

On the Course of the Wansdyke through  
Somersetshire, with a notice of  
the Camps in it.

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IN a former paper presented to this Society, and published in their last Proceedings some notice was taken of the course of the Wansdyke through this county; since then the subject has been further investigated during the past summer, and the line for the most part personally examined.

The writer is induced therefore to endeavour to supply in the present paper some deficiencies in the former, which was intended to treat of *Earthworks generally*, rather than of Wansdyke in particular.

The more this great boundary line is examined the more curious and interesting it becomes to the investigator,—therefore, notwithstanding that he may seem to be going over ground already sufficiently trodden, the

writer will now attempt to supply what he feels to have been wanting in his late paper, and add what he thinks may be of interest to those who take pleasure in rescuing from oblivion the remains of antiquity.

And certainly a more interesting remnant does not exist than Wansdyke. If we view it winding its course over the Wiltshire Downs, where it appears in its pristine state, attended by barrows of equally deep interest, and the contents of which have furnished us with very certain data of the æra of their construction. And again if we view it entering this county in the neighbourhood of Bath, where alas ! now only faint traces remain of its magnitude, though sufficient to guide us in delineating its course. The improved state of cultivation has been the great enemy to its continuance, and while the toast of all well-wishers to their country will ever be "Speed the Plough;" the antiquary occasionally wishes that the ploughman would turn his team aside when he encounters this old boundary line, or any antique mound, and that the farmer intent upon making the most of his land, (as indeed every good farmer will be) would no longer spread its broad back over the surface of his tilled field, and for the sake of the soil reduce this antient majestic barrier to the level of a common hedge row, as has been done not far from the Burnt House turnpike-gate, near Bath. Occasionally however the task of levelling this mighty ridge, has proved too great even for the persevering industry of the cultivator, and Wansdyke, notwithstanding the lapse of 2000 years, stands out again in all his breadth, and carries his irregular windings along the northern face of the hills, giving no doubtful sign how bold and commanding a front he once presented. Well has Drayton in his *Polyolbion*, song iii, thus described the subject of this paper :

"She first of plains,\* and that first wonder of the land,†  
 She Wansdyke also wins, by whom she is embraced,  
 That in his aged arms doth gird her ampler waist.  
 Who (for a *mighty mound*, sith long he did remain,  
 Betwixt the Mercian rule, and the West Saxon reign,  
 And therefore of his place himself he proudly bare)  
 Had very oft been heard with Stonehenge to compare;  
 Whom for a paltry ditch, when *Stonehenge* pleased t' upbraid,  
 The old man taking heart, thus to that trophy said,  
 'Dull heap, that thus thy head above the rest doth bear,  
 Precisely yet not know'st, who first did place thee there;  
 But traitor basely turned, to Merlin's skill do'st fly,  
 And with his magicks do'st thy maker's truth bely:  
 Conspirator with time, now grown so mean and poor,  
 Comparing these his spirits with those that went before;  
 Yet rather art content thy builder's praise to lose  
 Than passed greatness should thy present wants disclose.  
 Ill did these mighty men to trust thee with their story,  
 That hast forgot their names, who reared thee for their glory;  
 For all their wondrous cost, thou that hast served them so,  
 What 'tis to trust to tombs, by thee we eas'ly know.'  
 In these invectives, thus, while "Wansdyke" doth complain,  
 He interrupted is by that imperious plain,  
 To hear two crystal floods to court her, that apply  
 Themselves, which should be seen most gracious in her eye."

Seeing then that aged Wansdyke can so manfully speak for himself, let us proceed to see what are some of the traces of his antient merit.

Wansdyke seems to have been the boundary line of the last Belgic conquest in Britain. It has occupied the attention of many learned antiquaries, as Camden, Awbrey, Stukeley, and Sir R. C. Hoare; the latter has traced it with great care and accuracy in the second vol. of his *Antient Wiltshire*; Dr. Guest, the master of Caius College, Cambridge, has likewise given some valuable notices of it in his papers published by the Archæological Insti-

\* *i.e.* Salisbury.

† Stonehenge.

tute. He states that "this magnificent earthwork reaches from the Woodlands of Berkshire to the British Channel. The conquests it was intended to include, seem to have been, first, the Vale of Pewsey; secondly, the mineral district of the Mendip Hills; and thirdly, the country lying between this range and the river Parret. Ptolemy gives us Winchester, Bath, and Ilchester, as the three principal towns of the Belgic province. Bath is just *without* the Belgic boundary, and therefore could not have been a Belgic town; but the Belgic fortress on Hampton Down, which lay immediately above the hot baths, may probably have led the geographer into the mistake." See *Archæological Journal*, No. 30, July 1851.

