

ART. XXXIV. *The Recans of High Furness.* By Rev. T. ELLWOOD, M.A., rector of Torver.  
*Read at Lancaster, Sept. 18th, 1890.*

THE field names of Furness could, I think, if rightly read, be made to disclose an interesting portion of its unwritten history, and if we could but map and analyse the name of every field and farm, and then try to trace when and why these names were given them, we might find definite land marks, so to speak, of some of the earlier periods of settlement and enclosure,—methods of early cultivation,—and conditions of tenure of the soil.

We should find, for example, field names that have been applied recently to some of the new and later enclosures, and we should find earlier names such as *intake*, *croft*, *parrock*, *park*, *garth*; and then indicating an earlier period still, we should find such names as *thwaites*, *hummers*, *gards*, *recans*.

Yet however far back we may trace the origin in this stratification, if I may so call it, of the field names of Furness you can never get beyond the Anglo-Saxon, or Norse. I class those two together, for those who spoke them were so nearly allied in race and language, that in some words it is at times difficult to say to whether race and language our earliest place names and dialect ought to be referred. And yet, at any rate in our part of the country, when a distinction can be made, our earliest dialect and field names seem unmistakeably to point to the Norse.

I think I could soon prove this in reference to the dialect. We may take a passage—and one could find numbers of such passages in an Icelandic Bible—but in this instance it is a portion of the 1st verse of the 45th chapter of Genesis, where Joseph says; “Cause every man to go out from me,” that passage in the Icelandic is :  
 “Latid

“Latid hvern mann gang út (oot) fra mer.” Translate “Cause every man to go out from me” into the dialect of Cumberland or Furness, and we find the result of it to be something very like the following “Let every man gang oot fra me.” There is not much difference between this and the same passage in the Icelandic or Norse. That word *gang* is a more especial mark of the bond of brotherhood in the great northern family of languages. It is *gang* in Ulphilas, *gang* in Anglo-Saxon, *gang* and *ga* in Islandic, *ganga* and *ga* in Danish, *gang* and *ga* in Swedish. One of the old Norse seven league boot men was called *Ralph the Ganger*; and a very industrious old housewife whom I once knew upon the Border, when giving me an epitome of her life-long experience, summed it up in this way: “its gang gang gang, aye, gang gang, and when aw canna gang nea langer awm dūne”.

And this connexion in sound and significance between the Norse and our northern vocabulary is just as marked and evident when we turn from the dialect, to the earliest names of the field and of the farm. *Thwaite* in the one as in the other is a place cut off, or a clearing, used as a common noun, and also as a proper noun; *Hummer*, without any change of form or sound, means a grassy slope or vale in Lakeland, and means a grassy slope or vale in Iceland, *Ings* or *Engs* are meadows in the one language as well as in the other; *Haggs* or *Haughs* are pasturages on the borders and in southern Scotland, as well as in Iceland. *Dillicar* from *deila* to divide, and Danish *kar a cup*, is used of a section of land laying in the form of a cup or circle, which has been sub-divided into fields, hence called *dillicars*: from such a derivation the name would mean literally the dales or divisions of the circle, and there is a case in this parish, where six fields together forming something like a circle are hence called “*The Dillicars*”. *Reen* or *Ager-reen* is a strip or ridge between two fields or sections of land in Denmark. *Rein* is a strip and  
*ragna*

*vagna rein* is the heavenly stripe or rainbow in Iceland, and hence we get precisely the meaning of the word under consideration, for the *reins* or *reeans* of High Furness are the strips or uncultivated portions which were used to encircle the ploughed fields; elsewhere they have the name of *Head Riggs*. The name *reean* however serves best to mark their origin, for they arose from the uncultivated strips which, before town fields and commons were divided by fences, were left untilled in order to mark the boundaries, and in many cases, notably in what was formerly a town field close to where I live, long stone walls mark the exact boundaries of what consisted, to within living memory, of long untilled reeans. The town fields of Torver and Coniston, are still to some extent in existence: the old modes of tenure and division are still well remembered, and the reeans and meerstones\* by which they were divided are still partly left standing and in use; they enabled and in some cases still enable the landholders each to distinguish his own particular dale, or share. This word *dale* or *deecal* which in this connexion is often used as a field name, needs a passing remark. It is not *dale* or *deecal* a valley, but comes from another root Norse *deila*, to divide or allot; *deildir hlutr* is a share divided or allotted to any one, and so a *dale* or *deecal* in a town field was a share or allotment, divided or cut off by a *reean*. Hence in old deeds people's rights in town fields are spoken of as so many dales or shares. Of course this word in its sense of dividing or sharing is common enough in all Scandinavian and Teutonic languages. Ulphilas has *dailjan* in this meaning; and in the like sense we have the word *deal*; this early meaning of allot in the word *deal* comes very evidently in some older writings, as for example in that passage in epistle to the Romans, where the apostle

---

\* The word meerstone is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *meer* common or waste land; *moor* is a cognate word.

“ according

says: "according as God hath dealt to every man his measure of faith."

In several cases in Furness, the forms of fields laying side by side mark where the town fields and the dividing reeans have been. This is notably the case with some fields at Askam-in-Furness, and I remember that once when I was in Normandy, I was struck by the way in which the long strips of land lay side by side in the district through which we passed. An after inquiry proved that there had been a similar method of division, and that doubtless those same northmen who brought this name and this method of division into the valleys of Cumberland, and Westmorland, and the Lancashire Lakeland, had also carried the names of Northmen or Normans to Normandy, and also had left there in the strips and reeans of their early cultivation, an enduring evidence of their language and of their race.

