



SOLWAY MOSS (from Hutchinson's *History of Cumberland*).

To face p. 1.

ART. I.—*Solway Moss*. By W. T. McINTIRE, F.S.A.

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THE wide tract of country lying between the waters of Sark and Esk, land for the possession of which two rival kingdoms fiercely contended for centuries, is rich in sites renowned in Border history and tradition. It includes part of the Debatable Land, the remains of many of the pele towers of the redoubtable Graham clan and battlefields associated with memories of many a sanguinary struggle between the rival borderers of the realms of England and Scotland. Of such sites none perhaps is more famous than the great bog between Longtown and Gretna known to-day as Solway, and formerly as Sollom Moss.

Solway Moss, one of those areas of marshy ground left behind them by the receding waters of the Solway Firth, provided in the past, as did the not far distant Lochar and Tarras Mosses, a safe asylum for the disorderly spirits of the Borderland, who, escaping pursuit by safe paths known only to themselves over the surrounding quagmire, took refuge in hidden islands of dry land and set their pursuers at defiance. To the difficulties caused to an invading army by the obstacle presented by these formidable mosses Jehan le Bel, the priest who accompanied the army of King Edward in that monarch's unsatisfactory Border campaign of 1335, bears eloquent testimony in his interesting chronicle. On the other hand proof that the tactics of outlaws who fled to the marshes could sometimes be circumvented is provided by a remarkable passage in the memoirs of that shrewd Elizabethan Border warrior and man of affairs, Robert

Cary, whose description of his successful ambush of a body of Armstrongs who had fled to an island stronghold in Tarras Moss—that moss into which according to popular belief two spears tied together end to end could be thrust without reaching firm ground—is one of the classics of Border literature.*

Perhaps the best description of Solway Moss, as it appeared at the end of the 18th century, is that given by the Rev. William Gilpin, vicar of Boldre in the New Forest, whose writings upon the scenery of our neighbourhood continued the good work of the poet Gray in directing the attention of the public to the thitherto neglected beauties of the English Lake District. Writing in 1776, he thus described the great marsh:—

“ Solway Moss is a flat area, about seven miles in circumference. The *substance* of it is a gross fluid, composed of mud and putrid fibres of heath, diluted by internal springs, which arise in every part. The surface is a dry crust, covered with moss and rushes; offering a fair appearance over an unsound bottom—shaking under the least pressure. Cattle by instinct know, and avoid it. Where rushes grow, the bottom is soundest. The adventurous passenger, therefore, who, sometimes, in dry seasons, traverses this perilous waste to save a few miles, picks his cautious way over the rushy tussocks, as they appear before him. If his foot slips, or if he venture to desert this mark of security, it is possible he may never more be heard of.”

Descriptions of Solway Moss by Thomas Pennant, who visited the site in 1768 and 1772; in the 1778 edition of Daniel Defoe's *Tour through the Island of Great Britain*, and in Hutchinson's *History of Cumberland* (1794), do little more than repeat the above details, though it will be necessary to refer to them later in this article in order to illustrate certain points in the history of the Moss.

The name of Solway Moss is of comparatively recent growth. Throughout the Middle Ages the bog was known as Sollom Moss, and as such, with variations of spelling, its name occurs in all the older maps. In the excellent

* See *Memoirs of Robert Cary* (King's Classics Edition), pp. 64-67.

map, prepared in 1552 for the Commission entrusted with the division between England and Scotland of the Debatable Land, the position of the marsh is correctly marked under the name *Solome Moss*; in Aglionby's Platt of 159, it occurs as *Sollomoss*. As late as 1777 in Thomas Kitchin's map the name is still recorded as *Sollom Moss*. The battle of 1542 is invariably referred to by contemporary writers as that of Sollome or Solane Moss.*

The bog owed its name to the now extinct hamlet of Salom or Sollum, a place-name which seems to be derived from *sol-holm*, "the muddy island," though Professor Ekwall, in his *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, suggests that the base may be O.E. *solum*, dat. plur. of *sol*, "mud." All attempts to trace the site of this hamlet have hitherto proved abortive, though that of the 14th century chapel of Sollom, a spot often chosen as a meeting place for the settlement of Border disputes, is held traditionally to be Chapel Flosch, near Arthuret (T. H. B. Graham, in *Trans.* N.S. xii, 55).

