

THROUGH A STRANGE COUNTRY: THE PARKERS' WORK AT OLD WINCHESTER HILL, JULY 1807

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ABSTRACT

William Cunnington, of Heytesbury Wiltshire, is an undisputed pioneer of archaeology, bridging the divide between pure antiquarianism and the development of excavation as a research tool in the study of ancient landscapes. He and his regular excavators, Stephen and John Parker, worked on over 400 barrows across Wiltshire between 1798 and his death in 1810, developing ideas and techniques that were to form a benchmark for archaeologists for several decades. This article assesses the documentary evidence which survives in the Wiltshire Heritage Museum archive for a little known foray into Hampshire, conceived and funded by the Rev. Richard Iremonger of Wherwell. It demonstrates that Iremonger, while not particularly active in antiquarianism, was nonetheless responsible for the earliest known barrow excavations in this county, in 1805. It also establishes the fact that the Parkers were briefly employed by him in July 1807, and that Cunnington, though offering advice, had no direct role in the excavations at Old Winchester Hill.

INTRODUCTION

In the tumultuous first decade of the 19th century Napoleon's armies ravaged Europe; the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was created by the Act of Union; Wordsworth wrote 'Daffodils'; and in Wiltshire William Cunnington and his excavators Stephen and John Parker were literally breaking new ground in archaeology. Cunnington's excavations reached their widest audience through the publication of *Ancient Wiltshire* by Sir Richard Colt Hoare, his most famous patron, the first

fascicule of which was published in May 1810. Cunnington died on 31st December of that year, leaving a towering legacy that dominated the archaeology of Wiltshire, and the methodology of the fledgling discipline, for many years. However, the story that remains almost completely untold is the involvement of Cunnington and the Parkers in some of the earliest barrow excavations in Hampshire.

It is not certain when Stephen Parker, the father of John, was first employed by William Cunnington, but John's obituary in the *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, states that 'His name is favourably mentioned in Sir R. C. Hoare's *Ancient Wiltshire*, as the principal pioneer engaged by Mr. Cunnington, of Heytesbury, in 1801, and as having assisted him for several years in his interesting discoveries of British and other antiquities.' (*Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 23 May 1867) Other evidence suggests that Stephen may have already been employed for some time by Cunnington, whose earliest excavations appear to date from about 1798. Recent research undertaken by the author, in the archives held at the Wiltshire Heritage Museum in Devizes, has enabled new analysis of the exact nature of the Parkers' employment, and the previously unreported extent of their archaeological skill (Everill 2010), as well as the role of Cunnington's other patrons in the six years before Colt Hoare began financing his archaeological work in 1804. This research also revealed fascinating insights into the work undertaken at Old Winchester Hill and the truth behind the erroneous reports of it being excavated 'on behalf of' William Cunnington (English Heritage 2011).

Schadla-Hall (1977) identified evidence of antiquarian excavation of three Bronze Age round barrows within the Iron Age hillfort

at Old Winchester Hill. He stated that “the barrows, described by Williams-Freeman and later Grinsell are bowl barrows, c.2m high and c.1.5m in diameter. All three of the barrows bear, in the shape of circular hollows 1.5m – 2m in diameter and 50–70cm deep, signs of past excavation” (Schadla-Hall 1977, 22). He also found a reference to the work being proposed by a Hampshire antiquarian named Iremonger in the biography of William Cunnington (Cunnington 1975, 107) and if this had taken place in 1807 it was, as far as was known, “the earliest barrow opening in Hampshire, and I am still trying to find information on Iremonger – and also on any material recovered” (Schadla-Hall 1977, 23). However, it was not clear to Schadla-Hall if Iremonger’s plans had come to fruition and it has certainly not been possible until now to demonstrate a clear connection between Cunnington, the Parkers, and the evidence of early antiquarian shaft trenches observed by Schadla-Hall.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PIONEERS

