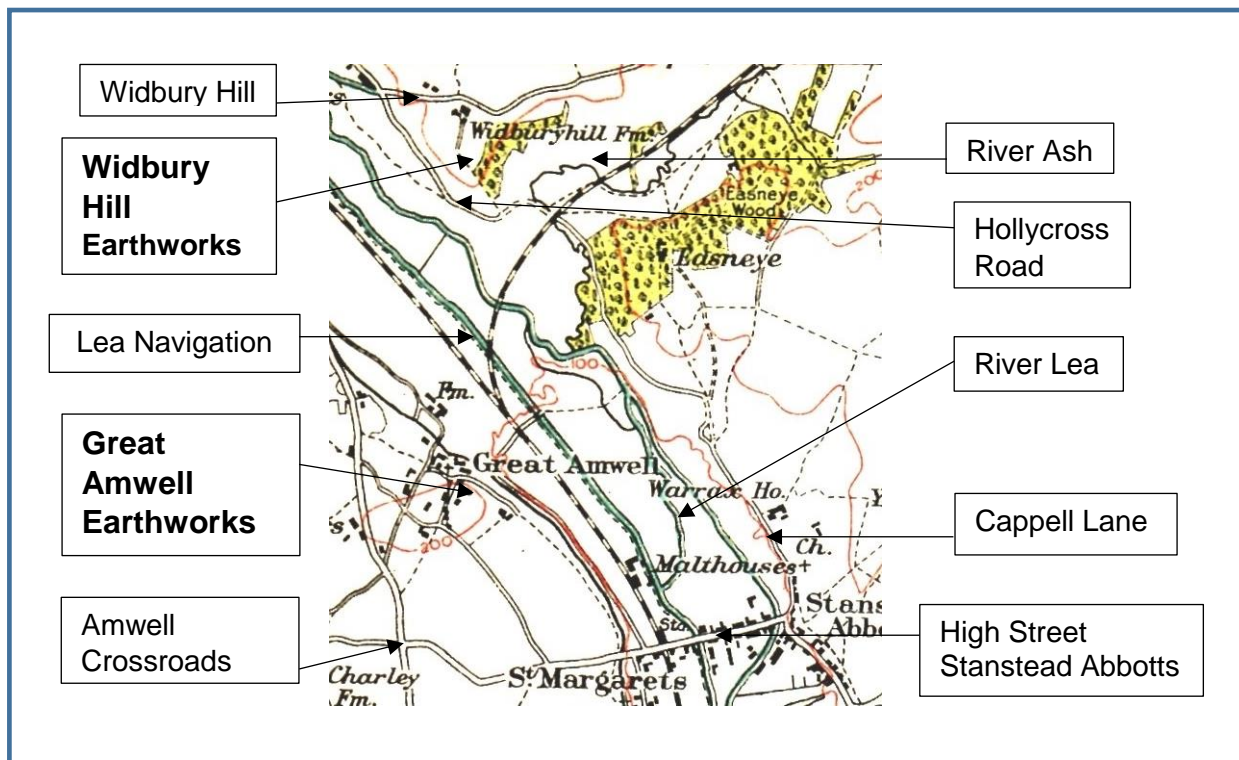


EARTHWORKS AT GREAT AMWELL AND WIDBURY HILL

By
Stuart Moyer

Not far from Stanstead Abbots are thought to be the site of two defensive earthworks both possibly dating from at least 1,000 years ago. One is near the top of Widbury Hill the other at the top of the hill above Great Amwell Church. The earthworks at Widbury are perhaps best known due to having often been associated with a defensive site built by the Danes during their incursion up the River Lea in 895 AD. However on the other side of the valley is a now vanished and forgotten earthworks which was very noticeable in the landscape some 220 years ago. These two sites are just short of one mile apart and would have been easily visible one from the other. It is thought that at least one of these earthworks dates from the Iron Age placing its construction sometime between 900 BC and the Roman invasion in 43 AD. When first built both these earthworks would have looked down steep valley sides to a marshy flood plain through which meandered a wide river. From the valley side both would have been good defensive sites for such earthworks to be located.

