

# Ethnology of Somerset.

---

BY JOHN BEDDOE, B.A., M.D., F.R.S.,

*Foreign Associate of the Anthropological Society of Paris ;*

*Corresp. Member of the Anthropol. Soc. of Berlin.*

---

THE idea of preparing for this Society a paper on the Ethnology of Somerset was suggested to me nearly twelve months ago, by my late friend William Jones, then honorary secretary of the Society. On my representing the insufficiency of the data in my possession, he promised his active assistance in adding to them, which promise his premature and lamented death prevented him from performing. I had, therefore, to fall back, as regards the physical characteristics of our neighbours, on my own pretty numerous observations upon the stature, weight, form of head, and colour of eyes and hair, and on those collected for me some years ago by a number of gentlemen, of whom I may specify Dr. Liddon and the late Dr. Gibson, of Taunton; Mr. Oakley, governor of the gaol there; Mr. Phillips, then of Bishops Lydeard; Mr. Prankard, of Langport; Dr. Swete, then of Wrington; Mr. Goodden, of Wookey; Drs. Medlicott and Bath, of the County Asylum; and one of your present secretaries, Mr. O. Malet.

I will first give a brief sketch of the ethnographical

history of the county, and then endeavour to show its bearings upon the physical aspect of the population at the present day.

Before the Roman conquest the eastern part of the county is believed to have been occupied by the Belgæ, who were recent immigrants from Gaul : the more ancient tribes of the Damnonii and Dobuni, or Boduni, occupying respectively the western half, and the small strip along the Avon, north of Wansdyke. Whether there were considerable physical differences between these tribes is doubtful ; but the Belgæ were pretty certainly a vigorous race, tall and rawboned, and much like the modern Walloons of Liege and the Ardennes, who are, generally speaking, a dark-haired people.

It is not probable that the Roman occupation had much effect in modifying the native population of Somerset.

Towards the end of the sixth century, however, the tide of Saxon conquest began seriously to influence the distribution of race in the west of England. We may leave out of question the semi-mythical campaigns of Arthur, and come at once to the exploits of King Ceawlin of Wessex, and his victory at Dyrham (577). Dr. Guest (for reasons which appear to me, as well as to a more competent critic, Mr. Freeman, to be very weighty), believes that this victory resulted in the occupation, by Ceawlin and his followers, of the northern corner of Somerset, the district bounded on the south-west and south-east by the river Axe, and by a line passing from Wookey, through Wallscombe and Wallsmead, to Englishcombe and Bathford, or thereabout.

How far this, and other early Saxon conquests, implied or brought about a change in the population, is a disputed question, and one of considerable interest. The old

doctrine was that the British inhabitants were either slaughtered or thrust out bodily ; but, nowadays, it has come to be the fashion to treat such conquests as merely the introduction of a new military aristocracy. For myself, I believe that the British freemen were exterminated in the literal sense of the term, that is, slain or driven out, but that the servile class, and especially the women, remained in considerable numbers, merely undergoing a change of masters. We may thus account for the fact that in the conquered district Welsh names, such as Dundry, survived, though the invaders imposed new names upon most of the villages and hamlets.

The eastern and central portions of the county were, probably, not subdued until about 80 years later, when Kenwalch, of Wessex (in 658), fought the Welshmen at the Pens (Peonna), and drove them to the Parret. This river seems to have been the boundary of races for another generation, until Kentwin, in 682, drove the Britons to the sea. The meaning of the last statement has been disputed ; I think it probable that Kentwin conquered the vale of Taunton, and, at least, overran the country as far as Bideford Bay. At all events, Ine, his almost immediate successor, was in possession of Taunton in the early part of the eighth century.

These conquests of Kenwalch, Kentwin, and Ine were made by Saxons calling themselves Christians, and it has been supposed likely that on account of the novel community of religion with the Welsh they would probably treat the latter, when conquered, more mildly than their forefathers would have done in the days of Ceawlin, and that accordingly a larger proportion of Welshmen would remain in the annexed districts. Indeed we know, from the laws of Ine, that in his day and under his rule,

Welshmen could be freemen and landowners. Again, the further the tide of colonization spread from its source in Hampshire, the more it must have been diluted with the aboriginal or British element. Take into consideration, also, the fact that invaders usually seize on the richer and more accessible, that is, low lying lands, while the conquered usually take refuge in poor, sterile, and hilly, or otherwise difficulty-accessible districts, and we shall be led to look for the greatest infusion of Saxon or English blood in the people of the north of the county, from Axbridge to Keynsham, for a smaller proportion in the Mendip Hills, and in the whole tract extending from Bath and Wincanton to the Parret; for as little or even less in the country about Taunton and Ilminster, and for quite a small flavour of it in the Quantock and Exmoor hills. Such, at least, was probably the relative position of the two great races in the county at the period of the Norman Conquest. Somerset was easily reduced and held by the foreigners; the dispossession of the old landholders was hardly so complete as in some other counties, and it is not likely that any material modification in the population resulted. But a gradual infiltration of Englishmen from other counties into the towns of Somerset must have taken place ever since then, the tendency of which would be to add somewhat to the Saxon element. And Flemish and Walloon refugees settled in several of the towns, exercising however a more important influence on the trade and prosperity than on the ethnology of the districts. There is also, as has been pointed out to me by Dr. H. J. Hunter, some history of a mediæval Irish colony at the extreme western border of the county.

