

Taunton Castle:

WITH SOME REMARKS UPON ANCIENT
MILITARY EARTHWORKS.

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TAUNTON Castle possesses an interest in the eyes of Archæologists which its present appearance and its unimportant Norman history may not seem to justify, but which depends upon the fact that it is of English and not Norman foundation, that it dates from a period nearly two centuries earlier than any other fortress mentioned in the Saxon Chronicle, and not only is the date of its construction approximatively known, but its existing earthworks, though mutilated, are beyond question original.

The earthworks of our country are among the most obscure of its archæological remains. Great attention has been and is being paid to them, but as yet with very partial results. The Transactions of this Society contain many valuable papers upon the earthworks of its district, and speculations, more or less unsatisfactory, upon their dates and authors; it will therefore not be out of place if,



TAUNTON CASTLE.—North-west View.

before treating of Taunton Castle, I attempt to shew the place which such remains hold in a general classification of the leading military earthworks of the country.

The British Isles are peculiarly rich in earthworks of various kinds, and concerning the origin of most of which history is silent, and the internal evidence afforded by which has not as yet been satisfactorily interpreted. This obscurity relates not so much to their intent and purpose, usually obvious enough, as to the period at which, and the tribes or persons by whom they were thrown up. The absolute date of many, probably of most of these, we cannot hope ever to discover, but it seems probable that their relative dates, and the tribes by whom and the circumstances under which they were thrown up, may be ascertained by a careful examination, not only of the details of each, but of the general arrangement of their groups, and by a comparison between each, and a consideration of what they were intended to protect. For this purpose the pits and traces of dwellings need to be examined, and both detailed plans and good general surveys to be made, such as we may expect from the new and larger Ordnance Survey now in progress.

Earthworks may be divided into sepulchral, civil, and military, and possibly those connected with religious observances. With those of the sepulchral class all are familiar. By civil are meant boundary dykes ; circles in which, as at Arthur's Table near Penrith, the earth from the circumscribing ditch is thrown outwards ; and such mounds as that at Hawick, the Tynwald in Man, and the hill at Scone, possibly of sepulchral origin, but from an early period used either for the promulgation of laws, or the display of a new chief to the people, or for some similar purposes.

Military earthworks, if not quite so common as those of the sepulchral class, are yet very common, and especially familiar to all who dwell in what has once been a border country. Their character is usually very evident. The defence is composed of one or more ditches, the earth from which is thrown inwards so as to form a bank. The entrance is by a causeway traversing both ditch and bank, usually obliquely, and often guarded by a small mount or cavalier, placed in front of the outer and sometimes also of the inner end of the passage, and intended to guard the entrance against a rush. These encampments, when large, are usually upon a hill top, or the crest of an escarpment. They are in plan irregular, governed by the outline of the ground. Those who constructed them were evidently savage tribes, having few or no wheel carriages or baggage, and no discipline : trusting mainly to the inaccessibility and passive strength of their works to guard against surprize. These seem also to have been intended to resist sudden attacks rather than a siege or blockade, since there is rarely a water spring in or very near the enclosure. Where the ground requires it some care is usually shewn in the formation of a trackway up the hillside, so as to make the ascent both moderately easy and to bring it under the command of those above. The inhabitants of such camps were evidently tribes of people, and the position of the works shews that they lived by hunting, and not to any great extent by cultivation of the soil. Such encampments are usually called British, because these conditions were fulfilled by the British tribes ; but whether they were thrown up by a still earlier race, or by the Celts against the Romans, or against other invaders, or against one another, or under all these circumstances, has not as yet been made clear.

Many certainly were intended for the refuge of small local tribes ; others, like those along the Cotteswold or the Mendips, had a wider scope, and were intended to protect a large tract of country, and are likely therefore to be of later date. Much skill of a certain sort is shewn in the selection of the sites of these frontier camps. The approach is of course well in the rear. Although labour was evidently plentiful, it was not wasted. Where the ground is steep the ditch is slight or omitted altogether ; where the slope is very gradual, as upon a long ridge like Worle, the defences are doubled or even tripled, and the outer line is usually some distance in advance, so as to allow the full force of the tribe to be mustered behind it.