EARTHWORKS LOCATIONS IN THE LOCAL LANDSCAPE

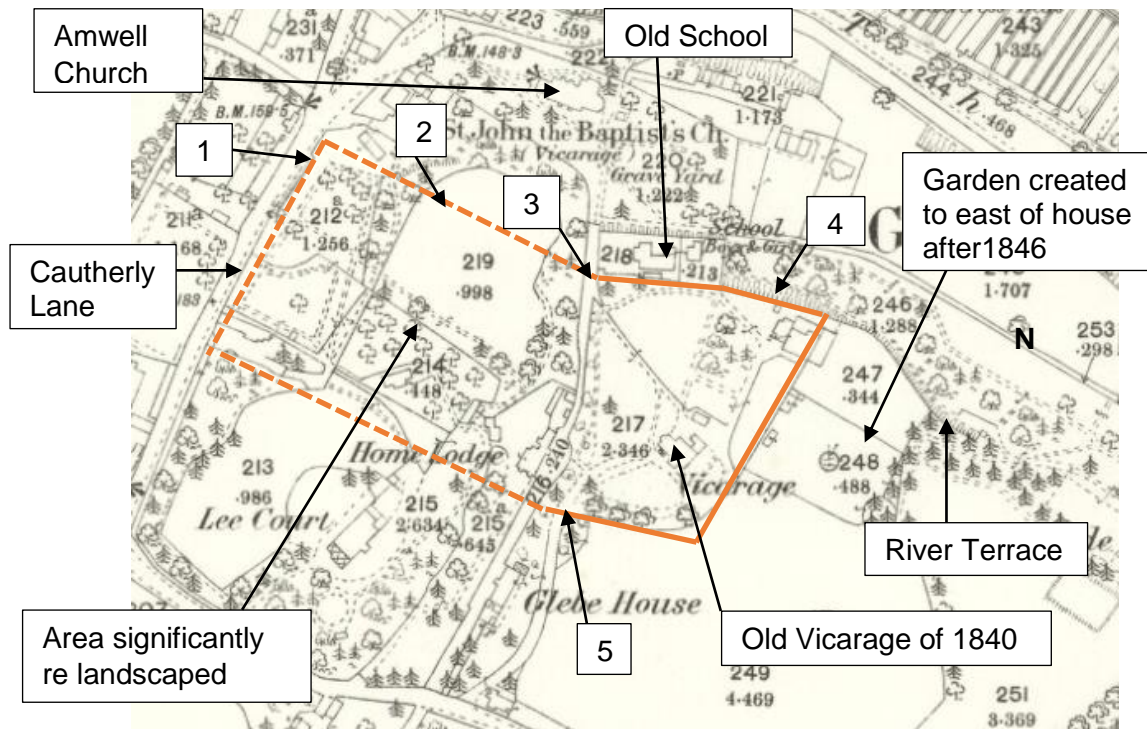


THE EARTHWORKS AT GREAT AMWELL

A reference to earthworks above the church at Great Amwell can be found on page 246 in "The Beauties of England and Wales Vol. 7" by E. W. Brayley published in 1808.

"On the hill above the church are traces of a very extensive fortification, the rampart of which is very distinguishable on the side overlooking the vale through which the river Lea flows"

A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE EARTHWORKS



The numbered boxes indicate the following features of the site:-

- 1 A short length of what may be a remnant of the earthworks rampart much denuded lies behind a knapped flint faced wall fronting onto Cautherly Lane and extends a little further up the hill.
- 2 A slight break of slope can be discerned in the steep footpath leading to the church.
- 3 A low ridge still exists today as a break of slope across a landscaped garden.
- 4 A steep bank still exists here at the top of the small graveyard annex.
- 5 A curious curve in the original approach road to the Old Vicarage may indicate the position of the earthworks at that point that still existed in 1840.

