

The Curbaries between Glaston and the Sea.

BY MR. W. STRADLING.

ALL persons who have been in the habit of visiting Burnham, and the beautiful strand from thence to Brean-down, must have observed the continual changes of the sands on that coast. Although the strand, upwards of five miles in length, is still one of the finest in the kingdom, I recollect when, for a few years, it was nearly double its present width; and when a boy, I was taken in a chaise by my mother from Bridgwater to Stert Point, where there was a small inn for the accommodation of parties who visited the spot. That point is become an island, and at high tide, large vessels can now pass over what was once the carriage road.

This continual alteration of the features of the coast, has led many to suppose that at no very distant period, the sea flowed uncontrolled over the immense plain from Burnham, Berrow, and Brean, to and around Glastonbury, thus forming

what was then known as the island of Avalon. I shall however endeavour to prove, by the few discoveries I have made, that it was at a most distant era that the sea was confined to its present bounds, and that it was not effected at the time the Romans are supposed to have undertaken that vast work, of embanking the river Parret, from its mouth to beyond Borough-bridge, in order to reclaim and protect all the fine land on either side, as far as what was then the island of Athelney.

Occasionally from particular causes, such perhaps as earthquakes abroad, the embankments known as the sand-tots have given way, and it is recorded that in the year 1606 especially, the floods were so great, that the inhabitants of Glastonbury "feared a watery grave." I consider it the duty of every member of such a society as ours is, especially before it is firmly established, if he has made any part of the county his particular study, freely to give his opinion, in order that those who are more learned, may have an opportunity of either contradicting any particular theory, or adding information on the subject.

I cannot believe but that it was the work of the Almighty, and not that of the hands of man, when the sea was recalled from Avalon to its present boundaries. We know not the time when the Mendip hills were lifted by the force of fire and water, and so shaken to their foundations as to cause that stupendous chasm, known as Cheddar

Cliffs; but at that awful period is it not probable that the Steep Holme was divided from Brean Down? The strata of rocks are in both the same, and there is also a small vein of lead running through each of them. Supposing such to be the case, what would be likely to have been the result of the destruction of such an immense natural break-water? I should imagine the waters from the Severn and the Bristol Channel, would rush violently through the chasm, and carry with them the ruins of the shattered hills, which would be more than sufficient to form the foundation for the slab and sand to rest on, which now form the boundary of the sea.

When we pass along the road from Woolavington to Mark, known as the causeway, we see by the ditches that all the rich land, as far as the commencement of the turbaries, was formed by the slime from the sea. The sand-tots are continually augmented by strong westerly winds, and are occasionally repaired by the land owners.

We now come to the turbary, the edge of which, in the parish of Woolavington, bounded to the west the fresh water lake, which extended from thence to the isle of Avalon. It was of vast extent, including the lowlands of many parishes. It is supposed the Phœnicians visited Britain about the year 333, before Christ, and as they partially settled here with the ancient Britons, or first inhabitants, we can reasonably conclude that at that period the Avalonian lake (as I term it by

way of distinction) was used by the natives as a fishery, and for conveying their productions to the surrounding villages, as well as to their great Avalon.

I now proceed to describe the different antiques in my possession, from time to time discovered at the bottom of that lake, now by age and other circumstances formed into the turbary.—First, as to antiquity, I consider the flint spears, which are rarely found; I have never met with but four; they are all of the same shape and must have been fastened to a shaft by thongs. As we have no flints in the neighbourhood of our parishes, they might have been an article of commerce with the inhabitants of Dorsetshire or other distant settlements, where they abound. The next spear I obtained was found in the year 1831, and is the *Gwaew-fon*, used by the Britons of the interior. There are also several kinds of the *Gwaew-Hela* or hunting spear, used by them in their excursions, all of them most formidable weapons. I next had the good fortune to save from destruction a curious British pin or brooch, sometimes used after the arrival of the Phœnicians, for the purpose of fastening the robe at the neck. I next met with a fine specimen of the *Bwyell Arv*, or British battle axe, commonly called a celt, also *Bwyell-Lydan* or British hatchet, used for cutting wood. All these are of British brass and have been kept in a high state of preservation by the peat. I have also obtained three paddles or oars, by which canoes were steered.