Modern researches have discovered that some of these large camps were connected with the early lines of track-way, and occasionally with boundary dykes. Also traces have been found of the pits over which the wigwams were constructed, of the hearths, pottery, food, and weapons of the inhabitants. Also of shallow pools, lined with clay, in which they stored their water. Where the ditch was cut in rock, the banks were of course stony, and now and then such banks were actual stone walls, often very thick, sometimes containing store cells, but always, where original, of dry and rude masonry. In camps, such as I am now describing, no wall of original date, in which mortar has been employed, has been discovered. That dry walling may however be carried to a high pitch of skill by a rude people, is evident from the revetments flanking the entrance to such chambered tumuli as those of Stoney Littleton, drawn in your Transactions, and in Gower.

Such are the so-called British camps. The name is at least convenient since it designates a definite thing, but whether these camps date from the earliest settlement of

Britain, or from the struggles of the Celts against the Romans or the Saxons, needs further enquiry.

Another very important and large section of our military earthworks is altogether of a different character. These are rectangular in plan, usually with a single ditch and low banks of earth, and with entrances in the centre of the sides, and passing direct through the defences. Within the area of such camps are often indications of huts or dwelling-places, usually also rectangular in outline. These camps are evidently laid out by rule. They are seldom placed on the tops of detached hills, and usually near water and near also to one of the military lines of road. Their occupants were evidently disciplined soldiers, attended by baggage waggons, and who trusted more to their discipline than to the strength of the ground as a guard against surprise. Such camps are of course Roman. It sometimes happens that having become permanent, as at Silchester or Porchester, they have been enclosed with regular walls, and have even, as at Chester or Winchester, become important cities. In such cases the plan of the original camp is to be traced through all subsequent mutations. The four entrances remain, and the streets connecting them meet at a central cross. Many, if not most, of these Roman camp-cities retain a British element in their name, as Winchester and Gloucester, and were constructed on British sites, but either the British earthworks are gone, or being on low grounds as though the work of a people tillers of the soil, they were founded by the later Britons, after the system of irregular fortification on hill tops had been laid aside.

Usually, where these rectangular defences have been occupied as towns, their Roman original is recorded in history, confirmed by more or less abundant remains of

Roman art and manufacture, but it sometimes happens that within such earthworks have sprung up towns of the Roman origin of which there is no historic record, the names of which are either Saxon or afford no guide, which are not upon the great lines of road, and within which are few or no traces of Roman habitation. Such are Wareham, Wallingford, and Tamworth, all enclosed within rectangular earthworks, and each upon a river. It is however, only in their distinctly rectangular plan that these enclosures resemble Roman works. The ditches are deeper and the banks far higher than were usually employed by the Romans, who, when so great strength was required, were wont to build a wall, a less expensive and far more complete defence. Hence these fortifications have been attributed to the Romanized Britons, cast up within a few years after the departure of the Romans; and this notion seems probable enough. The conical mounds and concentric trenches found in the above-named enclosures, and in others such as Leicester, Cardiff, and Caerleon, where the traces of Roman occupation are more clearly written, are evidently additions at a considerably later period.

The earthworks hitherto described, whether British or Roman, seem intended for the residence of a tribe having all things in common, or of a body of soldiers on the march or in garrison; we next have to consider a class of works of a different description, some few of which are indeed of large area and on lofty positions, but which are usually of very moderate area, in low situations, with defences more or less inclined to the circular form, and which were evidently intended for the strong and permanent abode of some patriarchal chieftain, who there dwelt in the midst of his own lands and surrounded by his own family and immediate dependents.

