

THE SOCIETY'S MUSEUM.

We are coldly drawn into discourses of antiquities, who have scarce time before us to comprehend new things, or make out learned novelties. But seeing they arose, as they lay almost in silence among us, at least in short account suddenly passed over, we were very unwilling they should die again, and be buried twice among us.—**SIR THOMAS BROWNE**, *Hydriotaphia*.

The earliest contributions of objects of antiquity appear to date from the first regularly constituted meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which was held in Loftus's Long Room, in the lower part of Newgate Street, on the east side. The minute book under date of 3rd March, 1813, records the following donations:—From Robert Surtees, of Mainsforth, 128 Roman and English coins: from John Adamson, 56 Portuguese coins. These are the first recorded donations of any kind to the new society. On the same day the minute book enters the gift, from Mr. G. A. Dickson, of part of a Roman millstone, and at the next meeting, held April 7th, 1813, from the same donor were presented:—

- A Roman Altar to Belatucader, found at Brougham Castle, in Westmorland.
- A small votive Altar, uninscribed, found at Vorēda, or Old Penrith, in Cumberland.
- A centurial Stone inscribed > CLAUDI.
- A Roman Millstone and the head of a Roman Statue of Stone, all found at Caervorran, on the Roman Wall.
- 2 Specimens of the Cement used in Roman baths, found in Carlisle: and a Piece of Basalt, which, from its form, appears to have been Part of a Millstone.

In these donations we have the beginning of the Society's collection of Roman stones. In the three succeeding years Mr. G. A. Dickson's name appears at meeting after meeting as

the generous contributor of objects of antiquarian interest and value. These include Roman vessels of earthenware, Roman bronzes, Roman lamps, Roman and Anglo-Saxon fibulae, coins, medals, stamps, prehistoric and Roman urns, broadswords, etc. The last of these benefactions by Mr. Dickson is dated March 6th, 1816, when the magnanimous example of these early members had become characteristic of the general spirit of the Society, and the stream of Mr. Dickson's generosity was probably interrupted by his death.

It may be well at this point to repeat the early vicissitudes of the Society in its quest of a settled habitation already told in the present volume, because the acquisition of numerous objects committed to its care, year by year, had added a feature to its character, which was to become in course of time of growing importance in directing and determining the Society's career.

Loftus's Long Room was very soon abandoned for congenial shelter in one of the rooms occupied by the Literary and Philosophical Society in Ridley Court, Groat Market. The great Tower or Keep of the Castle, however, appears to have attracted members of the young Society. It had been recently purchased by the Corporation from the successor of the grantees of the Crown, the floor of its Great Hall had been restored and a barrel vault of brick built in 1813 rendered its interior weather-proof. Permission having been obtained from the Corporation, our Society was inaugurated in the Keep in 1813, occupying for some time the room on the west (*sic*) of the Great Hall. This tenancy continued from the 3rd November, 1813, till May, 1819, and proved a time of trial to our members. 'Their lodgings in the Castle,' writes Dr. Bruce in 'Early Members of the Society,'* 'during the cold months of winter were found to be so uncomfortable that notwithstanding the fitting nature of the site they were obliged to forsake them.' To the cause thus alleged another

* *Archaeologia Aeliana*, Series II, vol. xi, p. 160.

equally forcible reason appears to have operated in an opposition of the free burgesses of the town to such an appropriation of the Corporation property. In the meanwhile, viz., on the 2nd May, 1817, there had been obtained from two of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace a licence for one whole year, in the names of the Rev. John Hodgson and John Adamson, 'to open a certain part of the ancient Castle of Newcastle-upon-Tyne aforesaid, and situate there, for the purpose of holding debates or conversations concerning and making inquiry into antiquities in general, but more especially concerning and into antiquities of the North of England and the Counties of Northumberland, Cumberland and Durham.' The recapitulation given in this document of the statutes of the Society shows that no account had been taken by our early fathers of the secondary function that was soon to force itself into notice, the custodianship of its rapidly accumulating objects of antiquity.