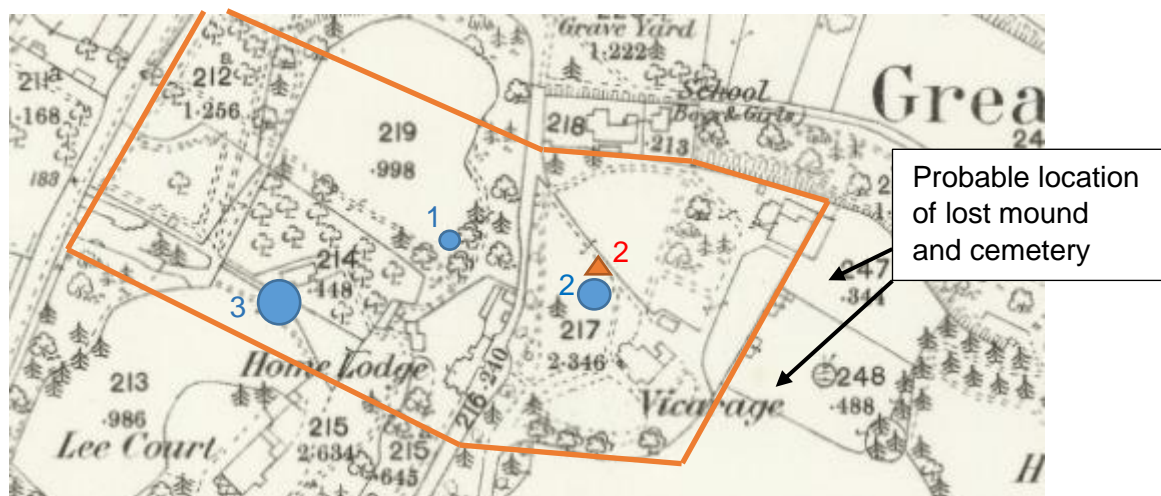
The probable fullest extent of the earthworks that may have been removed by 1840 are shown as dashed lines. The section shown within the dashed lines was farmland in 1840. It remains unclear if or by how much the earthworks extended westwards into this area or indeed when the mentioned extensive earthworks above the church were removed. The extract above from E. W. Brayley's work might suggest that the remains of extensive earthworks were still noticeable in the landscape in 1800. The easterly portion of the earthworks was still partly in existence when the Old Vicarage was built in 1839 to 40 by the Rev. Mordant Barnard. It was reported in the 1860s that there was no sign of the earthworks. Given that the earthworks no longer exist the above reconstruction can only be indicative, awaiting a more detailed professional archaeological investigation. Today there is little evidence left at all to suggest extensive earthworks ever existed here.

The earthworks when seen by early Antiquarians suggested to them that they were looking at the remains of a hill fort. One could therefore presume they could discern a rampart with a ditch on the outside encircling the protected area within. The site is located some 100 feet above the valley floor at the top of a steep valley side and has wide views across the valley. The noted impressive appearance from the valley was enhanced by the fact that the earth bank was built on top of a steep part of the valley side. This natural abrupt steep slope [part of a river terrace] can be traced down the valley right through the fields into the Folly estate where it merges into the river terrace below it, near the junction of Emmas Crescent and Folly View.

When the Rev Barnard began to build his then new Vicarage in 1839 it is said that only part of the line of the northern earthworks and the eastern end of the earthworks still existed. His new Vicarage being built in the middle of these remaining earthworks. Once the house was completed his attention turned to forming a large garden on the land mainly to the east of the house. This had for a long time been part of the Glebe land and used for agriculture, now to be used by the vicar to enhance his personal property. In 1847 the workmen employed on this project began to dig up a large number of Roman funeral urns many of which at the time appear to have been broken and scattered around. They also it is claimed found a considerable number of Roman coins associated with the Roman cemetery. Unfortunately some ended up unrecorded in private hands and the workmen helped themselves to the remaining coins as a welcome addition to their wages. The story was that they had them melted down before selling on the precious metal. In addition there was a more formal investigation of the mound which once existed in the same area to the east of the house. Despite an exploratory trench being dug some 10 feet deep and up to 50 feet long nothing was found. The mound was at first thought to be a beacon mound but once all the known local beacons had all been located elsewhere it was then thought to be a Roman burial mound. The formation of the garden appears to have seen the loss of most if not all of the finds of value including the removal of the mound.