The larger circular works, such as Badbury, the White Catterthun in Scotland, and a few others, evidently camps and not residences, are different from these. Some have thought them of Scandinavian as opposed to Celtic origin, a notion supported by the presence of many circular consecutive camps, often of small area, on or near the coasts, where also are found others, parts of circles, cutting off some headland or peninsula. These have been attributed to Scandinavian sea rovers, landing for a short time for plunder or provisions, as the larger and more inland circular works have been attributed to the same races, during their earlier attempts at a settlement in Britain, and before they had established the right of private property and the restraints of law, for which their immediate descendants became so remarkable.

The earthworks to which I wish more particularly to refer seem to have been formed after the right of private property in land was established. They are usually, not always, circular or oval, the area being enclosed within a ditch, the earth from which is thrown inwards, sometimes as a steep and narrow bank, sometimes so spread as to raise the inner area gradually towards the edge or scarp of the ditch.

Within the area, often in the centre, or where it is oval often near one end, and in some few cases upon or even outside the ditch, is usually a large conical mound from thirty so sixty feet high, and from sixty to one hundred feet diameter at the truncated summit. This mound, known in Normandy as a "Motte," is almost always wholly or in part artificial. It forms the keep or citadel of the enclosure, and upon it seems to have been placed the lord's house, of timber. Besides this, appended to the main enclosure are often found other enclosures more or

less nearly semicircular, divided from the main work by the ditch, but each having also a ditch of its own. They resemble in fact the ravelins or demilunes of later fortifications, only they were intended, not to cover the main work, but to afford shelter for cattle and retainers. Old Basing affords a good example of such appendages, as does Kilpeck, where however they seem the remains of an older camp. The mound usually has a ditch of its own, of course circular. Such earthworks are very common, and having been the seats of Saxon Thanes most of them have been taken possession of by their Norman successors, and have been made to carry a Norman castle. Windsor is a concentric camp of this kind with an artificial mound. The ditches, now filled up, have been probed and ascertained by Mr. Parker. At Dunster the mound or tor is natural, as at Montacute, but has been scarped. At Devizes, the finest work of the kind in England, the mound is of enormous size, and in great part artificial, and the ditch is of unusual depth and breadth. Marlborough is such a work, Ewias where the basis of the mound is natural, Binbury near Maidstone, Guildford, Tonbridge, Berkhamstead where the mound is outside the oval. Worcester mound stood within the works. It is now gone, as is that of Hereford which stood outside, with strong ditches of its own. Tonbridge, Arundel, and Tutbury, and perhaps Warwick are on the line of the enceinte, as was Southampton and as is Lincoln. In other cases the mound with its own ditches and works is placed, as has been mentioned, in or in connexion with a rectangular enclosure of different and no doubt of older date, as at Cardiff, Wareham, Leicester, Tamworth, and Wallingford.

Moreover, although the most perfect examples of this class of earthworks have their original mounds, this is not

always the case ; sometimes the work is a mere level platform, surrounded by a steep circular bank, outside which is a ditch with one entrance. Old Basing is such a work, as is the fine circle known as Mayburgh near Penrith, though there the ditch is wanting and the earthwork probably never contained a dwelling. These are circular but without a mound.

Others again, evidently to be referred to the same class, are irregular in plan, governed by the figure of a hillock of dry land, or by the course of the adjacent river, or the outline of a marsh. Taunton is a good example of such a work.

Now it is to be remarked that earthworks of the character I have been describing occur most frequently in England and Normandy. There are about sixty circular or oval earthworks, and with mounds, within a moderate distance of Caen, and there are two hundred or more in England. They occur also, though sparingly, in Wales. Most, as Chirbury, Radnor, Caerleon, Cardiff, Brecon, Builth, and those in the Welsh parts of Hereford and Shropshire being found in districts in which the Saxon early effected a lodgement, or as with regard to the two military mounds at Towyn, at no great distance from the sea.

