

XXIII.—MEMORANDA RELATING TO THE KING'S MEADOWS.

BY SHERITON HOLMES.

(Read on the 25th February, 1891.)

UNTIL the year 1884 there existed in the river Tyne, about a mile and a half above Newcastle bridge, a group of islands. The largest of these was known as the King's Meadows, the other two being termed the Annie and the Little Annie islands.

The King's Meadows island had a length of sixteen hundred yards by an extreme breadth of one hundred and sixty yards, was grassed on its surface, and had upon it a public house, the 'Countess of Coventry,' a favourite resort of boating men.

The other two islands were merely banks composed of silts and sands, and covered with water grass and reeds.

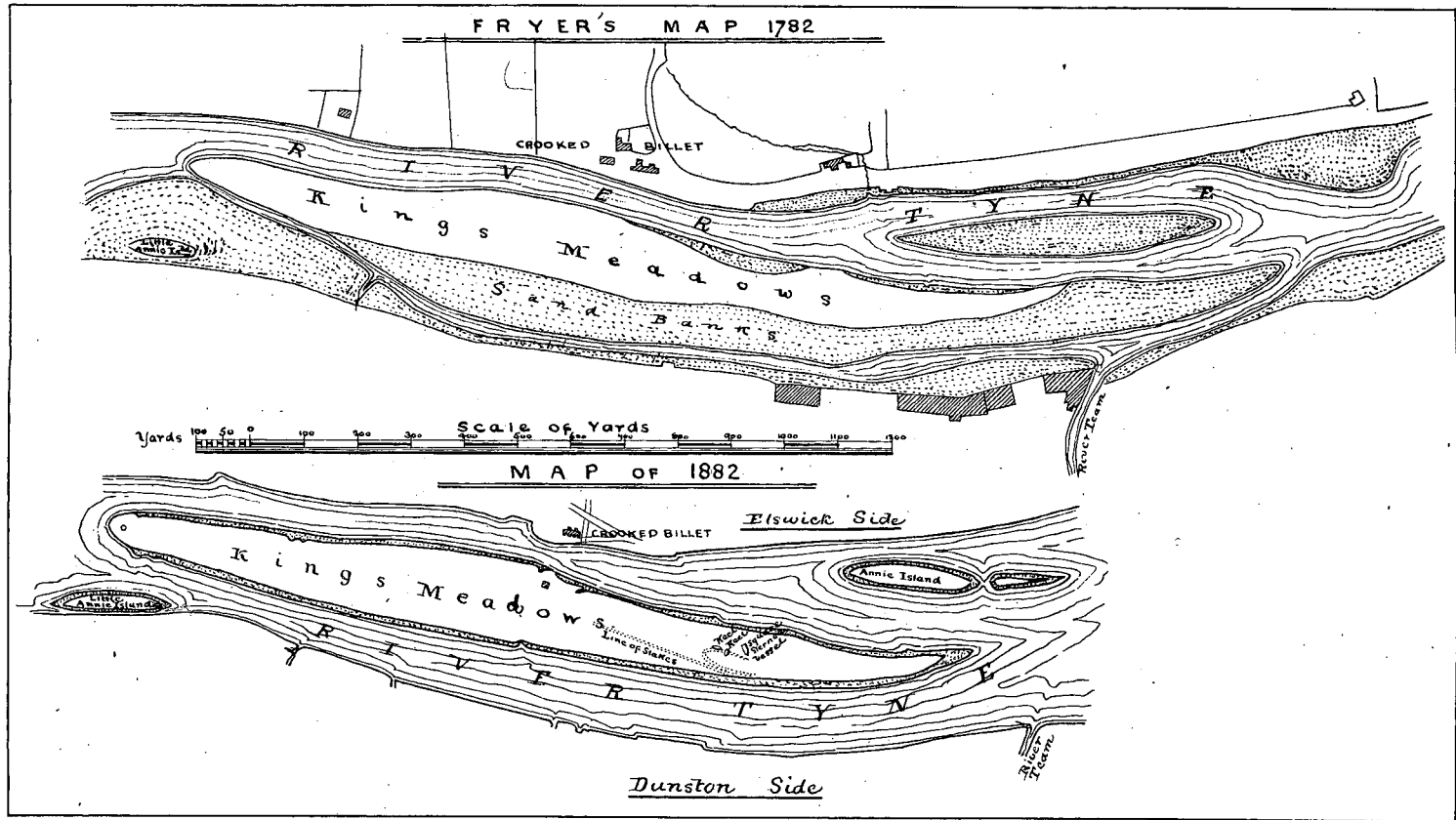
In the course of their operations the Tyne Improvement Commissioners dredged away the whole of these islands, the material being taken out to sea for deposit. As this work progressed, certain things were brought to light, of which I made notes at the time, and, as these notes may be interesting hereafter, I have thought them worth being placed on record.