On the 3rd November, 1817, the monthly meeting of the Society was held in the office of Mr. John Adamson, in Westgate Street, where members had, gladly no doubt, availed themselves of an invitation to escape from the winter rigour of the 'King's Chamber' and the protestations of the free burgesses. Books, coins, and minor possessions could still be housed in the meeting room, but the Housesteads altars, and the headless figures of the *Deae Matres*, were ranged round the grass-plot in Mr. Adamson's garden, behind his house.

After the exodus of the Society from its apartment in the Castle, at the May term in 1819, that structure witnessed strange variations in its occupants. In November of that year it was garrisoned by the Grenadier company of the 40th regiment. Later its function as a temporary place of confinement for debtors continued its use as a prison, until the completion of the new gaol in 1828. Probably these practical uses of the structure had the entire approval of the free burgesses.

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From the 7th July, 1819, until the 5th January, 1825, as has been told in another place, a room was occupied by the Society in Farrington's Court, No. 7 in the Bigg Market. The premises were those of Richard Farrington and Brothers, who are described as 'ship builders, cabinet makers, upholsterers, carvers and gilders and joiners.' Our Society possesses two examples of the handicraft work of this firm; the first of these is the enlargement of the seal of the Society, in carved wood, which now surmounts one of the show-cases in the meeting room at the Castle; the second item suggests a date mark in the acquisitions of the Society of which passing notice may be made. In 1823, William Chapman, civil engineer in charge of the canal construction from Carlisle to the Solway Firth, encountered the remains of 'a subterraneous forest of oak,' between Glasson and Kirklands on Solway side. The trees lay at a depth of eight to ten feet below the surface, and beneath the level of high water mark, and their site was crossed obliquely by the line of the Roman Wall, whose foundations rested 3 to 4 feet above the level of the prostrate trunks. As many of the trees were sound, Mr. Farrington was commissioned to make a president's chair out of the material. The seat thus constructed is the capacious chair, now at the head of the horse-shoe table, that has ever since been dedicated to the use of the chairman at the Society's meetings. The horse-shoe table itself was a later construction of oak dredged from the bed of the river Tyne.

If the relation of these minor incidents is unduly extended it is that they may serve to indicate the rapid growth and consolidation of the Society during the six years of its occupancy of the Farrington Court apartment. It was in 1821 that the Rev. John Hodgson enlarged the scope of the Society's 'inquiry' by actual spade work in examining the site at Housesteads and thus advancing the knowledge of the Roman military camp of

Borcovicus by scientific observation. The restraint exercised in the narrative of the results then and there obtained, gives us little indication of the effect produced upon contemporary public opinion. Mr. Hodgson exercised a glamour which has ever since been attached to this particular spot, and aroused curiosity and interest in the pursuits of the Society in a remarkable degree. In 1822 appeared the first volume of *Archaeologia Aeliana*, a quarto of 376 pages, whilst materials for a considerable portion of a second volume had already been accumulated at Farrington Court. The appendices to the first and second volumes, headed 'Donations to the Society,' exhibit the rise and progress of the museum, especially in its acquisition of minor objects, up to this period. Coins, medals and casts could be hoarded in the Society's apartment, as would be, in like manner, about 36 minor Roman objects, some 26 examples of pottery, 15 pieces of armour and weapons, the fragment of the Falstone cross, and a few prehistoric and other items that might be classed as portable property. But in 1825 the collection also included over a score of Roman sculptured stones, many of them, such as the Corbridge altar, of great bulk and weight.

In 1826 the new premises of the Literary and Philosophical Society were opened, and the older Society extended a welcome to its younger congener by providing apartments for its use in the rear of its basement. Mr. John Adamson was one of the secretaries of the Lit. and Phil., and shared, with the Rev. John Hodgson, a like position in the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries, so that each of the societies, besides their common bond of sympathy, were represented on the executive of the other, and thus linked, were helped forward in their several pursuits.

