

BRADWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER No.23 January 2023

Up-coming events

Of course the main date for you to write in your diary for January is our AGM to be held on Tuesday 17th January 2023 at 8.00 pm in the Methodist Hall. Once again to help cut down on paper usage we will have taken the step of posting most of the papers relating to the meeting on our Website : the agenda, reports by the chairman and treasurer and the programme for the coming year. You can view the first three of these by going to www.bradwellhistoricalsociety.org.uk and after selecting the 'about' option go to [AGM 2023](#). You will find the programme for the coming year on the 'home' page. After the formal business part of the meeting we are hoping that we will have a 'Down Memory Lane ' session.

Later in the month there will be a meeting for the new Committee on Monday 30th January at 7.30 pm in the Shoulder of Mutton. The agenda for this will be emailed to Committee Members after the AGM.

In January it is the time to renew your annual subscription. The Committee has agreed to maintain the membership fee at £10, although this will need to be formally ratified by you members at the AGM. It would be most convenient for our treasurer Andy Smith if you could arrange your payment via BACS transfer. The payment should be made to the Bradwell Historical Society and the details are as follows - Sort code: 16-15-15 Account number: 10004599. Please make sure when you make the transfer that you are clearly identified as the person who is making the payment. Should this not be suitable for you the treasurer will accept cash ((preferably) or a cheque. The Committee is also recommending that the fee for attending a meeting as a non-member remain at £5 and also should such a visitor attend a second meeting and pay a further £5 they will then become full members for the rest of that year.

THE GREY DITCH AT BRADWELL

This month we reproduce with Ken West's permission his recent revisiting of the story of the Grey Ditch. This can now be set beside the earlier account on our Website written by B.H.StJ. O'Neil, in *Antiquity*, vol. xix, pp. 11-19, March 1945.

Ken tells us :

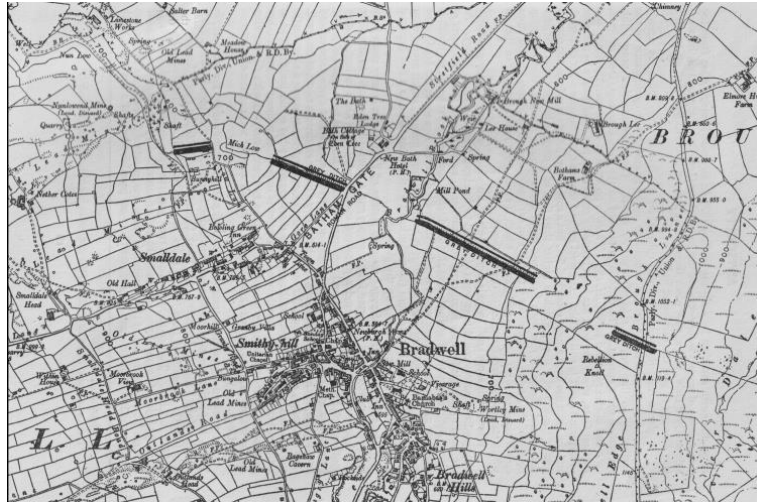
The death of Queen Elizabeth was anticipated and yet momentous. Her crown sat on her coffin, balanced precariously. This funeral, focussing on London as it does, might seem a long way from Bradwell and the Peak District. Yet, historical perspective has a remarkable way of bringing great events and the royal line closer than you might think.

Britain, though a small country, is amazingly diverse. The royal family work hard to retain our links with Scotland and Wales. Yet neither of those regions is any more significant than other parts of what we now call England. These were also autonomous regions and included Wessex and Northumbria, but I want to concentrate on Mercia because we are resident in that ancient kingdom. In addition, it is a region with more than a token relationship to the royal line and great events.

Enigma abounds and often arises as something created by people in the past, and yet we don't fully understand why or when. Take the Grey Ditch here in Bradwell. This earthwork, what we might truly call a dyke, drops down from Rebellion Knoll, crosses the old Roman Road called Batham Gate, and then heads west. It curves left beyond the rocky knoll called Mich Low and then abruptly ends. It is considered an Anglo Saxon feature and has been vaguely dated 5th to 8th century by Historic England. That is a rather indeterminate period and covers the so called Dark Ages and Viking incursions. They were less dark and rather more about a lack of scribes and paper. It might not have been written about but a lot happened, more especially in the foundation of the royal line.

However, the website for Derbyshire Heritage lengthens the Grey Ditch, suggesting the full extent was from Mam Tor to Shatton Edge, which lies beyond Brough Lane. That makes the Grey Ditch a regional feature rather than, as I suggest, a feature specific to Bradwell. That extended route is also considered in the article on our Bradwell Historical Society website called Grey Ditch, Bradwell, Derbyshire by B .H. St. J. O'Neil and dated 1945.