William Cunnington (1754–1810) was a self-educated merchant who developed an interest in the rich archaeological landscape around the Wiltshire village of Heytesbury where he lived and worked. In contrast to the vast majority of antiquarians of the time, Cunnington realised that to fully understand the barrows which fascinated him they should be excavated and recorded carefully and methodically. Beginning his work around 1798 the initial investigations were self-funded, but increasingly they attracted the interest of a succession of wealthy patrons culminating in Sir Richard Colt Hoare (1758–1838) of Stourhead. Hoare’s huge financial investment in Cunnington’s work from 1804, and the consequent increase in the number of excavations undertaken, enabled the latter to excavate several hundred barrows across south Wiltshire. By modern standards Cunnington’s excavation methodology – predominantly involving a shaft trench dug from the crown of a barrow to ground level in search of ‘novelties’ – was very poor, but he was the first archaeologist to undertake such an extensive campaign of work and was a

true pioneer. Indeed it is fair to say that it was not until the work of Thomas Bateman (1821–61) in Derbyshire in the 1840s, that large scale excavations saw a significant step forward in methodology (Marsden 1974; 1988). Cunnington’s meticulous record keeping included having copies of his correspondence made, normally by one of his daughters. These letters, along with many of those received, now form a central element of the archive held in Devizes, making it possible to read both sides of a number of the discussions that took place regarding his excavations.

Stephen and John Parker, also of Heytesbury, worked on nearly all of Cunnington’s excavations up to 1810 and were held in some esteem as reliable, careful and experienced excavators. John Parker is more frequently discussed in correspondence between Cunnington and Hoare and it is clear that he was often despatched on travels across the Wiltshire Downs in search of new sites. John, born in 1780, is portrayed with some warmth by Cunnington and he comes across as hard-working and enthusiastic, being deeply disappointed by the failure of excavations to produce interesting material. This disappointment led at times to what Hoare describes, perhaps harshly, as sulking fits and there was clearly some friction between them throughout this period. In late 1809 Cunnington interceded, after Hoare had complained of John’s stupidity for not mentioning to him the find of a new site close to Stourhead, by gently reminding his patron that he had told them that he knew of all the sites around his house (Everill 2010, 447). Perhaps it was this episode that led the volatile Baronet to threaten to withhold a Christmas ‘bonus’ from the men that year unless “they mend their manners” (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.2597, Hoare letter 80). Despite these problems Hoare was in no doubt about the value of John’s expertise, and in fact there is clear evidence that he employed him on at least one further occasion after Cunnington’s death (Everill 2010, 451). Sadly the Parkers have increasingly faded from histories of archaeology, warranting little more than a passing mention, yet the evidence suggests that they, and particularly John, were hugely respected at the time for their skill in what we now term field archaeology. It is worth men-

tioning here that this research also revealed the first ever reference to a trowel being used on an archaeological site, in 1808, and it was in the hand of John Parker (Everill 2009) – perhaps for this reason alone he warrants greater recognition than is currently afforded him by modern archaeologists.

THE PARKERS IN HAMPSHIRE

In 1806, after several years excavation experience – two of which under the massively expanded programme of excavation that Colt Hoare financed – the Parkers were paid by the Rev. Edward Duke, through Cunnington, to excavate barrows on his land at Lake Down, Wiltshire and to supervise and train Duke's own inexperienced workmen. The work was, however, effectively directed by Cunnington who advised Duke, briefly visited the excavations, and provided an interpretation. In effect, Duke's financial contribution simply bought him the right to keep the artefacts from the excavations and to publish the first account of them, which he did in 1809 (Duke 1807–11). The work at Lake Down appears to be the first occasion in which the Parkers were paid by someone other than Cunnington or his patrons, but the Rev. Richard Iremonger (1779–1819), of Wherwell Vicarage, was at this time already planning a campaign of excavation in Hampshire. It is not clear whether the two men had already met, but the oldest surviving letter to Cunnington dates from 9 September 1805, sent from Wherwell Vicarage:

'Absence from home has obliged me to confine my researches to single barrows in this neighbourhood + unfortunately none of them have proved of any importance, but I can not allow myself in the smallest degree intimidated by this failure + trust when the harvest is conducted, to resume it with redoubled vigour... by the bye, on the downs between Wherwell + Winchester I have discovered the site of several British villages adjacent to small groups of tumuli. My men are all impatience to commence our autumn campaign in the fields' (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.2598, letter 115)

This letter would seem to suggest that Iremonger had already attempted to excavate

barrows in the vicinity of Wherwell in 1805. The absence of surviving written reports and illustrations make it impossible to judge the success or even appropriateness of his operations, but, following Schadla-Hall's assessment (1977), they must be considered the first barrow excavations in Hampshire.

