

## Report on Excavation Work at Brinscombe, Weare, Somerset.

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LOCAL tradition has long reported that there was a ship or boat buried in the marshes of the River Axe near Brinscombe, a hamlet between Weare and Wedmore. Mr. F. C. Gadd, who has lived all his life only some 200 yards from the site of the supposed boat, and whose father held the farm before him, has known the report as long as he can remember. The site is in a rhine separating the marsh, now meadow, from the accommodation road leading along what was once the foreshore of the Isle of Wedmore to "The Woods," Mr. Gadd's farm. The ground on the island side of the road slopes upward very sharply.

Some years ago, when the rhine was being cleared out near the place where the vessel was supposed to be, the workmen came upon upright posts, some planking, and a cylindrical piece of timber, which they believed to be ribs, part of the side or deck, and the mast of a boat. Mr. Robert Brown, of Bridgewater, brought the discovery to the notice of the Rev. C. W. Whistler, then Vicar of Stockland, as representing the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, and the writer, who visited the spot together in 1908 and made enquiries. The result seemed to point to the possibility of a built vessel being buried there, and, as the spot was over half-a-mile from the present bed of the river, any such vessel would necessarily be of very ancient date.

The matter was brought before the Meare Lake Village Committee, and it was decided to make further investigations in the summer of 1911, while the excavations at Meare were in progress, in order to ascertain whether the remains belonged to a vessel or not. Further enquiries made on the spot by Mr. H. St. George Gray and the Rev. W. T. Reeder threw considerable doubt on the popular belief; but in order to decide the matter once for all, it was decided to make an exploratory investigation, which the writer undertook to supervise.

The work was carried out under considerable difficulties. Two workmen were engaged, but owing to the demands of hay-making, only one was available. As a result of this it was impossible to adopt the quickest and, perhaps, the most satisfactory method of working, viz., from the bottom of the rhine, as the constant inflow of water was more than the workman could cope with single-handed. So the cutting had to be made in the bank parallel with the rhine.

The soil was alluvium throughout, and there was no trace of peat. From a depth of 3ft. to 3ft. 6ins. onwards it was full of small shells with many water-worn stones. At 3ft. 9ins. the top of a wooden pile was exposed at the extreme corner of the cutting on the side nearest the rhine; and from 4ft. 6ins. downwards many fragments of wood were found, some of considerable size. Among them were branches of trees and two or three pieces of wood which had been worked. The cutting was carried down to a depth of 8ft. 9ins. at its deepest point, and was prolonged at the end where the wooden pile was found. The latter, which was 5ins. by 3ins. square, was embedded in shingle, projecting some 4ft. above it. Attached to it on the side away from the road, was a 2-in. plank, 14ins. broad, set flat against it some 2ft. below the top of the pile. This crossed the corner of the cutting diagonally, and it could not be determined how far it went; while it was impossible to make a satisfactory examination, or to find out how it was fastened to the pile owing to the constant flow of

water into the cutting. But the diggers satisfied themselves that there were no other planks below this,—only the shingle of which the bottom of the cutting consisted. Both plank and post were perfectly straight, and could not have belonged to a vessel. Amongst the shingle at the bottom of the cutting was a lump of Draycott stone.

The specimens of shells perfect enough for identification comprised the following varieties:—*Limnæa palustris*, *Limnæa peregra*, *Limnæa truncatula*, *Planorbis spirorbis*. They were in bad condition, and it was difficult to get specimens out whole, so there may have been other species present. There was certainly one large fragment of a bivalve shell, probably belonging to a large fresh-water mussel.

Obviously the excavations had reached what was the foreshore of the old bed of the Axe, at the remote period when the river-bed extended from the foot of the Mendips to the Isle of Wedmore, either in the form of an estuary or of a tidal broad. The presence of so many fresh-water shells shows that at this point the water can hardly have been more than brackish. The pile, with attached plank, may only have been part of a post and rail fence, such as is put round a watering-place for cattle. But it was found by probing that there was more buried woodwork between it and the road, and the former discovery of posts, etc., in the rhine at the same spot suggests that it may have formed part of a staging of some sort, perhaps a landing-stage on the foreshore. The wooden fragments found were exactly such drift-wood as would collect against a structure on the beach.

There the matter had to be left. To determine the exact nature and dimensions of the structure would have required two or three men at least, owing to the difficulty of contending with the inflowing water. It is very doubtful if the result would have been of sufficient value to justify the cost and labour, while the object of the Meare Committee had been attained, when the fact was established that the remains did

not belong to a vessel. The Rev. W. T. Reeder twice visited the excavations and agreed that this point had been conclusively proved.

To those who were inclined to believe in the tradition, the result must needs be disappointing. But even they will acknowledge that it is some satisfaction to have ascertained the facts and to have disposed of a phantom which might have continued to beguile enthusiastic archæologists; while students of the past history of Somerset will doubtless value the evidence that has been obtained as to the former condition of the valley of the Axe. It may be mentioned that so late as the time of Mr. Gadd's father the tide, which is now kept back by flood-gates at Bleadon, used to run up the Axe past Clewer, so that barges could bring coal up to Clewer itself.

In conclusion, thanks are due on behalf of the Meare Committee to Mr. C. O. Fry, the owner, and Mr. R. Clapp, of Alston, the tenant of the land on which the excavation took place; also to Mr. Gadd and his family for the invaluable assistance they rendered during the progress of the work, and not least to Mr. Whistler, who unluckily was unable to take charge of the excavation himself, for identifying the shells and for other help.