They are of the same form as those used by the Welsh, at the present day, for their coracles. Also a flint, found four feet deep in the peat; perhaps it was used for striking fire, as half-burnt sticks of yew were near it.

I have to lament the loss of a most interesting relic, as only one has been found of the kind in this neighbourhood; it was a very large canoe, and was formed from an immense oak, and no doubt excavated by fire. I understand it was long known as "Squire Phippen's big ship," and it made its appearance partially in very dry seasons. I met with this information too late, and to my great mortification, I one day had a piece of the poor old "ship" brought me, and was told she had been broken up in the dry weather, and used by the cottagers for fuel. The oak was as firm as when the vessel was sunk perhaps 2000 years since, the peat in which it was discovered having such a wonderfully preservative power.

The next British remain I have to describe, has been considered unique by many learned antiquaries to whom I have shewn it, especially by Sir Walter Trevelyan, the president of our society. It is a bow of yew, formed evidently before the Britons knew the use of brass. Nothing can be more rude: the knob and point are perfect, and the groove formed in the largest part of the stick (for it is merely such as a boy would now cut for the same purpose) was evidently scraped out by a flint

instrument, in order to obtain the necessary elasticity. The knob and point on the ends for supporting the string, are the same as we see on the modern bows from Owhyhee. Shortly before the death of my revered uncle, Mr. Robert Anstice, what I considered to be the point of a British ploughshare was discovered on the border of the turbary at Burtle. It was formed of stone; and, though nearly deprived of sight by extreme age, Mr. Anstice carefully handled it with all the zest of an antiquary of thirty, and fully agreed with me, that it was what I considered it to be. I was sorry to hear the observation made by the Dean of Westminster, (whose illness we now so much deplore) at the inauguration of our society, that in his opinion "it was wrongly described, and he did not consider that the Britons used a plough, although he thought the antique unique." It was certainly sufficiently strong to make furrows for containing the different seeds sown by the natives on the partly reclaimed turbary.

Many other kinds of spears and swords have from time to time being found, in the highest state of preservation. It appears by the coins and other remains, that the Romans at a very early period after their settlement in Britain, inhabited Edington and the other villages adjoining, on Pol-den-hill; and being a very enterprising as well as working people, no doubt they considered the lakes on both sides the hill, to be worth the labour of

drainage, in order to turn them to better account than mere fisheries. What is now the river Brue, could never have been effectual in the winter, but perhaps was sufficient to keep the level dry throughout the summer; and the peat which formed the bottom of the lake, and which was an immense accumulation of vegetable matter, when kept drained soon became an excellent article for fuel to the surrounding inhabitants, and of course every year became firmer in consistence. That part of the turbary nearest the sea, was of course first drained, which accounts for the peat dug in Woolavington, Huntspill, Cossington, Chilton Polden, and Edington being so much more firm and heavy, than what is taken from Shapwick and that part of the turbary nearest to Glastonbury.

A great flood and hurricane must have happened before the lake was drained, by the descent of the waters from the hills, immense numbers of trees, principally oak and yew, were rooted up and forced into the bog. They are often found in the peat about a foot from the surface, and are termed by the delvers or peat men "underground oak." Hazel trees are also found with the leaves still perfect, and the nuts in such high preservation, that it can be ascertained that though the kernels were formed, they were but half ripe when the flood took place. I am not aware that there is any record, or even tradition, of the era when this awful visitation occurred.

I shall now endeavour to prove that the turbaries of Huntspill, Chilton Polden, Edington, Catcott, and Shapwick were occupied by the Romans, at least through the summer months, soon after their settlement in this country.—When a boy I was often taken to the Burtles by my late revered relative, Robert Anstice, and he often pointed out to me a number of mounds or *barrows*, as they were considered by many. They were of various sizes, many of them containing several hundred loads of the fragments of Roman pottery. Antiquarians were greatly divided in opinion as to the origin or uses of these earthworks. Some thought they contained the bones of the illustrious dead; others that they were heaps of ballast thrown from ships, when the bog formed the bottom of the immense lake; others thought they were rubbish from the numerous Roman buildings in the neighbourhood.

