ON A SETTLEMENT OF PREHISTORIC PEOPLE IN DELAMERE FOREST.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE historic period, so far as we as a people are concerned, commences with the advent of the Roman forces to Britain, and the subsequent introduction of their customs and civilisation.

The Roman invasion of Britain made known to us the existence of two or three races then inhabiting the land.

We find a British people occupying the larger part of England proper, while in Wales and in Cumberland an older race, or perhaps only an older branch of the same Celtic race, was located, which had retreated thither before the advance of the later and more powerful immigrants. Further, there is evidence of a still older race, which had receded step by step across England, and had at that time found a resting place in the far north of Scotland and in Ireland.

But these are all historic races. We have to do at present with those earlier races with regard to which history

gives us no information, and our knowledge of which is derived from the study of their weapons and other relics, by which means we distinguish an earlier and later stone age, succeeded by an age of bronze.

PREHISTORIC CHESHIRE.

It is as well that I should state at the onset that prehistoric remains of the older stone age do not seem as yet to have been met with in Cheshire. If palæolithic man were ever here he has vanished, and left no tangible sign of his presence. It is neolithic man in his earlier and later developments whose monuments we find to-day scattered over our Cheshire hills.

It is not my intention to deal with the many difficult problems connected with these ancient races—their origin, migration, location, or absorption. My purpose is to point out and place on record their existence hereabouts, and to indicate their relics as they may be seen to-day.

Hitherto this subject, so far as Cheshire is concerned, has been neglected or overlooked by antiquaries, for I find that the record of prehistoric weapons found in the whole of the county is two stone hammers and seven bronze weapons, to which Delamere Forest contributes a single example—a bronze celt. It might be inferred from this paucity of recorded prehistoric relics from Cheshire that the prehistoric people from some cause or other avoided the district. This I hope to show was not the case; but, on the contrary, that there were more localities than one that were fairly peopled in neolithic times, and notably Delamere Forest. For the present I confine my inquiries to it, premising that anciently the boundaries were extended far beyond its present limits, even possibly coming into touch with the equally ancient forest of Macclesfield. We are quite safe in regarding the many enclosed parks in

Cheshire as a modified survival of a condition of things which formerly existed when all the higher ground in Cheshire was forest land.

The principal finds in the past of bronze implements have been at two extreme ends of the county—Broxton in the west and Wilmslow in the east. Quite recently I have seen two stone implements brought from the Heswell Hills, only a first instalment it is to be hoped. There is good evidence that the land between the Dee and the Mersey was not overlooked by the prehistoric people; indeed there is the evidence of a celt from Tranmere, as well as a fair number of arrow-heads, scrapers, and stone celts found on the sea shore at Meols, to show that they had a settlement on the spot in question; or, what is very likely with a more or less migratory people, they were in the habit of visiting the locality for purposes of fishing and gathering the mollusks so abundant on the sandbanks around. Some of the tribes of North America were in the habit of visiting the seaboard annually, when practicable, for a similar purpose. Coming back to the site of Chester, which has hitherto been regarded as a most unlikely spot in which to find traces of these people, something of much interest has turned up. In 1885, in sinking for a new gasometer on the Roodeye, there occurred at the depth of twenty-two feet a bed of gravel, in which, as the workmen informed me, several stones were seen bored with round holes. Unfortunately only one specimen was saved, which proves to be an axe made out of the base of a deer's antler. The cutting edge is much broken, as if it had seen much service. Axes of this kind, I may remark, are rarely found in England; the nearest approach to the type is from the lake dwellings of Switzerland. The find is full of interest, and may prove to be one of the earliest of our local prehistoric implements.