The Lit. and Phil. was also the *alma mater* of another Institution, to be known in 1829 as the Natural History Society of Northumberland, Durham and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. For their accommodation museum rooms were built behind the

library, and entered from that upper floor level. Two main blocks were constructed at right angles to each other, their upper stages devoted to the ornithological, mineralogical and geological treasures of the new-fledged Society, whilst the basement, open to a courtyard, gave ample room in which to place the weighty possessions of the Society of Antiquaries. When therefore the Society celebrated its coming of age, in 1834, it was in the apartments provided by the Lit. and Phil., and with the associated societies of which that institution had become the tutelary parent. The older and newer buildings formed three sides of a four-square gravelled court, in the centre of which stood a rain gauge. On two sides the Natural History Society's walls, unpierced by windows, rose high above, whilst below they were supported upon piers, leaving a gallery open to the quadrangle. The claustral effect of the sub-structure impressed itself on contemporaries, one of whom describes it as 'the collonade' (*sic*) and another as the 'piazza in which are deposited the Society's valuable collection of Roman altars.'

Our Roman treasures, hitherto ranged round the grass-plot in Mr. Adamson's garden, behind his house, were then transferred to more appropriate and more dignified quarters; but, whilst the stones were now under shelter from rain, they were still exposed in the quadrangle to the open air, and all the acquisitions of this period bear evidences of the atmospheric condition of Newcastle in the thirties and forties of the nineteenth century. At that time the river sides, from Closegate to beyond Skinnerburn on the one bank, and from the eastern end of Pipewellgate to Redheugh on the other, were lined with glass houses. Eastwards, from Ouseburn to St. Peter's Quay, also rose the truncated cones of another extensive group of glass works. These all, from Sunday evening to the end of Thursday's last shift, poured out, by day and by night, ceaseless clouds of smoke, that filled the valley and hung like a black pall over the

town, moved to and fro by every wind that blew, but ever impending over and permeating through the place. 'Smoky Newcastle' became a by-word, and the correctness of the phrase, as applied to that shadowed past, is evidenced by the blackened condition of many of our Roman remains. Happily our city is no longer under such a cloud, but may now compare favourably with many a manufacturing centre, and its atmospheric condition is now no more hurtful to objects of carven stone than to the busy citizens thronging its merchants' offices the day long. The dingy condition of many of the heavier stones bears witness to the difficulty experienced by our early members in obtaining house room; but it is only fair to say that the earliest acquisitions are otherwise unimpaired, and are preserved in the same condition of sculptured face as at the date of their coming into possession.

The Annual Report of 1847 states that in the previous year only one new ordinary member had been added to the list. The new member in the year 1846 was the Rev. John Collingwood Bruce, whose succession was in the coming years to add a new and powerful impetus to the Society's operations. His gift of exposition, lightened by flashes of humour, made him in request as a popular lecturer, and drew out the attention of the general public to the aims and objects of the archæologist. His participation with outsiders was looked at askance by old-school antiquaries, who considered an appeal to the people beneath the dignity of their pursuit. But it proved to have evoked a strong current of opinion in the town in favour of the Society, which was shortly to be called upon and tested. The rapid development of the railway system of the North had for its focus a central point in Newcastle. In 1844 London had been linked with Gateshead by rail, and, in 1847, Edinburgh was in like manner connected with Newcastle. The extension of these arms stretched athwart the site of the Castle enclosure, and the Keep itself was

threatened. Dr. Bruce threw himself with characteristic enthusiasm into the work of saving the Norman Keep, and converting it into the treasure house of the Society. In March, 1847, he delivered, at the Literary and Philosophical Society's lecture room, a course of lectures on 'Castellated Architecture,' with special reference to the fine examples in our midst. Popular enthusiasm was aroused, a Corporation lease to the Society was obtained, funds were raised to rehabilitate the interior at a cost of more than £600, and, on the 3rd August, 1848, the Duke of Northumberland presided over a banquet in the Great Hall of the Keep to celebrate the entrance of the Society upon its tenancy. In Dr. Bruce's own words:—'The duke presided with his usual grace and tact. The banners of the chieftains who in ancient days had fought in the Borderland, floated over our heads, and the music of the Northumberland pipes gave forth the battle tunes and the gathering airs of other times.'

The adaptation of the interior to the purposes of a museum had been carried out as well as the conditions of the ancient structure allowed. The main walls of the apartment on the first floor and its window splays were lined with cases for books and antiquities; a kind of trophy, formed of arms and plaster casts of weapons, surmounted the fire-place, whilst smaller objects were disposed in every nook affording space. In the Great Hall, tapestry from F. W. Peacock's house in Wallsend, armour and weapons from the old mansion house of Newcastle, and the bright hues of the depending banners, gave tone to the apartment. Here, and in every other portion of the building, were scattered the Society's collection of large and small sculptured Roman stones.