This long and interesting article begins with O'Neil's views on Navio, then the Roman road to Templeborough, followed by Batham Gate and it concludes on the Grey Ditch. O'Neil highlights the Grey Ditch in four parts, which is identical to its listing just 3 years later by Historic England (list entry no. 1017662). Perhaps the Grey Ditch was only listed in response to the findings by O'Neil in this article prepared for *Antiquity*, an academic journal of world archaeology. His article included the following map of the Grey Ditch, which is identical to that used by Historic England:



O'Neil records local observations that an embankment crossed the head of the Hope Valley where the road (the closed A625) from Castleton crossed towards Chapel-en-le-Frith. He saw this as an easy access into the valley. He continues by suggesting that an embankment dropped from the summit of Mam Tor, in the character of the Grey Ditch, and headed towards Castleton and then to Mich Low. He reported that this had been ploughed out or otherwise removed by subsequent farming. Neither of these lines makes sense as they do not seem defensible, neither do they identify a known adversary. However, if true, this would completely change how we might consider the Grey Ditch. What militates against change is that the Grey Ditch has been subjected to similar farming for the same period and yet still exists. Further, that where the Grey Ditch reached the steep terrain under Rebellion Knoll, similar to the side of Mam Tor, the builders did not consider it necessary to construct anything at all. This was because the steep terrain was a defence in itself. Alternatively, such steep terrain is likely to be comprised of rock or shale and was unsuited to excavation and embankment.

In considering fieldwork observations, we now have the disadvantage of looking at countryside that is far more wooded than was the case in 1945. For instance, O'Neil considers that the 4th section of the Grey Ditch beyond Mich Low blocked access to 'a grassy glade with an easy gradient'. That grassy glade, headed down towards Hope, is now woodland on part of the Breedon quarry site. O'Neil saw this section as an essential defence on that side of Bradwell. Overall, a weakness with the O'Neil article is that it fails to give us OS references that might help us understand potential extensions to the Grey Ditch. None of the features he mentions appear on current OS maps.

Other comments by O'Neil must also give us some doubt about his lack of knowledge in 1945 compared to ours today. He considered that the Grey Ditch possibly defended the local lead mining and its anticipated by-product of silver, a valuable substance for Anglo Saxon coinage. However, we are aware that the silver content of Derbyshire limestone is extremely low. It is doubtful that it was ever a source of silver throughout the dark ages. Whatever, he does point out that no evidence exists that any lead was mined during the Dark Ages.

O'Neil, in closing his comments, suggests that because he cannot identify any adversary against the Britons, whom he thought built the Grey Ditch, then he could move no further forward. In 1945 he appears to have no awareness of the threat posed by the Vikings. Indeed, only in recent times have we realised just how

destructive and cruel the Vikings were to the later Anglo Saxon kingdoms including Mercia. England was their focus and rarely Wales or Scotland.

My interest in the Grey Ditch arose after I read the bestseller called *The Anglo Saxons* by Marc Morris. I read it because I previously studied the Romans in Derbyshire and nearby Navio Fort. They left in 410 and I wanted to know what happened locally when we moved into the Anglo Saxon period. I did not expect the book to actually mention Bradwell and I was right. However, it did offer one teasing detail which enables us to posit a purposeful theory about the Grey Ditch. In 920, King Edward the Elder (899 – 924) of Wessex and Mercia ordered that a burh be established at Bakewell (page no. 259). The burh, an embanked settlement, marked the furthest point north after Edward advanced up the River Derwent. The Vikings of York were forced back east of the Pennines. The burhs further south had helped to counter the Viking incursions and were a strategic response to constant Viking ravages.

The question is, can we relate the Bakewell burh to the Grey Ditch? I now know the ditch really well, having walked as close as possible or on the dyke in order to identify its four sections, over about 1.7 kilometres. It was never a complete line and always had gaps. If you think that odd, consider that Offa's Dyke, built earlier in this period, was a similar construction. It was a series of embankment and ditch but never comparable to Hadrian's Wall. Neither was it permanently manned, more a feature to warn 'you are now entering our region'. It might also have been a place to assemble in the event of attack. We know that the Grey Ditch was built over ploughed soils so it was a response to an edict or an event. People were farming and then felt threatened or were instructed to build it. The identified threat was from the north or north east because they dug a ditch on the north side and embanked the soil on the south. It is easy to imagine that whoever controlled the burh at Bakewell considered all the potential boundary weaknesses in the surrounding area. One known weakness was Roman roads and at least two were at Bradwell.

Imagine Bradwell in 920. The west is held as far north as Manchester by the Anglo-Saxons. The wild Pennine hills shut off both the west and the north. The Vikings are over to the north east, with York at their centre. They, and whoever controlled the burh at Bakewell, are aware that Batham Gate is a weakness, a spot where the Vikings can sneak in behind the lines. Consequently, they built the Grey Ditch to protect the route and provide surveillance of the Hope Valley.

The second Roman road was from Navio to the fort at Templeborough, near Rotherham. This is assumed to cross Stanage Edge although the route has never been proven. That said, it is hard to imagine that the two forts were not linked. O'Neil clearly believed in the existence of this road. Even as late as 920 it might still have been used and headed directly north east into Viking territory.

Indirectly, the creator of the Grey Ditch would be Edward the Elder, a royal link to our late Queen. He was the son of Alfred the Great and he succeeded in October 899. He died 4 years after the advance to Bakewell. Nothing is recorded of his accession, however, his son, Aethelstan, who had been raised in Mercia, was crowned at Kingston (on Thames) in 925. He is said to be the first king (possibly the second?) to be donned with a gold crown whereas all previous monarchs had been donned with a helmet. London, including Kingston, was part of Mercia. That was the southern extreme of Mercia whereas Bradwell was the northern extreme.

As a consequence, can we at least suggest a more precise date to the Grey Ditch as circa 920? The localised nature of the dyke, a major undertaking, suggests that

Bradwell had strategic significance to the Anglo Saxons. This may have been purely defensive or related to the production of lead, about which we know virtually nothing from that period. We should recognise that Bradwell was important to the Kingdom of Mercia and through that has direct links to the royal line and that English crown.