

ART. XXXII. *An Earthwork at Little Asby.* By the  
REV. CANON MATHEWS.

*Read at that place, July 3rd, 1890.*

THIS curious relic of antiquity was first brought under my notice by a letter from Mr. R. Walker, Architect, in a Kendal paper. Although noticed by former writers (as by Dr. Gibson in his "*Legends of North Westmorland*"), I cannot find that it has ever been examined or described critically by any one; and it seems well worth inspection, and perhaps further research by this Society. Even the Ordnance Survey, usually so exact, has passed it over,—probably from the difficulty felt in knowing how to describe it.

There is an irregular oblong court, very carefully levelled, about 80 yards in greatest length, 24 yards wide at the south end, and 29 across its greatest width. The eastern or longest side is formed by a long mound, heaped up against the foot of a low hill or ridge in the limestone scar. Opposite, and nearly parallel to this, is another mound 60 yards long, which seems wholly artificial, of earth heaped up to from 10 to 13 feet in height. Across the south end, at right angles is another mound rising in the middle to a similar height (15 ft.) to the summit of the side mounds; each of them falling away to two or three feet only at the corner where they meet.

In front of this, six paces from its base, is a smaller central mound of irregular oval, but nearly circular, shape at base; about nine paces in frontage, and seven in depth, rising in conical shape to nine feet in height. On the west front angle of this are two small hillocks: a little in front and to the east is a small stone well, fed by a spring running probably from a shaly bed in the limestone scar. The overflow is taken by a covered conduit to the front  
of

of the central mound, and thence down the middle of the area to the north end of the court, where is another stone well, and in front of it a breadth of mire, part of which is used as a watering place for cattle. Beyond this the eastern mound seems to fall away into the natural hillside, along which, a little lower down, there appear to be considerable traces of ancient occupation. From the north end of the western mound a double line of stones, some much overgrown with turf, runs obliquely for 22 yards to the lower well, having the appearance of ground work stones of a rough wall. In front of them is a sort of terrace falling away to lower ground. The whole appearance is very remarkable, and as far as I know, unique among the prehistorical relics of this neighbourhood. It has none of the features either of a British or Roman camp :—the mounds seem not sepulchral barrows, as the main object of the work has clearly been the area, and the mounds (except the small central one) have been heaped for its enclosure; yet it does not appear designed for defensive purposes, as it could have been taken easily by an assault from the higher ground on the east. The whole arrangement gives to my mind the impression of a sacrificial area, with the central mound for a high altar, and the sacred well for purposes of lustration.

I am inclined to think that some light may be thrown upon its origin by the usages of Celtic mythology, as set forth by Professor Rhys's "Celtic Mythology," (pp. 182-3, 202-4), in which we find that the worship of the Celtic Zeus—the God of Sun and Sky, called in the book of Taliëssin "The Blazer of the Mountain Tops,"—was conducted on sacred mounds, on the tops of hills, so that a common name for him was the God of the Mounds. *Pencrug* is the name of a place devoted to the worship of the Chief of the mounds, surviving in *Pennocrucium* or Penkridge, equivalent to *Bennocruaich* the Chief of the mounds in Irish. And it may be that this place arranged  
to



