

The First West-Saxon Penetration into Somersetshire.

BY MR. T. KERSLAKE.

IN the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles appear the short records of two great national conflicts, at two very distant dates—A.D. 658 and A.D. 1016—at a place called “Peonna,” which was certainly somewhere upon the confines of the present counties of Dorset and Somerset. The first of these two battles is the one which directly concerns our present consideration. It is that by which Kenwalch extended the subjugation of the Britons westward from the territory already occupied by the West-Saxons in the district of Salisbury, by the penetration of what is now Somersetshire. Nearly all our historians and topographers have identified this “Peon” with Penselwood. But it is found that Penselwood was already “Pen” (short), as it still continues, long before the Saxons came, and that it was not the habit of the Saxons to confound the diphthong “eo” with the short vowel: and where they used the diphthong it still maintains its force in our own speech, continued direct from them, as witnessed by most such words in constant use, such as “thief,” “deep,” “week,” &c. It is believed, therefore, that this name “Peon” cannot now be represented by any of the many place-names that have been formed out of “Pen,” but must be sought for among those which now appear either as “Pion,” “Pewen,” “Pevin,” or “Poin;” and it is to the name “Pointington” that it is now intended to direct particular attention.

The high range of hills between Somerset and Wilts, of which Penselwood is the southern terminus, is supplemented, or continued toward the south-west, by another lofty range, called by Leland, “great Crestes of Hylles,” a similar natural rampart between Somerset and Dorset, the boundary of which counties

is crossed in the short journey from Yeovil to Sherborne. On the Dorsetshire, or south-eastern side, this range commands views over the Vale of Blackmore : as also does Penselwood, but from the north towards the south ; and both lines of view look over Gillingham, which, a little indirectly, lies between them in the lower country. On the other side the steep north-western escarpment, or out-crop, looks down upon that one of the extensive Somersetshire levels in which occurs the junction of the Ivel with the Parrett. Beyond the northern ending of this western escarpment, about equal to it in height, but insulated in advance of it, stand out, like a sentinel upon the deep combs and valleys of the range, the hill and castle of Camelot or Cadbury. This block of high country was most likely included, with Selwood proper, in Selwoodshire. Sherborne, Milborne-Port, Charleton Horethorne, and several considerable places, nestle in the deep valleys that intersect it ; and in these are also the sources of several streams that afterwards become considerable. One of these, the Yeo or Ivel, takes its rise in seven springs, at a place called "The Seven Wells," or "The Seven Sisters," a secluded spot at the top of the small valley in which, scarcely three miles lower, lies Sherborne, with its Norman castle apparently occupying the earthworks of a strong fortress that had previously commanded the widened junction with another valley.

From this deep and narrow interior valley, close to the "Seven Sisters," arises a large and nearly quadrangular platform, sloping upwards until it is terminated westward by the lofty and precipitous escarpment itself, commanding an extensive prospect over the Somersetshire plain, and overlooking Ilchester and the Fosse-way. This is "Poinington" or "Pointington down." The village of Pointington lies about a mile lower down the valley towards Sherborne. The quadrangular down retains some marks of having been, to some extent, artificially levelled ; and there are slight remains of earthworks about it, and appearances of the edges having been declivitated and the angles squared ;

although these are not so conspicuous as to attract uninvited attention, nor more so than such as are frequent and generally unnoticed on many of our unploughed downs. But none but extemporised works are expected by our theory. There are, however, four or five barrows, more or less flattened, on a steeper slope called "Pointington Slait," separated from the down by a small stream and ravine on the north side. The view from the western, or highest, edge of the squared platform over the broad level of southern Somerset includes the entire field of the retreat of the Britons to the Parrett, which perhaps where the valley narrows again, by Langport, into a sort of land gate, through which the river passes, would be the next tenable natural boundary. The western outcrop of Pointington Down, although steep and very high, is rather lower than the hills that flank it; and there is at one part a much easier descent to the lower country than is the general habit of this precipitous range. Holway Hill to the south, and Corton Down to the north, form cheeks to this down, and to this descent from it.