In much more recent times Access Cambridge working out of Cambridge University carried out an archaeological survey in the years 2013 to 2015. This took the form of 35 one metre square test pits mainly located in the area of Madgeways Lane, Cautherly Lane and Hillside Lane. Of the 35 pits 5 were within the area that could be considered to be inside the maximum projected extent of the earthworks. It is 3 of these 5 pit locations that the majority of the Late Iron Age pottery finds were excavated. Given the rarity of such finds in general such a concentration deserves to be considered of some significance.

Finds analysis in and around the Earthworks



Iron Age pottery sherds finds in Blue and Roman in Red. Numbers indicate number of finds

Of the five sampling sites within the earthworks 3 contained small Iron Age pottery sherds amounting to 6 finds in total, all in an undisturbed context. Only 1 other site of the 35 had an Iron Age find in a disturbed soil about 250 yards to the west of the earthworks. All Iron Age pottery sherds were dated to between 100 BC and 43 AD. Of the Roman finds 2 were found within the earthworks and 2 outside one 300 yards to the west the other 250 yards to the south west. The finds might suggest that the earthworks date from the late Iron Age possibly built by the Belgic tribe the Catuvellauni who settled in this area and are known to have built hill forts. The Roman finds both in the test pits and the Roman Cemetery area discovered in 1847 suggests the site remained in continuous use from the Late Iron Age into the Roman period. However later finds suggest occupation ceased during or just after the Roman period, pottery finds of the mid 1500s were the chronologically next pot sherds to be found.

More can be learnt on the test pit survey at <https://www.access.arch.cam.ac.uk/>

More recent work on hill forts suggest that some were not particularly suited as defensive sites but in many ways a showy landscape feature built to impress some and deter others who might aspire to take over the territory. The earthworks at Great Amwell above the church may well have shown a fine and impressive defensive face overlooking the valley but one suspects on the flat land behind less dramatic earthworks existed with much less value as a defensive barrier. After the earthworks were completely removed the land became private gardens instead of farmland. Knowledge of the existence of the earthworks then seems to have rapidly faded from common knowledge.



A view from the church tower looking north east over the Valley of the Lea. This view point is the best one can manage today in duplicating the view as it would have been from the earthworks. These were situated up the slope behind the camera at roughly the same elevation as the church tower today. Widbury Hill is seen on the horizon to the left, the valley of the River Ash in the centre and Easneye Hill to the right.

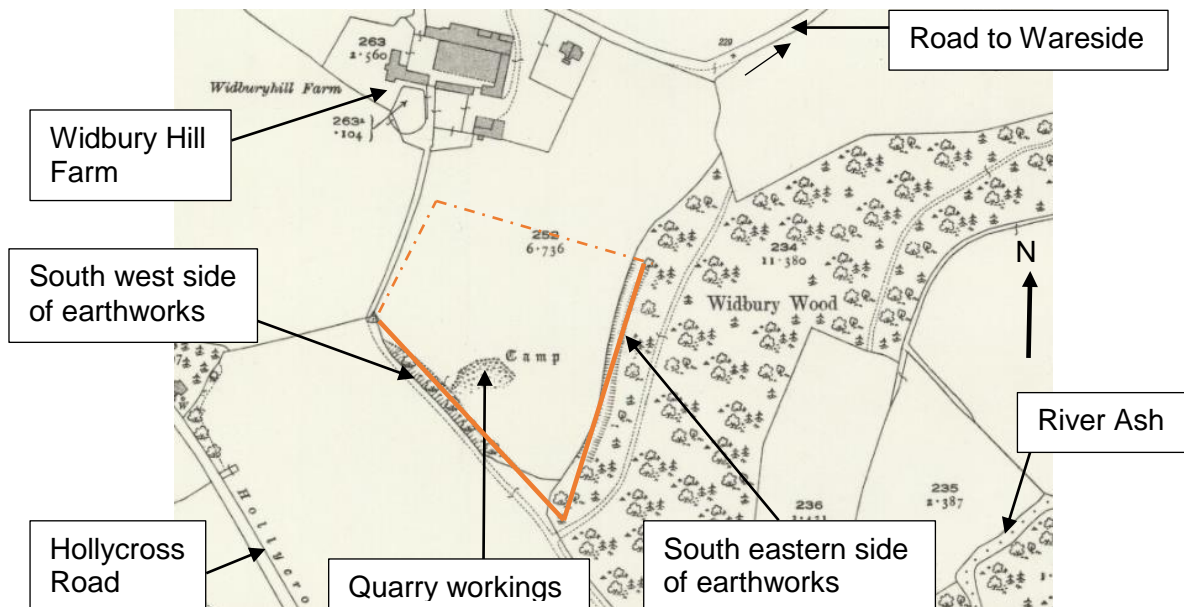
[Picture taken by S. Moye in April 2010.]