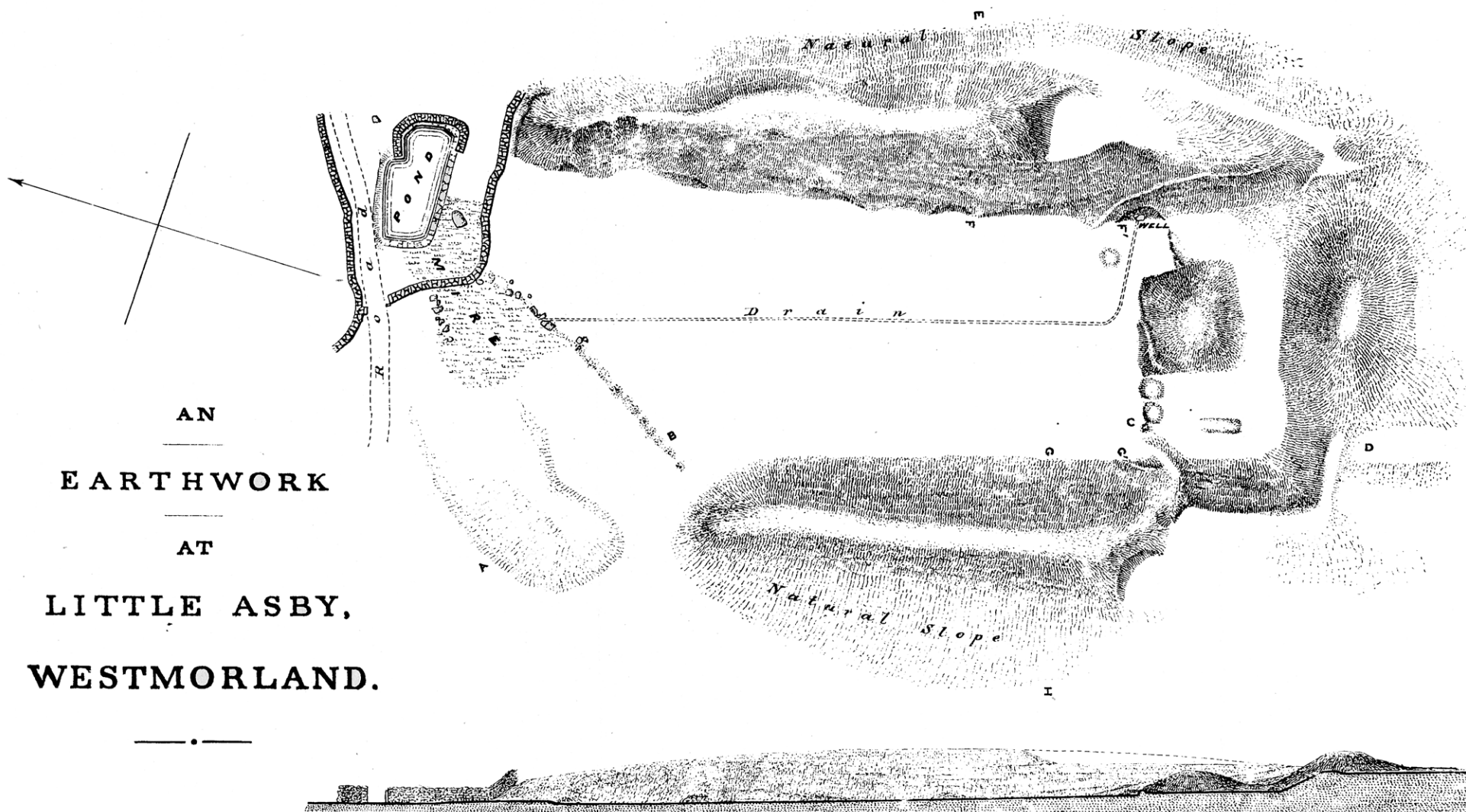
SECTION OF S.E. NECK.



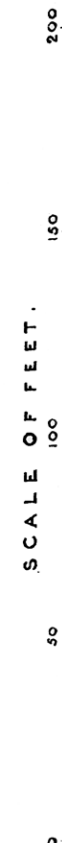
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SECTION OF S.W. NECK.



AN  
EARTHWORK  
AT  
LITTLE ASBY,  
WESTMORLAND.



Surveyed by C.W. Dymond, F.S.A., Sept. 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup>, 1890.

SECTION A B C D

to look directly where the first rays of the sun would strike the highest tops of the Pennine hills at dawn, was a high place of sacrifice for the Celtic tribes, traces of whose occupation are so abundant along the high lands that sweep from here over Asby and Orton scars, past Crosby, Ravensworth and Shap, to Moordivock above Ullswater, a region richer in Celtic remains than almost any other in England. It is like the Sacred Arcadian enclosure and well on the top of the Lycæan mountain, sacred to the worship of Zeus.

As a matter of more recent interest I may mention the local tradition that it was chosen as a gathering place for secret worship by the nonconformists of the villages for miles around after the passing of the Act of Uniformity, of 1662:—A tribute to the suggestive character of the place, but certainly it is of an antiquity far superior to that date.

[Since the above was written the place has been very carefully surveyed and planned by Mr. C. W. Dymond, C.E., F.S.A., whose valuable remarks upon it are here appended].

#### NOTES BY C. W. DYMOND, F.S.A.

This earthwork—unique in plan, it is believed, among the antiquities of these islands—is situated at Little Asby, in Westmorland, 120 yards S.E. of the site of the ruined church of St. Leonard, and not much farther from the northern edge of Little Asby scar. It is exactly on the 1000 ft. contour-line, which well indicates its shape and position on the 6 inch ordnance-map; \* opening toward the north, (its axis points N. 17° W.), and sheltered on the south and east by gently rising ground.

A space, nearly half an acre in extent, is inclosed on the south, east, and west sides by three mounds; each of them rising from its ends to a crest in the middle of its length. The north end is now open; and perhaps was always so: but there are traces of the foundations of what possibly was an ancient rude stone fence crossing the

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\* Westmorland, sheet xxii.

mouth of the inclosure; outside which are, at one end, a small mire, and at the other, a broad bank or terrace, scarcely relieved from the general surface.

The eastern bank, considerably longer than its *vis-a-vis*, is partly artificial and partly natural; the lower portion being formed by excavating the ground within to a nearly level surface. So, too, with the bank at the southern end, and with the nearer part of the western bank; the remainder of which, toward the north, is almost wholly artificial. The southern portions of the two principal banks have been cut and carted away—so Canon Mathews was informed—to top-dress the neighbouring fields.

The inclosed space is divided into two unequal portions:—(1) a leveled area, originally of about 1890 s. yds., and (2) a platform of about 370 s. yds. at its southern end.

