornly contested engagements with the Britons, in which he had well nigh suffered signal defeat, losing upwards of 50000 men in these sanguinary encounters. But by whom the Conger Hill was thrown up and on what occasion we have no evidence to show, but I make no doubt that this extraordinary monument of antiquity is of British origin and in all probability contains the mortal remains of many human beings slain in some sanguinary conflict very near or on this very spot. I think this remark alone is sufficient proof what my Father thought the Hill to be in its original state.

Having perhaps said sufficient to show that Toddington of the Roman times was a place of some consequence, I shall merely add that these people not only left Toddington but the whole of England also, about the year 420 of the present era, having held possession of the whole island nearly 400 years, and it would seem the country had little repose, for 29 years later we hear of the Saxon invasion which was in the year 449, of which I am about to speak, and I make no doubt that these people soon extended themselves inland, and that Toddington, lying as it were in the apex of the angle of the principal road, soon came under their sway, and from whom we receive our present name of Toddington, which is evidently pure Saxon, and which the Rev. Mr. Monkhouse, in his Etymologies of Bedfordshire states to be simply a hill or a down, I shall not here enter into any attempt at the refutation at his statement, but merely state that I understand the Saxon word "dun" to mean a barren hill, not fertile meadow land, as undoubtedly the land around Toddington then was, as a considerable portion of it is so at this day. Even the word Toddington itself has in itself the elements of meadow, and I think if the word Toddington was literally turned into the English of the present day in word merely be "Sheep-meadow-town," or perhaps "Wool-meadow-town," as we know the word Tod and Dod in Gaelic have reference to wool and sheep, and it would seem that prefix Tod or Dod in reference to Toddington has been used indiscriminately, for in Doomsday survey it was written Doddington. Having said that in all probability Toddington soon came under the Saxon rule, but be that as it may, we find by the Saxon Chronicles that in the year 571 the Saxon General Cuthbert defeated the Britons at Bedford, and that he took the towns of Lygae Bury, Eddles Bury, and Begford, the first place some think to be Leighton, whilst Davis, in his History of Luton, says that Luton is meant, and the battle was fought at Toddington which lost these towns, but my opinion is that Limbury was meant (I add here that the Rev. Mr. Cobbe, of Maulden, who is an authority in these matters, assured me some 12 months since that my father was quite right in his choice), and there is an extensive earthwork near, called "Waulud Bank," and I believe the Saxon word Lygae is nothing more than the present word Lea, the name of the stream, the source of the Lea, and which runs through Limbury, and the whole means nothing more than a town on the Lea. Now supposing the Lygae Bury is Limbury, the first town taken, and that the Saxon army is moving from Bedford, it must have come somewhere to the north or north west of Limbury, and perhaps it would not be saying too much in saying it came by the Herne lanes, either by Woburn or the Watling-street, and that the British army met them at Toddington, that is, on the present Frenchman's highway. Be this as it may, it is most evident that a great battle had been fought there, and from the deposits found I do not hesitate to say these were not British anterior to the Roman occupation, as the weapons were all of iron - there being numbers of spear-heads, swords &c, that these were not Roman is pretty evident, as no coins of this were there and the coins, of which great numbers were dug up, were all of coarse material and very plain. Some few had the zigzag ornament on them and these were found in shallow parallel trenches filled with a fine black mould mixed with bones, &c. I saw several perfect human skulls, and in many instances the plough had taken off the tip of many of them, and which in every instance contained bones apparently of extremities. On one I noticed a piece of skull, and my impression at the time was that these urns were used for the purpose of containing the different members of the combatants lopped off during the fight and collected from the battle field. But I could never learn that coins of any people were found, not even a solitary one came under my observation. There were many beads, principally of earthenware or a kind of a very opaque glass, but many were of composition very like coarse sealing-wax, and which was very fragile. Now supposing the battle mentioned by the Saxon Chronicles was fought here and this deposit is Saxon, it is natural we should wonder what became of the British casualties, as undoubtedly they must have had many. The inference would be that they retreated on Lygae Bury (Limbury), in the Saxon of that day a Walled Town. Well, then, in a field at Chalton, now in the occupation of Mr. Anstee and adjoining the Luton Road (which is the main track of the ancient thoroughfare leading from Fancott) some years since, whilst digging for gravel, many skeletons, weapons, and gold rings were found, and I make no doubt was the burial place of the Britons on that disastrous day, as in all probability they would carry off all they were able of their dead and wounded and would bury their dead in the first place of security they arrived at, and as this place is on the direct line of retreat on Limbury and only distant some three or four miles from the scene of the disaster (that is, Frenchman's - highway) and I would not hesitate to say that the Britons were the richer amongst their Roman conquerors not so much as the conquered, but during the latter part of their subjugation as friends and equals, and at this period it is also well known the Romans were the most civilised of all nations, and wherever the people went they not only took the useful arts with them, but the polite ones followed, which will go to prove at the time we are now speaking of the Britons must have been well acquainted with not only the necessaries but also the luxuries of life and also proves the latter deposit to have been a British one which will account for the valuables there found, whilst the Saxons of that day would be little better than savages, ignorant of most of the arts of life, tempted here by the riches of the inhabitants and the fertility of the soil, and having but then recently gained a footing in the country would not be expected to possess many of the superfluities of life which may account for the paucity of ornaments and valuables found in the deposits at Frenchman's highway and near to which is a track of land called "Warmark," lying west of the Leighton - road on a portion of which several human skeletons have been dug out near the farm house of Mr. John Osborn.