

Ancient Earth-work at Norton Fitz-warren.

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BY THE REV. F. WARRE.
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THE summit of the hill on the north of the parish church of Norton Fitz-Warren, situated about two miles and a half north-west of the town of Taunton, is occupied by a very curious and remarkable earth-work; which, strange to say, seems to have escaped the notice both of Collinson and Phelps: nor have I met with any mention of it, except in a paper upon the Roman remains discovered at the neighbouring farm of Conquest, in the year 1666, by an anonymous writer (who certainly appears, from the mistakes he has made, not to have been well acquainted with the country), which is to be found among the miscellaneous tracts appended to Hearne's chronicle of Robert of Gloucester and Peter Langtoft, published in four volumes at Oxford in the year 1724. This omission is the more extraordinary, as the earth-work is situated in the midst of ancient enclosures, in a part of the country where the plough has long ago destroyed every other vestige of similar works; indeed it is probable that this has only escaped, from the fact of the area con-

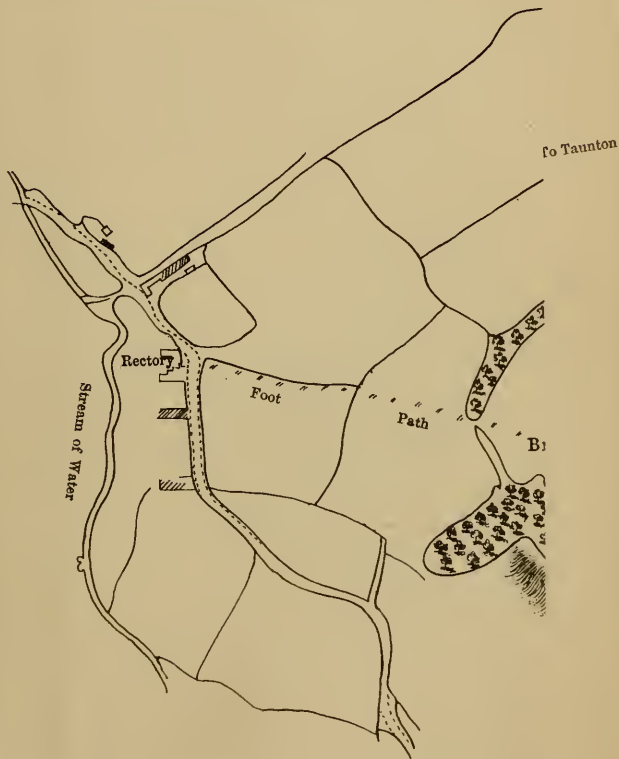
tained within the ramparts being of a convenient size for agricultural purposes; and the ramparts themselves consequently useful as fences, of a very different kind from that for which they were originally constructed.

A foot-path from the church to the rectory leads us up a rather steep ascent to the south-west side of the camp or town, which it enters by a wicket-gate, and passing on to the north-west side, leaves it by a similar gate; the rampart being broken through at both points, another path, branching off immediately within the entrenchment, leads to the north-eastern boundary, which it passes through by a gate now used for farming purposes. Whether these entrances existed in the original plan of the work or not, I have no means of discovering, but it seems more probable that they have been made in, comparatively speaking, modern times, for the convenience of the tenant and the neighbourhood in general. Besides these doubtful gates, four others are very evident. As to those on the north, west, and south sides, there can be no doubt; the deep excavations which formed the avenues to them being still in existence, though now occupied by trees and brush wood; while that leading to the eastern entrance, though nearly obliterated by the plough, may still be traced through the fields in the direction of Staplegrove. The western gate appears to have had two entrances, the space between which was probably occupied by a fortification for the defence of what was evidently

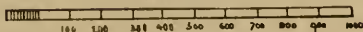
the principal entrance to the place. The rampart consists of a deep ditch of irregular breadth, with an external and internal vallum, and is still perfect in the greater part of its extent; though the outer vallum has been destroyed in some parts, and the whole rampart from the western gate to the wicket leading to the rectory, is nearly obliterated. The area contained within the ramparts is about thirteen acres, and has so long been under cultivation, that all traces of its original contents have disappeared, with the exception of hollows leading from the four gates towards the centre of the area; which is more particularly remarkable at the eastern entrance, where it is sufficient to act as a drain for the surface water of the enclosure; the accompanying plan, for which I am indebted to the kindness of an ingenious friend, will render the description which I have given more intelligible than I can hope to make it in words.

