

Hamdon or Ham Hill. S. Somerset.

NOTES ON ITS EARLY OCCUPATION—AND AFTERWARDS.

BY R. HENSLEIGH WALTER, M.B.

“There is that beauty and agreeableness in Truth, even supposing it to be merely speculative, as always affords, on the discovery of it, real pleasure to the well-turned mind.”—Horsley's “*Britannia Romana.*” *Preface*, p. ii.

HAMDON Hill, standing boldly to the forefront of a chain of hills extending away to the eastward, stern and uncompromising, its beetling brow unrelieved by foliage, keeping watch and ward over the erstwhile inland sea of Central Somerset to the north, and westward over the fertile vale of the Parrett, must, from its commanding position, have strongly appealed to successive warlike races as an almost impregnable stronghold and place of refuge.

First the swarthy little Iberian with his weapons of flint and stone, as full of fight as his present day descendants; then the big fair-haired raw-boned Goidel bringing his knowledge of the working of bronze, who was still later succeeded by the Brythonic iron-worker, who had apparently founded a definite colony on Hamdon¹ at the time of the advent of the Romans under Claudius Cæsar; all have left traces of their habitation there. Probably the earthworks were originally constructed by men of the Bronze Age,² who also may have given the place-name Hamdon (*afon-dun*, water-fortress) to the Hill.³

1. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, LIII, ii, 181.

2. Allcroft, “*Earthwork of England*,” 91.

3. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, XXX, ii, 144.

From its natural position it would appear that Hamdon was the most northerly of a chain of hill-forts extending from the south coast, including Hawksdown, Musbury, Membury, ? Lambert's Castle and Pillesdon Pen,¹ garrisoned by the Durotriges² in defence of their territory against their neighbours the Dumnonii. The former tribe seem to have been of Brythonic origin, which in the opinion of Prof. Boyd Dawkins is most probable from the weight of evidence.³ Their existence on Hamdon is borne out by the fact of numerous relics, similar to those from the Glastonbury Lake-village, having been found on the site of an Early Iron Age settlement at "Ham Turn." With the exception of three Roman coins (two 1st brass of Claudius and one 2nd brass of Caligula) no purely Roman remains have been found on this site.

It was, however, as a Roman military station that Hamdon attained pre-eminence, undoubtedly the most important in the south of Somerset. Evidence is accumulating year by year as to the extent of this, though its definite existence has previously been doubted. Though probably a small force was kept at Ilchester to protect the line of communication at the ford of the Ivel, there is but little evidence of its having been a Roman station.⁴ Moreover its situation, being then no doubt flooded during a great portion of the year, would render it quite unsuitable for an extensive military occupation.

The success which attended the arms of the Emperor Claudius was largely due to the prowess of his lieutenant Vespasian,⁵ who is credited with having elaborated and

1. Davidson, "British and Roman remains in the vicinity of Axminster," 10.

2. The idea that the Morini succeeded the Durotriges in Dorset originated in the fertile brain of Richard of Cirencester, which error has been perpetuated by subsequent writers.

3. Prof. Sir J. Rhys in "Celtic Britain," p. 44, expresses doubt as to the Durotriges being Brythons, but certainly the district was occupied by Brythons previous to the Claudian conquest.

4. *V.C.H. Somerset*. Haverfield, "Romano-British Somerset," p. 294.

5. Suetonius, "Vespasian," chap. iv.

adapted the existing defences of Hamdon to Roman requirements.¹

During his campaign in the West, Hamdon would figure largely as a base of operations, overlooking, as it does, the ford of the Parret at the eastern boundary of the territory of the Dumnonii, and the ford of the Ivel, probably a southern limit of the Belgæ.

It is generally accepted that the two powerful nations subjugated by Vespasian in the south-west of Britain were the Belgæ and the Dumnonii.²

The active military occupation of Hamdon was probably of short duration, not lasting more than three or four years, for in A.D. 47 Aulus Plautius, the commander-in-chief returned to Rome to celebrate his triumph. This would account for the absence of more permanent evidence of encampment. With the subjugation of the Belgæ and Dumnonii the strategic value of Hamdon would have been greatly lessened and its occupation in force rendered unnecessary.