Wansdyke traverses the whole of Wilts from E. to W., and enters Somerset on the brow of Farley Down, crossing the Avon at the foot of the hill, a little beyond the village of Bathford—between it and Warleigh—on the property of D. Shrine, Esq., where it can be distinctly traced just before crossing the river. The line between the road to Warleigh House and the river, is marked by some trees growing on the Vallum, and a cattle shed erected on it, while the Foss serves as a waggon road to the shed. After crossing the river, it mounts up the hill called Hampton Down, and forms the northern boundary of the camp there situated. Here the construction of a tram road, formed by Ralph Allan, Esq., of noted memory, for carrying stone from his quarries to the canal, and the former working of these, now no longer in use, have for a space obliterated the traces of the bank and ditch. Some inequalities of the ground just above the canal, probably however indicate its course, which is very distinctly marked all along the N. and W. boundary of the camp, having, as is always the case with Wansdyke, the *ditch to*

*the N.* From the antient settlement on Hampton Down, the traces of it have been much obliterated, and are barely visible, but when you come to the back of Prior Park, they become very distinct in a grass field just behind the house. With very careful examination, and aided by a friend who had made it a subject of diligent study, and to whose exertions I am much indebted, I think I have been able to trace its course from Hampton Down Camp across two arable fields and a portion of Claverton Down, (where it crosses the road to Claverton, and the turnpike road to Warminster) until it is quite lost in a third tillage field, but may again be discerned in the tillage field at the back of Prior Park, before you come to the stone quarries which have again destroyed its continuity. After the grass field behind Prior Park, where it is very distinctly marked, it would seem to have skirted the head of the Mitford valley, and is again to be met with just beyond the Cross Keys public house.

Sir Richard Hoare says that a small fragment of the dyke was visible on the S.E. side of the great road (leading from Bath to Warminster, on which the Cross Keys house is situated) as if bearing along the east side of the valley towards the river. I have more than once very carefully examined this point, and cannot satisfy myself that this exists at present. The ground is here much broken, and although a wall and fence run upon a somewhat elevated portion of ground, there is no distinctive mark which would enable one to say that this was a portion of Wansdyke. I fear that its course from the Cross Keys to Prior Park must be left to conjecture, and we must assign to it the probably route I have mentioned. From the Cross Keys public house it can be traced until it crosses the high road from Bath to Radstock and Wells

at the Burnt House turnpike-gate, where it also cuts the antient fosse road. Here it is that for a space it has been levelled and reduced to the size of an ordinary hedge bank. The work has however happily stopped after a field's length, and the provident farmer of old or modern times, (for I know not to what period to assign the demolition) found better employment for his labourers. The portion betwixt the Cross Keys to within a field of the Burnt House turnpike-gate, is very clearly marked by a wall running on the top of it. Very distinct traces of it exist in the valley before you enter Breach wood, on the way to English Combe, at which latter place it is to be seen to the greatest advantage in Somersetshire, and it appears in its pristine condition in a field or two just beyond the church. It is visible again in some pasture lands leading to Newton Farm, but in the pasture adjoining Newton Farm is lost. From hence it runs direct for the Fortress of Stantonbury, and forms the North rampart of that hill camp; which is the *second* fortress on its course through Somersetshire.

Hence it may be traced without difficulty in its descent to Compton Dando, and at its entrance into which village it presents a bold and well-preserved appearance. It is much obliterated in the district betwixt Compton Dando and Maes Knoll, but may be recognised in its approach to that eminence. As it ascends the side of it, the foss appears in a waggon road till it reaches the summit, where the dyke forms, as elsewhere, the *Northern boundary* of this the *third* camp in its course through Somersetshire.

From this camp it cannot now be traced with any degree of certainty, although Collinson in his *History of Somerset* has pointed out its course until it terminates at Portishead on the Severn Sea; and as he was vicar of



Long Ashton, he had every opportunity of knowing what traces of it were existing in his time. Sir R. C. Hoare was able to discern scarce any vestige of it in the valuable survey which he caused to be made, and in a long examination which I made in company with a friend and a most indefatigable investigator of antient earthworks, we could not find any mark of its former existence.

Mr. Leman, however, in a note contained in his copy of Stukeley's *Itinerary*, which he bequeathed to the Bath Literary and Scientific Institution, with other valuable works containing his annotations, fixes the termination of Wansdyke at Stokesley Camp, one of the two camps which crown the precipice above the Avon, on the Somerset side, directly opposite the Observatory at Clifton. Of this camp he says, (after describing Bowre walls, its twin companion in respect to situation) "The second called Stokesleigh Camp has been altered by the Saxons, being the head of their celebrated Wansdyke." These important works guarding the passage of the Avon, seem to fix *this* as a very likely termination for the great Belgic boundary line. The camps protecting the entrance to the port of Bristol are of very antient, but of very different dates.

