

THIRLWALL CASTLE.

So thoroughly are we accustomed to call the fortified lines stretching from Bowness to Wallsend the Roman Wall, that it is hard to bring ourselves to believe that this is comparatively a very modern phrase. Till quite recently our Wall always appeared on the maps as the Picts' Wall, the *Vallum sive Murus Picticus* of Camden, a designation borne not on account of its having served as a defence against the Picts (as the Saxon shore may have been so termed from its liability to the incur-



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sions of piratical Saxons), but because it was popularly held to have been the uncanny work of that mysterious race. Sir Christopher Ridley, writing in about 1572 what in many respects is a very excellent account of the stations *per lineam Valli*, gravely informs Mr. William Claxton that 'sure theyr is one wall builded betwyxt the Brittons and Pightes (which we call the *Kepe Wall*) builded by the Pightes.'¹ Even in this century the tradition survived that the Wall was erected by supernatural agencies in a single night.

At the close of the 13th century the Wall seems to be referred to, in a lawsuit between the prior of Tynemouth and Richard Turpin of Houghton, under the name of the 'Thwertonerdyk,' which Hodgson was ready to think meant the 'Thwarting-dyke.'² But the usual name

¹ *Harl. MS.* 374; Hodgson, *Northd.* II. iii. p. 273n.

² *Placita de Banco*, Pasch. 18 Ed. I.; Hodgson, *Northd.* II. iii. p. 282n.

for the Wall in the Middle Ages was apparently the 'Thirlwall.' Fordun, in his *Scotichronicon*, written about 1385, in fixing the site of the battle of Heavenfield, mentions the Thirlwall, which the Romans drew across Britain from sea to sea in order to keep back the attacks of the Scots, and goes on to explain this name to mean the *Thirlit-wall* or *Murus Perforatus*, giving as the reason that after the departure of the Romans, the common people dwelling in the districts near the Wall *thirled* or pierced it in *many different* places so that they might always be able to pass to and fro through it.³ It says much for Fordun's powers of observation, however fanciful and false this piece of etymology may be, that he should have been struck by the numerous gateways and openings in the Wall, an aspect of its character that was till quite lately again lost sight of. Wyntoun, prior of St. Serf's on Loch Lomond in the beginning of the 15th century, in his rhyming chronicle, also says of the Romans building the Wall:

'It off comon cost thai maid,
And yhit men callys it Th[r]ylwal.'

The implied derivation that it was made at the cost of the *thralls* or common people is different, the name is the same. Indeed Hodgson was so positive that the 'Thirlwall' was the true title of the Wall that he has not only prefixed it to his admirable description of the fortified lines of Hadrian, but has also repeated it at the head of every page. 'Thirlwall,' he says, 'was, I think, a general name at one time for this barrier.'⁵ Nevertheless the sense of the passage in Fordun has been so stupidly distorted, that he has been supposed to have applied a name common to the entire barrier from sea to sea to only one particular locality upon it, and a whole tribe of copyists have continued to asseverate that the castle of Thirlwall derives its name from the circumstance that it was here that the Caledonians first *thirled* or broke through the Wall.

Till 1297-Thirlwall was practically in Scotland, though Blenkinsop, hardly a mile east of it, formed an isolated patch of England.

It was long the possession of a family bearing the local name, the representatives of which seem to have styled themselves barons of Thirlwall. At the Assize of Wark in 1279, the 31st year of

³ Fordun, *Scotichronicon*, lib. II. cap. vii.; III. cap. x. Hodgson, *Northd.* II. iii. p. 149n.

⁴ Wyntoun, *Cronykil of Scotland*, bk. v. ll. 3250-1; Hodgson, *Ibid.*

⁵ Hodgson, *Northd.* II. iii. p. 436.



J. P. GIBSON, PHOTO.

THIRLWALL CASTLE FROM THE S.E.
1890.

(THIS PLATE PRESENTED BY THE EARL OF CARLISLE).





