



The Locality of Great Boughton in the time of the Romans

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MENTIONED in a former paper, when giving the evidence that the fresh-water supply to Deva was drawn from this locality, that this neighbourhood had not received the attention which it deserved from archæological students. I will seek in some degree to supply the omission, not that I am able to throw any special light upon the question, but in the hope that my calling attention to it may induce further research.

For my purpose Boughton commences with the junction of the Tarvin and Christleton Roads, known as the Cross, and distant one mile from Chester Cross. The first thing that strikes one is the identity of the roads mentioned with the Roman; they are all on Roman lines. The Roman road known as Watling Street passed out of the Eastgate, but at a much lower level than the present roadway. Foregate Street, and the wide thoroughfare beyond to Boughton Cross, are a continuation of it. The paved way is found at a depth of four to six feet, and nine feet at the Eastgate. At the Cross the road divided; the Tarvin Road to Stamford

Bridge is virtually the Roman road; thence it made its way through Delamere Forest to Manchester. The other branch of the Roman street followed the Christleton Road for two miles, and then by Beeston and Chesterton for London. The triangular piece of country enclosed by these roads—say between Vicar's Cross and Christleton—is practically the locality I speak of as Great Boughton.

The traffic along either of these roads would be considerable. Here, along the Tarvin Road would pass the legionaries and traffic from Deva for Manchester and York in the east, and Carlisle in the west, and indeed for all the northern stations. The traffic, if only for the material to construct the roads and stations in Cheshire, would be heavy.

In this inquiry we get no aid from documentary evidence; our only resource are the local antiquities. Our record as to Roman relics found in Boughton only dates back fifty years. Land that has been highly cultivated for centuries will well nigh have yielded up its treasures; while any remains of old buildings will have been used up long ago to mark the divisions of the various properties. Still, we have to report that in our day has been found a pig of lead, the produce of the Flintshire mines, two altars, several urns (some cinerary), water-bottles; while fragments of Roman pottery, Samian and other kinds, abound in certain localities. A circular piece of lead used as a weight, or in some game, was found at Vicar's Cross; coins I have known found there: Mr. Thos. Hughes confirms this fact. Horsely, too, mentions a find of coins at Boughton—a misprint, I take it, for Boughton.

Looking at these relics as a whole, and seeing that they were all found at least a mile distant from the Roman

camp, we may certainly regard them as an indication of a definite Roman settlement, not necessarily of a military or defensive character, for no fortified lines are suggested. Then the fragments of brick and tile would point to a building, or even a villa; while the broken pottery would shew that it was occupied. Then, as to the altars: we may take it a locality which could furnish two altars, one of them finely executed, and the largest of our local altars, was a place to which the Romans attached some importance. Moreover, there is a peculiarity about the large one not seen in any of the others. The inscription appears on both faces of the stone, showing that, like the crosses in the Middle Ages, it was set up in a prominent position in some public way, not necessarily the street. Its size and weight would render it likely that it stood originally near to where it was found—Cherry Grove, near the Cherry Orchard, some distance from the street.

We next turn to the altars for any help they may afford us. Inscriptions upon altars often throw light upon the past history of the place where they were found. The smaller altar is a dedication to the Genius of the Century of Aurinus for its welfare. It is true that we are left in doubt of the past or present service rendered by the Century, or the specific object in setting up the altar, beyond commending them to the care of the special genius who was supposed to watch over their well-being. One thing, however, is clear, the fact that the altar was found here under circumstances which leave no doubt that it belonged to the locality. It follows that the Century of Aurinus was at one time stationed here, in charge of the varied duties incident to the position.

We have now found not only traces of Roman buildings hereabouts, but of the existence of a Roman Centurion and his soldiers. As to the cause of their

being here, and the nature of their occupation other than military, we get no clue to.

We now turn to the larger altar now in the gardens at Eaton. The inscription on it reads "NYMPHIS ET FONTIBVS." It is a dedication to the Nymphs and Fountains. The allusion to the fountains I have dealt with in a previous paper, in showing that the springs of water in this neighbourhood were utilized to furnish the Devan Camp with fresh water by means of earthenware pipes as described.