The tone of his letter seems rather grand given his relative lack of experience, but this is perhaps not exceptional given his social standing. It must also be remembered that Iremonger was only 26 at that time, only a year older, in fact, than John Parker, and youthful over-confidence and exuberance might also be blamed. Richard Iremonger was born on 9 July 1779, the sixth of seven sons of Joshua and Ann. He was, however, the second eldest of only three to survive to adulthood (Derek Iremonger, pers. comm.). His grandfather, another Joshua, had acquired the lordship of Wherwell and Goodworth Clatford Manors in Hampshire through a combination of marriage and purchase in 1743 (VCHH 1911, 414). However, it seems likely that it was his marriage to Eleonora Crawley-Boevy on 11 June 1801 that ultimately provided the resources to pursue an interest in antiquarianism. Eleonora was a daughter of Sir Thomas Crawley-Boevy, Baronet of Flaxley Abbey in Gloucestershire (Courthope 1835, 227). She died tragically in September 1802 a week after giving birth to their only child, Richard Joshua Iremonger, in Southampton. Richard did not remarry, but instead perhaps found solace, or at least distraction, in antiquarianism. As an adult his son moved to Italy where he married and raised a family in Milan (Derek Iremonger, pers. comm.). The antiquarian himself died at the age of only 39 and was buried 7 June 1819 at Wherwell.

Following the initial contact between Iremonger and Cunnington in 1805, there are no further indications among the documents held in Devizes that Iremonger engaged in archaeological activity for nearly two years, and one could perhaps reasonably assume that he would have reported any such work, if it was of a substantial nature, to Cunnington. Then, on 30 June 1807, he wrote again to Cunnington, from the marital family seat of Flaxley Abbey, outlining his plans for excavation at Old Winchester Hill.

'My dear Sir

I have just arranged my plans for commencing my long projected campaign at Old Winchester immediately after the Salisbury assizes (15th July); + if I am not very much mistaken, you promised to join our party on this occasion, which will consist of Sir R. Hoare + Mr Lambert... You will I trust not think me of great intrusion in requesting the assistance of your Wiltshire labourers on this occasion, for my Hampshire men have disgraced themselves by their exorbitant demands + I am confident that the expenses of their journey will be amply repaid by their superior skill + alacrity – so provided this scheme is approved of, + I am not imposing on you too much trouble, I should conceive they may venture to leave Heytesbury about the seventeenth of July – their shortest way will take them thro Winchester + so to Meonstoke, where they may receive directions to Old Winchester Hill + the tumuli are too conspicuous to escape their observation. You will indeed confer an additional favour on me, if you would have the goodness to supply them with money for their travelling expenses, tho I fear you will think me guilty of great intrusion in making this request' (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.2598, letter 116).

The reference to the Salisbury Assizes seems likely to relate to the inclusion of Hoare in the party of gentlemen due to attend Iremonger's excavation. Hoare describes having to attend the Assizes of March 1806 (Cunnington 1975, 84) and the Marlborough Quarter Sessions of October 1807 (Cunnington 1975, 122). It seems likely, therefore, that Iremonger was so keen to include such significant figures as Cunnington and Hoare in his party that their availability determined the dates of the work to be undertaken. There is no evidence, in fact, that either of them did attend, which must have caused Iremonger a great disappointment. There was evidently a short delay in the date of the Parkers' projected departure on 17 July, for that day Iremonger wrote again from Wherwell Vicarage with his latest plans for the excavations.

'My dear Sir,

I this morning received a letter from Sir Rich^d Hoare, which has given me reason to expect the Wiltshire diggers early on Monday next, at Wherwell, + I write these few lines to give them a more direct road to the tumuli I propose opening.

They will save themselves some miles by going to Salisbury, Stockbridge, Winchester, where they will enquire their way to Meonstoke + from this place Old Winchester Hill where the barrows are situated, cannot be a great distance – Meonstoke is about 10 miles from Winchester. The labourers (sh^d they be interrupted in their work) will inform the tenants that I have obtained the permission of their landlords. Your goodness will excuse the trouble I have imposed on you. I am sadly disappointed by the reduction of my party – excuse haste – Yours ever truly

Rich^d Iremonger ' (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.2598, letter 117).