"Bowre walls," says Mr. Leman, "remains in its original state, and exactly resembles the fortified port of Caractacus described by Tacitus." "Montibus arduis, et si qua clementer accedi poterant, in modum valli saxa præstruit: et præfluebat amnis vado incerto." Tac. Lib. Ann: xii. 33.

This he seems to consider the oldest camp. The *second* called Stokesleigh, he regards as altered at a later period, and the *third* on the Gloucester side, on Clifton Down,

retains its ancient British ramparts with a Roman camp within it.\*

We may conjecture these camps on the opposite side of the Avon, to be fortresses of two independent and rival tribes, the Belgæ and Dobuni, and posts of observation.

These then are the vestiges which exist in Somersetshire of this very extraordinary earthwork, which must ever be an object of the greatest interest to the lover of antiquity.

The name Wansdyke has been derived from two independent sources.

1. By Dr. Stukeley from the Ancient Celtic-British word, *guahanu*, *seperare*, and denoting a line of demarkation, separating the Belgæ from the Dobuni, the Atrebatii and the Regni, and marking, according to Dr. Guest, the "last frontier of the Belgic province," the "district which the Roman Geographers assigned to the Belgæ proper."

2. By Mr. Leman and others from *Woden* the Saxon Mercury, being formed from his name in the same way as Wednesday, the day of the week.

It is curious that this dyke is said by Sir R. C. Hoare to exhibit marks of having been *used by the Saxons*, as well as the Belgæ, and having been made a boundary between two of their petty kingdoms, the West Saxon and Mercian. "As to the antiquity," says he, "of this grand and extensive boundary, the Wansdyke. (which some writers derive from the Saxon deity Woden, and Dr. Stukeley from the British word "*guahan*," *distinctio*, *seperatio*), my friend Mr. Leman had often stated his opinion to me, that the *first* bank and ditch were constructed by the *Belgæ*, before the Roman æra, and that the said bank and ditch

\* See an account of these camps, with a drawing, in the number of the *Proceedings* of the Archæological Association for July, 1857.



were elevated to a greater height by a *subsequent nation*, perhaps the Saxons; judge then of our mutual satisfaction, when very lately, he found his opinion most fully confirmed, by a section made across in *two different places*, where the strata of soil and chalk forming the original agger, and subsequent elevation, were evidently to be distinguished."

It is worthy of remark that after Wansdyke reaches the top of Farley Down and continues its course through Wiltshire towards Marlborough, there are very strong evidences of its having been adapted *by the Romans* to the purpose of a road. Sir R. C. Hoare says, "It is not without strong reasons of probability that former antiquaries have supposed that the line of Roman road and Wansdyke were the same for a considerable distance; and this conjecture seems well grounded, as hitherto no traces of the latter have been found between the high ground above the Avon near Farleigh Clump, and the Western point of Calston or Morgan's Hill, and there can be no doubt about the line of Roman road which is traced on the map. Tradition has indeed given the name of *Wansdyke* to this whole tract of Roman road." Mr. Lemon says, "it not only bears the name of Wansditch through the whole of its course, but the "Saxon bank and ditch," are plainly visible, as made on the foundation of the previous Roman road in the grounds of Mr. Fuller at Neston." Dr. Stukeley points out where the Wansdyke has its junction with the Roman road, and where it has been adapted to the purpose of a road, and a part of the agger left as a parapet to protect the roadway on the side of a deep declivity.\*

\* The junction of the Roman road with Wansdyke, says Sir R. C. Hoare, has not escaped the notice of the intelligent Stukeley, for in his *Itinerary*, p. i., p. 142, when speaking of the Roman road, that passes over Run-

All this is evidence of the *great antiquity* of Wansdyke.

We have it first thrown up by the Belgæ as their boundary, then adapted to the purposes of a *Roman road* during part of its course through Wiltshire, and *afterwards* heightened and strengthened as a barrier in Saxon times. Thus the examination of it, brings before our minds **THREE** distinct periods of history. Its Belgic foundation, its Roman adaptation, and its Saxon completion.

Surely it is a monument well worthy of preservation, but how ruthlessly has it been treated, and how little is the interest with which this most curious relic of antiquity is regarded? May we not hope that what little is still left of it may be most carefully preserved! Surely if Societies like ours call attention to the *preservation* of such historic records, and afford accurate accounts of them as existing in our own and preceding times, they confer a very great benefit not only on the present, but upon unborn generations.