THE EARTHWORKS AT WIDBURY HILL

In 1921 the Congress of Archaeological Societies based in London reported on Widbury Hill in their publication "The Year's Work 1921" [Page 5 *Hertfordshire-Middlesex*.]

"Ware. A new camp (at Widbury) has been discovered, and reported to the Ordnance Survey by the owner, Mr. J. H. Buxton, of Easneye. It lies between Widbury House and Widbury Wood, and the ditch is well-preserved on the S.W and E. sides of the camp which coincide with field boundaries. The site has been visited and the necessary additions made for publication on the next edition of the O.S. maps; but as a new edition of the 25-inch sheets [Herts, 30 S.W.] was published in 1921, the camp will only appear on the 6-inch Sheet now in course of preparation." [This map was published in 1923]

LOCATION OF WIDBURY CAMP



The solid brown lines indicate the identified position of earthworks.

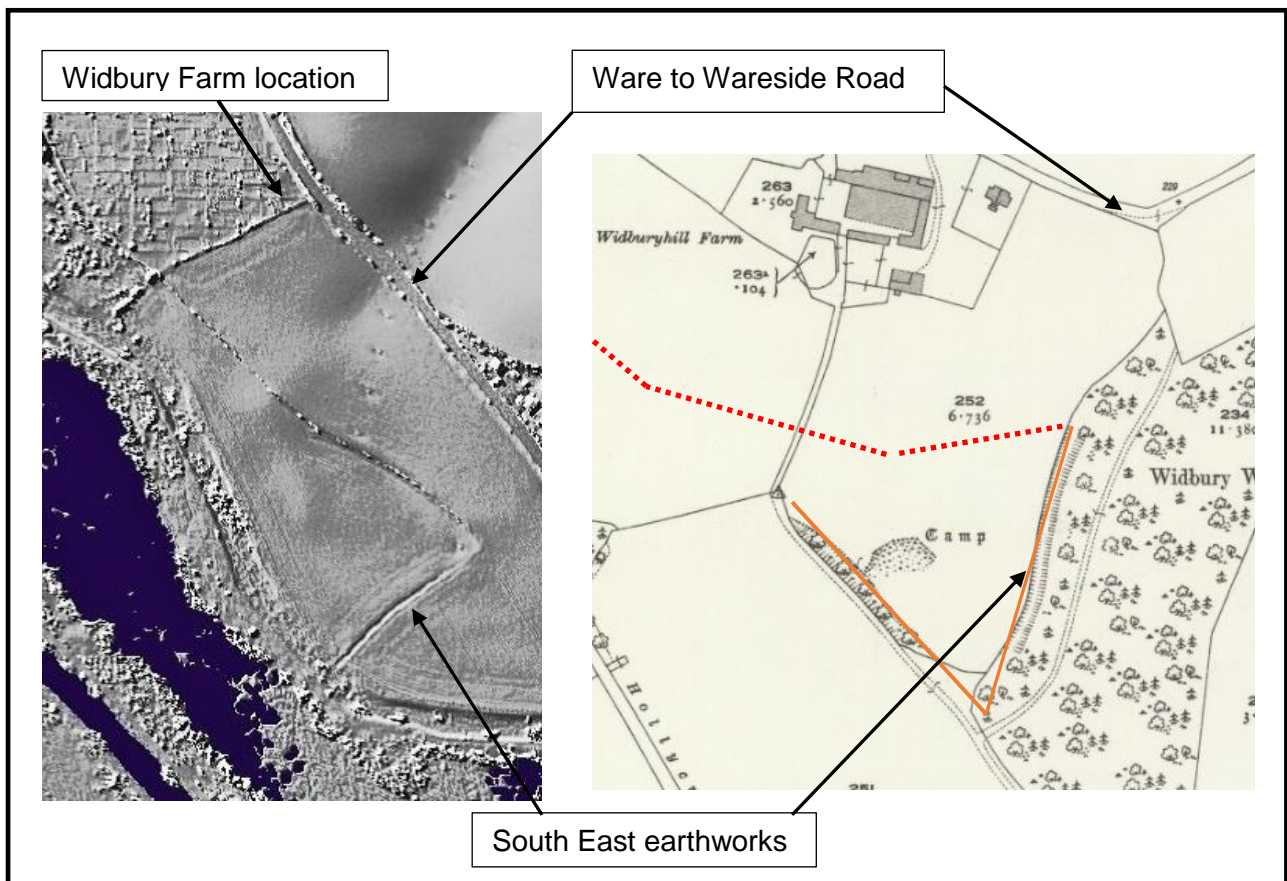
The dashed / dotted lines indicate the suspected position of the missing earthworks.