In the year 1833, when I changed my residence from Chedzoy,—almost adjoining that battle-field so fatal to the Duke of Monmouth, (the favorite and almost adored of the west,) as well as to his poor followers, and in which for nearly thirty years I had taken so exciting an interest as to its traditions, legends, antiquities, records, and other interesting matter,*—I found that wherever my guardian angel was

* The reader of Macaulay's History of this period, will not fail to call to mind his acknowledgments of the valuable information communicated to him by Mr. Stradling, in reference to this memorable spot.—*Note by the Committee.*

directed to place me, I could not rest without finding something at least to dispel idleness, if nothing more,—and when I looked back on the happy hours I had spent with my revered relative, who was no longer able to search for antiquities, as from old age his sight was daily worse, I thought it my duty at least to go to the field in which we had spent so many happy days, and endeavour to procure for him such antiquarian food, as had so long delighted his heart, that he might still feel with gratification, the produce of my labours. I remembered the cheering advice often given to me by my late universally respected friend Sir Richard Colt Hoare, who said, “Be a spade and shovel antiquary, a real working one, or none at all. If you will not dive your hand into the earth to bring out its treasures, you cannot expect your labourers, until they are broken in to feel an interest in your pursuits, to do so.” I therefore determined upon such a search in the turbaries, as would make me fully acquainted with their productions, more especially with regard to the mounds.

I soon found they were a mass of potsherds of Roman black ware, and my attention was next directed to the question—How came they here? My labours were soon rewarded, for at the distance of a few yards from one of the mounds, I found at the depth of about eighteen inches, a square platform formed of clay, around which were several pieces of Roman ware, mixed with rude bricks

bearing the marks of straw, and formed by the hand. Upon making further search, I was soon convinced that I was standing on what was once a Roman pottery; and the bricks were for the purpose of keeping the rudely formed pitchers, pipkins, vases, and a sort of patera or plate, in their proper position, during the process of burning.

Those mounds were very numerous, and I concluded were formed of the potsherds of the different vessels broken whilst baking on the platforms of clay, which served for kilns. I should imagine the potteries were sufficient to have supplied the country with the common black-ware, (which is always found in the ruins of Roman villas) for a vast distance round. I afterwards found on one of the kilns in the parish of Huntspill, some small pipkins which were perfect, until unfortunately cut through by the turf scythe. Both peat and wood were used for fuel, as appears by pieces of charcoal. Scoriæ of iron and pieces of coal were found in some places. Clay and sand were to be had at no great distance. After the process of burning, all the perfect pieces were no doubt selected for package, and those with fire-flaws and other injuries, were thrown by, and served to form those numerous and large heaps of potsherds.

My venerable pitcher which I described in my hastily written "Little Book," some years since, was completely buried with potsherds, but is perfect with the exception of a small piece taken from the mouth

by a spade, and a crack or fire-flaw running round it, which not only rendered it useless for the purpose of holding liquor, but also made it much too fragile to bear carriage to any distance. I value this antique above all I have ever discovered, and consider it, as to preservation, a unique specimen of Romanized-British manufacture. All the Roman villas and other buildings in this county appear to have been hastily destroyed by fire or otherwise; and I have never heard of any vessels of pottery having been found in them entire. I value it from the situation in which it was discovered, as it at once convinced me, that my theory, as to the potteries was correct. No situation could have been more convenient for the workmen, as with brocks of turf, plastered with clay, they could form comfortable walls for their huts, and the various heaths served for an excellent covering. We often, in the present day, see decent cottages in the moor, built in this way, with the assistance of a frame work of wood, and the outside plastered with mortar. This custom might have been handed down by the Romanized-British inhabitants.

