

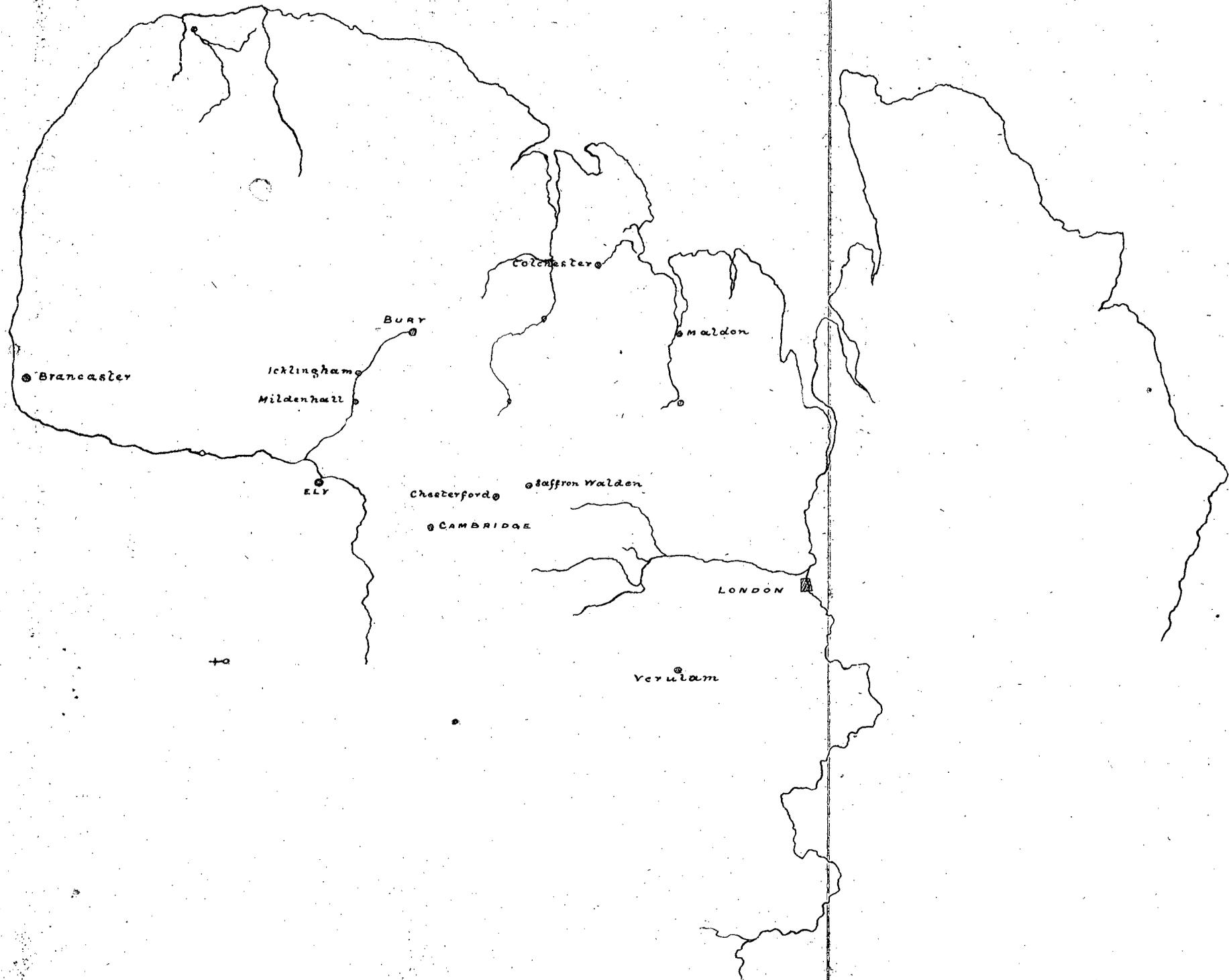
NOTES ON THE ROMAN STATIONS AT AND NEAR ICKLINGHAM.

[READ JUNE 5TH, 1851.]

THAT the Romans maintained a considerable station at Icklingham, during a long period; is generally admitted.