Alexander III. of Scotland, William, 'le Barun de Thirlwalle,' brought an action against the prioress of Lambley on South Tyne for illegal pasturing on his lands. The prioress, determined to resolutely uphold the rights of the church of St. Patrick of Lambley, challenged the baron to battle in the presence of her champion, Robert de Burgh. The baron in accepting the challenge appointed Robert de Thirlwall to fight in his stead. The day of the duel was fixed, the sureties were taken for the appearance of the champions, when an amicable arrangement was effected by the prioress paying the baron ten pounds in silver. This redoubtable nun had, it was proved, counselled and abetted Michael the shepherd of Fergleu in burning down a house the baron had built in Thirlwall, a charge that it took twenty shillings to settle.⁶

The Thirlwalls had their full share in the Scottish and French wars. One of the earliest exploits of Wallace was his surprising the peel of Gargunnoch on the Forth, the English garrison of which was commanded by a Thirlwall :—

'On Gargownoo was byggyt a small peill,
That warnt was with men and wittail weill,
Within a dyk bathe closs, chawmer and hail ;
Captayne tharoff to nayme he hēt Thirlwall.'⁷

Wallace is said to have himself laid this Thirlwall low with a staff of steel he reft from the watchman. A Thirlwall, as we shall see, took part in Wallace's discomfiture at Falkirk. 'Johan de Thirlwalle,' who had been taken prisoner and had to mortgage his lands in England to obtain his ransom, came to Edward I. at Newbrough in Tindale on the 24th of August, 1306, and prayed the King to grant him the lands of 'Eustache de Retteref,' an enemy in Scotland.⁸ His petition would seem to have been granted, as letters of protection were issued by Edward III. in 1365 for 'John Thirlwalle, senior, and his tenants at Grenhowe and Rydale in Liddisdale.'⁹ Edward I. was himself at Thirlwall on the 20th of September, 1306;¹⁰ but the first mention of a 'castrum de Thirlwall' occurs in 1369,¹¹ and it is probable

⁶ *Iter of Wark; Proceedings of Arch. Inst.* 1852, ii. App. p. xxiii.

⁷ Thomas the Rhymer, *Wallace*, Book IV. v. 213.

⁸ *Documents and Records Illustrating the History of Scotland*, i. p. 310.

⁹ *Rotuli Scotiæ*, i. p. 896 b.

Rymer, *Fœdera*, ii. 1025.

¹¹ 'Noverint universi per presentes me Johannem Thirlwall juniorem constituisse et in loco meo possuisse Philippum Thirlwall ad liberandum nomine meo Johanni Thirlwall seniori domino castri et manerii de Thirlwall, etc., 1669.'—Hodgson, *Northd.* II. iii. p. 147n.; *Lansdowne MS.* 1441, fo. 55.

that the castle had it been in existence would have been mentioned in connection with the king's sojourn, while there is nothing *primâ facie* in the architecture to make it probable that it was built before the first half of the 14th century. Some curious evidence was given on the 9th of October, 1386, by John de Thirlwall in the great heraldic trial of Scrope and Grosvenor respecting the right to bear the coat *Azure, a bend or*. It runs: "Johan Thirlewalle" of the age of liiiij years, armed xxxij years and more, being sworn and asked whether the arms *Azure, a bend or* (*dazure ove un bende or*) belonged to Sir Richard Lescrope; said, Certainly, and that he would prove by evidence, for the grandfather of the said Sir Richard, by name William Lescrope, was made knight at Falkirk in Scotland under the banner of good King Edward Longshanks (*desouz la banniere de bon. Roy Edward ove lez longues jaumbes*), as his father told and showed him before his death; for his father was through old age bedridden, and could not walk; and whilst he so lay he heard say that some people said that the father of Sir Richard was no gentleman because he was the King's Justice; and his father called his sons before him (and the said John was the youngest of all his brethren), and said, "My sons I hear that some say that Sir Henry Lescrope is no great gentleman because he is a man of the law (*nest point graunde gentil homme pour cause quil est un homme de la ley*); but I tell you certainly that his father was made a knight at Falkirk (1298) in these arms, *Azure, a bend or*, and that they come of great gentlemen and of nobles. And if anyone say otherwise, do ye bear witness that I have said so of truth upon faith and loyalty; and if I were young I would hold and maintain my saying to the death." And his father was when he died of the age of four score years and five (*del age de iv^{ans} ans et v*),¹² and was when he died the oldest esquire of all the north and had been armed in his time lxiij years, and it is forty-four years (*des ans quarant et iiij*) since he died.' John de Thirlwall's further evidence implies that he himself was present at Ballingham

¹² The original MS. has 'del age de vij^{xx} ans et v,' which is a manifest error, for not even a court of chivalry in the fourteenth century would have believed a witness who said he was born when his father was 135 years old. It was usual to write 'eighty' (*quatrevingt*) as 'iv^{xx}' in old documents, but 'vij^{xx}' would be unique. Correcting this clerical error, we find that John Thirlwall the father was born in 1267, and armed, at the age of sixteen, in 1272, and that he died in 1342, while his youngest son, born in his extreme old age in 1332, was armed before 1354. It is strange that Sir H. Nicholas should have overlooked this very natural explanation.