Any notice of Wansdyke would be incomplete without examining what has been said by former writers respecting it, and correcting errors into which they have fallen. Thus R. C. Hoare in his *Ancient Wilts* has stated the points upon which he considers Collinson in his *History of Somerset* to have erred. As the work of Sir Richard is not very accessible, and as few are acquainted with the survey of Wansdyke which he has recorded, and the minuteness and care bestowed by him upon it, I feel that I

way, *i. e.* Roman Way Hill, he says "Soon after it meets with the Wansdyke descending the hill just by the gibbet, here it enters full into it, and very dexterously makes use of it all along to the bottom, on a very convenient shelf, or spurn of the hill, at the place of the union is a flexure of the Wansdyke, so that the Roman road coincides with it directly, and in order to raise it from the ditch into the road, the Roman workmen have thrown in most part of the rampire, still preserving it as a terrace to prevent the danger, and the terror of the descent on the other side."

may be doing service to this Society by bringing portions of it before them, and here I should suggest that our Brethren of the Wilts Society should also take up the subject of Wansdyke, and carefully record in their *Journal* the particulars relating to their own county, reprinting so much of R. C. Hoare's account as may be necessary to elucidate the subject.

Speaking of Wansdyke, Collinson says of the point where it enters Somersetshire, "it meets the same meandering river (Avon) at Bathampton, where it enters the N. W. portion of the Belgic territories. Its course is then continued over Claverton Down to Prior Park, English Combe, Stanton Prior, Publow, Norton, Long Ashton, and terminates at the Severn Sea, near the ancient port of Portishead," vol. i. p. 22. At p. 170, he says, "it runs to Publow, and Belluton, (written Belgeton in Domesday Book, *i. e.* Belgarum oppidum)." He notices it again in vol. ii., p. 423, and again vol. iii., p. 140, where a circumstantial report of its westward course towards the Severn is to be found. Speaking of the hundred of Portbury, he says, "To this remote corner tends that egregious boundary of the Belgic warriors called Wansdyke, its course is directed hither from the ancient fortress of Maes Knoll, in the tything of Norton Hautville, south-eastward, whose lofty western rampart seems to have been a post of observation for all these parts. Descending the hill it crosses High-ridge common where its track is still visible, and soon after thwarting the Great Western road from Bristol to Bridgwater, forms by its vallum a deep narrow lane, overhung with wood and briars, leading to Yanley-street, in the parish of Long Ashton." From Yanley it traverses the meadows to a *lane* anciently denominated Wondes-ditch-lane, as appears from a deed, which he quotes, and to

which I have referred in my paper on earthworks in the last number of the Somersetshire Society's *Proceedings*. "Here," he says, "it crosses the Ashton road to Raynes Cross, and ascending the hill, enters the hundred of Portbury, in the parish of Wraxall, and terminates at the ancient port of Portishead."

On this account Sir R. C. Hoare observes, (after first pointing out an error into which Collinson has fallen in stating that the dyke *commences* at Andover, in Hampshire,)—"Mr. Collinson has described its course with such a degree of minuteness and authority, that the reader would entertain no doubt of its veracity, but," says he, "even with the assistance of his topographical remarks we have upon personal investigation, been completely foiled." He then states that Mr. Leman, whose opinion I have before quoted as to its termination at Bowre Walls, and Stokesleigh Camps, and his surveyor, Mr. Crocker, had minutely examined the ground between Bowre Walls Camp and Maes Knoll, and discerned very faint, if any, existing vestiges of this mighty bulwark. He describes the careful way in which he caused the whole track to be investigated from the earthworks over the Severn, to which I have just alluded, and the tract of unbroken ground on Leigh Down, where many vestiges of ancient population were noticed, and ancient pottery picked up, but no signs of Wansdyke discerned, as if it continued towards Portishead. The stratum of limestone, says he, approaches so near the surface of the soil on this down that an agger like Wansdyke could not without immense labour and difficulty have been raised on it. About Yanley-street, and Raynes Cross, they could trace no vestiges of the dyke, he "thinks the fosse of the old work appears in some parts of Deep Combe Lane, which breaks off from the turnpike road leading

from Bristol to Bridgwater at the third milestone from Bristol." There are some traces of the ditch to the right of the lane leading down to the brook, where it made a small bend to ascend the hill to a field called Bear-croft, and then skirting High-wood (once so called, but now cleared) it appeared as a slope by the hedge through Bear-croft, into a pasture field of the same name; it seems then to come to the end of Deep Combe Lane, where it appears as a ditch on the left, leading to the cross roads at Yanley-street.