To me it appears that this was a *military* station, the object of which was to watch and keep in check the bands of Britons who lurked in the fastnesses of the fens, and to protect the line of communication between Brancaster and Chesterford. The fen-country was in those days well calculated for the purposes of the native insurgents. The Britons were, in the early time of the Roman domination, national enemies: at later periods the same country afforded refuge to outlaws, and hiding places to banditti. From hence they could sally forth to plunder the borders, attack travellers, or even make attempts on weak parties and exposed out-posts of their Roman masters.

Dugdale, who is our chief authority with regard to the Great Level of the Fens, gives us a map of what he considers to have been the state of this vast district, "as it lay drowned." He quotes sundry fragments from Saxon writers, and he represents the country from St. Ives to Brandon in one direction, and from Crowland to Swaffham Bulbeck in another, as covered with water, a few portions excepted. It is exhibited as an enormous lake, out of which there arose certain islands, and of these the Isle of Ely was the most extensive. According to the Saxon accounts, these islands were generally covered with wild woods, thickets, and reeds; and they continued to be, till long after the Norman conquest, the lurking places of desperate men, of the descriptions I have already mentioned. Dugdale's map represents the water as reaching to Worlington, while upon the other side of Mildenhall a branch of the inundation ran up nearly



Brancaster

Icklingham

Mildenhall

Bury

Colchester

Maldon

Ely

Chesterford

Saffron Walden

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON

Verulam

to the point where the turnpike gate now stands upon the Brandon road.

There are grounds for believing that the edges of the country which bordered and confined the inundation, must have been in the time of the Romans somewhat similar in character to that which has been ascribed to the islands of the fen: that there was much wild wood, and thickets, and marshes. Near the turnpike I have just mentioned, a tract of land along the brook still bears the Saxon name of the Harst, and that of Wild-street is probably a corruption from *neald*. Between Holywell and Beck Rows there are still vestiges of an old oak wood; and in the skirt-land of West Row many trees have been found at a trifling depth beneath the present surface.

I have gone into this detailed description of the fens, because I conceive that the principal duty of the Roman station at Icklingham was to furnish outposts along the borders for the repression of attacks from that dangerous neighbourhood; while at the same time it seemed a pass of importance on one of the great Roman roads.

What was afterwards called the "Ickenild way" appears to have crossed the stream which now bears the name of the Lark, or the Mildenhall river, at Icklingham. The banks on either side of the stream are dry, and they close to within a short distance. In former times there were marshes both above and below Icklingham, extending upwards to Culford and Timworth, and downwards nearly as far as Mildenhall. At the present day it is difficult to appreciate the change which has been effected by drainage, and by the deepening of the outfall of the fen rivers. Even I can well remember to have heard, when I was a boy, the booming of the bitterns in the deep fen which then lay between Barton Mills and Tuddenham, and Icklingham. The passage of the military road at this place was, therefore, of great importance; and I imagine that the Romans secured it by a double camp. I mean, that they had one camp on the rising ground of Icklingham, and another on the opposite bank, Cavenham heath. Their road would have run through, or close under, these fortifications. It might

be worth while to examine Cavenham heath with care, and perhaps to make excavations in that part which has borne the name of "the Black Ditches."

Such are my conjectures as to the position held by the Romans across the river, at Icklingham, and as to the purposes of such a station. From hence they would have furnished outposts to watch the fens more closely, at such points as Wamhill, the Rows of Mildenhall, Eriswell, and Lakenheath. And in support of this conjecture, I may mention that many pieces of antiquity, Roman and British, have been found near Wild-street; and many human bones buried in a chalk-pit near Holywell Row, one being a collar-bone, in which a javelin-head was still sticking. To this I may add, that I have heard recently that some Roman remains have been dug up near Wamhill.

Far be it from me to venture on the much-vexed question of Roman roads in the country of the Icenii. But whether Roger Gale was right, or not, in placing Camulodunum in the neighbourhood of Chesterford, it is at least clear that there were great Roman establishments thereabouts, and that from thence their line of communication with Branodunum, or with any stations which guarded the coast of the Metaris æstuary, must in all probability have passed by Icklingham.

HENRY EDWD. BUNBURY.

Barton, May, 1851.