The references to the King's Meadows in local history, which I have been able to find, are few in number and comparatively recent in date.

The Whickham burial registers shew that during the siege of Newcastle the Scots had sentries on the Meadows, as there is an entry in the first volume, under 1644, to the following effect:—'A man that was fhot bij the fctifh Centres in the meadows, as he was Comeing vp the water in a boate 3d daij of September.'

Brand records that in Gray's MSS. there is a note stating that the King's Meadows belonged to the castle. I have been unable to find this paragraph in Gray's notes on the margins of his *Chorographia*,¹ unless it be taken as being the sense of the following on the flyleaf opposite p. 24:—

¹ In the Gateshead Public Library.





'There is an Iland in y^e river of Tine aboue, y^e Bridg called y^e Kings Medowes frō y^e k^s of E . . . had proviſion of hay for their horſes, w[hen] any of them came down to Newcastle w[ith] an army.'

On Fryer's map of 1782 the meadows are stated to be the property of Thomas Moses.²

Mention is made of a seal having been shot there in 1771, and there are frequent notices of high jinks having been performed upon them by the Newcastle mayors and corporate bodies on their Ascension day visits.

Mr. William Mitchell, the editor of the *Tyne Mercury* newspaper, in his 'Tim. Tunbelly' letters, says³:—

'There is indeed an island amongst certain fields in the river, called the King's Meadows, which has within a few years been completely formed by the alteration of the stream, and there are trees upon it, and every year the proper authorities get a good crop of hay from it. As another proof of the changeableness of the river, I may mention that on the south side of the King's Meadows, almost all the way from the Derwent to the Team, (places well known to persons acquainted with the river,) there is at low tide, little but a continuation of dry ground; whereas on the north side, the stream is now regular and deep during all times of tide, though some years ago, all the depth of the tide was on the south side and all the shallows on the north.'

This statement that the formation of the island was caused by a then recent action of the river in detaching it from the Elswick side does not harmonise with the entry in the Whickham register of 1644 nor with Gray's memorandum of 1650. Nor does it agree with a map of the river at the place made by John Fryer in the year 1782.

It is, however, probable that sometime during the last century the passage on the Elswick side may have become so silted up as to render the island for the time being attached to the main land.

That considerable changes must have been going on about the beginning of the present century seems clear, for, quoting again⁴ from these interesting 'Tunbelly' letters:—

² 'PLAN | of the | RIVER TYNE | from | Tynmouth Barr to Heddon-
streams, | being the part which is affected by the | Tide, | and of which the |
Mayor and Corporation of Newcastle | are Conservators: | from an accurate
Survey, | finished in 1782, by | John Fryer.'—In the Tyne Commissioners' office.

³ *The Letters of Tim. Tunbelly, Gent. Free Burgess, Newcastle upon Tyne, etc.*, p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 80.

'A little way above bridge, about high tide, I was going gently up under the influence of a light breeze from the SE. congratulating myself that at that state of tide at least there was no danger from the abominable shoals. I had not half-formed my cogitations into an imaginary sentence, when I came plump upon a laden keel, sticking fast at the head of the King's Meadows. The tide was then at the height. There seemed, therefore, nothing for this keel but to get out her coals, or wait for a higher tide, which might be in a few days! I did not enquire how she got off; but this shows pretty well that in that quarter at least the river is worse than ever.—Another day, when the tide was flowing, I went up with the keels^s (for, thinks I, if I go with them my barge will be safe,) and I was surprised to see a great island gradually forming at the foot of the largest meadow, opposite to the Team mouth. There is now to be seen, at low tide, a quantity of sand, with plenty of grass growing in the centre, where two or three years ago there was no such thing as any sand bank at all.'