The earliest known allusion to Sollom is in the Inquisition *post mortem* of Peter de Tilliol of Scaleby, held in 1246, when one of the jurymen was a certain Hugh de Solum (*Cal. Doc. Scot.*, i, 313). Subsequent early mentions of the place remind us of the interesting fact that Sollom and Sollom Moss, though now part of the English parish of Kirkandrews-on-Esk, were until the division of the Debatable Lands in 1552, reckoned as part of Scotland. A Cumberland jury at an Inquisition in 1280 refer to Salom in *Scotland* (Bain, *Cal.* ii, 208, p. 65). In the Inquisition *post mortem* of Baldwin de Wake, held in 1281-82, in defining the extent of the manor of Liddel in Cumberland; it is recorded that "the liberty of the men of Roceland and Salom in Scotland of free pasture

* For other variants of the place-name, see Dr. George Neilson, "Annals of the Solway" in *Trans.* of the Glasgow Arch. Soc., Vol. III, Part ii, p. 279.

in the fields of Arthuret is extended to 7s. The liberty of fowling there is extended to 18d. The prestation of selfodes there is extended to 8d. Grassums, gresmen, mortuaries, marchets, fines, pleas and perquisites there are extended to 100s. (*Cal. Doc. Scot.*, ii, 63). Among other endorsements upon this Inquisition is one mentioning "the heir of Hugh de Folum (Solum?), probably the son of the Hugh de Solum mentioned in the inquisition held at Scaleby in 1246.

The Blennerhasset family, who, originating in the village of Blennerhasset acquired property in Carlisle and its neighbourhood before 1388, when Alan de Blennerhasset was mayor of Carlisle,* evidently held lands in Sollom; for in 1399 there was a Feet of Fines between "Alan de Blennerhasset and Johanna his wife, complainants, and William Osmondelawe and Johanna his wife, deforciant, concerning land in Carlisle, the suburb, Arthureth, Caldecotes, Weryholme, Stubhill, le dale, Botchardby, Etterby, Cumbrisdale, Wampole, Aynthorne and Solum (*Trans. N.S.* vii, 245).

With regard to the chapel of Sollom, which was probably destroyed by the victorious English after the battle of Solway Moss, there are a few mentions in 14th century documents. Nicolson and Burn record (Vol. ii, p. 474) that "near the place called the Chapel Flosch stood anciently a small oratory, the chapel of Sollom, in which, in the year 1343, a league between the Scots and English, about fixing the limits of both Kingdoms, was in a solemn and religious manner sworn to and confirmed by commissioners appointed for that purpose. At present (1777) nothing remains of this chapel but the name." The same writers record also (Vol. I, pp. xxxix-xl) an indenture made on March 15th, 1384, "at the water of Esk beside Salom, between Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland, and Archibald Douglas, lord of Galloway. In this

* See F. J. Field, *An Armorial for Cumberland*, p. 89.

indenture it was agreed that there should be a truce between the signatories until July 1st following. If either party desired any modification in the terms of this agreement, they were respectively to certify the fact by letter on Black Monday (Easter Monday) before noon at the said chapel of Salom by the water of Esk" (T. H. B. Graham, *Trans.*, N.S. xii, 55).

That the chapel was a recognised place of meeting between the Wardens of the English and Scottish Marches in the 14th century may perhaps be inferred from a record of Nov. 6th, 1398, enjoining the men of Eskdale, Lidderdale, Tynedale and Redesdale to meet the Wardens at certain times at Kirkandres.* It has indeed been suggested that the chapel of Sollom was identical with Kirkandrews Church, but documentary references seem to keep the two buildings quite distinct. The allusion to the delivery on July 3rd, 1307, of £1223. 6s. 8d. of the late King (Edward I's) wardrobe at "Kyrkandres," probably refers to Kirkandrews-on-Eden, which was near to the scene of Edward's death at Burgh-on-Solway, and not to Kirkandrews-on-Esk and the neighbouring Sollom.

