

Wargrave Local History Society

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The Survival of British Lowland Words and Phrases

Michael Bayley was the speaker at the May meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society, when his subject was the language used by the local farming people that was, he suggested, derived from the Celtic languages.

Michael began by commenting that some people suggest that as there is no 'written record' of spoken language, it has no 'history', and therefore probably 'did not exist'. Although it is often thought that the Celts were pushed into Cornwall or Wales by the invading Saxons, research had shown that the Saxon invasion of Hengist and Horsa was about 200 men in 3 ships, and even the largest group of Cedric and Cynric was only 5 ships and 350 men. Compared to the 25000 men that Julius Caesar sent for the first Roman invasion, or the 100,000 men and cavalry of the Norman invasion, this is a tiny force, and it seems improbable that the Saxons 'captured' Britain. Elements of the Celtic language survived, therefore, across the land.

Michael was a native of the Chiltern Hundreds, and was brought up with the 'old fashioned way of speaking', which used odd words and phrases. A farmer, for example, might have a lot of "diddies" working for him - real Romany gypsies who were expert field workers, who expected to be allowed 'perks' from the land, but would 'guard the crop as if their own'. Their time on the farm was mutually beneficial. The word 'diddies' derived from the lowland British 'diddithr' - meaning a stranger. They were not to be confused with the 'diddy-coy', who were also 'travellers' or 'tinkers' but would steal, leave a trail of mess in their wake and quite a different sort of people. Their name derives from the British 'diddim-kai' - meaning 'worthless dogs'.

In this region of the Thames Valley, the word 'gypsy' was also used for those old established families with specific skills. The name comes from 'chy-ep-saeri -- "the house of the horse craftsman".. Such people were skilled in the breeding, breaking and working of horses, be it on the land, for transport, or at war, and many were members of the 'Secret Society of Horsemen'. They had their own primitive medicines, and could train a horse so it would not go with anyone apart from its 'rightful owner'. Up till the 1930s, such people could still be found on the farms - and indeed anywhere where horses might be found.

The main place where the old words of the British language can still be found is in field and place names. Michael explained many examples -- near Dorney, for example is 'Ruddles pool' - known to local boatmen as 'Buddles pool'. The Welsh drovers would get their cattle to swim across the river, to avoid paying the bridge taxes. The ford they used had been important from medieval times. Ruddles pool meant 'field of the ford' - but Buddlespool means 'drowning ford pool'. Michael explained that in those times, boats navigated the river by 'flash locks', which would be partly dismantled to let a boat down stream, with an enormous rush of water, after which other vessels could be hauled upstream. The rush over water would also cause the stones of the river bed to move, and over time built up the bed to create a ford. The lock keeper would blow a horn

when the lock was about to be opened, to warn those on the ford of the impending rush of water - but 'strangers' would be unaware of what this meant'. - and might therefore be drowned on the ford. Farmers even kept pigs on the fields just below the ford, "to save the cost of a burial". Another example came from one of the few written references to the lowland British language - a map of the fields around Eton College of 1797. There was a field called 'cuckoo weir'. Cuckoos are not particularly common there, nor are they especially fond of weirs -- but 'cuck ow' is the Welsh for a sailing fishing boat - which is much more relevant to the location.

How did such a language 'escape' being recorded? It was used by people who did not normally write anything down. The yeoman farmer might understand what was said, but would not admit to it for fear of being thought 'uneducated' - or a Welshman (!) - and the working men found it 'useful' to have a language that the squire, the parson or the beadle could not understand.