This letter is dated 1822, but previously to that (as shown upon Fryer's map of 1782) the grassed surface of the island extended nearly down to the river Team, and the sand spit from it three hundred and thirty yards beyond.

If we compare this map of Fryer's in 1782 with a map of the river made shortly before dredging was commenced at the place, it will be seen that during the period of one hundred years between their dates scarcely any alteration had taken place in the conformation of the island, the size and shape of which remain almost the same; but there is a very considerable difference in the water ways. For whereas in the later map the channel is wide and navigable on both sides of the island, the former one shows the channel wholly on the north or Elswick side, the south side being occupied by a sandbank with a small stream winding through it, which rejoined the main channel about four hundred yards below where the Team river enters.

Mitchell remarks that there were trees on the island. Now at some remote time the timber here had been of a gigantic character, for in the year 1882 when the dredging of this portion of the river was commenced, the action of the dredger was greatly impeded by timber in the bed of the river, and about twenty magnificent oak trees were hauled out by locomotive engine power on to the Elswick foreshore. These measured from two to four feet diameter of stem,

^s Here is a note that, 'In the year 1704, there were 400 keels employed on the river Tyne, in the coal trade, and about 1600 keelmen.'

and were of great length. When got out the timber was chiefly sound and perfectly black, but exposure to the sun and air so warped and rent the trees that it became very difficult to obtain sound pieces of any useful size. Quite lately, however, I saw a very beautiful cabinet which had been made from a portion of this timber, the wood of which was as black as ebony and took a high polish under the plane.

These trees being in the way when operations were commenced for converting the foreshore into a shipbuilding yard in the year 1884, I had them blown to pieces by dynamite and burnt.

There were also several similar trees unearthed from the island itself, but none of them so large as the ones got from the bed of the river.

The material composing the island was generally silt of a peaty character deposited in thin layers, in colour ranging from black to light, ochrey browns and yellows, to a depth of from five to seven feet from the surface. Below this occurred beds of clean river sand which rested on a bed of gravel at about low water level. From this gravel I obtained sundry articles which appeared to be *in situ*, but which (there is the remote possibility) might have been washed in from the upper material. Amongst these I have some of the small, hard-burnt, tile-like bricks of deep red colour, one of which I exhibit, which has upon it the prints of an animal's feet, most likely that of a dog, and some pipes of the kind known as fairy pipes with very small heads and very thick stems.

From the positions in which I have known this description of pipe to be found, it seems to me that their age must date further back than that of the known introduction of tobacco into England, and if so, it remains a question what the people smoked before they possessed the 'fragrant weed' with which to solace themselves.

In the year 1884, as the dredger wrought its way up stream the lower end of the island fell in before it, and as the tides washed away the surface, many interesting objects were gradually revealed which had previously been deeply buried in the heart of the island. These generally were clustered within a small area about six hundred yards above where the Team river enters, and consisted of lines of double-staked protective works and stranded vessels.

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 Roger North's  
 description of  
 "the verdant  
 flat of the  
 island with  
 wood dispersed  
 upon it,"  
 should not be  
 lost sight of.  
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Firstly, a double line of stakes commenced at the then foreshore of the island on its southern side, which curving inwards and forming a sharpish-pointed oval, returned down the centre of the island as though they had formed a protection to the upper portion of a smaller island.

These stakes were all of oak, in good and sound condition, forming continuous parallel lines four feet apart. The stakes were from six to eight inches square, with well-cut tenoned heads five inches square for a depth of eight inches. On these would be placed mortised cross heads, for the purpose of tying the two lines of stakes together transversely. The inner faces of these stakes had been planked with oak planking about one and a half to two inches thick, and the interspace filled in with river-washed stone.

As the tops of these stakes must have been many feet below high tide mark, they could only have formed a protection to the foot of a sloped bank, and not have been in the nature of a quay.

A second line of double stakes, somewhat similar to the former, commenced near the same place and ran in almost a direct line up the centre of the island to near where formerly there was a building. In all probability they continued much farther, but beyond this point the surface had not then been disturbed, and I was unable to trace their further course.

These stakes were not all of oak, and some of them were much decayed, nor had they been nearly so accurately tenoned as the former ones, and the filling in between had been done with quarry chippings.