After this glance at the scattered traces of these people, we will look at the point more in detail as it affects their migration across the country. Derbyshire from some cause seems to have had special attractions for them if we may judge from the number of grave mounds, many hundreds of which are known. From Derbyshire they crossed the borders of Staffordshire and Cheshire, but more especially the latter. From the locality of the ancient forest of Macclesfield to Delamere we find characteristic traces all along the route, over a wide area. From Delamere we follow them to Beeston, and along the Cheshire hills to Broxton, finishing with a find of bronze implements. The main stream of migration seems to have taken the course we have indicated across Cheshire, with a branch through Wirral to the seaboard at Meols, while another important branch spread widely along the North Wales coast line. For several miles inland topping the hills and points of vantage are found the characteristic mounds and urns. We have a noteable example at Hawarden in Truman's Hill. Euloe is suggestive, while around Mold are several large barrows, including the Baily Hill. Then we have them continued along the Moel Fammau, as well as the Clwydian range, and at Penmaenmawr and Llanfairfechan.

The type of urn discovered along the lines of the suggested migration corresponds to that found in Derbyshire, even to the accompanying small food-vessel, so that urns found at Penmaenmawr and Delamere are in no way distinguishable from those of Derbyshire, thus confirming the view as to the course of the migration.

TRADITION AS TO A FORMER POPULATION IN DELAMERE FOREST.

Enough has been said to show the probability of a considerable population for such times having existed here, and

this may help to clear up a mystery which at present is associated with the forest. Some Saxon writers refer to the existence of a city called Edisbury in the centre of the forest. Later writers, as Webb in the seventeenth century, rather enlarge upon the original statement, as in the following passage: "I might venture to wade into a long discourse of those two towns, or cities, which not only old tales but writers both ancient and modern do make report of, and not so much as the ruin of any piece of them do remain."

The late Mr. Thomas Hughes, F.S.A., and also Mr. Beamont, two local antiquaries of no mean repute, advocated the existence of a Saxon city in the Forest. Thus says the former: A.D. 915 found Ethelfleda establishing a city and fortress on the edge of Delamere Forest. What once was Edisbury has been for centuries extinct either as a fortress or city, but tradition avers that what was now called "the chamber in the Forest" is the site of the town. However, all trace of this Saxon camp has disappeared. (*Journal Ch. Arch. Soc.*, vol. ii., p. 293.)

My own opinion upon this question is that the tradition points to something older than Saxon times. The Saxons were late in reaching this immediate district, and with the one exception of Ethelfleda, the Saxons were never a power hereabouts. It is difficult to understand how a city or fortress could disappear so completely as Edisbury is supposed to have done. Even if this were so one would expect to find some traces of a burial ground. Up to the present time no suspicion of a Saxon interment has been reported from the Forest.

The reference to these vanished cities or towns has long been a puzzle to antiquaries, since it is admitted on all hands that there is not a vestige of evidence to support the

fact of the existence of a city, or even town, within historic times. Yet it is difficult to understand of a statement so persistently made that there should not be a certain amount of truth mixed up with it; and if the tradition handed down has reference to a settlement of prehistoric people in the neighbourhood of Edisbury, the mystery is partly cleared up, for there can be no question of their existence in the locality. Their grave mounds still cluster around the hill of Edisbury. It need not be thought incredible that a tradition of this kind should be handed down from these early times. We can justify this by a local incident, which will be found fully described by the late Mr. Thomas Hughes in the first volume of our *Journal.* Near Mold, at the beginning of this century, was a mound known as the Goblin's Hill; the tradition associated with it was that a spectral figure clad in gold had been seen to enter the mound at the witching hours of midnight. Such was the local belief, vouched for on good authority. However, in 1833, the mound was levelled, and then was brought to light an urn, and a skeleton covered with an ornamental plate of gold over three feet in length and eighteen inches wide. Thus was the tradition amply justified. In this case the mound had been traditionally associated with the figure dressed in gold, and it did contain a skeleton covered with gold armour for the body. There can be no doubt about this tradition being one which had come down from prehistoric times.

We have not the same means of verifying the tradition regarding Edisbury. The frail dwellings of these early settlers could not have survived, but their grave mounds—a sure indication of their presence hereabouts—we have with us to-day.

THE BURIAL MOUNDS IN THE FOREST.