This seclusion might have been penetrated from Gillingham, on the east, by a pass a little to the south of Charleton Horthorne, through which it may now be approached from the Temple-Combe railway junction. But the part of the eastern side of the valley, opposite the down or platform presumed to be the battle-field, is closed by a long steep declivity, a most formidable position if it should have been attained by a force advancing from that side. And such an advance would have been easy by a line of way nearly the same as that which has been adopted by the South-Western Railway; but about a mile to the rear of this position, at Milborne Week, and close to the railway station, is the very remarkable earthwork which the late Rev. F. Warre has described, but despaired to account for, as "a very puzzling construction." It is, however, no more than an artificial dyke of rather unusual magnitude crossing a hill promontory, and insulating a considerable level platform; evidently with particular provision against an advance from the

east. There can be no doubt that this is a hill fortress or camp of that type which consists of a promontory separated from a main land of equal height by an artificial vallum, such as those at Maes Knoll, near Bristol; Broadhembury, Devon; Devil's Dyke and Telscombe Tye, Sussex. Whether or not it is a continued usage of this ancient type, adapted to the later emergency of the resistance to the Saxon invaders of the seventh century, may be a curious consideration. In one respect it differs from the better-known examples, that whereas they are mostly found to command a wide outlook of forty or fifty miles, this, although the spot itself is very high, is almost shut in within a scope of at most four or five. It seems, therefore, to have been specially intended to bar this direct passage of the hilly fastness, which is here suggested to have been the last holdfast of the Britons before their recorded westward flight, A.D. 658. At all events, there it stands, across the most accessible way from Gillingham to our adopted "æt Peonnum" or Pointington Down.

It is hoped that what is called the philological evidence for this place has been satisfied. In the present name "Pointington" the diphthong of the ancient "Peonnan" survives in that undiminished vigour which ought in such cases to be always expected against the pretensions of any of the "Pens" that are so conveniently numerous and everywhere at hand. As to the geographical fitness of the site of this platform for the two battles recorded in the Chronicles, it is not necessary that both the annals—of the seventh and eleventh centuries—refer to one place, but it is most likely that they do; and this site suits the requirements of both. Its superior aptitude for the last strong holdfast of the Britons upon this hilly region, and the flight and pursuit of Kenwalch to the Parrett, is very obvious. As for the fight of Eadmund with the Danes, A.D. 1016, at Peonnan near Gillingham, this plain is ten miles west of Gillingham, and as Penselwood is only five miles north of it, we must trust to the diphthong reason for a preference of the ten miles. Along

the plain west of the escarpment of Pointington, then, as now, ran the Fosse-way, the direct and only road by which Eadmund could lead the "Dorsetenses, Domnani, Wiltonienses," to the place of his next following engagement, the famous drawn battle at Sceorstan, where it appears his army still consisted of these three peoples. No matter whether "Sceorstan" be now represented by Sherston, near Malmesbury, or the Four-Shire-Stone near Chipping-Norton, for the road passes close to both.

That Kenwalch penetrated Somersetshire, A.D. 658, by this southern entrance at Pointington, and not by the more northern one at Penselwood, is further confirmed by one of his footsteps left in this very path. The first record of the church of Sherborne, almost adjoining to this battle field, upon which he won a large extension of his dominion from the Britons, is that Kenwalch was the first founder of that church, and gave it a hundred hides at a place called "Lanprobi." It does not matter to our argument what may be the cartular authenticity of this record. It is sufficient that it attests a very ancient belief that Kenwalch, with the zeal of a convert, had a special interest in this spot, and that he exercised the well-known instinct of conquerors to mark the scene of his victory by a religious memorial. Of this motive Battle Abbey will be remembered as a later instance. But although this place, Lanprobus, is no longer known by that name, there is some reason to believe it was close to the battle-field. In the record above cited it first appears with its unaltered British name, and must have had a sanctuary dedicated in the name of S. Probus, as Cornwall still has one. But in a Papal Confirmation of the terrier of Sherborne Abbey, dated 1145, this name turns up again in the more English form of "Propeschirche." It there follows the names of Higher and Lower and a third Compton, which are all still situated on those very western slopes of the great crest of hills, whereon our proposal is that the battle of A.D. 658 was fought.