In 1911 Mr Eliot Howard along with the landowner Mr Buxton of Easneye surveyed the site and their findings were reported in the Hertfordshire Mercury. The earthworks were described as the remains of a deep ditch along the crown of the hill some 120 yards long then turning inwards. The deep ditch is thought to be a reference to the south east side earthworks and the turning inwards reference related to the south west earthworks. At this time it was thought that the usual rectangular form of such hill forts had once existed here and the missing earthworks shown on the map perhaps indicate the thinking in 1911. It must also be born in mind that the Anglo Saxon Chronicle relates that the Danes built a camp 20 miles north of London in 895 AD, having sailed their ships up the Lea. Along with the name of Widbury Hill and the commanding position of the site it must have been compelling for people to make a connection between the earthworks and the record of a Danish camp. Subsequently the earthworks at Widbury became the most favoured site for the location of the Danish encampment of 895 AD.

In more recent times the more noticeable south east earthwork overlooking the valley of the Ash has been measured and described. Its width measured at 7m [23 feet], depth 1m [3 feet] and a rampart only 0.5m on the downslope side. The south west earthworks were described at 50m [162 feet] in length and about 8m [26 feet] in width but much damaged by quarrying. Concerns have been expressed that these earthworks may not be the remnants of a defensive site at all. Observations include the fact that the northern and western sides are not obviously visible on the surface and maybe never existed. The lack of archaeological investigation hinders a definitive answer to that issue. The south east earthwork, the best preserved, have to some seem to be more akin to the remains of a hollow way [ancient roadway] rather than a defensive earthwork. In addition what remains does not seem to be best placed on the slope for defensive purposes and the remaining embankment is very low even for a well eroded defensive rampart. There have been some opinions expressed that it represents a triangular enclosure rather than the rectangular one that might be expected. Such doubts have no doubt prevented it officially being recognised as a feature to be officially protected from further destruction.

New technology in the form of airborne LIDAR scan [Light Detection and Ranging] has provided a new appreciation of the context of the visible earthworks.