Our knowledge of the neolithic races, scanty as it is, is largely derived from the contents of their grave mounds. In these we find interred with their late owners their weapons, implements, and objects of personal attire, as well as the bones of a variety of animals, which might be presumed to have been placed there in order that they might accompany their master to the happy hunting ground beyond the setting sun, or in some way be of service to him. Like the Indians of the North American continent, they probably believed in the immortality of the soul—a belief which is seen in their treatment of the bodies of the dead and their singular burial customs. Taking for a moment a wider view of our subject, and looking at the remains of the people in adjoining counties, we are met with this fact, that on the higher lands, and often on the highest point of Derbyshire and North Staffordshire, there are grave mounds often themselves of considerable height, and conspicuous landmarks.

Our earliest knowledge of these mounds comes from our Saxon forefathers, who well knew their use, and, indeed, often used them for their own interments. By the Saxons they were called "Hloew," meaning a grave, or little hill. "Hloew" or "low" is still the name by which they are known in Derbyshire and Staffordshire. Usually there is a prefix as Hare-low, Briar-low, or Stone-low. But so persistently is this word "low" associated with these mounds in Derbyshire and Staffordshire that some three hundred places so named proved, on investigation, to have been the site of prehistoric interments. It will be inferred from the number of these mounds mentioned that in the counties named these "lows," or "barrows," as they are termed in other parts of England, have been fully investigated. Such

is the case, it may be added, with very interesting results. On the other hand, in Cheshire there had been no such systematic examination of these ancient burials.

In the Forest two only of these lows have been opened out of curiosity, and two others for the sake of the gravel they contained. In each they have proved to be the site of ancient burials. This refers to the Forest more particularly. The value of this evidence is, that it goes to show that the rule which holds good in Derbyshire, that all mounds or hillocks in which the word "low" forms a part of their names is a prehistoric burial ground, is equally true of similar mounds in Delamere Forest. This rule, I find, holds good in places at a distance. For example, near Malpas is Willow Farm, the name evidently derived from "low," for close by is a tumulus, which has yielded the usual evidence of a prehistoric burial. With this light on the subject we search the surroundings of Delamere Forest for the name of fields or mounds in which "low" or "barrow" forms a part, and find there *Cob-low, Rough-low, Seven-lows, Oulton-low, Houns-low, Ru-low, Garras-low, Kels-barrow, Wil-low Wood, and Wan-low's Well.*

In the case of words ending in "low" there can be no doubt that it points directly to the existence of a grave mound, on the spot indicated, of these prehistoric people; the name of which has through long centuries of tradition been handed down to a time when all local significance of their original designation is forgotten. There are names in which the word "low" has a secondary meaning, as *Low Farm, Wanlow's Well, Willow Green*; all places in the Forest, and indicative of the existence at one time of a low, or mound in the immediate vicinity, all trace of which except the name may have disappeared. Then in some of the southern counties, as Wiltshire, lows so called are

unknown. They are "barrows," probably owing to some tribal peculiarity of nomenclature on the part of the original people or the later comers. These we find illustrated in the forest by Kelsbarrow, in which bronze implements have been found, and Barrow, a pleasant village on the edge of the forest, which, if true to its name, ought to yield a very colony of "lows." Lastly we have in the Forest "lows" which are designated "cobs," as Glead Hill Cob, and Castle Cob. Possibly in the use of the word cob we have an allusion to a fortified position at one time. An examination of one of these cobs showed that they were originally sepulchral.

Reverting to the primary use of the word as seen in Hounds-low, Rough-low, one is tempted to regard the first word as the name of a person or tribe, as Hounds grave, Roughs grave. Certainly the personal nomenclature at present in vogue among the American Indians, in naming themselves after animals and common objects, lends some countenance to the idea. The first word in most cases is ancient; in others it has lapsed and been locally supplied, as in Oulton low. However, generally speaking, its present surroundings seem to have had little to do with the present name.

This list given of the lows must be looked upon as fragmentary. My own observations in the Forest have led me to the conclusion that these grave mounds are more numerous than is usually supposed. The value of this evidence is that it shows that a goodly number of these people lived and died within range of the Forest.

