

An Extract from  
**BOROUGH HILL (DAVENTRY) AND ITS HISTORY**  
by William Edgar.

(At the time of publication in 1923, the author lived at 'Southlands' London Road, Daventry)

The greatest monument of the Roman occupation of Britain is the network of roads which extends over the greater part of the island. Planned and executed with a skill scarcely excelled by modern engineers, they remain a tribute for all time to the foresight and enterprise of the earliest historical invaders of these shores.

It must not be assumed that Britain was devoid of roads at the time of the Roman Conquest; roads of a kind existed, but they must have been mere tracks in the forests, cleared for the passage of men and animals, and useless for wheeled vehicles, except in dry seasons. These probably dated from Neolithic times, and linked up the great hill-top fortresses already described<sup>(1)</sup>. It was along many of these old track ways that the Romans made the roads which have been used ever since.

Probably the first constructed was Watling Street <sup>(2)</sup>. It extended from Richborough in Kent<sup>(3)</sup> to Canterbury and London, thence proceeding via

*(1) R. H. Cox ('Green Roads of England') traces a road from Borough Hill to Arbury Hill.*

*(2) Isaac Taylor's opinion is that the name is derived from the Anglo-Saxon "Woetlinga Stroete," the way of the Woetlingas, probably mendicant pilgrims. This is by no means a satisfactory conjecture.*

*(3) Portus Ritupis. The port by which the Romans usually entered Britain. Owing to its reconstruction during the Great War this harbour has regained its former usefulness.*

Edgware Road to St. Albans, Dunstable, Stoney Stratford<sup>(4)</sup>, Towcester<sup>(5)</sup>, Weedon-on-the-Street<sup>(6)</sup>, High Cross, Atherstone, and Wroxeter, whence it branched to Chester and other places. In the itineraries in Britain of the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius <sup>(7)</sup> mention is made of several places upon Watling Street which are of considerable local interest. The account is supposed to date from the second or third century, and contains fifteen itineraries or lists of places situated upon the Roman roads in Britain. Those that concern this article are Itinera, 2, 6 and 8.

*Extract from Iter 2, VENONAE XII, BENAVENTA XVII,  
LACTODORUM XII.*

" " " 6, LACTODORUM XVI, ISANNAVARIA  
XII, TRIPONTIUM XII.

" " " 8, VENONAE XII, BENAVENTA XVIII,  
MAGIOVINTUM XXVIII.

With the exception of Benaventa and Isannavaria, no difficulty has been found in identifying these places. Venonae is High Cross, where Watling Street is intersected by the Fosse Way. Lactodorum is Towcester. Tripontium has been assigned to Lilbourne in consequence of the existence of earthworks and evidence of Roman occupation, but the name does not fit, neither is Lilbourne upon Watling Street. Tripontium is more likely to be Dow Bridge, where the Avon, as the name would suggest, was

(4) *The Paved Street Ford (Isaac Taylor).*

(5) *The Camp on the Tove.*

(6) *Hence "Road Weedon" as it is now called to distinguish it from the other parts of the village, Lower Weedon and Upper Weedon.*

(7) *Itinerarium Antonini Augusti. Iter Britanniarum.*

crossed by three arches. Magiovintum is Fenny Stratford.

It will be noticed that in Iter VI, where one acquainted with local topography would expect Benaventa to be again mentioned, occurs the name Isannavaria<sup>(8)</sup>. Talbot, one of the earliest commentators on the Antonine Itinerary, considered that the two names designated the same place, and Baker said "their identity is unquestionable."

The actual site of Benaventa has provided a subject for a great deal of controversy. Leland, Fulk, Talbot, Camden, Burton, Stukeley, Leman, Gale, Morton, Baxter, Horsley, Baker and Botfield have all used their deductive powers, with the result that it has been variously assigned to Northampton, Castle Dykes, Weedon, Lilbourne, Ashby St.Ledgers, and Borough Hill.

The spelling of the name appears to have exercised the imagination of these commentators to as great an extent as the site. Each seems to have used a different form, and as the proper one is by no means certain, the writer has adopted that used by Baker<sup>(9)</sup>.

Benaventa was a posting station for Roman travellers, and served on Watling street exactly the same purpose as did Daventry in the coaching days on the London and Holyhead Road. Had the old commentators sufficiently realised this simple fact, their search would have been differently conducted, and most of the foregoing places, Borough Hill included, would consequently have been ruled

(8) *Spelt also Isannavantia, Isannavenna etc.*

(9) *Talbot furnishes no less than twelve different readings of this station.*

out as its site; for its builders would certainly not have selected for the purpose of a hostelry a place 1.¾ miles away from the main road, and only with difficulty accessible to wheeled vehicles.

The problem which disturbed the old writers to such an extent has been solved to the satisfaction of more modern archaeologists by discoveries made during the last hundred years.

According to Baker, foundation walls have been exposed at various times near the junction of the road from Daventry to Watling Street at Thrupp Grounds in the parish of Norton, and a considerable amount of ancient pottery and Roman coins have been found there. The area over which these discoveries have been made is about 30 acres.