It seemed as though the land had grown up stream from the high end of the small island, and that this line of protection had been to guard the southern side of a much larger area of land. Later still the land had further increased on the south side until the former staked line had become buried in the island about midway in its breadth.

The first described line of protection, hemming in, as it appeared to have done, the head of a smaller island, would I think be of considerably earlier date than the latter one.

At the time when this alone existed two keels had become impaled on the stakes of its northern face, and an old patched-up square-sterned vessel had found her last resting place on the island foreshore a little to the east of them. The impalement of these keels bears out rather

clearly the description of the stranded keel described by Mr. Mitchell, as previously quoted.

The most westerly keel had settled down on the piles in the direction of their course, or about east and west, the other one athwart it. The former was a well-built boat, forty-three feet long by seventeen feet six inches breadth of beam, and had been constructed throughout of heart of oak, oak trenailed and iron-fastened in her main timbers. The iron was much eaten away by rust; her timbers (planking included) were perfectly sound and quite black.

The second keel, about twenty yards to the eastward, was somewhat smaller. This was also built of oak, but the timber was partially decayed, probably owing to the sapwood not having been removed, which must have been done in the case of her companion.

The square-sterned vessel had been built of soft wood, and was in a condition of utter decay. She had from time to time been much patched up, so that it seems probable she had been beached there for abandonment purposes, or it may be had holed herself on her anchor and not been worth the cost of re-floating; for an anchor was found underneath her, one fluke of which had pierced her bottom.

This anchor, through the watchfulness of our custodian, Mr. Gibson, is now in the guard room of the Castle.

All these vessels, though formerly on the northern foreshore of the small island, were latterly deep buried in the heart of the land as it existed prior to the dredging operations, the island being at this point one hundred yards across on the grassed surface and the vessels about midway in its breadth.

A short way below the King's Meadows a very fine red deer antler was dredged up, which has been exhibited by me in the Black Gate museum, and is now before you, together with the foot-marked brick and the pipes.

Of the early history of the keels of Tyne and Wear but little seems to have been recorded, unless we adopt the theory advanced that they were of similar build—in fact, true descendants—of the 'Coel' in which, according to Verstegan, the Saxons came over to invade this country. The rig of the keel, however, has changed completely within the memory of some yet living from the square to the sprit-sail, and within my recollection the mode of propulsion has also

changed, for in the earlier days when the bed of the river was shallow punting poles (or, as the keelmen termed them, 'pooies') were used to push the boat along, and afterwards when the river had been deepened, sailing had to be resorted to. This might possibly be the reason for the change of rig, as with the sprit-sail the vessel would come much nearer into the wind, and the sheet being fleeting would aid it in the short tacks across the river in head winds.

Owing to the improved modern method of shipping coal by spouts the keel has lost its vocation and become well nigh obsolete, so that the rising generation may have to resort to drawings and description to realise what it was like.

Although apparently a flat-decked, broad-beamed, clumsy-looking craft, yet the keel was constructed on fine sailing lines, and in a brisk wind could hold her own with any river craft afloat.

'Weel may the keel row' is now a song of the past.

XXIV.—THE CONYERS FALCHION.¹

BY CHARLES CLEMENT HODGES.

THIS remarkable weapon is in an excellent state of preservation, and is one of the finest, as it is one of the earliest, examples of this class of sword remaining in the country.

The occurrence of the three lions of the Plantagenet kings² on one side of the pommel indicates that the date cannot be earlier than the time of Henry II., and as the character of the ornament is that of the type in use at the close of the twelfth century, there can be little doubt that this falchion is of the time of Hugh Pudsey, the tenth bishop of Durham, and was therefore made before 1195.

The falchion is a broadsword with one cutting edge, and has an Eastern origin. It is supposed to have been introduced into England about the time of the first Crusade.³ It was not in common use, and but few examples have been preserved to the present time.

¹ The falchion was exhibited by Sir E. W. Blackett, at a meeting of the Society, on the 29th April, 1891. See *Proc.* V. pp. 26-28 and 42-44.

² The earlier Plantagenets wore, *gules, two lions passant guardant in pale, or.* Henry II. added a third lion to the shield.

³ 1096 A.D.