The enumeration of these has been attempted none too soon; some have been levelled to improve the land, others for the sake of the stone of which they are largely composed, while some, under the altered conditions of the Forest, are in part if not wholly forgotten. Yet they have left some

traces in the district. They have given a name to a township in the hundred of Edisbury, which could only arise from their prominence in that particular district. Again, they have given a name to more than one county family, just in the district we should expect, the east side of the county, and the name has since become common in the county, all of which points to a local association in past time with these "lows."

One low at least has the honour of being celebrated in Cheshire song:—

> Bad luck to the country! the clock had struck two,
> We had found ne'er a fox in the gorses we drew;
> When each heart felt a thrill at the sound "Tally-Ho!"
> Once more a view hollo from Old Oulton Lowe!"

Oulton low was at the time a famous fox cover, and celebrated for a run on the 16th February, 1833.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENTS OF THE "LOWS."

We may, I think, rightly conclude that in the discovery of these "lows" we have found the burial places of these prehistoric people. Very remarkable structures they are, whether we regard them as the work of a rude and primitive people, or as commemorative memorials, simple but effective, which have outlived the more costly works of later times, both Roman and Saxon. They are not merely heaps of soil, but are constructed with considerable skill, as a habitation for the dead; for, as Professor Dawkins remarks, "the tomb was to the neolithic mind as truly the habitation of the spirits of the dead as the hut was that of the living. It was the home of the dead chieftain, and the centre into which the members of the family or clan were gradually gathered, and where they led a joyous and happy life similar to that which they enjoyed on the earth. Hence the offerings made to them, and the superstitions which have clustered round them, to be remarked among the survivals

from the neolithic age into the historic period. The little cups, bowls, vases, and hollows on some of the slabs of the stone chambers of the tombs were probably intended to hold offerings made to the spirits of the dead." (*Early Man in Britain*, page 289.)

In one of the seven lows that were opened, it was found that fifty tons of quarried red sandstone had been used to form a rude cairn over the remains. So well was this done that the fragile urn was recovered unbroken, and is now in the British Museum.

The size of these mounds, too, is suggestive; they are found of all dimensions from a few feet in height to one hundred feet, a fair-sized hill.

Of the latter we have many fine examples on the North Wales border; for instance, Truman's Hill at Hawarden, Baily Hill at Mold, and the Gop above Prestatyn is a conspicuous landmark in the vale of Clwyd.

In Delamere Forest the remaining six "lows" vary from forty to one hundred and five feet in diameter, and occur at an altitude of three hundred and fifty feet above sea-level.

I have spoken of the Saxons being familiar with the nature of these "lows." Following on to Tudor times we find that Leland in his *Itinerary* thus alludes to them:—"There is a place in the Forest of Delamer cawled vii. Loos, wher be seene vii. Castle Dykes. The people there speak much of them. I think that they were made by men of warre."

The Messrs. Lysons, in 1810, referring to the passage from Leland, say: "We supposed this description to have applied to the site of Edesbury, but found nothing to answer it, at the Chamber of the Forest, or Old Pale, supposed to be the site of that town, nor could we learn, on the most diligent enquiry, that any such remains as those described by Leland are now to be found in any part of

the Forest." They were not lost as supposed by the Lysons. They are indicated on the old map of the Forest to which Ormerod had access and of which he gives a sketch. The real nature of these lows was not understood until the operations of 1845, to which I shall refer shortly.

From Leland's notice it is obvious that he wrote from report. He could not have seen them. There are no traces of dykes, and the mounds are insignificant compared with other natural banks close by. Some of them are only raised six feet. There is nothing in their external form beyond their circular shape to call attention to them. The highroad to Tarporley passes through the group, and to passers-by there is nothing in the physical features of the spot beyond what may be seen in other places in the forest. The circumstance that these "lows" formed a rude circle may have suggested to Leland that they were defensive positions and the work of men of war.