Davidson³ says:—"We may safely conclude that the south-western parts of the kingdom were not subject to scenes of warfare after the time of Vespasian, and we are warranted in assigning to the period of that commander such remains of military works as any researches in this district may bring forward to notice."

Evidences of Roman and Romano-British habitation of Hamdon are very numerous, relics to the number of over a thousand being in the "Walter Collection" at Taunton Museum.

When one realizes that the majority of this number are casual "finds" made by workmen whilst "rubbling," and are but a mere fraction of what have been unearthed, one must

1. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, LVI, ii, 53, footnote.

2. Rhys, "Celtic Britain," 79; Wright, "The Celt, the Roman, and the Saxon," 22; Davidson, *op. cit.* 43.

3. *Op. cit.*, 44.

come to the conclusion that under Roman rule a more or less settled habitation existed.

That the Hill was at one time occupied by Roman legionaries, probably a detachment of the Second Augustan Legion, is confirmed by the finding on various sites there of fragments of scale armour (one portion consisting of over 300 scales) to a greater extent than have been found on any other Roman site in Britain, and one may reasonably infer that so important an outpost was visited by the illustrious commander Vespasian in person.

The camp proper, as occupied by the Romans, was apparently restricted to the northern spur of the Hill, as but few relics have been found outside this area, which is entirely situated within the parish boundaries of Stoke-sub-Hamdon.

During the past six years the writer has located here six distinct sites of Roman habitations—probably huts of timber and turf, being a portion of the winter quarters of the troops. Each site has yielded remains of scale-armour; and more than fifty brooches, together with various personal ornaments, weapons, and implements, have been found on these sites.

It is not unlikely that more permanent stone buildings existed at "Stanchester" where foundations are said to have been traced, about half a mile to the north of the Hill near the Fosse Way. Adjacent to this are two long barrow-like mounds about 70 yards long, 5 feet high, and 20 feet broad, running due east and west, known as "The Trutts." These are possibly relics of the Stone Age. The writer obtained permission from the Duchy of Cornwall to excavate them in 1905, but very little evidence of their nature was gathered. Between the eastern extremities of the mounds, about 4 feet below the present surface, was found a flooring of roughly-hewn Ham-stone slabs extending over an area of 8 feet by 10 feet surrounded by a low wall about 1 foot high. These stones showed evidence of having been burnt, but no remains of bones were seen, though traces of charcoal and decayed organic matter were noted.

After the close of Vespasian's campaign in the south-west Hamdon probably ceased to be used for defensive purposes, and its occupation by troops would be on a smaller scale than hitherto, possibly as a "hill-station" for considerations of health, weapons being rarely found in association with coins of a later date than the I Century A.D. Doubtless there was also a proportion of civil inhabitants of the camp, not improbably Romanized Britons. Practically no coins dating from the latter half of the I Century A.D. to the middle of the III Century have been found on this part of the Hill. At the east end, near Bedmore Barn, a hoard of coins of the Antonine period was found in 1882. This, however, was in the vicinity of buildings, the foundations of which were discovered by the writer in 1907, and during the past year have been systematically excavated by Messrs. Adams and Beattie. These were probably the residence of the local landed proprietor, who owned the "villa" in its larger and true sense—the counterpart of the mediæval manor.¹ On this site and on the north spur of the Hill coins dating from the middle of the III Century A.D. (Gallienus, 253-268) to the beginning of the V Century (Arcadius, 395-408) are fairly plentiful.

So far there is no evidence, with the exception of an iron *umbo* of a shield, that the Saxons ever came to Hamdon, unless one infers their presence from the obviously wilful destruction of implements and ornaments of metal which one not infrequently comes across.

To pass to more recent times. During the early coaching days—probably in the first half of the XVIII Century—one of the chief coach-roads from London to the West passed over Ham Hill. At the present time a deep cutting may be seen a little to the east of the present road, in which this coach-road lay. The writer has been told by an old man that the latter's grandfather well remembered as a boy having seen the coach

1. Ward, "Roman Era in Britain," 72.

toiling up over the Hill with a team of oxen yoked in front to assist the horses. On this road, as it approaches Odcombe, is a mile-stone—127 miles to London—which stands near a spot named “Five-Ashes,” so called from the fact of five pollard ash-trees, set in a quincunx, having been planted at the cross-roads. This method of planting ash-trees appear to have been customary to denote a meeting-place for pilgrims on their way to Glastonbury. There was another similar cluster of trees at the cross-roads near Tintinhull on the Fosse Way.