'The new and auspicious era of the Society's taking possession of the fine old Norman building,' said the Annual Report for 1855, was succeeded by the early realization, that the Society's collection had been housed in the recesses of an edifice

quite unsuitable to the purpose of a museum. ‘Not only is space deficient,’ continued the report, ‘but the essential article of light penetrates but sparingly through the deep windows of the Castle Keep.’ The catalogue of Roman stones, numbering at that time 162, printed in *Archaeologia Aeliana*, Series II, vol. i, p. 221, etc., exhibited their distribution, not only in the principal apartments, but ‘upon the stairs of entrance,’ ‘in the oratory,’ ‘in mural chambers,’ ‘in window nooks and in the vestibule,’ etc. Any approach to classification was impossible. The subject became, and continued to be, a burning question in years to come.

Of the remedies discussed, one was for erecting an upper floor over the Great Hall, lighted by a circular aperture pierced through the barrel vault of brick. A plan was prepared for this by Mr. John Dobson, in 1855, and the project was urged again and again in following years, ‘with the concurrence of most distinguished architects.’ A counter-proposal was ‘to restore the inner wall of the Castle’ (probably the reference is to the ‘chemise’ that once enclosed the Keep), ‘and within the area to provide space for their altars, etc., under a lean-to roof of glass.’ Another project was to lease the adjacent railway arches.

At a meeting of the Society, held on the 5th April, 1856, it was announced to the members that if the museum were suitably enlarged, the Duke of Northumberland had most generously intimated that he would be disposed to place in their hands the whole of his Roman altars and inscribed stones. This magnanimous offer was afterwards extended for acceptance within two years. Notwithstanding this stimulus, the Society’s Report for 1858 regrets that nothing had been done, and ‘by this delay the Roman remains offered for their acceptance by the Duke of Northumberland had been lost.’

It was not until the following year that a decision was made to obtain land between the Castle and Blackgate, on which to

erect 'a Lapidarian Gallery,' and, in 1859, plans by Mr. John Dobson were passed for a structure estimated to cost for erection and site, £2,000. A subscription list, headed by a contribution of £250 from the Duke, was opened and many generous donations followed; yet, at the annual meeting in 1862, the amount raised to that date 'barely equalled the sum required for the purchase of the ground.' The financial failure of the project must not be regarded as the fault of the Society itself. Its members numbered a comparatively few individuals, and, whilst many of them were enthusiastic specialists in Roman antiquities, others were facetiously alluded to as 'mere medievalists.' To the latter the Roman possessions of the Society had proved a continued source of difficulty, discussion and embarrassment. It was therefore, to them not altogether an unwelcome result to find a truce at last to the conflict so long maintained. Their attitude found expression in the Report presented in 1856 in the following terms:— 'It has been repeatedly urged against the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle that its attention has been too exclusively devoted to the study of Roman antiquities.' Their contention was that a private society ought not to have been charged with so great a burden, but that the municipality at large was equally concerned; or, in other words 'that there was no particular reason why one or two hundred persons should, at their own cost, relieve a wealthy town from the ordinary obligations of townsmen.' The new museum fund, amounting to £629 16s. 0d., was lodged with the bank at interest pending the production of some other well-considered scheme for a museum.

In 1883 the Blackgate was leased from the Corporation for the purposes of a Museum, the tenancy being assumed on condition that the Society should expend £1,000, more or less, in converting the premises, and Mr. R. J. Johnson prepared plans for the necessary work. The repairs begun in August were completed next year, and on the 4th March, 1885, a formal

opening took place. The actual outlay, with extras, on the building alone amounted to £1,657, towards which £1,633 14s. 7d. was in hand, leaving a balance yet to be raised, and the whole of the furniture to be provided by further subscriptions.

The first floor was filled with the weightier Roman inscribed stones, arranged by the late Dr. Hodgkin and Mr. Robert Blair, and smaller objects were deposited in the second and third stages. A new catalogue was prepared in which 208 Roman sculptured stones, etc., were enumerated and described.