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the Britons were driven A.D. 658, indicates the same field as that of the defeat of the Danes, A.D. 1016, "æt Peonnan with Gillingham," may be given. Although Gillingham is not mentioned in the first annal, it was without doubt the basis of assault of the invaders in that case also. When mentioned in the second event, the name had already suffered the mutilation with which it is still current among us, and in which that remarkable testimony which is contained in the name to nearly the date of its own beginning is obscured or nearly obliterated. The compilers of the Exchequer Domesday are answerable for many distortions of English names, but here they have compensated a multitude of their shortcomings by having inadvertently, as it almost seems, for it is only once in seven entries of the name, preserved the name in something like its entirety—"INGELINGEHĀ." Our concern with the restitution of the decayed intelligence of this name is, that at some time in the century between the conquest of Sarum, A.D. 552 and A.D. 658, when the Saxons pierced the hilly phalanx of South Selwood into South Somerset, there was a settlement of them—the Englings—upon the holm or "ham" formed by the confluence of a stream, now known as Shreen Water, with the Stour; and called, as an advanced frontier outpost of them, by the distinctive name of their nation—the Ham of the English. Dr. Guest, with his usual sagacity, felt the want of such a frontier, but was attracted by the neighbouring name of "Mere." But when Mere is not the equivalent of "more" or "marsh," as it is at Mere—formerly Ferlingamere—near Glastonbury, it will usually prove to be the almost technical name for a forest boundary. And this one is probably so named as a mere of Selwood. What has since been called Mere Castle, with Whitesheet and the other surrounding hill forts, were likely to have been the British outposts which checked the progress of invasion, and maintained this great natural rampart for another hundred years.

But there is still another word, concerning the retreat of the Britons to the river Parrett, from this first inroad of the West-

Saxons into Somersetshire, as well as for the fact, that this was indeed the first military or dominant penetration of the West Selwood country by that nation. It has been usual to interpret the annal of the year 658 of the Chronicles, as the establishment of the course of the Parrett for the subsequent strict boundary of the two nations. And this interpretation has been employed to explain the great and obvious difference of the two English dialects of North and of South-West Somerset, more likely due to slower, or at least more natural, causes than to such a distinct and artificial political division. No one can have passed through Somersetshire without having noticed its most striking physical feature, the division into long and wide level valleys, by continuous lines of mountainous hills, running from west to east. Like water-tight compartments in ships, these broad valleys are in a manner invasion-proof. That is, an inroad which has penetrated one of them, must be repeated before it can be extended to the others. If the battle of A.D. 658 was fought at Pointington, the more southerly field, as above maintained, the consequent entry into what to us is Somersetshire, would have been into that very compartment in which alone the flight to the Parrett was possible—the plain within which the Ivel falls into that river. If the invasion had, on the contrary, been made at Penselwood, the more northern field of conflict, as heretofore presumed, the entry would have resulted in the valley of the Brue, and the Parrett could not have been reached nearer than its mouth, or rather it could not have been reached at all; for it is not outside probability that Huntspill level, through which the river's mouth now winds, was at that time a wide bay of the sea itself. Again, that the course of the Parrett should then have been established as a political boundary is most unlikely, for the *line* of that river neither divides the dialects nor takes the required direction. What the annal must have meant is, that the fugitive nation was pursued to the Parrett, at the point in that valley where it would lie in their path—the junction of the Ivel with the Parrett flowing from the south, at Langport; and to the

the Britons were driven A.D. 658, indicating the defeat of the Danes, A.D. 1016, "ingham," may be given. Although given in the first annal, it was without doubt the invaders in that case also. When the event, the name had already suffered, it is still current among us, and the testimony which is contained in the its own beginning is obscured or neglected by the compilers of the Exchequer Domesday Book, and the distortions of English names, but a multitude of their shortcomings, it almost seems, for it is only the name, preserved the name in the "INGELINGEHĀ." Our continued decayed intelligence of this name, a century between the conquest, when the Saxons had the into South Sea there Englings—upon or of a stream, as S' called, as an anti-tive name of with his usual attracted by Mere is not Mere—formed prove to And this he

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narrow gorge through which the united river almost immediately passes out, a resting place which they maintained until some fifty years afterwards the West-Saxon frontier was pushed further westward. A religious observance, that must have been also a tradition of this conquest, continued into the twelfth century. William of Malmesbury narrates that the poor monks, in the Isle of Athelney, which is just at the mouth of this valley, still continued to sing the praises of their patron saint Eielwini, who was also at that time still considered to be the brother of King Kenwalch.