And if we look forward as we have looked backward I do not know whether we cannot see something of the same kind going on at present. For if you examine the map of Tasmania, you will find the sister counties of Cumberland and Westmorland there, laying side by side with a Derwentwater and a chain of lakes and mountains between them, and there is no doubt but that the emigrants who have thus so faithfully reproduced the name and position of their native counties, will like the old Norsemen have as faithfully reproduced our field and farm names in the land of their adoption, and that the antiquary and philologist of a far future age will still find in his place-names and language an irrefutable evidence of that place and language from where he had originally sprung.

Recurring again, however, to the subject more immediately under consideration, I may remark that there is in the history of those reeans of High Furness, as well as in the meerstones which served for dividing the grasslands, evidence of the early tenure of a village community  
in

in which every member had equal and acknowledged rights. There is an example in the parish of Torver, in land situated in the old town field, in which the tenants of two adjoining portions of land exchange them yearly, and have done from time immemorial, and there are other instances in which two or three have equal dales or rights in the same field, originally a portion of the town field, and the division is still made by meerstones, *i.e.* stones placed at the corners of the portions divided, so that the straight lines between those stones mark the boundary.

There are several other words which in Furness, or elsewhere in Cumberland or Westmorland, have a special local meaning to indicate shares in grass-lands, commons, and pastures, and the rights of fuel and turbary: such are *grasses, stints, lotments, cattle gates, darracks, green hews*, and there is a passage in the laws of Ine (A.D. 670) entitled "Be Ceorlees Gaers Tune", *i.e.* "of Farmers Grass Fields", in which the law is laid down, and the custom made clear about the general fencing around the town common grass field, and also around the portion that was divided into allotments or reeans. The system of reeans, or ranes as it is there spelled, prevailed in Cumberland, and Dickinson in his glossary of the Cumberland Dialect (*English Dialect Society*), defines *rig and rane*, a phrase common in Cumberland formerly, as "an arable field held in shares, which are divided by narrow green lanes (*ranes*), and the intervals usually cultivated": I understand some of the latest instances of this method are to be found at Orton near Carlisle, and Bowness-on-Solway. J. B. Davis of Kirkby Stephen, thus tersely describes the system as it prevailed in Westmorland: "The name *reeans* is used here for narrow strips of grass land a little higher than the ground on either side, left in closes called *field lands* or *dale lands* to mark the division of each *land* or *dale*. We have fields called *raynes*, sloping lands with  
riggs

riggs or terraces, on the lower side of which there is usually a *reean* or slightly elevated strip. These elevated strips are often levelled down, but the name is still retained". The president of this society has kindly informed me that he understands this mode of division is still in operation in a field near Tebay.

It prevailed also in Yorkshire, and Lucas gives a description of the system formerly in use there, which seems to coincide with what prevailed in Cumberland, Westmorland, and Furness.

In Nidderdale a *reean* is a strip that was formerly left unploughed round a ploughed field. The farmers used to allow the men who worked for them to graze their cows upon them during the winter. Since the introduction, however, of the steam plough, they plough much closer to the hedge, and the *reeans* are not now left. The *reean* was the only kind of boundary which it was practicable for the occupiers of adjoining land to make where there were no stones, and few labourers. The Danes brought the institution into these dales with them, as they did to Normandy, where I believe they are still in use. In Wharfedale, Coverdale, and Wensleydale, and in the slopes of the hills to the east of Nidderdale, the country is covered with little steps like terraces called *reins*, pronounced *reeans*. The sides of the limestone slopes of Wharfedale are covered with them, each being twenty or thirty or more yards long, and two or three yards wide, and though they almost always there run horizontally, yet occasionally they lay up and down. These *reins* lay on land that belonged to the village communities of the dale, and each man in the village had one; one man held a *rein* for three years when he exchanged it for another. With the decline of agriculture, and the increase of grazing, consequent upon the departure of manufacturing, advantage was taken of the enclosure Act of 1836, which gave power to enclose without a special Act open and arable fields and pasture lands, by commissioners with consent of seven-eighths in number, and value. Long stone fences were built and the *reins* remained as a monument of a bygone age, and this was followed by a rapid depopulation of the dales.

Smith (*Walks in Weardale* p. 107), shows that the same name *rein* is found, and the same system was formerly practised in the county of Durham.

I

I believe the system of *runrigg* once known in Scotland, by which alternate ridges belonged to different individuals, had a similar origin. It was put an end to by enactment in 1695. This system of *runrigg* is, I believe, still in some measure retained in that portion of Scotland which is most allied to Norway and Denmark in customs and dialect, namely the Shetland Islands. The mode in which until comparatively recently, not only many words, but even the language, literature, and customs of the old Norsemen were retained in the Shetland Islands, will be very evident to anyone who has read the "Pirate" of Sir Walter Scott, together with its accompanying notes. The following passage occurs in the 2nd chapter of that work:—"At this time the old Norwegian Sagas were much remembered and often rehearsed by the fishermen, who still preserved amongst themselves the ancient Norse tongue which had been the speech of their forefathers".

The information respecting *reeans* in our own neighbourhood has been collected by me from personal inquiries from farmers and others, and I cannot find that any paper or work bearing upon the subject in Cumberland, Westmorland, or Furness, has yet been published; I think, therefore, much more information may yet be obtained, and as the object of this paper is as much to get as to give information, I should be very glad to know anything further about *reeans* that those interested in them would kindly communicate.

---