In 1905 a row of half-timber houses, which formerly filled the space between the roadway and the south curtain in Blackgate Street, had been demolished. A proposal was made to acquire the tenancy of the strip of ground left vacant, to erect a hoarding, and cover the site with a lean-to roof, in order to form an annexe to the Roman Museum. Mr. W. H. Knowles prepared a report and estimate for the work. But it was at the same time strongly urged by Mr. Knowles that opportunity should be taken of excavating the site with a view of ascertaining the nature of any subterranean structure that might exist. A special subscription list was thereupon opened and the work was begun. The disclosures which resulted exceeded expectation. A fragment of the outer wall of the castle, apparently of the same date as the Keep, was uncovered, and against it, but not bonded into it, was the south curtain, added in 1247, with the mark of the stairway leading to its platform walk. The exact site of the original gateway of the enclosure of 1177, and the junction of the curtain of 1247 with the main work, were thus fixed. The Heron pit itself was discovered and found to be literally a pit—a prison of great depth, without provision of light or air in its four-square walls, which were found to be bonded into and contemporary with the curtain. Beam holes clearly indicated the gaoler's apartment over the pit, and its connection with the latrine passage already known. Adjacent to the pit, and at

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equal depth, were uncovered a 13th century doorway, constructed as a secret postern when the curtain had been extended across the earlier moat; and in line with it the site of the drawbridge, originally an outer defence to the old gate, but, on the building of the Blackgate, converted from an outer to an inner drawbridge. These discoveries were of such importance that they formed a feature of the highest interest when left open for inspection, as they must needs be; but so large an area of the site was thus absorbed that the space left for the display of Roman remains was greatly circumscribed. Provision was, however, available for the heaviest and most bulky items of our collection, and for the whole of the centurial stores from the Wall. Including some repairs to the North Guard room, the work had cost £282 5s. 2d.

These details are recapitulated because it is necessary that the succession of onerous tasks undertaken by the Society should be clearly understood.

The policy of the Society in securing the Black Gate was, that whilst this example of thirteenth century military architecture should be rescued from neglect and possible destruction, there should be effected, at the same time a settlement of the museum question, which had more or less disturbed and distracted the operations of the Society during the previous thirty years.

But, after all, the completion of these tasks left much to be desired. The first floor of the Black Gate had been filled to overflowing, so that numerous stones were left in obscurity. This was inevitable, in an apartment where light was imperfectly distributed, and where space was inadequately available. It was, however, but one aspect of the adaptation of the building for museum purposes, and it rendered impossible a classification of the Roman collection, except in the catalogue form.

For the display of minor objects, in the upper stages of the building, the inadequacy of cases and the exhaustion of the

special fund, caused a further drain upon the annual income of the society. Already this had become a serious question, for the current expenses of cleaning, lighting and attendance proved greatly in excess of receipts for admission. To a great extent the deficiency of show cases was made good by the private generosity of the late Mr. C. J. Spence, one of the society's hon. curators.

The appropriation of the third floor of the Black Gate for library purposes was met by returning many objects to the meeting room in the Keep. These were selected chiefly from such as related to the town, or its immediate interests. At the same time, as far as the show-cases in the Black Gate permitted, classification was introduced. In this the curators were greatly assisted by our vice-president, Mr. Robert Coltman Clephan, who labelled and arranged the numerous Egyptian objects which he had himself presented.

Our museum is rich in objects of interest and value illustrative of all periods. It has been maintained, as the foregoing observations are intended to show, under the greatest difficulties, and it is accommodated within the walls of buildings of the highest historic interest, to which it lends an added attraction. Yet the finding of a sub-committee, recently appointed to report upon the question, disparaged the condition of the Roman collection in the strongest terms. In the light of the sacrifices made in the past, for the sake of the treasures entrusted to its keeping, our society needs no vindication. But the obsession which has weighed upon it from the outset of its career obtrudes once more in the latter-day report of its sub-committee. Still, as at an earlier date, it may well be a matter of congratulation that, notwithstanding the heavy burden of the museum and its claims, these have in no degree narrowed the scope of the society's 'inquiry.' Its published volumes are more than ever in evidence 'in proof of how wide a range of research has been embraced' by members of the society.