Various legends abound regarding the coach-road over the Hill in the “good old days,” the most striking of which has reference to a certain highwayman named Forster, who, it is said, was captured, hung up in an iron cage and left to starve. It is said that his cries could be heard for miles around, and that a woman of Witcombe¹ near by took pity on him and fed him with tallow-candles. Rumour says that even now, at dead of night, the shrieks of the poor wretch may be heard. The deep cutting running from the coach-road by Bedmore Barn towards Montacute is still known as Forster’s Gully.

Tradition has it that on Stroud’s Hill, adjoining the coach-road, a large fair was formerly held, lasting for a fortnight, at which horse-races and various sports were held. For the time being quite a small town of caravans and booths existed to provide entertainment for pleasure-seekers,—weird and wondrous shows to tempt the gaping rustics to spend their hard-earned savings, vendors of merchandise galore vying with one another in proclaiming the excellence of their wares. People flocked from miles around there to purchase their stocks of clothing and stores for the winter.

1. There is a tradition that Witcombe (now only a name) was once a prosperous hamlet nestling in the valley under the shadow of the great earthworks at the s.e. corner of Ham Hill, adjacent to the line of the reputed Roman road. It is said that in 1665 a visitor from London came there and was stricken with plague, which infected and wiped out the entire population, save a few who fled. In consequence of this, the place thus deserted fell to ruin, the foundations being traceable at the present day. In the early part of the XIX Century one or two cottages stood there, possibly rebuilt with stone from the ruins.

Attractions at fairs were, at times, to say the least of it, somewhat sensational. As an instance, an annual fair held at Ilchester, not a hundred years ago, provided public executions for the delectation of the people. A number of the chief criminals of the year were reserved for this festival. At Hang Fair, as it was called, the condemned men, with ropes around their necks, were driven in an open cart from Ilchester Jail to Gallows Green, adjoining the Ilchester-Yeovil road, where the hangman knotted the ropes over the gallows cross-beam, and whipped up his horses, leaving the unfortunate men to be slowly strangled.

Sheep-stealing, which was a capital offence, was responsible for at least one man, who lived on Ham Hill, figuring at Hang Fair. Having stolen a sheep and skinned it, he threw the skin down a deep well in order to hide evidence of his guilt. This well,¹ said to have been constructed by the Romans, is situated near the inn on the top of Ham Hill. The water, having thus become polluted, led to the conviction of the sheep-stealer, and the well being closed, many cartloads of stone having been thrown in. Though the filling reaches above the water-line the well is still over 100 feet deep.

One cannot leave this site of many stirring scenes without recalling an incident which took place, so it is said, in the early part of the last century. An old woman named Betty Hayne had been to Yeovil shopping, and returning after dark over Ham Hill was overtaken by a heavy snowstorm, which greatly impeded her progress. In order to "keep out the breeze" she lighted her pipe and stumbled on through the snow, which was getting rapidly deeper. On arriving at the brow of the Hill she missed her footing and, enveloped in snow, which gathered around her, forming a ball, she rolled down hill until stopped by a wall at the foot, where she was found by her husband next morning little the worse for her adventure.

1. A model section of this well (now in the Society's Museum) was made by Richard Walter. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, IV, ii, 81.

This was celebrated in song by the late Richard Walter under the title of "The Snow Dumpling—a legend of Ham Hill," of which the following is an extract:—

"When Betty had finished her comical roll,
She thought that her quarters were rather droll,
So she up wi' her stick and she poked a hole
To let out the 'baccy smoke—cunning old soul!"

"Next morning Jack Hayne came whistling wi' glee;
He was mazed such a smoke from a snowball to see:
He gave it a kick—Lor' ! how stared he,
When out bundled Betty as brisk as a bee."