Hill (outside Calais), in the Pays de Caux, in the expedition of Edward III. to the gates of Paris (1360), in Gascony with the Black Prince, and in Brittany with the duke of Lancaster (1378).

The arms of the Thirlwall family *Sable, a chevron argent between three boars' heads or* (to be seen carved on the fine sepulchral slabs in Haltwhistle Church) resemble those anciently borne by the Swinburnes; and may have been adopted after the marriage of John de Thirlwall, senior, with a daughter of Sir William de Swinburne. Two griffins appear as supporters on the seal of John Thirlwall, Junior, in 1369.

From the list of castles drawn up in 1415, we learn that of Thirlwall then belonged to 'Roland de Thirlwall.'¹³ In the Survey of the Marches in 1542 we read:—'At Thyrlwall ys a toure of thinerytance of Robert Thyrlwall, of the same, in measurable good reparacions.'¹⁴ The castle was garrisoned for the Parliament by the Scots in 1645; but after the Restoration, John Thirlwall, the head of the family, betook himself to a more cheerful home at Newbiggin near Hexham. Matthew Swinburne, the husband of his grand-daughter Eleanor Thirlwall, sold the old place to the fourth Earl of Carlisle, and it still belongs to the Howards of Naworth.¹⁵

Thirlwall Castle is not only situated close to the Thirlwall, but is actually almost entirely built of stones robbed from it. In consequence of this free use of Roman materials, there is little or nothing in the general character of the masonry to afford a clue to the date of its erection. Nor can any better conjecture be based on the nature of the extremely narrow slits that do duty for windows, and give the castle, to use Hutchinson's words, 'the appearance of a horrid gloomy dungeon.'¹⁶ The ground-plan consists of a main building (measuring inside about 46 feet 2 inches from north to south by 18 feet 9 inches from east to west) which is joined on the east side by a tower (15 feet 3 inches internally east to west by 13 feet 8 inches north to south) in an unbroken line with the south wall, so that viewed from the south the castle looks considerably larger than it really is. The wall between the main structure and the tower is 6 feet thick; the outer walls are nearer 9 feet. The entrance was in the east wall near the north-east

¹³ See above, p. 15.

¹⁴ See above, p. 48.

¹⁵ Hodgson, *Northd.* II. iii. p. 148; *Journal of House of Commons*, iv. p. 305; *Acts of Scotland*, vi. p. 224.

¹⁶ Hutchinson, *View of Northumberland*, i. p. 42.

angle of the castle. Wallis, in about 1767, still saw the remains of the iron gate;¹⁷ and so late as 1884 the hole for the unusually massive bar (about 6 feet 6 inches long by 8 to 9 inches square) was intact with a few dressed stones on the south splay of the doorway. Immediately inside the door a stair (averaging 3 feet 8 inches in width) turned off to the right, and ascended in the thickness of the north wall in irregular steps (lighted by a diminutive window with a spout fixed in its side), landing in the first floor of a turret at the north-west corner of the castle. This turret, which projects slightly to the north, has some curious features; the basement may *really* have been a dungeon, as a hole in the east jamb of the doorway, now nearly buried, proves it to have had a strong bolt on the *outside*. This dark den (6 feet 5 inches by 5 feet) has a peculiar pyramidal vault, formed by each course of the four walls coming in about 6 inches till they meet at the top; the vault above the stair-head has fallen in, but above it on the second floor is a yet better example of similar construction. This turret and a corresponding one at the north-east corner are shown in Hutchinson's view of the castle, taken in about 1776, rising as high above the main hall of the castle as its eastern tower. The east wall of the tower (Hodgson calls it the south; to be scrupulously accurate, it is the east-south-east) fell over the Tipalt in 1831.¹⁸ The jamb of a door, that probably led into a latrine, is still left at its south-east corner, which stands sadly in need of support to prevent its sharing the fate of the east wall. In the upper floor of the tower, to the north and south, are two fairly wide shoulder-arched window recesses, which, however, merely contain small pointed slits. Neither the tower nor the main hall seems to have been vaulted on the groundfloor; the few remaining corbels are much worn and broken.

A wider celebrity has been given to the name of Thirlwall by the pen of the bishop of St. David's in the 19th century, than can have been won for it by the swords of the knights and squires who dwelt in its grim fortalice. Well may Northumberland be proud that two writers who, in antagonistic lights have done so much to bring back to our view the classic days of Greece, bore her ancient Border names of Thirlwall and Mitford.

¹⁷ Wallis, *Antiquities of Northumberland*, ii. p. 3.

¹⁸ Hodgson, *Northd.* II. iii. p. 148.