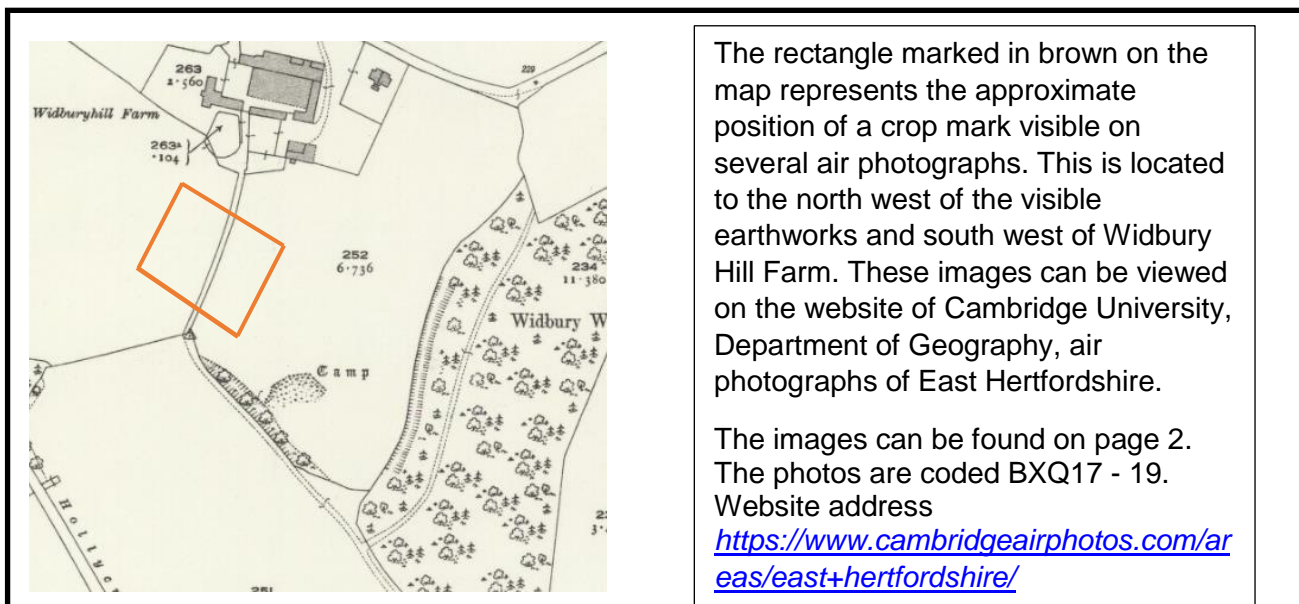
LIDAR INTERPRETATION



The red line has been drawn on the map to show the approximate position of the feature shown on the LIDAR image which leads off in a westerly direction from the northern eastern end of the south eastern earthworks. There does not appear to be an indication of the two missing sides of what has for long been suspected to be a rectangular defensive encampment. However the idea that a triangular enclosure is given some credibility even if the supporting LIDAR evidence is partially missing. Today all of these features are open to personal interpretation as indeed they were in 1911 by Mr Eliot and Mr Buxton.

It must be remembered that Widbury is just one of the possibilities put forward for the location of the Danish encampment. The other contenders include Port Hill at Hertford, an unspecified location at Ware, and as far off as Widford. In reality the actual site of the Danish Encampment remains unknown. Even though Widbury has become the best known of the possible sites there have been no archaeological finds to support the claim. If the lack of evidence for Widbury is unsettling to those locals who are rather attached to the idea of a Danish camp, all is not lost. In the right conditions a crop mark becomes visible from the air located further up the hill. This crop mark suggests a rectangular enclosure that many would perhaps expect for such a defensive structure. It is located between the earthworks already discussed in the direction of Widbury Farm. This might just be an alternative site for the Danish encampment but awaits archaeological investigation into such a possibility.

LOCATION OF CROP MARK



IN CONCLUSION

A reference to both the Great Amwell and Widbury earthworks can be found in the "Memorials of Old Hertfordshire" published 1905 on page 157.

"The almost obliterated earthworks on the south side of the valley, a little east of Amwell church, and on the opposite side of the river, may be part of Alfred's defensive scheme."

This is a reference to the fact that King Alfred is recorded as having erected defensive works on both side of the river, to prevent the Danes sailing away downstream. It is this type of idea that has contributed to the belief that Widbury Hill was the site of the Danish Encampment. It is perhaps unlikely that this idea is true for the Great Amwell earthworks, as they are more likely to date from some 900 to 1000 years or so before the Danes sailed up the Lea. For Widbury what little evidence there is has perhaps been mixed with a dose of wishful thinking to relate the site to the events of 895 AD. On the other hand the Great Amwell earthworks described as extensive and in part impressive some 211 years ago have in the last 100 years faded from memory even among those who live locally. Neither location appears to have yielded sufficient evidence to allow an accurate account of the history of either earthworks to be understood with any certainty. It is to be hoped that at some future date archaeologists may be able to throw more light on these two intriguing local sites