Many years since, a great many moulds, for casting Roman coins, were found, in the parish of Chilton Polden, in a field, on the Nidon, or the little hill, at the northern foot of the Polden hill, and extending from that village, through Edington, Catcott, and Shapwick. Upon the 26th day of August, 1835, almost adjoining

one of the pottery kilns, a large lot was found within a circle of about ten inches diameter, and a foot beneath the surface of the peat. The situation in which those moulds and kilns were found (only a foot beneath the surface) clearly proves what I suggested at the commencement of my paper, that the turbaries are not of recent formation, but were the same in the reign of Commodus, about 1670 years since. They were made from coins of Commodus, Severus of several types, Julia Pia, Caracalla, Geta, Julia Mamæa, Alexander, &c. Two perfect coins, one of Severus and the other of Geta, were found in them, and were of the debased white metal used by the Romans of this district.

I have never met with many of this kind of metal brought from any great distance. I have one from Chedzoy field, of Orbiana Augusta, and another from a large urn, holding nearly two gallons, found at the head of a skeleton, in a Roman cemetery at Yatton, at the foot of the encampment known as Cadbury-hill, and now the garden of the Rev. Richard Symes. The bodies were all deposited about eighteen inches below the surface, and the urn of black-ware was nearly full of second and third brass coins, of the lower empire. I one morning collected forty from the village shops, where they had been for some weeks passing for farthings.

In the year 1838, two small leather purses were found in a pottery mound; one contained the smallest kind of silver coins of the latter emperors, and the

other, the smallest size copper of the same era. Both purses soon fell to dust after exposure to the air. In the last named, was a beautiful little coin of Theodosius Augustus, the first or Great, and one of his wife, Aelia Flaccilla,—the latter very rare, and both so very beautiful, as perhaps even in the eyes of a barbarian, to prevent them from mutilation. I think it very evident that the clippings from those coins were used for casting some of the larger size in the moulds.

At the opening meeting of our society at Taunton, the Rev. Dr. Buckland alluded to those moulds and clipped coins, which I had deposited in the Museum, and considered they afforded proof that among the Romans there were forgers and clippers of money. They were taken there by me, with the hope of proving the reverse, and that those base Roman coins were not forgeries. Who for an instant could have taken either of the coins, found in the moulds, for silver? and what proof have we that the commanders of the Roman forces stationed here, had not a right to coin? I am truly sorry to differ from the opinion of the Dean of Westminster, and still more so, from that of a friend, who through a long life, has been always respected by all those of the higher class, who have had the honor of his acquaintance, who has always been esteemed for his learning in every department of science, and above all, has always been revered by the poor around him, young and old, to whom he has been

a spiritual father and kind benefactor. I am sure all will join with me in this feeling when I mention the name of the Rev. John Poole, of Enmore. He considers those base coins to be the work of forgers, and was one of the party when so many moulds and a few coins were found on the Nidon.

I believe his argument is, "if those coins were sanctioned by legal authority, how came the obverses of so many Emperors and Cæsars to be in circulation at the same time? Why had not the makers of the moulds taken the reigning Emperors only? My reply is, that if I had the same work to undertake, I should select all the best coins I could find, as to preservation, for the purpose of stamping the moulds, so as to obtain the highest relief on the coins to be cast from them. I believe in all countries, coins of different reigns have been generally in circulation, and in the reign of George III, when the silver coins were much worn, they were called in, and in order to enrich my cabinet, I was allowed by my friends who were partners in Mr. Stuckey's bank, to attend daily at their receiving house, when I procured crowns, half-crowns, shillings and sixpences of Charles II, James II, William and Mary, William alone, Anne, George I, George II, and George III.—We have at present in circulation, coins of George III, George IV, William IV, as well as those of her present Majesty, Queen Victoria.

In order to support my argument, I shall con-

clude by quoting a few lines from a description of the Pitney Villa, by Sir Richard C. Hoare, which I consider high authority, as to the right of coining granted to the Romans of high rank. He says "I consider therefore that this fine villa belonged to the Præses loci or lord of the manor, who had his vassals settled around him, employed in certain manufactories, such as mining, COINING, &c., &c." Sir Richard told me he had always considered that Romans, high in office, had the privilege of coining.