It may perhaps not be unreasonable to suggest, that it was the tradition of the former existence of this hamlet and chapel of Sollum which induced William Camden in his *Britannia* to derive the name of the Solway Firth from "*Solway*, a town of the Scots that stands upon it." It is true that the position of this mysterious place is marked on the map accompanying Camden's volume, and also on that of Ortelius, at the mouth of the Nith, but no other evidence for its existence has been discovered, and it would appear possible that the similarity of the place-names Sollom and Solway led to a mistake.

Though Sollom Moss has bequeathed its name to the famous rout of the Scottish army of James V by Sir Thomas Wharton and his English Border levies on

* Bain, *Calendar*, IV, No. 512.

November 24th, 1542, it must be borne in mind that the actual battle—if battle it can be called—took place at some distance from the morass and on the other side of the Esk. There are wide discrepancies in the accounts given by historians of this remarkable conflict, most of the writers seeming to base their descriptions of the battle upon such material as is provided by Lord Herbert of Cherbury, who was not present at the battle; by the chroniclers Raphael Holinshed and Pitscottie, who wrote some time after the events they describe; by several passages in the writings of John Knox and by Sir Thomas Wharton's despatch to the central government reporting the victory and giving a list of the principal Scottish prisoners (See *Nicolson and Burn*, Vol. I, xlv). All these accounts vary widely in their description of the battlefield, in their estimates of the respective numbers of the two armies engaged and in their details of the combat. A more reliable source of information is provided by the English despatches dealing with the battle, printed in *Calendar of Letters and Papers*, Henry VIII, vol. 17, pp. 617-649, though even in this account the numbers of combatants given do not seem to be trustworthy. The late Mr. W. Nanson has already, in these *Transactions*, o.s., VIII, 257ff, given a vivid account of the battle of Sollom Moss, based chiefly upon Holinshed, and it is necessary here merely to supplement—and so far as the actual battlefield is concerned—to modify his description in the light of the above-mentioned despatches.

Concerning the events which led up to the battle there is little disagreement among the chroniclers. James V, who remained behind his invading host at Caerlaverock Castle, launched an army variously estimated at from 10,000 to 17,000 men against the English enemy. This army advanced across the land between Sark and Esk, burning and pillaging the pele towers and farms of the Grahams on its route. The Esk was crossed, probably by the

ancient ford of "Greenbeds" or "Willie of the Boats,"* and immediately upon entering England, the Scottish nobles received the unwelcome news that the King had appointed his worthless favourite, Oliver Sinclair, to lead the expedition, though the chief command should naturally have devolved upon Lord Maxwell as Warden of the Western March on the Scottish side. Already ill disposed towards the expedition, which they believed to have been undertaken with the object of restoring the rule of the papacy in the Scottish church, and indignant at the promotion, over their heads of an upstart and adventurer the Scottish nobles broke out into open mutiny. Their discontent spread to the rank and file of the army, which despite the wise counsels of Lord Maxwell, who tried to preserve some semblance of order, degenerated into something little better than a disorderly mob whose sole thought was to get back safely into Scotland.

Here the story of the disaster in which the Scottish army became involved, can be better followed from the despatches referred to above. Sir Thomas Wharton, who had been informed by his spies of the state of affairs in the Scottish camp, crossed the Leven, where he had been waiting the arrival of the main English forces, which under the command of the Duke of Norfolk were speeding from the south to his assistance. Wharton had with him a small force of perhaps 1500 footmen, some 200 lances of the Grahams and 300 mounted gentlemen of the country under Jack Musgrave, the notorious captain of Bewcastle. The English prickers had already drawn the Scots, whose numbers were estimated at 17,000, towards the Knowes of Arthuret, still upon the English side of the Esk, and manœuvred them into a position where they were hampered by the swampy holm of Arthuret on their left and the river Esk which barred their retreat in their rear.

* For an account of the ancient fords of the Solway, see these *Trans. N.S.*, xxxix, 152-170.

