



## Norton Camp.

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BY WILLIAM BIDGOOD.

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THIS ancient entrenchment occupies the crest of a hill of slight elevation, but still commanding situation, about 200 yards to the north of the Church of Norton Fitzwarren. The shape of the camp is somewhat roughly circular in form, corresponding to the course of the hill on which it is situated. From the earthworks forming the fortifications there is a gentle slope on all sides to the valley below. The entrenchments consist of an inner and an outer bank, with a broad ditch between. The banks were originally of considerably greater height than they are now, and the ditch was much deeper. The effect of denudation for so many centuries has been to lessen the height of the ramparts and to fill up the ditch. Sufficient, however, remains to trace clearly the course of the defences in their whole circuit. The enclosure is about 12 or 13 acres in area, and being of convenient size for agricultural purposes, the entrenchments also forming a good fence, has tended to the preservation of this interesting earthwork. There are three main entrances, north, west, and south-east. That to the west is probably the best preserved, and most typical, although the main defences of the camp for some distance on either side of it have been obliterated, and a modern hedge substituted. This entrance consists of a hollow way, projecting from the camp some 400 or 500 feet into the adjoining field, which would enable the defenders to sally forth unseen, and attack their assailants in the rear: on the other hand, if the invaders got possession of the approach, they would be met on reaching

the camp by a barrier thrown across the road, causing it to bifurcate into two narrow passages easily held by the defenders. The entrance on the north is prolonged to a much greater distance, and terminates in a narrow lane, leading in the direction of a place called "Conquest," on the Bishop's Lydeard road. This camp appears to be of purely British construction, and although remains of Roman occupation have been found in the valley below, there is nothing to show that the camp was even occupied, much less constructed, by them. Whether it be of pre-Roman construction, or of the later British period, it probably played its most important part in history at the time of the West Saxon conquest of the valley of the Tone.

At what precise date Norton Camp was captured by the West Saxons does not appear. The Parret remained the boundary of the Welsh for about a quarter of a century; but in A.D. 683, the Saxon Chronicle records that "Centwine drove the Brito-Welsh as far as the sea." This is interpreted as the country west of the Parret along the coast to Quantoxhead, and would have included the forts of Dousborough and Ruborough, with the ridge of the Quantocks as the boundary. Ine succeeded to the kingdom of the West Saxons in 688, and between this date and the close of the century the camp at Norton and the rich vale of Taunton Deane would appear to have become English, for we find in the early days of the 9th century Ine bestowing lands "on the Tān" to the church at Glastonbury. This land would have been that represented by the parish of West Monkton, which remained as one of the possessions of the abbey until the Dissolution. About the same period the frontier would appear to have been extended southward and westward to the river Tone, and a chain of forts ranging from Elworthy Barrows, Clatworthy, Wiveliscombe, Bathealton, to Castle Hill near West Buckland, with Taunton established as a bulwark on its southern bank. There does not appear to have been any further fighting westward, but the Saxon Chronicle records, A.D. 709, "Ine and Nunna his kins-

man fought against Gerent, king of the Welsh." This must have been a most important and probably sanguinary conflict, for it is seldom that a British leader is mentioned in the Saxon Chronicle, but here it is the king himself who is fighting. The result of this campaign would appear to have been the conquest of the south-western portion of the county—Neroche and Ilminster district. Castle Neroche would at that time have been the principal, if not the only, fort left to the Britons in Somerset, and its possession would have been hotly contested. A relic of this fight might, perhaps, exist in a barrow on the Blackdown Hills, situate about six miles south-west of Taunton, and the same distance west of Castle Neroche. On the old ordnance map this barrow will be found marked "Noons Barrow." The late Mr. Dickinson drew attention to it in the early pages of *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries* (vol. i, p. 159), and suggested that it was the burial-place of Nūn or Nunna. This is extremely probable, from the circumstance of the fight, and the fact that Nunna's name does not again occur in the Chronicle. Had he been living, he would certainly have been mentioned in Ine's subsequent wars. During one of these insurrections, which were constantly occurring among the English, Taunton appears to have been besieged by the rebels, for the Saxon Chronicle records, under date 722, "In this year Queen Æthelburh (Ine's Queen) destroyed Taunton, which Ine had previously built." The king himself was engaged fighting elsewhere. This is the first mention of Taunton in history. Before Ine's time, the Saxons had become converted to Christianity, and the war between the English and Welsh became one of subjugation and government, rather than of conquest and extermination. His great code of laws deals alike with the English and Welsh.