What is the age of these half domestic, half military earthworks? Their founders do not seem to have been nomade. Those in Normandy were almost invariably the seats of Norman barons, as those in England were of Saxon thanes.

Moreover, the age and authorship of several of them is known. Some are mentioned as fortresses in Domesday. Such are Canterbury where there is a small, and Rochester with a very large mound; Arundel, Bramber, Lewes

which has two mounds, Carisbrook, Wallingford, Windsor, Wareham, Montacute, Dunster, Launceston, Trematon, Gloucester, Worcester, Wigmore, Clifford, Ewias, Caerleon, Cambridge, Huntingdon, Warwick, Stafford, Shrewsbury, Montgomery, York, Lincoln, Stamford, Norwich : all have mounds, some large some small, some natural some artificial, but all come under the class of earthworks I am here describing, and all these works were most certainly of a date preceding the conquest.

Of several of these earthworks the date of construction is recorded in the Saxon Chronicle. Thus Taunton seems to have been constructed in 702, and it was destroyed, that is its timberwork burnt, in 722. The works outside Rochester city, including probably the mound, were thrown up in 885. Those at Wareham, probably the mound and its ditches, in 877. Bridgenorth in 896-912. Badbury camp was used in 901, Bramsbury in 910. Sarratt and Witham date from 912; Maldon, 912-20. Tamworth, Stafford, Eddisbury, Chirbury, Wardbury, Runcorn, in 913; Hertford, 914; Warwick, 915; Brecknock, where is a large mound, 916, probably also the date of the mound and concentric works at Builth; Bedford, 919; Huntingdon, Tempsford, Towcester, Wigmore, part of Colchester, 921, and Stamford in 922. Some of these works remain intact; others are more or less perfect; others are removed, but descriptions of them are preserved.

I think therefore that on the whole the evidence is in favour of a Scandinavian and Saxon origin for these earthworks, and that they were all constructed between the 7th or 8th and 9th or 10th centuries.

While speaking of these domestic-military works, works intended not merely to last during the military occupation of a country, but to be transmitted to the heirs and successors

of the owner, mention should be made of those remarkable, but in Ireland very common, works known as Rathes, and which are found also in Pembrokeshire. These are circular platforms, sometimes raised, surrounded by a bank and ditch, and upon which was constructed, usually of timber, the house of the owner. Though smaller they closely resemble in their main features the larger circular works, and seems to have been intended for the protection of an ordinary dwelling, just as the others were for the stronghold of the Thane. A mile or so east of the Pontilas station in Herefordshire, and close north of the railway is a low mound or platform, circular, and with a ditch, which if it occurred in Ireland or in Pembrokeshire would be called a Rath. I am told that there is a similar work called locally a "Belch," near Worle village in Somersetshire, and that another, in the same neighbourhood, has been removed within memory.

Taunton Castle stands upon one of the many low hummocks of gravel, often with a base of red marl, which rise out of the extensive fen lands of this very singular district, and which, before agriculture had drained the marshes, were even more inaccessible, or in military phrase, stronger ground, than even the hill fortresses of the upper country. The Thone, the river whence the town derives its name, rises by many and copious tributaries over a wide sweep of country, north, west, and south, and traversing the low land, which though neither so wet nor so extensive as many of the adjacent levels, was yet broad enough and marshy enough to serve every purpose of defence.

Here, upon the right bank of the stream, Ine, the celebrated leader and lawgiver of the West-Saxons, is reputed to have established himself in the year 702, while engaged in securing his frontier against the western Britons, who,

under the leading of Geraint, still maintained a footing in the broken ground east of the Tamar, upon Exmoor and among the Brendon and Quantock Hills, holding probably the camps which still remain, but little altered by the lapse of a thousand or eleven hundred years.