On the other hand we more correctly regard them as the burial places of men of war, perhaps noted warriors or chieftains in their day. We can scarcely imagine that similar burial rites were bestowed on each member of the tribe, involving, as it did here, the quarrying of fifty tons of stone, and the piling up of two hundred tons more of earth and gravel. Again, we see the strong tradition regarding them in Leland's time. "The people there speak much of them." We are indebted to him for chronicling this belief of the people thereabouts, and so keeping up the continuity of the tradition. The disafforesting of Delamere did something more than uproot the trees; it has removed the old squatters, with their stories and traditions handed down through many generations of bygone times. The nature of these "lows" is not now understood by the humbler dwellers on and around them. To them they are "boonks" and nothing more.

We have valuable details as to these "lows" in Delamere Forest a century ago, in the pages of Ormerod, who mentions, "That a mile south-east of the foot of Edisbury Hill, at the lower end of a small natural lake called Fish Pool, are the tumuli known by the name of the Seven Lows, undoubtedly the 'VII Loos,' alluded to by Leland as the marks of 'men of warre,' and much spoken of in his time. They are arranged in a form nearly semicircular, and are of different sizes, measuring in diameter at the base respectively 105, 45½, 40, 105, 66, 68 feet. The seventh has been carried away to form a road, another was opened at a former period, both of which were composed of the dry gravelly soil of the forest, and contained a black matter, similar to that which appeared on opening Castle Hill Cob, a tumulus also on Delamere Forest, in connection with a second called Glead Hill Cob, and is stated to have contained a quantity of black soil, which might be supposed to be either animal matter or produced by the effects of fire."

The later history of these lows is supplied by the late Sir Philip Egerton, on whose estate these seven lows are situate, who tells us that in February, 1845, "a tenant employed in cultivating the adjoining land, being in want of materials to level an old road, opened for that purpose the tumulus referred to in Ormerod's plan as No. 6. On digging into it he found that, so far from being composed of the dry gravelly soil of the forest, as the others were, with the exception of the superficial covering, it was composed entirely of fragments of the sandstone rock, derived apparently from an old quarry between the tumulus and the lake on its north, called 'Fish Pool.' On digging into the mound on the east side they arrived at a single layer of stones; on advancing a little further they found two layers; still further the stones were two in depth; still further the

stones were three, four, and five deep. The quantity of stones in this tumulus cannot have been less than fifty tons. Fragments of charcoal and earth, discoloured by fire, were found over a great part of the floor of the mound. Its circumference was rather more than sixty yards, and the height in the centre six feet.

"The urn was found on the north-east side, where the stones were two in depth; it was of earthenware, apparently baked or sun dried. Its dimensions are as follows: Circumference at the rim, two feet seven inches; largest circumference, two feet eleven inches; diameter of the foot, five inches; height, one foot one inch. At four inches below the rim a raised fillet surrounds the urn, and the portion between the rim and the fillet is rudely ornamented with parallel lines drawn diagonally in various directions, but never decussating. They appear as if formed by pressing a piece of twisted cord on the soft clay." (*Archæological Journal*, vol. iii., p. 157-8.) I have seen the urn in question in the British Museum. It is identical in character and outline with urns found in Derbyshire and on the coast of North Wales.

Four miles north of the seven lows is Houndslow. In 1879, Mr. John Harrison, of New Pale, commenced levelling the site known as Houndslow, preparatory to building. The workmen in the course of their operations came across a tribal burying place of the neolithic people; for such this mound proved to be. Ten or twelve large urns, filled with burnt bones were met with, and, as is usually the case in unskilful hands, fell to pieces on attempting to remove them. The only survival was one of the smaller vessels, so often associated with the larger, and known as food or incense cups. Mr. Harrison was from home at the time of the discovery, and on his return did his best to recover from the pockets of the workmen some of the relics which

were seen. These included three barbed flint arrow-heads of good type, flint scraper, fragment of flint knife, bronze pin. In 1887 Mr. Harrison was good enough to show me the several articles described above.

