

TOWYN-Y-CAPEL,

AND THE RUINED CHAPEL OF ST. BRIDE, ON THE WEST COAST OF HOLYHEAD ISLAND: WITH NOTICES OF THE CURIOUS INTERMENTS THERE DISCOVERED.

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Towyn-y-Capel. Holyhead.

At a distance of about two miles and a-half from the town of Holyhead, on the old London road, in the direction of the four-mile bridge, a steep descent leads to a level tract of land, about a quarter of a mile in length, composed of drifted sea-sand, now covered with short and beautiful green sward. At this spot the sea, at high tides, meets within a few hundred yards, almost severing the Island of Holyhead into two distinct parts. The public road crosses this space, and on the westward of the road, at a distance of about one hundred yards, rises a green mound about thirty feet in height, and 750 ft. in circumference at the base. On the summit of this mound are seen the foundation walls of a small chapel, which has given the name of Towyn-y-Capel, the Bay of the Chapel, to the beautiful inlet, on the shore, and in the centre of which the mound is situated. Towyn signifies, in Welsh, a sandy bay.

This bay is of considerable extent, and deeply recessed from the iron-bound coast, which forms the northern side of Caernarvon bay: a frowning and jagged barrier of rocks guards the entrance, and breaks the heavy wave which

flows from the south-west, warning the sailor to keep at a distance from this dangerous coast.

The ancient name of the chapel, the remains of which are still visible on this mound, was Llan-Sant-Fraid,—the church of St. Bridget, or by contraction, St. Bride. She was born in Ulster soon after the establishment of Christianity in Ireland, and received the religious veil in early youth from St. Mel, the nephew and disciple of St. Patrick. St. Bride formed for herself a cell under an oak, thence called Kill-dara, the Cell of the Oak, and subsequently, being joined by others of her sex, formed a religious community, from which several other nunneries in Ireland derived their origin. She was regarded as the patroness of that country, and is supposed to have lived in the early part of the sixth century, being first named in the Martyrology of Bede. She was held in much veneration in Scotland, and one of the Hebrides, near to Isla, was called, from a famous monastery built there in her honour, Brigidiani. Several churches also were dedicated under her name in England, France, and Germany, and her relics are still preserved by the Jesuits, at Lisbon. Sorwerth Vynglwyd, a Welsh poet of the fifteenth century, makes mention of the miracles performed by St. Bride in Wales, and the number of churches in the Principality dedicated under her name, is considerable^a. The legend states that she sailed over from the Irish coast on a green turf, and landing on the Island of Holyhead, at the spot now known as Towyn-y-Capel, the sod became a green hillock, on which she caused a chapel to be built, which was dedicated under her name. The walls and east window of this little building were standing within memory, and the green sward was to be seen, extending for a considerable distance to the sea-ward of the tumulus. Of late years, however, from the gradual encroachment of the sea, aided by the removal of sand for manure, the mound has been half washed away, and in a few years it will probably cease to exist.

The mound is formed entirely of sea-sand, and contains a

^a Llansantfraid, Brecknockshire; Llan-santfraid-Glan-Conway, Denbighshire; Llansantfraid-Glyn-Dyrdwy, Merionethshire; Llansantfraid-Glyn-Ceiriog, Denbighshire; Llansantfraid-yn-Elvel, Radnorshire; Llansantfraid-yn-Mechan, Montgomeryshire; and Llansantfread, near

Aberystwith, Cardiganshire. In Glamorganshire there are also the churches of St. Bride, Major and Minor, at Bridgend; St. Bride's-super-Ely, near Cardiff; St. Bride-Netherwent, Pembrokeshire, and another church of the same name in Monmouthshire.

