

VIII. — HADRIAN'S GREAT BARRIER; by CHANCELLOR
FERGUSON, F.S.A., in a Letter to the Rev. J. C. Bruce, F.S.A.,
LL.D., etc., Vice-President.

[Read on the 28th December, 1887.]

CARLISLE, DEC. 10TH, 1887.

MY DEAR DR. BRUCE.

I think you deserted before its close the very pleasant and successful meeting held this year by the Royal Archaeological Institute at Salisbury, and that you were not present at Rushmore. I was somewhat remiss myself, and took an off day or two: on these I was not wholly idle, archaeologically, for my host, the Hon. Percy Wyndham, took me some interesting drives, notably between his residence, Clouds, near Semley, and Wardour Castle, and between Clouds and Rushmore, where I was afterwards a guest.

In some places we drove along well made roads, with very broad margins of turf—as much as 100 feet: beyond the turf, on either side, came ‘scrub’, in places so dense that not even a dog, much less a man, could penetrate it, while in height it reached to eight or ten feet or even more.

I felt that I had come upon a piece of England that had remained in, or had reverted to, the condition in which it was when Robin Hood and the Curtel Friar ranged the jolly greenwood—the condition in which it was at the close of the Roman rule, ‘an isle of blowing woodland, a wild and half reclaimed country, the bulk of whose surface was occupied by forest and waste.’¹ And in the broad green expanse of turf on either side of the roads I recognised a survival of, and saw the necessity for, the mediaeval law that the woodlands were to be cut back a certain distance from the highways, lest they should afford lurking places from which robbers might rush out upon the unwary traveller.

I afterwards, with a guide, penetrated the ‘scrub’ at Rushmore, and found that well-defined, but narrow, paths wander about it,

¹ J. R. Green's *The Making of England*, p. 8.

enabling persons acquainted with them to traverse the 'scrub' in many directions, to suddenly *rendezvous* together, and to as suddenly disappear: the finest troops in the world would be baffled to follow through such 'scrub', and to put down a few *banditti*, had they any great extent of such country, as I have described, to roam over.

The following reflections have occurred to me since my return to the north:

Looking at the Roman Wall in General Roy's *Mappa Britanniae Septentrionalis*, or in the map given in your valuable Handbook, it is seen to be backed at no great distance to the south by river valleys, extending from Newcastle to Carlisle, namely, the valley of the Tyne and its affluents eastward of the central watershed, of the Eden and its affluents westward. To the condition of these valleys in the days of the Roman sway I wish to invite attention.

The rich and lower soil of our river valleys, now the favourite home of agriculture, caused them to be from the very earliest times covered with primaæval 'scrub' of the densest character. Such is now the case in the uncleared forests of Canada and America; such we know was the case in the earliest times in the valleys of the Thames, of the Kennet, of the Severn, etc.; such we may confidently assume was the case with the valleys of the Tyne and Eden systems at the time when Hadrian erected his Great Barrier, and for long afterwards. These valleys, and the valleys down which run the various streams which cross the Roman Wall, must have been full at that time of primaæval 'scrub', extending northwards in many places almost to the site of the stone portion of the Great Barrier, certainly touching it at the points where it is crossed by the Cambeck, the Kingwater, the Irthing, the Tipalt, the Cawburn, the North Tyne, etc. This 'scrub', until cleared away—the task probably of generations—must have sheltered in its recesses large numbers of Britons, stone implement men, broken men from tribes the Romans had defeated, fugitives from tribal or Roman justice, and others, men who would have an intimate knowledge of the paths and tracks through the 'scrub', where no heavy armed Roman soldier could follow them. Such men assembling suddenly at unexpected places, perhaps by night, in bands of from, perhaps, a dozen to two hundred, would quickly demoralise the Roman troops defending the Stone Wall; sentries would be con-

stantly harassed, small parties would be cut off, and night alarms would perpetually spoil the rest of the legionaries who could no more follow their tormenting foes into the 'scrub' than they could fly over it.

The idea then occurs to me that the great military engineers who laid out Hadrian's Great Barrier made up their minds from the first that their valuable troops should not be harassed in this way: accordingly they planned the Great Barrier with an embattled Stone Wall as a defence to the north against the attacks of hordes of barbarians that might be called armies, with a palisaded earthen vallum to the south against the attacks of *guerillas*, *banditti*, and *dacoits* that infested the 'scrub' in their rear. The first the Roman general dealt with *more Romano* by flinging open the gates of his mile castles and precipitating his troops on both flanks of the advancing foe. But as for the *guerillas*, the *banditti*, and the *dacoits*, there were no gates in the palisades for them to come through; and the field officer of the day, some veteran centurion, *hirsutus et hircosus*, could be trusted to see they did not come over.

Such are the ideas as to the Roman Wall that my drives in Wiltshire and Dorsetshire have put into my mind; I hope they may be considered worthy of being laid before the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

I remain, my Dear Dr. Bruce,

Yours very truly,

RICHARD S. FERGUSON.

APPENDIX I.

One or two additional remarks I may be permitted to make by way of appendix.

(1.) It has been the subject of remark that no gates have been discovered in the Vallum. I think they were dispensed with as worse than useless. The Roman general would not want to launch large masses of troops upon *guerillas*; and numerous gates would have necessitated equally numerous guards, which would mean a large number of extra men on duty day and night. The Roman engineers were not so pedantic so to make gates where they were of no use.

(2.) If the use I have conjectured for the Vallum be the right one,

it does away with criticism as to its not always taking the most advantageous ground for defence towards the south. In the case of the foes expected from the south strict adherence to the rules of military engineering would have been pedantry.

I am glad that the idea I have put forth makes Wall and Vallum the work of one mind carried on simultaneously.

APPENDIX II.

LOWTHER STREET, CARLISLE, DEC. 31, 1887.

MY DEAR BLAIR,

Since I posted the proof of my letter to Dr. Bruce to you, I have received the following information from my friend Mr. Horrocks, who owns large moors at Alston, which for a long way lie on either side of the Maiden Way. He tells me that proof positive exists that the whole district was once covered with 'scrub', in the roots of birch and alder, which are now buried beneath the peat, which are exposed on the banks of the streams, and in digging for peat. In the low bottoms the 'scrub' still exists.

Another proof of the existence of extensive 'scrub' in Roman times is that in the ditch of the camp at Chesters, and elsewhere, there have been found with Roman remains antlers of red deer of a size beyond any that can now be found in Europe. This implies that the deer had unlimited supply of 'browse', i.e. 'scrub', to feed upon.

Yours truly,

RICHARD S. FERGUSON.