There is in truth more than one reason to believe that the large northern part of Somersetshire, claimed as a portion of the earlier and pagan conquest in Gloucestershire, A.D. 577, was not included in the shire. The usual leading authorities, such as Mr. Sharon Turner, had already been accustomed to conclude that this earlier conquest included a "part of Somerset," probably because one of the three cities named—Gloucester, Cirencester, and Bath—as having been captured is included in the Somersetshire of our day. But at a still later time Bath was in the kingdom of Mercia, and not in Wessex, out of which the bulk of modern Somerset has come. Bath contained one of the dedications of S. Werburg, found to be a land-mark of the early frontiers and conquests of Mercia. The north bank of the Avon was lined with them, as this at Bath, one at Bristol, and one at Henbury. This misapprehension has been much exaggerated by living writers, who have interpreted and mapped the grasp of the earlier conquest as including—all but a long and narrow, not to say a most anomalous and exceptional, strip—not only all South Gloucestershire, but the very large part of Somerset extending to the river Axe. Thus it is represented that a conquest which having crossed the Avon and passed the Wansdyke, although it was unable to appropriate the long, narrow, and comparatively easy barrier north of Selwood, dividing it from its own territory eastward, was yet able to include in one lot the mountainous fastnesses of the Mendips, not

to be conquered by saying so, only to be stopped by a small river to the south of them. This extension does not, however, seem to be very strongly suggested by the line of the four places named in the annal of the conquest—Bath, Dyrham, Cirencester, and Gloucester—which leaves it even doubtful that the capture extended at all even into the south-west corner of Gloucestershire, the angle of the Severn and the Avon.

Then again, what ground is there in the scanty written records of the following century for supposing that Somersetshire had already been conquered? Four years before Kenwalch penetrated South Somersetshire "*æt Peonnum*," we find him only yet attempting that feat upon this northern district which he afterwards affected at a much more southern point. In A.D. 652, he is recorded to have fought at Bradford by the Avon; that is, he is still endeavouring to enter Somersetshire from the east.

Another reason for believing that North Somerset was not included in the earlier conquest is, that the Britons were Christians, whilst the conquerors of A.D. 577 continued, as a nation at any rate, or political body, in their ancient barbaric paganism; whereas, except those districts of which the population remains to this day certainly British, there is no part of England of which the surface is so overspread with traces of the continuity of the more ancient Celtic Christianity until it became absorbed into that of the newly-christened invaders—not to speak of the unbroken transmission of Christian Glastonbury. The whole of this part of Somerset that has been claimed for the pagan conquest is dotted with the names of Celtic Christian saints, often actually surviving in the present dedications of churches, in other cases leaving visible impressions in the names of places, of extinct dedications, where later churches have superseded older sanctuaries. It is believed, moreover, that the doubt above expressed, of the extension of the pagan conquest of A.D. 577 to the south-west angle of Gloucestershire, might be similarly justified. On the north side of the Avon more than one of the institutions of the Celtic missionaries near the shores of the

Severn estuary, not only lived through the period when the whole of Gloucestershire has been assumed to have been under pagan Saxondom, but still flourished with endowment in the twelfth century. Indeed, it may safely be asked whether any part of England which submitted to that rule of Saxon paganism that has been imputed to this part of Somersetshire, retains so many and such scattered traces of the continuity of Celtic Christianity. We see throughout this district the undisturbed reliques of the institutions of the antecedent Celtic peoples, still in their own places, unswept by any torrent of exterminating pagan conquest : the very cobwebs left by the former occupants still hanging from every beam and rafter. In fact, this district chiefly became English by the quieter process of intercolonization ; and so the dialect of North Somerset, so different from that of the South, entered it by infiltration from the north or north-east.

One incidental episode is upon record which might possibly illustrate the social condition of this district in the midst of this very transition period. It is the well-authenticated expedition of S. Augustine of Canterbury, about A.D. 601, to the western English frontier, to meet in conference the Cambrian Bishops. This, it will be observed, was just intermediate in time between the pagan Saxon conquest in Gloucestershire, A.D. 577, and the Christian Saxon penetration of South Somerset, A.D. 658 ; and the path traversed on foot by the Saxon Christian missionary and his attendants must have been also intermediate of the two points of conquest, and through the very district imputed to be at that very time under the pagan rule of the earlier conqueror. The name of the place of conference, if not lost, has been obscured during the long interval ; but the locality has been so circumstantially defined as to provoke a hope, or at least a wish, that it may not yet be beyond recognition.