We are indebted to Dr. Hübnér for throwing much light on the situation. On a question of this kind he speaks with undoubted authority. Although unacquainted with the special features of the district in which the altar was found he expressed the opinion that the altar was originally set up in the *prata legionis*, that is, in meadows used for the pasturage of the cattle belonging to the Legion. The bare mention of the site of the altar as being a meadow used as a pasturage for the cattle of the Legion, brings us within sight of an agricultural settlement, a farm colony of Southerners in charge of the Centurion Aurinus. This allusion to the cattle of the Legion is indeed a comprehensive phrase. It would include the horses belonging to the several *alæ* of cavalry, who we know formed part of the garrison of Deva. Then there would be cows, sheep, goats, and not least in importance, pigs. A writer tells us "that far above all other dishes did the Romans value pork, and no wonder; their pigs were fattened upon figs, and died of apoplexy brought on by the sudden administration of a dose of honey and wine." Pliny tells us that "they could give pork nearly fifty flavours. *Apicinis* gives over eighty receipts for cooking it. They roasted it, broiled it, fried it, baked it, boiled it, and stewed it. They cooked

sucking pig in sixteen different ways." From this extract we may conclude that there would be piggeries in Boughton, and the race is not extinct. Then the cattle would require attention and shelter, and attendants who would need housing. Indeed, the Centurion and his men would not be too many to do the pioneering work—as felling trees, clearing the ground, making roads and enclosures, and preparing the land for tillage or pasture, as most suitable.

But before settling down our Roman agricultural colony at Boughton, we ought to ask the question—Is the neighbourhood suitable for a location of this kind? In short, is Dr. Hübner's suggestion feasible? If the altar had turned up in the city, we should have been embarrassed; but occurring as it did in Great Boughton, all we can say is that around Chester no more suitable ground could be found. The Romans had the pick of the county, and a better selection could not have been made of land suitable for the all-round purpose for which it was required. That in parts it was nicely wooded is obvious from the flourishing growth of forest trees seen to-day. It was to some extent an outlier of Delamere Forest; while it could boast of some of the best of meadow land. The lighter loamy soil around Boughton Cross is still noted for its fertility, and is equal to any demand upon it, as shewn by the fact that its principal inhabitants are market-gardeners, who supply not only Chester but neighbouring towns with its produce. There can be no question that there is no place within a mile of Chester so pleasantly situated, and offering the like supplies and resources. In front was the wide river covering the Earl's Eye, and behind the dark shades of the Forest, and the long line of the Cheshire hills. Then in the meadows the tired horses belonging to the Legion might

recruit after their arduous expeditions, and share with the various herds of cattle its pleasant pasturage. Then the trees on the farm would supply the fuel and timber required in the building of Deva. Again, some of the land would be cultivated with grain of a superior quality, as well as raised by improved methods.

It must not be overlooked that the Romans brought to this country an advanced form of civilization, whether relating to agriculture, horticulture, mining, construction of roads, or the building arts. One of their objects during their stay of over 300 years in Britain, was to reproduce here many of the surroundings of their pleasant sunny homes, as the amphitheatre, a frequent accompaniment to their camps. Hence the fountains alluded to on the altar, may have reference to some ornamental fountains supplied by the springs, and placed in some public garden or enclosure in which were grown familiar plants and herbs, the seeds of which may have come from Italy or Gaul: a pleasure garden, if you will, delightfully situated, and within easy reach of the camp. The Romans were a practical people, combining the æsthetic with the useful. There would not be the flower garden without the herb or vegetable garden, in which would be grown many to us now familiar articles of diet, or savoury edibles, which were brought here originally to gratify the Roman palate. Many of these, once introduced, have been cultivated in our gardens ever since. Our indebtedness to the Romans in this respect is not always remembered, and I give a list here, on the authority of Chancellor Ferguson, of some only of the vegetables and herbs they brought: Sage, rue, marjoram, anise, basil, mint, thyme, fennel, parsley, pennyroyal, asparagus, onion, leek, garlic, and celery. The omission of some of these familiar savoury herbs from our English *cuisine* would be sorely missed.

The amount of skill displayed in Roman cookery may be inferred from the care bestowed on their cooking utensils. Some fifty of these, doubtless a consignment to one of the Welsh stations, were found in 1862. They comprised stewpans, skellets, and cullenders of various sizes and nested. They had been cast in bronze, then turned on the lathe, and tinned on the inside. We hardly do better nowadays. The late Duke of Northumberland had a set of these cooking utensils made from the Roman model, for the use of his establishment at Alnwick Castle. I spoke of many of the plants becoming permanently cultivated—of that there is no doubt. The Romans might leave the locality, but the plants would remain, and, I doubt not, survive to Saxon times, when once more we have a people, who, like the Romans, loved good eating and drinking, and the flavouring herbs would once more find a place in the Saxon evening stew or meal. As these vegetables became established, and spread to other places, we should expect them at least to retain a hold upon the kindly soil in which they were first planted. Be this as it may, they are there to-day, and flourishing as vigorous as ever. May we regard them as a survival from the old Roman stock? There are more unlikely things; similar instances of survival are on record. I do not put the case of the survival of the herb garden so strongly as I do that of its existence on the spot of the farm. That these things would be cultivated here I have no doubt. Deva, in its time, entertained more than one Roman Emperor—the Imperial Legate Agricola passed the winter of 90 and 91 resident here. Commodus, we know, wintered here. Savoury dishes and good living they would expect, and would not be disappointed; for, in addition to the domestic cattle furnished by the Boughton farm, there was salmon in

the river, and deer and other wild game in abundance in the forest. The *et ceteras* to the feast the kitchen gardens in Boughton would supply.