The main area dips outward just enough for drainage purposes. At its inner end, the fall from each side to the centre is two feet: near the outer end, one foot. In the S.E. corner is a small well, 2 ft. 4 ins. in depth, supplied by a spring, and covered with flat stones; the overflow passing away by a dry stone drain, which also drains the area, and delivers into the mire.

The platform is about a foot above the area at its front edge; but rises toward the back six inches at the S.W. corner, and six feet at the S.E. corner. On this platform is raised a detached mound 9 feet high from the ground immediately in front, and  $4\frac{1}{2}$  feet from the passage behind it. That edge of the platform to the west of the mound is partly marked by three small tumps which, being probed, appear to have no stones within them. The dividing notches have, I think, been made by the passage of sheep or cattle. Just to the west of these, on the face of the lateral bank, is a ramp, formed, no doubt, by the same agency. A ramp crossing the N.W. corner of the detached mound; and another, symmetrically corresponding with it, but only faintly marked over the N.E. corner, though, possibly, parts of the original design, are, perhaps, more likely to have slipped or been trodden into their present form. In the western part of the platform a small oblong bank is just visible. The edge of the platform, east of the mound, is defined by two or three buried stones set a little back from the face of the mound. The height of the neck between the southern and western banks above the S.W. corner of the platform is 6 feet, that of the one at the S.E. corner, between the southern and eastern banks, is a foot and a half;—the platform at that part, as before stated, rising several feet from its front edge.

To complete the description, and to make the sections fully intelligible, I will give the principal dimensions in tabular form;—pre-mising

missing that the heights (which were not instrumentally observed, but only carefully measured by means of rods) are sufficiently near the truth for all practical purposes.

	Feet.
Total length of eastern bank .....	260
Total length of western bank .....	210
Central length of area .....	190
Breadth of area (N. end) .....	90
Breadth of area (S. end) .....	75
Length of platform (east to west) .....	75
Breadth of platform (north to south) averages about	42
Fall of drain along axis of area .....	about 1
Dip of area from sides to centre (N. end) .....	1
Dip of area from sides to centre (S. end) .....	2
Height of front edge of platform .....	1
Rise of western end of platform from front edge to S.W. corner .....	$\frac{1}{2}$
Rise of eastern end of platform from front edge to S.E. corner .....	6
Height of neck at S.W. angle .....	6
Height of neck at S.E. angle .....	$1\frac{1}{2}$
Height of detached mound above ground immediately in front .....	9
Height of detached mound above passage at back .....	$4\frac{1}{2}$
Height of mound at south end above same passage .....	$11\frac{1}{2}$
Height of mound at south end above top of detached mound .....	7
Height of crest of eastern bank above edge of area .....	15
Height of crest of western bank above edge of area .....	$12\frac{1}{2}$

The surface of the field north of the pond is much broken,—giving, at first sight, an impression that here are remains of artificial banks. No meaning, however, can be made out of them; and it is possible that they may altogether be due to natural causes.

Evidently this earthwork was made, if not for constant occupation, at least for some frequently recurring use. With none of the marks of a defensible post, it was manifestly designed for a place of concourse. Its form is not that which we generally attribute to the Celts, who seem to have had an aversion to straight lines; preferring circular or erratic plans. But the Scandinavian practice, within the period covered by history or tradition, was often quite the reverse of this. With much of the Roman in their mental habit, their buildings, and

and certain structures for open air assemblies,—such, for instance, as “things” and duelling-lists,—were of regular and generally rectangular form. Hence, if our choice really lies between these two people, (but perhaps it does not), the probabilities would seem to be strongly in favour of the view that this earthwork was cast up by Scandinavian settlers in these parts, rather than by the Celts whom they dispossessed; and who have left many marks of their occupancy in the ruined villages scattered over the uplands to the south and west of Asby.

But for what purpose? The design is well suited for a “thing”; but the “things” that we know are not of this form. It is even better adapted to the purpose to which Canon Mathews is inclined to refer it—as a place of sacrifice. But here again we are met with the difficulty that the Scandinavian sacrifices in recorded—at least in later—times were, for the most part, performed in roofed temples, before the idols. It is true that there is reason for believing that formerly offerings were sometimes made on stone altars, and on mounds, *sub jove*: but I think there is no evidencé to show whether these were or were not set in any such precincts as we have in the case before us. Tempting as the theory is, (and I must confess it is hard to resist it,—so appropriate are all the conditions), there is one great difficulty in the way of its acceptance. The Northmen being so devoted to sacrifice, is it not indeed strange that, considering the strength of their hold upon this part of England, we should have found only this isolated instance of a type of inclosure of which, on the theory in question, we might have expected to meet with many other examples.

In casting about for an explanation, it is clear that we should first take into account the existence and position of the spring, which, it seems to me, was the ruling element in selecting the site. Next, we must put the levelling of the area, and the circumstances of the platform and its mound: then, the arrangement of the outer banks; and their dip toward the necks which divide them at the inner angles. I am not inclined to lay any stress on the fact of the inclosure opening toward the north. It may well have been that this was merely incidental to the choice of a site otherwise naturally convenient, and partially ready to hand.

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