Many and various have been the conjectures of neighbouring antiquaries, as to the original constructors of this curious earth-work, and the purpose for which it was erected; as usual in such cases, the general voice has given it in favour either of the Romans or the Danes. Popular tradition says that it was once the haunt of a fierce and gigantic serpent, which having been generated from the corruption of many dead bodies which lay there, spread terror and death through the neighbourhood, some of whose ravages are said to be portrayed in the carving of the beautiful rood screen of the parish

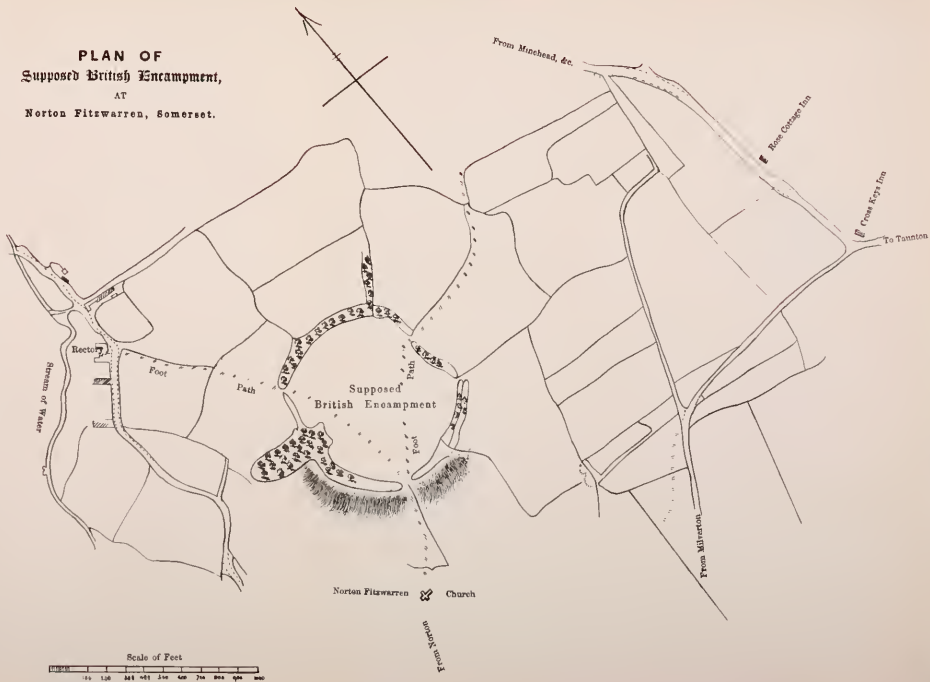
PLAN OF
Supposed British Encampment,
AT
Norton Fitzwarren, Somerset.



Scale of Feet



PLAN OF
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church,* and one worthy gentleman has, as I understand, decided that it is nothing but an old lane ; in which case our ancestors must have had a strange predilection for going round and round ; and the anonymous writer whom I have before mentioned, supposes it to have been a stronghold of the Cangi, whom, on the authority of Camden, he states to have been the inhabitants of this part of Somersetshire, in the reign of the emperor Claudius, about the middle of the first century. In cases of such remote antiquity, where we have no documents to guide us, and particularly in a country, the surface of which having been under cultivation for many hundred years, must have undergone very extensive alteration since the time of the aboriginal Britons, it is evident that conclusions drawn from data so slender as those which have come down to us, can at best be very little more than guesses. I will, however, proceed to lay before you the reasons which lead me to incline to the opinion, that the ramparts on Norton hill do mark the site of an ancient British town of considerable importance.

Mr. Phelps, the historian of Somersetshire, speaking of the unfinished earthworks near Elworthy Barrows, informs us, that the Romans under Ostorius, having subdued the Belgæ and driven the Silures beyond the Severn, marched towards the west, to the territory of the Cangi, who occupied the

* To this tradition I shall have occasion to refer presently.

western part of Somersetshire bordering upon the sea. The Britons, on his approach, threw up on the Quantock hills, Dousborough, for their retreat, and commenced a similar stronghold on Brendon hill, near Elworthy, there to await the advance of the Romans. In the mean time the Silures and western Brigantes revolted, and threatened his rear, which obliged the Roman general to retrace his march, to secure his newly conquered territory. The Britons being thus relieved from the impending attack, ceased from their labours on Brendon hill, and left Elworthy Barrows as they now appear. The country having been tranquilized, there was no farther necessity for these defences.

The anonymous writer whom I have mentioned, supposes that Ostorius, having approached the sea, near the mouth of the Uxella or Parret, ascended the ridge of Quantock, at Cothelston, and from thence descending into the vale, marched to attack the British strong-hold at Norton, and being met by the aborigines at Conquest, obtained a complete victory over them at that place. Now, without deciding upon the reason which induced the Britons to leave the earth-work at Elworthy in an unfinished state, which might as likely have been owing to a defeat having compelled them to fall back upon the fastnesses of Exmoor, as to the countermarch of Ostorius, I see every reason to believe that both these accounts are substantially true.