The next find I have to chronicle brings these neolithic people to the neighbourhood of Beeston, and again we find them occupying the higher ground around Beeston Castle Hill. In 1885, during the course of draining a field in the vicinity of the old castle, the workmen disinterred three stone implements. First a very fine specimen of an axe-hammer, eight inches long, two and a half inches wide, and weighing nearly five pounds. It is a formidable weapon, symmetrically shaped, hammer headed at one end, with sharp cutting edge at the other. The material is not unlike a variety of greenstone that occurs at Penmaenmawr. The second implement was still larger, a stone axe; the curiosity of the workmen led them to break it in pieces, and the pieces were, unfortunately, not recovered. The other implement was a stone polished celt, with sharp cutting edge. By kind permission of Lord Tollemache, the axe-hammer is exhibited to-night. For the details of the above find I am indebted to Mr. Stephen Cawley, Priestlands, Tarporley.

The author of the *Cheshire Glossary* has scarcely caught the right meaning of the word "low." Hence he tells us that lowe means a bank or hill, and explains that the name may often be found in hills, the summits of which were used for bonfires or signal fires, "lowe" meaning a flame, "all in a lowe" all in flames. The latter use of the word I should derive from "glow," hence the expression "all in a glow." I think it quite possible that some of the more elevated of the "lows" may have served the purpose of beacon fires; just as others in Saxon or later times had their rounded tops encircled with wooden palisades, as a

dwelling or for defensive purposes, and then they have come down to us with the addition of the word castle, as in the case of Castle Cob Low, in the Forest. But in either case, the beacon fire, and fortified dwelling was not the original object of the structure.

THE HABITATIONS OF THE PREHISTORIC PEOPLE.

We have found the burial places of these prehistoric people, and now a word as to their dwellings. These, we may rightly assume, would not be far distant. These dwellings, as we know from other instances, were wooden, or wattled huts, clustered together within a circular patch of ground, and defended by a ditch, or palisades. In many parts of England the outline of the ground, and ditch used for the purpose is still to be seen. I have not as yet met with any similar indications in the Forest, and the light and sandy nature of the soil, as well as the advanced cultivation, is somewhat against the prospect of finding such spots.

Still, in elevated positions in various parts of the county, and especially on the borders of North Wales, there are circular patches of ground with an encircling ditch, which it is usual to describe as a British encampment, and some of these at least may be with greater probability put down as the sites of prehistoric villages. As to the position selected for these dwellings, geology can throw a little light on the question. In these early times there is no doubt of the fact that the rainfall was considerably in excess of what it is at present, consequently much of the ground at low levels was either marsh, bog, or inundated by water, while the rivers extended beyond their present bounds. It follows from this physical condition of the country that its only habitable parts were the hills, and hillsides, covered with an abundant growth of forest trees and herbage, affording both

food and shelter for a variety of wild cattle and game. Under the circumstances we have mentioned, it is evident that the site of Delamere Forest would have many attractions for this early race. Its elevated position, its sandy and gravelly soil, its gentle undulations, its streams and meres abounding in fish, the forest glades, the home of the deer and wild oxen, were advantages which were duly recognised, and probably no inconsiderable population of this early race found a home in this genial spot. The correctness of this opinion is shown by the number of "lows" scattered here and there over the Forest.

As late as 1617 Webb tells us of the existence of "no small store of deer, both red and fallow, plenty of pasture in the vales, wood upon the hills, fern and heath on the plain, great store of fish and fowl in the meres, pewits in the flashes," &c. (Ormerod, vol. ii., p. 110.)

As to the Forest, it is only within the last century that it lost one of its chief characteristics—its game. The supply was abundant, and in the Middle Ages was liberally shared by some of the Chester monasteries.

In prehistoric time subsistence would largely depend upon skill in hunting. We know from the bones of animals found in and around their settlements that there was plenty of large game; while their flint arrows and bronze spears would not be thought contemptible weapons at the present day. We therefore conclude that these neolithic men were hunters.

May, 1892.—I must apologise for this abrupt termination of my paper. I had hoped to have continued my researches in the Forest. It has been wisely ordered otherwise. The pleasant and fruitful task I leave to other hands.