It is not certain which gentlemen, if any, were actually present in Iremonger's 'party' during the excavation, however, his comment does serve as a reminder that a significant percentage of early antiquarian activity was principally a social activity and a way of demonstrating wealth and influence; education and enlightenment. This is particularly evident in the letters from the Rev. William Coxe, one of Cunnington's early patrons, from whose house a note was sent in June 1802 informing Cunnington that, contrary to their plans, Coxe could no longer attend the excavation at "Stonehenge on Monday because he has company to dine with him that day. He will however go early on Tuesday morning, and will send a tent and cold meat, as he expects a party of gentlemen to be there, which will render it necessary to go to Amesbury to dine" (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.2597, Coxe letter 23).

It also seems from Iremonger's letter that the Parkers were about to be despatched directly to Wherwell, to meet Iremonger, but the young antiquarian instead wanted them to go directly to the site and begin the excavation. As was common of the age, the antiquarian enthusiasts very rarely felt it necessary to constantly attend and supervise the work of the actual excavators. The date of Iremonger's letter, 17 July 1807, was a Friday and the 'Monday next' to which Iremonger refers would therefore have been 20 July. It is not clear precisely when the Parkers left Heytesbury, though Saturday 18 July seems most likely, but clearly the lines of communication were quick and effective, as Iremonger seems to have expected his letter of the 17th to have reached Heytesbury soon enough to

inform the Parkers' route. It is a considerable distance from Wherwell to Old Winchester Hill (a little over 20 miles as the crow flies) but even with this diversion removed the total journey from Heytesbury to the barrows was 52 miles (by Cunnington's reckoning). It seems likely, therefore, that the journey on foot to Old Winchester Hill from Heytesbury might have taken up to three days in total, with the Parkers finally arriving on Tuesday 21 July. However, as will be seen, the Parkers evidently hired horses for part of the journey and this was perhaps to ensure that they still arrived to start work on the morning of Monday 20th as had initially been planned. Whatever day work started at Old Winchester Hill, however, it was evidently completed before Sunday 26 July 1807, on which date Iremonger wrote to Cunnington:

'Before this will reach you, you will probably have heard of the very indifferent success which attended our researches at Old Winchester. Unfortunately several of the most striking barrows had been previously [word unclear: possible meaning dug/robbed?] + the remaining tumuli have not afforded a single novelty... On the down I was too much hurried to settle with the labourers + have taken the liberty of referring them to you + it is but justice to assure you that I am perfectly satisfied with their work + conduct' (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.2598, letter 118).

Iremonger was clearly disappointed with the results of the excavations, and one wonders what Stephen and John must have thought, to have travelled all that way only to be sent home after the work was done without even a penny from their employer. Clearly at this stage Cunnington had provided the vast majority of the financial support for Iremonger's project, having given the Parkers money for their travelling expenses beforehand, and now being asked to pay their wages. A fortnight later, on 10 August, Iremonger wrote to Cunnington informing him that he was unable to undertake a planned trip to see him in Heytesbury:

'as the chief object of my visit was to discharge my pecuniary obligations, you will do me a favour by giving me a line stating the amount of my debt + I trust you will take that opportunity of favouring me with your observation on the camp at Old Winchester Hill for I

confess myself very impatient for your opinion' (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.2598, letter 119)

In reply, Cunnington sent details of the total cost of the work at Old Winchester Hill to Iremonger on 13 August 1807. Unfortunately the transcriber of the original letter – almost certainly one of Cunnington's daughters – left the figure blank, but it still represents an interesting insight into the logistics of the project.

'I was much disappointed in not meeting you at Sir C Mallets' and again in not seeing you at Heytesbury. I am extremely sorry to inform you the expenses attending the old Winchester expedition are very great, having paid for you £_. The whole length of the way being 52 miles and through a strange country, they were charged high at the different public houses on the road; in addition to these expenses was a considerable sum paid for riding part of the way. I have a long bill of the particulars which you shall have the first time I see you.' (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.2594, Book 4, p.41)

Sadly, no indication of the actual sum survives in any of the letters held in Devizes, though we do know from some of Colt Hoare's surviving accounts that the cost of the surveyor, Phillip Crocker's three day stay at the Inn at Heytesbury from the 5 April 1810, including stabling for his horse, was 19s 9d; and that in July 1809 Crocker paid 5s to 'Mr Hilliar of the Lord's Arms for Horse for the day' (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.726, Colt Hoare's accounts). It also seems likely from these accounts that the Parkers were paid a 'day rate' of 3s 6d. On the basis that the Parkers worked for Iremonger for perhaps four days, the cost of getting them to Old Winchester Hill and employing them might easily have been at least £2/10s, excluding the cost of accommodating them during the work, which one assumes they would not have paid themselves. That figure also excludes the fact that the Parkers were apparently charged quite highly en route through the 'strange country' of Hampshire, so the final amount was quite likely to have been over £3. To put that sum into perspective, Colt Hoare, a far wealthier man than Iremonger, wrote to Cunnington in May 1806 regarding the costs of an entire year's work: 'I should not wish to exceed £50 this year as my expences in furnishing my House

&c have nearly drained my purse...' (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.2597, Hoare letter 25).

