

## BRINKLOW HISTORY

Brinklow's most notable topographical feature is the imposing grassy mound behind the church, known locally as "The Tump", or "The Big Hill". Built on a natural rise, and offering a commanding and striking view of the surrounding countryside, the hill and its nearby earthworks represent one of the best-preserved Norman motte and bailey castle sites in the country. However, the name of Brinklow itself suggests a much older settled community, or at least that it was a site of some importance to people long before the Norman Conquest.

The name is thought to originate from two Old English elements: the personal name Brynca, and the word *hlaw* meaning "hill" in the sense of tumulus or burial mound. This ancient derivation implies that there was almost certainly a man-made "tump" here long before the Normans exploited the site to build their castle, clearly drawn to it by the strategic nature of the hill as a defensive sighting point, and its position on the Roman Fosse Way.

There is some dispute as to the exact location of the Fosse Way as it passes through Brinklow. Some authorities suggest that the original route would have passed behind the Tump, from Bretford, joining up again at Stretton-under-Fosse, and certainly, from today's map, this seems the logical straight route. Ell Lane has also been suggested as a possible echo of the ancient road, gaining its unusual name as a corruption of "Hill" Lane. However, there are arguments in favour of the theory that the present road and the old Roman military road are one and the same. The Roman engineers, where possible, did not build their roads uphill, preferring to go round them - the present route is the least hilly. Not all Roman roads were totally straight - where a natural obstacle occurred, their roads kink to avoid it. It is also known that they preferred to leave native sacred sites intact, rather than disturb them. Brinklow Tump may well have had some significance to the ancient Coritani people, whose capital was Leicester, but who, it is thought, may well have strayed in isolated small settlements this far southwards; the exact boundaries of their lands are not known.

Brinklow Hill was the subject of much debate in the "Transactions, Excursions and Reports" of the Archeological Section of the Birmingham and Midland Institute, published in 1873. In the report, it is noted that it is not unusual to find a British burial mound closely connected with Roman remains, Saxon masonry and medieval architecture, and mention is made of another tumulus at High Cross, long believed to be the tomb of one Claudius, leader of a Roman cohort. Further, tumuli between Pailton and Withybrook, and one destroyed by the making of the railway line at Wolston are suggested as evidence of a link between the Watling Street and the Fosse Way, forming a significant triangle of early occupation with the River Avon. It is certainly noticeable, tracing local tumuli on any Ordnance Survey map, that the lines of such earthworks run diagonally across Warwickshire from north-east to south-east, and that they are roughly parallel to the Fosse Way itself. This may, of course, be more by accident than any significant design, but many have suggested that such invisible "ley lines" imply either the sites of ancient and now lost trackways, such as "Tutbury Lane", which runs from the Avon to Brinklow Heath, or that they echo pagan belief in the harnessing of natural earth energy forces along such man-made connections.

Whether Brinklow Tump is the last resting place of a minor British chieftain, circumvented by the Romans and later owned by an Anglo-Saxon named Brynca, or whether it was indeed, the burial

place of Brynca himself, we shall probably never know - to date the mound remains unexcavated. What does seem likely is that there was some form of settlement or human activity in Brinklow long before the Normans built their castle, and later, their fine church. Modern historical research tends to suggest that our old view of ancient Middle England as a vast tract of impenetrable forest is wrong, and that the land, from ancient times, was settled, and even farmed, if in smaller and more isolated communities than exist today.

It is also possible that the present church of St. John stands on the site of a much older sacred place, giving way with the coming of Christianity to an earlier church or chapelry, perhaps Saxon, although it must be said, no evidence of this has yet been found. It is known that Christian churches of great age were invariably established on sites of importance to local communities, often superimposing the Christian ethic on an earlier, pagan one. Mounds, especially burial mounds, were often associated with the earth and fertility rites, the midsummer solstice being of particular significance. In the Christian Church, Midsummer Eve, the Summer Solstice, is also St. John's Eve.

Perhaps as a concession to an ambivalent flock, early church builders often incorporated inescapable symbols of the old religion into the fabric of their buildings, and Brinklow Church is no exception - defaced figures on pillars close to the present entrance are almost certainly female fertility figures, and around the corner from the clock tower, is a well-preserved "Green Man" head. Such figures in themselves may have been conceived as an awful warning to backsliding parishioners, but their origins lie deep in the pagan past.

That the Romans themselves passed through, and even stayed awhile in Brinklow is evidenced by the finding, in the 1930s of Roman coins behind the school. The Fosse Way, close to the Roman frontier, was essentially a military road, and was originally a link between the frontier forts and the military ports near Exeter, Bristol and Humber. Later, as conquest flourished, and the border moved northwards, it became a vital trade route, a role which it still maintains today.

It is likely that Brinklow Hill provided an alignment point for the Roman road builders, and although no other Roman artifacts have been discovered, the proximity of Brinklow to Tripontium, (Churchover) the Lunt Fort (Baginton), Venonis, (High Cross) and Ratae Coritanorum (Leicester), suggests that its earliest inhabitants could scarcely have failed to feel the presence of the legions. In addition to this circumstantial evidence, modern historical thinking is that the oldest unit of land-holding is the parish, and that modern parish boundaries almost always imply the site of lost Roman settlements - we should not forget that the Romans were in Britain for almost 400 years, and that not all of them were soldiers. There is a tendency to think that the history of villages began with the Domesday Book; it did not. Without evidence, the history of Brynca's Low must remain informed conjecture, but nevertheless, the probability is that despite the turbulence of their times, ordinary people have been doing their best to live ordinary lives on this soil since time began.

The history of a village must always be primarily the history of its people. When the first settlers founded a settlement here, they must have noted its fertile soil, its sheltered aspect - it has often been said that Brinklow has its own climate - and the ready accessibility of ground water, without which they could not have survived. Perhaps those first homesteads were scattered, or grew from a single adventurous family; it may even be that the Hill first drew them as a meeting place, and became their defence. It is possible, even probable, that different communities settled, at different times, until, perhaps, having claimed the land by name, Brynca's people stayed. Over

the centuries, the village has seen many changes, as one would expect. The remarkable thing, however, is how much has not changed. The fields, the hill, the road, and Brynca's people endure. This is their story.