Dismounting at Hopesike Hill, Sir Thomas Wharton advanced to the attack with his foot-soldiers in six divisions, commanded respectively by Sir Thomas Wharton himself, Lord Parr, Sir William Musgrave, Sir Thomas Curwen, Sir John Lowther and William Pennington. The Scottish nobles and gentry at first dismounted and prepared to meet the English onset, but seeing that their troops would not support them, remounted their steeds and strove to encourage their men. In this moment of irresolution they were charged by the English horse, and perhaps thinking that these few assailants had behind them the support of the whole army of the Duke of Norfolk, which in reality was far away, the whole Scottish army broke and fled. In headlong flight they made for the Esk at Sandyford, near Arthuret, and, hotly pursued by the victorious English, made their way as best they could through the swollen waters of the river. Many of the fugitives were drowned or taken prisoner without offering resistance, and the pursuit was continued across the Debatable Land on the further side of the Esk. Some of the vanquished probably perished in Sollom Moss, but the loss of life appears to have been insignificant on either side. Pitscottie indeed states the total losses at 10 Scots and 15 English! The English, however, took many prisoners, among these some of the principal Scottish nobles, and much booty, as reported by Sir Thomas Wharton in his despatches. There is mention in one of these letters of the capture of 5,000 horses, "by reason of a marsh which they would not pass." This "marsh" was probably Sollom Moss, which, as will be noted from the above account, played only a subordinate part in the battle.

There is no authority for the tradition which Gilpin referred to in his description of Solway Moss as "now authenticated" that a whole troop of horse was engulfed and swallowed up in the moss. Hutchinson, moreover

(*History of Cumberland*, II, 542) dismisses as absurd Gilpin's statement that the bodies of a man and horse, in complete armour, were found preserved in the moss and kept in the house of "a certain baronet of the name of Maxwell." According to Dr. Todd, however, "bones, coins and utensils of various sorts and immensely large trees have frequently been dug in the moss," and Hutchinson goes on to state that he had in his possession "a very perfect Tripodal vessel, the exact counterpart of the one that is delineated in Mr. West's map of Furness, which, he says, was found at Urswick, in 1774. Ours was got out of Solway Moss, not long after, by the late Dr. Mowett of Longtown." At Netherby Hall are weapons traditionally supposed to be relics of the battle dug up in Solway Moss, but perhaps the most interesting discovery of such possible relics of the combat is a 16th century musket, found in the Moss early in the present century, and presented to the Museum at Tullie House, Carlisle, by the late Lady Cynthia Graham. In one of the cottages on the new road between Gretna and Longtown, over Solway Moss, is preserved a collection of objects—spurs, buckles, etc.—dug up from time to time in the neighbourhood.

Of the history of the moss during the 17th and 18th centuries there is little to record. Doubtless in the earlier part of this period its proximity to the towers of the Grahams, afforded members of that vigorous Border clan, convenient refuges on the numerous occasions on which it was embroiled with its neighbours. It was moreover a place of resort for the "Graitney thieves" who continued their depredations long after the union of the crowns of England and Scotland. It also provided a place of concealment for the hapless Grahams who returned to their ravaged homes from banishment in the Low Countries during the period known as that of the "Extirpation of the Grahams." The conveniences it offered for carrying

on the contraband traffic which was rife in the Borderland after the Union must have appealed also to successive generations of smugglers. Direct allusions to the moss are, however, rare and a recent search through a transcript of the diary of that great agricultural reformer Dr. Robert Graham, covering several years of the middle of the 18th century, during which period he held the living of Arthuret, while it yielded many mentions of neighbouring houses and farms, disclosed two mentions only of Solway Moss in the recovery of which after the disaster to be described presently Dr. Graham played so prominent a part. Both these allusions are merely to shooting expeditions upon the marsh.

On the night of November 16th, 1771, occurred the tragedy known as "The eruption of Solway Moss." Such eruptions or overflows of marshes have occurred frequently in other places, often with disastrous results. Among such calamities were the overflow of the peat bog at Charleville, near Limerick in 1691; that of Chat Moss, in Lancashire, graphically described by the antiquary Leland; the shifting of Pilling Moss, also in Lancashire; and an outburst of the liquid contents of a bog between Falkirk and Stirling in 1629. The eruption of Sollom Moss, however, differed from those mentioned above in that it was not caused by an internal movement but by the bursting of the peat wall which retained the semi-liquid contents of the morass upon the side of a rising ground. A torrent of mingled mud and water thus escaped and inundated the fields below. William Gilpin, whose description of Solway Moss has already been quoted above, has left us the best description of this calamity, the scene of which he visited shortly after its occurrence in order to observe its effects.