Having given Iremonger the bad news regarding the cost of his project, Cunnington went on to respond to Iremonger's request for his opinions on the site of Old Winchester Hill, and leaves the reader in no doubt that the site was in no sense excavated by, or on behalf of, William Cunnington. It also seems from this letter that the Parkers excavated not only the barrows, but at some locations within the hillfort. It is worth quoting this letter at length, as it represents the only known discussion of the results of this early archaeological work in Hampshire, and is not published elsewhere.

'I have never seen this work myself, but having a sketch of the camp made by Mr Crocker, together with the remarks of Stephen and John, has led me to draw different conclusions to those you have formed. It is a difficult thing to decide on many of our earthen works, therefore I may be wrong, but as you seem desirous of my opinion I send it, -by comparing different opinions you may perhaps arrive at truth [...]

The sections to the north and south

The approach on these sides being difficult of access one vallum was deemed sufficient. But unfortunately Mr Crocker neglected to measure the slope of the ramparts and some other things that might have led us to pronounce it a British or very early saxon work. If the vallums are very high, and both foss and vallum neatly formed, I would pronounce it saxon or a British work altered to its present form by the Saxons. In digging within the area of this work the men only found two or three pieces of rude pottery, this might have been British or the rude saxon pottery of perhaps the seventh or eighth century, similar to what we found under Barbury Castle. I cannot learn from the men that there are any signs of a British village near it, I only mention the linsheads [Lynchets] and marks of enclosures on the sides of that and other hills near it; and these we consider as marks of ancient agriculture' (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.2594, Book 4, p.41).

Though inconclusive, Iremonger was evidently satisfied with Cunnington's thoughts on the subject, and replied from Lymington on 8 October 1807, finally settling his debt two and a half months after the work had commenced.

'The note inclosed I believe will more than discharge my account with you + the balance may be settled when we next meet; the thousand interruptions to my long projected trip to Heytesbury must plead my apology for the delay in its settlement.' (WHM, DZSWS: MSS.2598, letter 119).

Later documents and letters in the Devizes' collection demonstrate that Iremonger was an invited guest in a party, including Mr and Mrs Lambert, who observed excavations on Normanton Down, Wiltshire, on 11 July 1808. There is also further correspondence regarding a shared enterprise, though it is not clear whether this refers to work in Hampshire – it seems more likely that Iremonger had contributed financially to some work in Wiltshire that John had been employed in. However, sadly there are no further references to work being undertaken in Hampshire, and no written descriptions or sketches from Iremonger outlining the work he had funded at Old Winchester Hill in 1807.

CONCLUSION

The documents held at Devizes offer a tantalising glimpse into some of the earliest archaeological excavations in Hampshire. Sadly for historians of archaeology, Iremonger was not the fastidious record keeper that Cunnington was. However, it is now at least possible to state with certainty that Old Winchester Hill was excavated by the Parkers – over several days probably starting on the 20 July 1807 – and that Cunnington, though not the instigator or director of the work was at least consulted and provided Iremonger with a broad interpretation of the results. From Iremonger's earliest letters to Cunnington it is possible to identify the former as the director of the first known barrow excavations in Hampshire in about 1805, though nothing is known of the exact location of the excavations or the methodology used, and very little is known about the results. The subsequent excavations at Old Winchester Hill benefited from the skill and experience of Stephen and John Parker, supported by the expertise of Phillip Crocker, and are undoubtedly

the first documented barrow excavations in Hampshire. That Cunnington himself did not play a more active role in this work is a great pity and, while Iremonger can now be properly identified in the history of antiquarianism in this county, this episode serves to remind us of the huge step forward in the recording of archaeological excavations that Cunnington pioneered in that tumultuous decade.

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