When Norton Camp was taken by the Saxons, the Britons retired to the west and south of the Tone, where they probably afterwards dwelt in peace. There are two or three place-names which would suggest this: Wiveliscombe is but a slight

corruption of Wælas-combe, pronounced by the natives Wuls-combe. Another place, a little west of Wellington, on the Tone, is marked Wellisford on the map, but called Welshford by the inhabitants. Wellington as Welshtown, or Wælas-town, is not so clear.

Folk-speech also is important evidence of racial boundaries. While there is a very marked distinction between the pronunciation east and west of the Parret, there is also a correspondingly conspicuous difference between that east and west of Taunton, as Mr. Elworthy has pointed out,\* the pronunciation gradually shading into the western dialect, until by the time we reach Wellington, Wiveliscombe, and the western slopes of the Quantocks, the speech has become almost thoroughly Devonian in character. This would tend to prove, as well as Ine's "Dooms," that, after their conversion to Christianity, the English did not drive the conquered Britons out of the country altogether, but that they lived on peaceably and intermarried. Indeed, there is some suspicion that Ine himself was half a Welshman.

There is also a noticeable difference in the physical appearance of the inhabitants westward, a larger proportion of shorter, thick-set people, with dark complexion and black hair, being observable, and this distinction increases until on Exmoor and in Devonshire it becomes the rule.

Local traditions and legends are worth sifting, as generally there may be found some foundation on which they have been built up. Thus the old rhyme

"Norton was a market town  
When Taunton was a furzy down,"

has some truth in it, for Norton Camp is undoubtedly a place of greater antiquity than Taunton, and although the latter was never a furzy down, the soil being more congenial to the growth of alder, withies, sedges, and equisetum, than to heath

\* "Dialect of West Somerset," p. 6.

or gorse, yet on the north side it was certainly a morass. The selection of its site for the building of Ine's new fortress would seem to mark a fresh era in fortification—a system in which the ordinary defences of earthworks and palisades are strengthened by an outer ditch of water. It is also interesting to note that the date of its foundation is nearly two hundred years earlier than any other fortress mentioned in the Saxon chronicle.

The legend of the Dragon who lived on Norton Camp and ravaged the country round, descending into the valley, devouring the inhabitants and their flocks, has some foundation. It will be remembered that the Dragon was the Standard of the West Saxons. Freeman makes frequent mention of this in his *History of the Norman Conquest*, and we might easily imagine how this monster, stuck on the top of a pole and planted on the camp, menacing the people in the valley below inspired the inhabitants with awe and superstitious wonder. And such a hold does the legend appear to have had on the people, that down to mediæval times it was strongly believed in, for on the beautifully carved fifteenth century screen of the parish church of Norton Fitzwarren, it is depicted in the form of reptiles resembling crocodiles, seizing and devouring men at the plough, and even women and children seem not to have been exempt from their ravages. It may well have been, however, that this dragon legend was turned to account in the religious fervour of the middle ages, and served to typify the evil spirit going about seeking whom he might devour. Even in our own day the inhabitants will tell you of the pestiferous reptile that once upon a time lived on the hill, bred from the corruption of human bodies, breathing disease and death around. Similar dragon legends exist elsewhere, associated with stories of great battles. At the present time the Wessex Dragon, or rather the modern heraldic representation of this mythical monster, waves over the Society's Castle of Taunton.