After describing the position of the Moss and its retaining wall of peat, he goes on to relate how on the dark tempestuous night of November 16th, 1771, the

inhabitants of the plain were alarmed by the sudden crash of the bursting dam, a noise of which in the darkness they were at a loss to discover the cause before many of their houses were overwhelmed in a stream of liquid mud.

“ The enormous mass of fluid substance,” he continues, “ moved slowly on, spreading itself more and more as it got possession of the plain. Some of the inhabitants, through the terror of the night, could plainly discover it advancing like a moving hill One house after another, it spread round—filled—and crushed into ruin; just giving time for the terrified inhabitants to escape. Scarce anything was saved, except their lives: nothing of their furniture: few of their cattle. Some people were even surprised in their beds and had the additional distress of flying naked from the ruin This dreadful inundation, though the first shock of it was most tremendous, continued still spreading for many weeks, till it covered the whole plain—an area of five hundred acres; and like molten metal poured into a mould, filled all the hollows of it, lying in some parts thirty or forty feet deep, reducing the whole to one level surface. The overplus found its way into the Esk; where its quantity was such as to annoy the fish, no salmon, during that season, venturing into the river. We were assured also that many lumps of earth, which had floated out to sea, were taken up some months after at the Isle of Man.”

Gilpin adds that twenty-eight families were rendered homeless. Pennant who visited the spot three years afterwards, also bears witness to the appalling change brought about upon the face of the country by this eruption. The area of land covered by the overflow, and its place of outlet from Solway Moss are clearly shown in the map accompanying Hutchinson's *History of Cumberland* (Vol. ii, 548).

Gilpin, very unfairly, in concluding his account of the catastrophe states that the landlord had done nothing to alleviate the distress caused among the inhabitants of the submerged district or to repair the damage caused by the inflow of the moss. In this statement he is altogether incorrect, and the story of the recovery of the lost land under the guiding influence of that great agriculturist and

benefactor of the Arthuret district, Dr. Robert Graham, forms a fitting conclusion to this account of Solway Moss.

The method employed to clear away the debris left by the overflow of the Moss was that known as "hushing," or washing away the superincumbent mud by directing powerful jets of water upon it. The originator of the scheme was one John Wilson, whom Hutchinson (*Ibid.*, Vol. ii, 543) describes as "a plain Yorkshire man, one of those self-taught philosophers; such, as there is reason to believe, are oftener to be met with in these remote regions than in countries where there is less scope and less necessity for exertion." He adds:—"With all this genius, and all this judgment, this truly great man (so mixed are all human characters) was debased by one of the most degrading of vices—he was a confirmed drunkard: and ebriety in him was not softened by any of the usual pleas that are offered to excuse it. He did not drink to drown care nor to promote hilarity; but merely to gratify his appetite."

Despite this handicap, Wilson proved highly successful in the difficult task entrusted to him. He gave a preliminary proof of the efficacy of his method by washing away by means of a stream of water directed by conduits from two reservoirs a big knoll which stood in front of Netherby Hall, and afterwards applied the same principle to the lands overflowed by Solway Moss in a manner thus described by Hutchinson:—

"From the reservoirs formed by a little stream at the highest part of the overflowed ground, he cut channels in various directions to the Esk; and when the water was let off, he placed numbers of men by the side of the stream, who rolled into it large masses of mossy earth, which were hardened by the sun. By this simple but sensible contrivance, which he called *hushing*, in due time, this extraordinary man carried away thousands and thousands of loads of extraneous matter, and all the plain is now in as

good order and tilth, as if no such astonishing event had happened."

Solway Moss has now lost something of its former forbidding appearance. As already mentioned, the high-road between Longtown and Gretna passes right through the midst of its former pools and quagmires, instead of following a roundabout route to avoid the treacherous surface of the morass. Cultivated fields encroach here and there upon its boundaries, and occasional copses near the road lend a more cheerful and diversified aspect to its scenery. The great peat moss still, however, remains as a picturesque reminder of the former existence of the ill-famed Debatable Land and of the stirring days of Border warfare.