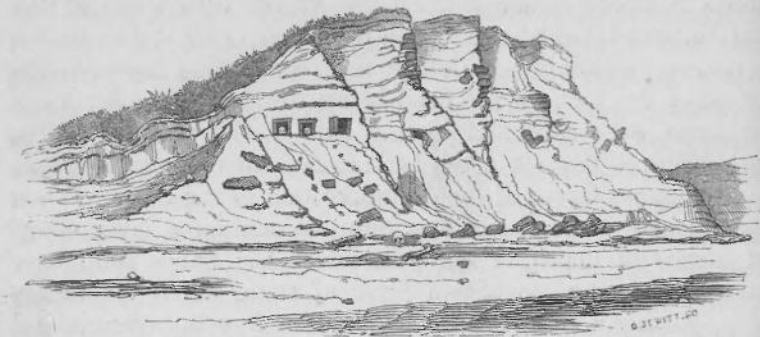
great number of graves, arranged in four or five tiers, one above another, at intervals of about three or four feet. These graves are of the ordinary length of a human body, measuring from six to seven feet in length, their height being about two feet; they are generally formed with about twelve stones, rough from the quarry of the slaty schist of the district; three stones compose either side of the grave, with three at the bottom, and three placed as the top or covering. The bodies were laid, invariably, with the feet converging towards the centre of the mound, the head being towards the outer side: the arms were extended by the side of the corpse: and a dark-coloured deposit in the bed of sand whereon the skeletons lie, still shews traces of the decomposition of the body. When first opened, these graves are found to contain a layer about six inches in depth, of sand, on which the bones rest; over the remains there is also a layer of sand, about six inches deep, leaving a vacant space of about a foot between it and the stones which form the covering of the grave. No indication of clothing, no weapon, ornament or any other object, has ever been found with these human remains, as far as I can ascertain; and in the numerous graves which I have examined, when freshly opened, nothing has appeared, differing from the description above given. The skulls appear, mostly, from the sound state of the teeth, which are little worn, to have been those of young persons, and they are of large size. Towards the upper part of the tumulus, under the remains of the chapel, there is a great mass of human bones; and occasionally the perfect skeletons of children have been found, without any stone cist or grave, intermixed with the sand, and quite embedded in the walls of the chapel. In one part, at a depth of about three feet below the surface, and for about three feet in length, a stratum of charcoal, or burnt wood, and a dark substance resembling burnt bones, is visible; but the extent of this layer beneath the surface cannot as yet be ascertained^b.

The foundation walls extend to a depth of eleven feet into the mound; they measure about four feet in thickness; the lower portion being formed of dry masonry, and the

^b The following measurements will suffice to give a correct idea of the size of the tumulus, and ruined chapel:—

Diameter of the mound, from N. to S.	-	-	-	-	250	FT.
Diameter of the area on the summit	-	-	-	-	50	—
Circumference at the base	-	-	-	-	750	—
Circumference of the area	-	-	-	-	150	—
Height of the mound above the surrounding sward	-	-	-	-	31	—
Height above the shore	-	-	-	-	36	—

upper part constructed with mortar, containing numerous sea-shells. A mass of stones and mortar surrounds the area, or summit of the mound, on which the walls of the chapel are constructed, apparently as a support to the foundation. The dimensions of the little building seem to have been about thirty or thirty-five feet, by twenty-two feet six inches.



These singular places of interment have, from time to time, been exposed to view, during stormy weather, or in consequence of a fall of the sand, as the mound is by degrees undermined by the sea. The number of graves which have been brought to view since the year 1823, when attention was first excited by any considerable discovery of human remains at this place, may be estimated at about sixty or seventy: the third part of the mound has already been washed away, and disappeared. The representation at the head of this notice, sketched during the last winter, exhibits the western side, with the shore of the bay of Towyn-y-Capel: a tier of several recently-exposed graves appears, about twelve feet above high-water mark: in the distance are seen the heights of Snowdon, and the Caernarvonshire hills, in the neighbourhood of Llanberis.

At the spot where this mound and chapel stand, the parish of Holyhead is divided from that of Rhôscolyn, by the isthmus which has been described, measuring, at high tides, not more than 300 yards in width. It may deserve notice, that, under the sandy shore of Towyn-y-Capel, lies a stratum of peat, which is used for fuel by the inhabitants of the Island: it extends nearly to low-water mark, and seems to indicate an encroachment by the sea, at this place, or possibly a depression of the strata, over which have been formed an accumulated bank and *dune* of sand by the action of sea and winds. The mound, on which the Chapel of