These are the only traces which Mr. Leman and the surveyors of Sir Richard could discover, and I regret to say my own experience quite confirms this statement, only my friend and myself were even less successful, being however strangers to the country we might have overlooked traces. I have been thus particular with this portion of its course in the hope of inducing some members of the Society, who may reside near Bristol, to take up the investigation, and to ascertain if there still remain any traces of this interesting dyke at these points, or if all that Collinson has recorded, (and which from his Living of Long Ashton being in that locality, he certainly must have known) has been obliterated. It is the object of a Society like ours to settle if possible *disputed* or uncertain points, as well as to record what exists at present.

"At Maes Knoll," says Sir R., "we stand for the first time on *certain ground* with regard to Wansdyke, for hitherto in our progress from the Severn eastward, we have been obliged to place more dependence on report, than in *existing proof*."

Sir R. then traces it with great success, and his great accuracy I have for the most part personally verified, and he particularly notices the *fortresses* upon it, "It has some



particularities which other boundaries have not, and which deserve our attention. I here allude to the camps or earthworks *projecting* from the dyke." These camps I have already noticed, and for a more particular account must refer to the paper on Earthworks in the last No. of the Society's Proceedings. "Wansdyke presents," says Sir Rd., "the most *singular irregularities* in its course, it does not continue its track along the strongest ridge of the hill, but often descends from it into the valleys, and the open downs, and where no obstacle impeded its taking a straight direction, it frequently makes the most unaccountable angles, but in *one* respect it is *invariable*, viz., in having the ditch *to the north*, and bank *to the south*, which proves from what quarter the attack of the enemy was to be expected." Sir Richard does not doubt that the camp at Stantonbury was an appendage to the dyke, not the dyke to the camp, and this I think may be shewn also of Hampton Down Camp, and probably Maes Knoll. The dyke seems to have been *anterior* to all these in its formation, and they were probably *afterwards* added to strengthen it. They were no doubt a chain of boundary camps drawn probably much upon the same system as those along the wall of Hadrian, between Carlisle and Newcastle, only *much older*, and also probably afterwards occupied in the Saxon period. It is worthy of remark that on the other side of the valley through which flows the Avon, there are fortresses nearly similar in their construction, on the hills opposite. Thus, if the Belgæ guarded their line of territory by the forts along Wansdyke, the Dobuni had also their camps of observation, and forts of occupation facing them at a convenient distance, and just within their own territory. The camp on Clifton Down is opposite the camp on the other side of the river. Maes



Knoll and Stantonbury can easily be watched from a large camp formed at the extremity of Lansdown, overlooking North Stoke; and Hampton Down again is checked by an earthwork on little Salisbury. It is instructive therefore to see how carefully each frontier was guarded, and from observing this we have a more exalted idea of the system of warfare and defence, in those early times.

In conclusion a word or two should be said about the probable period of the first formation of Wansdyke. It is uncertain at what precise period, as Sir R. C. Hoare observes, the Belgæ first invaded Britain, but it is supposed to have been *four* or *five* centuries before Christ. "After forcing the barrier of the Rhine, they over-ran and conquered the Netherlands, and all that part of Gaul north of the Seine, and from Gessoriacum (Bologne) and Portus Iccius (Wissan) crossed the Channel into Britain, and drove the Celts successively from the county of Kent, the greater part of Hants, Wilts, Dorset, Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall, and from a part of Berks, where the *Thames* and *Wansdyke* formed their native boundary. But under their general, Divitiacus, they crossed the Thames, and conquered Essex, part of Herts, and made inroads into Berks and Buckinghamshire." Wansdyke is supposed to mark the *last* of their conquests, *before* Divitiacus crossed the Thames. With respect to Divitiacus, I have noticed in another place, that Cæsar informs us he had been King of the Suessiones, and even in his time (*nostrâ etiam memoriâ*) the most powerful chief in Gaul, and that he had obtained supremacy not only over a great portion of Belgic Gaul, but of Britain also. These were the latter Belgic conquests, but anterior to the date of Cæsar's invasion, 55 B.C., and after Divitiacus crossed the Thames, hence the date of Wansdyke must have been

much earlier than these,—earlier than 100 years before Christ, and probably 150 or 200 years.

The Tumuli found along its course, especially on the Wilts Downs, all point to a *very early date*, but this subject we must leave to other antiquaries, or to another meeting, earnestly hoping that the present imperfect notice may induce others more skilled than the writer, and more at leisure, to enter upon, and follow out, the interesting enquiry, to a successful result.

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