This seems to be the origin of the town of Taunton, and here, upon the edge of one of the inosculating branches of the sluggish stream, Ine founded his castle by throwing up banks of earth girdled with deep and formidable ditches, and no doubt further strengthened by stockades of timber, or at best by walls the workmanship of which scarcely deserved the name of masonry. Such as it was it was destroyed, that is burned, by Queen Æthelburh in 722, who probably however left the earthworks, the better part of the defence, much as she found them.

The spot selected, resting upon the river, is covered by a loop, which has been converted into a mill stream, working a mill placed a little below the Castle. This river or north front is tolerably straight and about 180 yards long. The west front, about 168 yards, is formed by what seems to have been a tributary stream called the Potwater, which here joined the river nearly at a right angle. The south and east fronts, of 340 yards, were formed by a curved water course, probably artificial, which connected the tributary, by a second junction, with the river, and thus completed the circuit of the defence. The enclosure was thus a sort of quadrant, the river and the brook being each a radius, and the curved ditch the arc. The area thus enclosed measures about seven acres, and lies between the river and the town, which covers its east and south sides.

Within this area, occupying its north-east corner and about a quarter of its extent, is the inner court or citadel of the place, roughly rectangular, and measuring about

123 yards east and west, by 73 yards north and south. Its east and north faces rest upon the main ditch and the river, and its south and west faces are covered by a curved ditch, artificial, which gives the eastern outer ditch a second connexion with the river, and divides the outer called "Castle Green" from the inner court. The position was a very strong one, having the river, and beyond it a morass, towards the north, or threatened side, and to the south a ditch, in part double, and always filled with water.

The inner court is further subdivided into two parts, of which the eastern half seems to have been raised into a sort of platform upon which probably Ine's actual residence was placed.

Mr. Warre speaks of a mound here, but as I cannot make out that there is any record or tradition of a mound in the technical sense, I presume that he calls by that name the very considerable bank and contiguous platform of earth, much of which is still seen. What occurred here, and by whom occupied, or what changes took place between the reign of Ine and the end of the 11th century is not known, but the Normans, accustomed, as far as practicable, to occupy the Saxon seats, soon perceived the advantages held out by the position and earthworks at Taunton, and William Gifford, who held the lordship as Bishop of Winchester in the reign of Henry I., seems to have decided upon building a regular Castle. His successors, Bishops of Winchester, were much here, and the Castle received much addition at their hands, especially in the early Decorated period, of all of which traces more or less considerable still remain. The outer ward is traversed east and west by a road upon which were two gatehouses, of which the western was till recently represented by a fragment of wall and a stone bridge across the moat.



TAUNTON CASTLE,
WEST VIEW OF THE EASTERN GATE, AS IT APPEARED ABOUT 1814.

Reduced from a Drawing in the Society's Museum.

Traces of a barbican in part of timber, were discovered a few years ago while digging on the counterscarp. Of the eastern gatehouse the remains are still considerable. It was of large size, the entrance passage being 60 feet deep, with portals at each end, and at the outer end a large square portcullis groove. The upper floor contained a fine room, of which on the north side there remain two windows in the early Decorated style, which is that of the whole gatehouse. The gateway was placed just within the ditch, on the counterscarp or town side of which some foundations, probably of a barbican, were laid open a few years since. The wall of the outer court is gone, save a small fragment on the south-west quarter, neither are there any of the ancient buildings remaining within the area. Bishop Fox's school, the oldest of them, is later than the period when the defences were of much value.

The defences and contents of the inner ward are less imperfect. The masonry here did not extend actually to the river, the immediate bank of which, as at Leicester, is very low, so that the enclosed ward occupied only about two-thirds of the whole moated area. The walled part is roughly triangular, the base being the east side, and the truncated apex to the west. This area seems further to have been divided by a cross wall into two parts, the keep, hall, and gatehouse being in the western, and in the eastern the earthworks, which favours the notion of this having been the old English citadel. These earthworks are two banks along the east and south fronts, expanding at their junction into a rectangular platform of about 80 by 120 feet. The banks have been used as terraces or ramps, the Norman wall having been built against them and along the river edge of the ditch. These banks are about 18 to 24 feet broad and about 10 feet high.