Botfield in his "Bennavenna" states that at a place called "Great Shawney" a field to the south-east of Thrupp Grounds, and near where Watling Street is intersected by the road from Daventry to Whilton, Roman remains have been frequently unearthed. During the diversion of a road a short distance from Great Shawney, at the lower end of Norton Park, in 1837 an interesting discovery was made. A Roman burial-ground was found, and numerous interments both by cremation and inhumation were disclosed. Although the examination was far from complete, cinerary urns, cups, paterae, and various kinds of Roman pottery were brought to light. An account of this discovery was recorded by Mr. M. H. Bloxam, of Rugby, who was of opinion that this was the cemetery of the town or village of Bennaventa close by.

In the "Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries Mr. Bloxam states:- "Mr. Radburn of Thrupp Grounds <sup>(10)</sup> showed me some twenty coins of Hadrian, Pius, Constantine, and later found on or near his farm and told me he had met with foundations, pavements and fire-places in the fields".

In "Roman Roads in Britain" (Thomas Codrington) occurs the following:- "On the west [should be east] of Norton Park the road [Watling Street] turns out of the straight line to the east and back again to it in half-a-mile. In the field through which the straight line thus quitted passes, a shallow pit, in the summer of 1900, afforded fragments of Roman pottery, mortaria, etc., and about 18 inches below the surface there were traces of a pavement of flat stones too thin to be part of a road. Somewhere here, according to the distances in the Itinerary should be the site of *Bannaventa*".

All these discoveries appear to have been made by accident, generally in consequence of drainage operations. In cutting a drain near Great Shawney a few years ago a quantity of Roman coins was found.

Baker in referring to this locality says:- "from its situation fronting the N.end of Borough Hill it is not improbable that this spot had some connection with that station." Considering that it coincided more nearly with the mileage mentioned in the Itinerary than any of the other places which had been suggested, it appears strange that its identity did not occur to him.

*(10) Mr.Radburne lived here just over 100 years.*

Professor Haverfield, writing in the Victoria County History, expressed the opinion that this place could be none other than the Benaventa of the Antonine Itinerary, adding the interesting statement that it was possibly the birthplace of Ireland's Patron Saint. According to St.Patrick's own account ("The Confessio") his boyhood was spent at Bannavam Taberniae, which name, it is suggested, might have been more correctly rendered Bannaventa Berniae. Haverfield, while

not attaching too much importance to this coincidence, evidently regarded it as worthy of consideration <sup>(11)</sup>.

Taberniae may possibly mean “of the Taverns or Wine Shops,” and if Benaventa means “welcome” which has been suggested, the combination is particularly appropriate.

The etymology of Benaventa has given rise to other speculations. While the Borough Hill fortress and this place were synonymous in the minds of commentators it was excusable that such suggestions as “Ben Afon” (head of the river)<sup>(12)</sup> or “Pen Gwent” (head of the plain)<sup>(13)</sup> should emanate as explanations of the name, but coming down to the level of Watling Street they must be discarded <sup>(14)</sup>. As a rule, Roman stations were named as stations are almost invariably named to-day: that is, after the nearest town, village, or hamlet; but in this case the usual custom seems to have been departed from and an Italian name adopted. “Beneventum” was an ancient City of the Hirpini in Samnium in the South of Italy, and according to tradition was founded by Diomedes; its celebrity was due to its having occupied an important position in the Punic Wars.

*(11) St. Patrick was carried off from his home during a raid of the Picts and Scots from Caledonia and Ireland about the year 405 A.D. (Haverfield). (“Romanisation of Roman Britain.”)*

*(12) Walpool.*

*(13) Baker.*

*(14) The word “Ben” is conspicuously absent from England. (Isaac Taylor).*

Possibly the reason for establishing a station upon this spot was to secure the protection of the camp on Borough Hill. Although the Romans did not usually depend upon elaborate earthworks of their own construction, yet the advantage of a site commanded by an already existing fortress of such immense strength could scarcely have been overlooked, so here, according to evidence which can hardly admit of doubt, was built the British Benaventa.

Two roads lead to Borough Hill. The one by way of Norton is according to Botfield the Roman road leading to Brinavis (Chipping Warden)<sup>(15)</sup>. This posting station and the Villa on Borough Hill must of necessity have been in constant communication <sup>(16)</sup>;

It is therefore quite possible that the Camp assumed the name of the station <sup>(17)</sup>. Regarded in this light, Borough Hill may after all have been Benaventa, for there is nothing unusual in the practice of calling places a mile or so apart by the same name, but this conclusion cannot be arrived at by the premises of the old commentators.

*(15) The road branching off from this to the left in Norton and skirting Borough Hill is the one mentioned by Baker as leading to Burnt Walls.*

*(16) There are breaches in the north-eastern part of the Camp which probably were entrances from here.*

*(17) It may be contended that the Romans called the camp Benaventa, and the station assumed the name, but the general opinion of historians is that the stations were established first.*

In the absence of any organised search, the extent and importance of the posting station of Benaventa can only be conjectured<sup>(18)</sup>, but there is conclusive evidence that something of great interest awaits the explorer in this locality.

*(18) The distance from Norton Park to Thrupp Grounds is three-quarters of a mile.*