Let us now examine the differences in physical characters which are demonstrable or apparent, and consider whether

they may be referred to the ethnographical differences which I have pointed out as probably existing.

It is a fact that the people of the eastern half of the county have, on the whole, broader heads, lighter hair, and darker eyes than those of the western half. In all these respects the eastern men approach more to the ordinary English, the western to the Irish standard. These are the clearest and most important differences between them, and are very much what we might have expected to discover.

The mixed-blooded inhabitants of the towns appear to be lighter as to both eyes and hair than the people of either division. This is contrary to the relation which subsists between townsmen and country folk in the eastern parts of England; but it may be accounted for easily. Owing to the greater intercommunication and mixture of blood in the towns, their inhabitants, throughout England, tend far more to uniformity of type than those of the rural districts; and the uniform type which is approached by them is more Teutonic than that of most parts of Somerset.

Again, at the period of the Norman Conquest, the freemen of Somerset must have been on the whole somewhat less Keltic, and therefore probably more often light-haired than the serfs; and for some time after that event the franchises of the towns must have offered a tempting refuge to the unsupported Saxon freemen of the neighbourhood.

There are other local differences in feature and complexion, of the existence of which I am myself pretty well satisfied, though I cannot give you sufficient statistical grounds for my opinion, as I could for the statements hitherto made.

Thus I may say that the fair and handsome Frisian type is pretty common in the north of the county; that in the hilly south-eastern region about Wincanton, dark complexions and dark or even black hair attest the late and imperfect Saxonization of the country; that the same may be said of the Quantocks; that about Minehead and Dunster, perhaps from the less fixity of population induced by sea-faring, there is more evidence of mixture of blood; and that in Exmoor and in some villages of Mendip, the narrow skull, prominent jaws, and bony frame of the Gaelic type, and the Turanian oblique eye and pyramidal skull, crop up here and there, possibly as aberrant or degraded forms, but more probably as relics of primeval races.

Respecting the stature and bulk of the people in the several divisions of the county I have a great deal of statistical evidence, collected by careful and competent observers, mostly of my own profession; and it has yielded me some valuable information, bearing, however, less directly on ethnology than might, perhaps, have been expected. My friend, Mr. Prankard, of Langport, is of opinion that there is a notable difference in physique, as well as in dialect, between the people to the east of the Parret and those to the west of it—the eastern men being larger, and having more of the Saxon type. That this is the fact in so far as that they are, on the whole, lighter-haired, I have already affirmed. The supposed difference in stature does not come out so clearly in my tables. The labouring people about Taunton do, indeed, stand very low in this respect, but Mr. Malet informs me that this may be due to the extreme popularity of the military service in those parts, which is such that most of the well-grown youths are speedily picked up by the recruiting sergeants, for the

marines or other corps. If one were disposed to be complimentary, one might ascribe this to the hereditary valour of the descendants of the men of Sedgemoor, or even (if Mr. Freeman will permit me) of the followers of Eadnoth. But, in sober earnest, I believe it is connected with the redundance of agricultural population, and the low wages concurrent therewith. Under such circumstances the finer, stronger, and more enterprising men migrate or enlist, while in counties where employment is abundant and highly paid, such as Yorkshire, it is the physically inferior men who do so. Accordingly, the Somerset recruits in my tables (which, however, take account only of men of full age) stand high above those of Yorkshire in stature and size, though a mass of other evidence shows that the average Yorkshire man is really a much bigger animal than the average Somersetshire man.

The race-character, as to size, should be sought among those who are sufficiently fed and not overworked in youth. And I find that the farmers of Bishops Lydeard are a well-grown set of men, averaging over 5 ft. 8¼ in. in height without shoes, and about 12 stones in weight. I have no return exactly corresponding to this from any part of East Somerset. At Wrington, a number of little farmers (13), belonging to a friendly society, yielded quite a low average of weight, though in stature they somewhat exceeded the labourers.\* The small working farmer is generally, I think, in most countries, a careful, frugal man, and more apt to fatten his pigs and cattle than himself.

I am one of those who believe that not only complexion, but stature, and not only physical, but mental and moral character, depend very greatly upon race. But other and

\* Farmers, 5 ft. 6·9 in. (without shoes), and 151 lbs. Labourers, 5 ft. 6 in., and 150 lbs. Artizans, 5 ft. 5·6 in., and 147 lbs.

powerful influences may thwart and obscure the hereditary tendencies. Laws, language, religion, modify the moral and intellectual nature of man; and similarly abundance or scarcity of food, quality of air and water, modes of living and occupation, and like agencies, whether operating directly or through natural selection, do, doubtless, modify his physical nature.

## NOTE.

The modulus, or index of relative breadth, in 162 Somerset heads was as follows:—In 80 of East Somerset, average 77·9, exactly the same as in 50 Bristolians and 50 Gloucestershire men. In 53 of West Somerset, 76·9, and in 29 of south (Mid) Somerset, chiefly from small towns, 78·6.

The colours of the eyes and hair are best given in a tabular form.

Natives of	Number observed	Eyes per cent.			Hair per cent.				
		Light	Neutr.	Dark	Red	Fair	Brown	Dark	Black
Somerset, towns excluding Bath	176	60·2	14·7	25	2·5	16·7	40	32·9	7·6
East Somerset (rural)		53·8	11·8	34·4	3·9	11·8	33·6	45·7	4·7
West Somerset (rural)	120	57·5	16·6	25·8	1·2	5·4	38·7	49·6	5