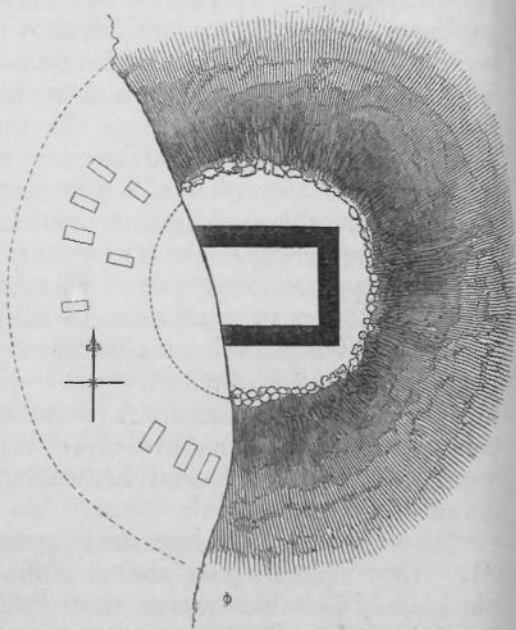
St. Bride was raised, is visible from the Chapel Lochwyd on Holyhead mountain, from Bardsay Island, and various prominent headlands on which in early times anchorites had fixed their abodes.

It appears that no similar instance of interment in graves formed indiscriminately, as regards the point of the compass towards which the feet of the corpse were laid, has been noticed. The formation of successive tiers of graves in such a tumulus of sand is also a circumstance of unusual and curious nature. It is not easy to determine whether these cists could have been formed in the side of the tumulus, after the sand had become accumulated into a mound, or whether its formation may not have been, in great part, artificial, graves being constructed with flat stones, and sand heaped thereon in successive tiers, so as ultimately, with the assistance of the drifting of sand from the neighbouring shore, to form the mound, which served in after times to support the Chapel of St. Bride. The inhumation without any regard to the position of the corpse towards any particular point of the compass, appears to connect these interments with the usages of primeval tribes. It may be conjectured, that, in later and Christian times, the ancient cemetery of the district, doubtless regarded with some measure of veneration or respect, was still used as a place of burial, as shewn by the numerous human remains found under and around the chapel, deposited without any cist, as customary in earlier ages; and that the spot was hallowed by the erection of a Christian chapel over this remarkable assemblage of heathen sepulchres.

About the middle of the fifth century, indeed, the Island of Anglesea appears to have been ravaged by invasions of the Irish Picts: they were repulsed by Caswallon Llaw hir (long hand), who was sent by his father to oppose the invaders. About A.D. 450 he fortified a post at the spot now occupied by the church of Holyhead. A great slaughter of the inhabitants had occurred at a place called Tyn Dryvel, near Aberfraw, and the spot is still known by the name Cerrig y Gwyddel, (the Irishman's stones.) At this time came Caswallon, who routed the Irish, and pursued them to Holyhead, where their vessels lay; a second conflict took place there, in which Caswallon slew Cerigi their leader, and subsequently fortified Holyhead with a wall, now called Mur-Caswallon. According to tradition, he tied his men together, previously to

the battle, to prevent their breaking their ranks, an expedient to which allusion is made in the Triads^a.

The spot which has been described, on the western shore of Holyhead Island, may, very probably, have been the scene of this cruel contest. The Irish were routed near Aberfraw, about ten miles distant; they fled towards their boats, and made their last stand on the narrow isthmus, defended by the sea on either side, with a plain adjoining, upon which their force might be drawn up. Here Caswallon must have sought to pass in crossing from Mona to Holyhead Island by the line of the old road. The Irish made stout defence to save their vessels, but they were defeated, Cerigi their chieftain was slain, and, possibly, the corpses were interred indiscriminately, forming the accumulation of remains found in the centre of the mound under the chapel. The single interments, in rudely formed cists around the tumulus, may have been those of chiefs who fell on this occasion. Again, the supposition is admissible, that these were the remains of the islanders massacred by the Irish, previously to their repulse by Caswallon. Cerigi, who fell in the fight, was regarded as a saint by the Irish, and his shrine was even long-time venerated in a chapel within the churchyard of Holyhead, called Eglws y Bedd (church of the grave), or by the British, Capel Llan y Gwyddel. The ruins were removed not many years since. It may reasonably be surmised that the spot where the bones of his victims reposed would be viewed with no common veneration, and might become the habitual burial place of successive generations of their kindred or descendants.



Plan, Towyn-y-Capel.

^a See Rowland's *Mona Antiqua*.