Ostorius was at the mouth of the Parret ; the

Britons were entrenched at Dousborough, and probably holding the line of Quantock in force; in order to march westward, it was evidently necessary to dislodge them; and that a battle did take place on the top of Quantock is probable from the following facts. On the top of Bagborough hill are several cairns or heaps of stones, commonly called the Rowboroughs, which most likely mark the place where the slain were buried. A few years ago, a Roman coin was found near these cairns, and in draining an ancient alder bed, near Cothelston house, a bronze torque, and celt or battle axe were discovered, probably the ornament and weapon of some wounded Briton, who had retired to its shelter to die; Roman coins have also been found at no great distance from the spot. Having checked the Britons and driven them back to their entrenchment at Dousborough, it would clearly have been a most hazardous proceeding of the Roman General to have continued his western expedition, while a strong body of the enemy remained unsubdued in his rear at Norton; and in order to render the base of his operations secure, it was obviously necessary to attack that stronghold. Now, in order to go from the top of Cothelston by the shortest way to Norton, it would be necessary to pass through Conquest, indeed it is probable that a British way led through it, for the northern entrance and excavated approach to the ramparts on Norton hill are nearly in that direction.

There is no reason therefore that the Britons of Norton should not have met the invaders at Conquest, as the garrison of Dousborough had met them on Quantock. And their being totally defeated there might well have given the Roman name of Conquest to the place, and at the same time have been the cause of the evacuation of Dousborough, and the discontinuance of the works at Elworthy. It may perhaps raise a smile among my hearers, when I refer to the absurd legend of the serpent before mentioned, as a corroborative proof of this theory ; but an eloquent writer has said, tradition is generally an accretion of error formed upon a nucleus of truth, and there is danger, if we cast away the tradition too hastily, that we may cast away the truth with it. Now that serpents have been generated from the corruption of human bodies is an idea common enough in classical antiquity, and whether it be typical of disease produced by that corruption or no, it is by no means an uncommon tradition in places where slaughter is known to have taken place ; so much so, indeed, that wherever the antiquary meets with it, it is well worth his while to enquire into the history of the place.

An additional reason for supposing Norton to have been a permanent British town is this. There is still in existence a portion of an ancient trackway, probably paved in aftertimes by the Romans, leading from the British village Byng Ny

Pwl, or the village on the water, now corrupted into Bathpool, round the base of Creechborough hill to the turnpike road near Curry's gravel pits, from which it probably proceeded across the vale to the undoubtedly British fortification of Castle Neroche. Now, from certain indications on the ground, slight though they certainly are, it seems likely that a branch of this trackway crossed the river Thone at Obridge, or the old bridge, near the spot where the back stream from the fire-pool, (at that time the main stream) is crossed by a wooden foot bridge at its confluence with the present navigable river. Now, a line drawn from this spot through Plaice-street, the name of which indicates that a road existed there in the time of the Romans, would lead very nearly to the eastern entrance of Norton camp, and probably did actually lead there. It must be remembered, that neither the locks at the end of the Priory fields, nor the mills at Bathpool existed at the time of which we are speaking, and that consequently the river at Obridge must have been much less deep and more easily forded than it is in these days.

If I may again have recourse to tradition, I would call to your remembrance the ancient local rhyme

“ When Taunton was a furzey down, Norton was a market town.”

Now, this can hardly refer to Northtown on the other side of the bridge, as that is evidently a descriptive name, relating to its situation, with

regard to Taunton ; but there is no reason why it should not refer to the ancient town which stood on the north side of the river Thone, at the distance of more than two miles from the modern town of Taunton.

The last argument in favour of this theory which I shall now bring forward is this. Collinson, following, I believe, Dr. Stukely, calls ancient Taunton, Theodunum, and speaks of a Roman road through it, though he says in a note, that Taunton was not a Roman town. Now, the word Theodunum, if such a place ever existed, is a Romano-british name, similar to Sorbio-dunum, Camalodunum, and many others, signifying the fortified post on the hill near the Thone. Now, Taunton was founded by Ina, king of the West Saxons, in the beginning of the eighth century, about three hundred years after the final departure of the Romans from this island ; and is certainly not situated upon a hill, but Norton is quite near enough to the Thone to have been called the town upon the Thone, before Taunton existed to deprive it of its claim to be so distinguished ; and its ramparts remain to this day upon ground quite high enough to entitle it to be called the fortified town upon the hill.

I before observed that on points of such high antiquity, and with the very slight data before us, our conclusions at the very best are little more than guesses ; but for all this I cannot think that we

shall be guilty of any very absurd credulity, if we think it not improbable, that the area contained within the rampart on Norton hill is the site of the ancient British town, Theodunum ; which certainly, if it ever existed, might as far as date goes, have been a market town for many hundred years, while Taunton was a furzey down, or an almost impervious forest.

As for the idea, that it was originally a Roman work, the extreme irregularity of the plan, so different from their usually rectangular system of fortification, renders it highly improbable, while the importance of the fortifications, and particularly the deep excavations which formed the approach to its gates, make it as unlikely that it was a work thrown up by the Danes, in one of their hurried and temporary incursions.