Along the east face about 150 feet of the original wall remains tolerably perfect, and is about 25 feet high outside. This is returned along the river or north front, and near the angle is a buried arch at present invisible, and which may have been a postern or a sewer. From the south face the wall has recently been removed. At the south-west corner of this court is a dwelling-house, part of the wall of which is old, either Norman or Edwardian.

The smaller or west court contains the chief remains in masonry, and of these the most remarkable is the keep. This is a well-defined though mutilated tower, standing upon the enceinte wall, of which it forms the north-west angle. It is rectangular, 50 feet north and south, by 40 feet east and west, with walls about 13 feet thick. There is no chamber below ground. The basement is vaulted with a heavy barrel vault, apparently original, though this is doubtful, and round headed. Outside are flat narrow pilaster strips, dying into the wall at about 30 feet high. There are traces of Norman loops in the wall, which may have been 50 feet high, and probably included three stories. At the north-east angle is a well staircase leading to the battlements, probably in part an Edwardian addition. The entrance is most likely to have been in the south face, no doubt on the first floor, though there is nothing left to shew this.

From the keep, along the north front, the original, though much mutilated, Norman wall, with its flat pilasters and the jamb of one original window, crests the rising ground, as at Leicester, about 50 feet from the river, and, also as at Leicester, evidently formed one side of the hall. At the end of the wall, about 140 feet from the keep, is a postern, with a segmental arch, possibly in substance Norman, though mutilated.

In the centre of the south front, but at the south-east corner of this section of it, is the gatehouse, a rectangular structure, with an Edwardian portal, and some Perpendicular additions, square portcullis grooves, gates, and lodge. In the front are seen the holes for the chains supporting the drawbridge, now replaced by a permanent structure. Above the entrance passage is a chamber.

Right and left of the gatehouse the curtain extends about 70 feet, terminating a short time ago in bold drum towers, of which one is gone, and the other caps the south-west angle of the ward, and connected this front with a short curtain leading to the keep. Against this wall stands a line of buildings ranging with the gatehouse. Opposite, against the north wall, is the hall, modern as to its inner wall, fittings, and roof, but very evidently occupying the sight of the original Norman hall and domestic buildings.

The south-west drum tower has been rebuilt or faced, but evidently represents the Edwardian or early Decorated works that replaced the old Norman curtain. The ditch along the west and part of the south fronts of this ward, has been recently filled up. The drum towers, curtain, and keep stood on its edge, and formed its scarp.

Here, then, we have a combination of earthworks dating from the commencement of the 8th century ; walls and keep the work of the early part of the 12th ; and towers and gatehouses towards the end of the 13th or early in the 14th century. Bishop Langton executed some additions here in 1490, and placed his arms outside the inner gatehouse. In 1496 the Castle was taken by the Cornish rebels who rose against the close taxation of Henry VII., and here massacred the Provost of Penrhyn. Bishop Horne made further repairs here in 1557.

In the Parliamentary wars Taunton was first occupied for the Parliament, then taken by Lord Hertford for the King, and finally retaken for the Parliament by Blake, who held it against a far superior force. The infamous Jefferies held the "Bloody Assize" in the present hall.

It has been thought that Ine's Castle was confined to the inner ward. No doubt his strong house was there, but the whole enclosure is not larger than Framlingham or other Saxon holds.

The absence of a mound is rather peculiar, and it is remarkable that the Normans should have placed this keep on the lowest ground. Altogether, looking to its very curious though scanty remains, and its very ancient history, Taunton Castle is a work of unusual interest, and deserves to be cleared and employed as a promenade or museum, or for some public purpose, so that its walls and earthworks may become an embellishment to the ancient town to which it unquestionably gave rise.