I turn now to Pennant for another hint. He says—

“I must not omit the most valuable memorial which the Romans left, in a particular manner, to this country—the art of cheesemaking; for we are expressly told that the Britons were ignorant of it till the arrival of the Romans. The Cestrians have improved so highly in this article as to excel all countries, not excepting that of Italy, the land of their ancient masters.”—*Pennant's Tour in Wales, Vol. I., p. 154.*

Pennant is not far from the truth, for Strabo expressly tells us that the Britons had no cheese. It is very doubtful whether they understood the making of butter. Accepting Pennant's statement as correct, and I see no reason to doubt it, then it follows that the first dairy farm in this locality for the making of Cheshire, or rather Roman cheese, would be at our agricultural colony in Boughton.

As the tide of conquest rolled northward, and the better route from the south lay through Deva, there is little doubt that in turn it was visited by all the notable commanders, who would expect to be suitably entertained, in which case the savoury dishes to which the Romans were accustomed would not be forgotten. If such hospitality could not be shewn in Deva, with its fine salmon, and wild game in the forest close by—where else? The native supplies would not suffice for guests such as these. One peculiarity in the Roman *cuisine* was the sauces and flavouring imparted to the various dishes by the use of the herbs mentioned—and again the garden in Boughton becomes a necessity.

This is no fancy sketch in which I have been indulging of what were the surroundings of Boughton in the time

of the Romans. The existence of two altars found on the spot is sufficient to mark out the place as a Roman settlement of some kind. The Romans came to this country to stay, and to gather for imperial use the available mineral and other resources of the land. In this district lead and copper were to be had, mines had to be developed, roads made; meanwhile, the necessary commissariat supplies would be drawn from the conquered race. As these supplies were neither of a kind nor quality to suit the Roman taste, farms after the Roman model became a necessity, and would be set up in suitable neighbourhoods to provide what was wanted. The remains of Roman villas, often met with in rural districts miles away from any camp, are often those of the residence of a Roman official, whose duties were to see that the necessary supplies from the surrounding district were forthcoming. One such existed near the Dee above Farndon. The Romans would take kindly to this work: many of them had been agriculturists before they became soldiers. To them the rearing of poultry and cattle, ploughing, sowing, reaping, and gardening, when supplemented by native help, would by no means be an uncongenial occupation.

The farm colony I have been endeavouring to describe would have little in common with the farms of to-day; it would, in general, more resemble a well-wooded park, with meadows extending even to the banks of the Gowy, in which roamed various herds of cattle; while within enclosures there would be fields of wheat, barley, and oats. Coming nearer to Boughton Cross, we have the ornamental flower and kitchen gardens, with the fountains and springs of water.

If I have not succeeded in establishing all the points of interest which have been mooted, sufficient has been

said to show that the locality under review has had an interesting history in the past, and that in its way it rendered an important service to the Roman camp at Deva.

There are still further data to be gathered from the derivation or signification of the word Boughton. As now spelt the meaning is not very obvious. Boughton, I have shown, has been an interesting spot in Roman times. As such we may expect some part of its past history to be bound up in its present name.

There is first of all nothing Roman about it. Our earliest place-names are Norse or Saxon—the majority are much later in date. My suggestion is that Boughton was in Saxon times, and onward known as the Burghton, indicating that it had been a fortified or protected place, meaning no more than that a series of wooden huts were enclosed within a ring of wooden stakes. This is highly probable since this West Chester of ours, or probably Waste Chester, was one of the latest localities they occupied in England. They came from the west of England along the eastern side of the Severn and the Dee, following in good part the Roman street, which in due time would bring them to Boughton, from which roads branched to the north, and also to the south of England and North Wales. To occupy a position of this kind, with rude protective works to command the roads, was but common prudence; but apart from this, the Saxons may have found, like the Romans, other advantages possessed by the situation.

The natives of Cheshire are not particularly rough on the "r," and my suggestion is that in time they dropped or rather softened the sound of the "r" in Burgh to Boughton, as we now have it. Boughton, I may remark, as a name derived from some defensive position held by

the Saxons, is common in England. We have two in our locality—Broughton Hall, the seat of Alderman Johnson, was even in the present century a moated house; Broughton, near Wrexham, is the other, with its *Caer* on the hill-top. The rude fortification long since disappeared, and its ancient character only survives in its name.

This point is not without interest, since it would go to show that Boughton was not only occupied by the Romans, but also by the Saxons.

