

VI.—CHRISTOPHER HUNTER: ANTIQUARY.

BY JOHN ROGAN.

The closing years of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries are recognized as a time in which the study of antiquities was flourishing. The studies of many a gentleman interested in Roman remains must have received great impetus from the publication of Gibson's edition of Camden's *Britannia* in 1695. It was a time when men rode forth to view the remains, notebooks in hand; and a season when they discussed or corresponded about what they had seen of the remains of earlier times. Amongst these gentlemen was one, not now very well known, but who was able to assist John Horsley in his researches; and who was one of the first visitors to Hadrian's Wall. He was Christopher Hunter.

The Hunter family seem to have lived throughout the seventeenth century in the parish of Lanchester, and to have belonged to the lesser gentry. Thomas, Christopher Hunter's father, was "of the chapelry of Medomsley, in the parish of Lanchester, and a gentleman thereof". In his will dated 21st December, 1685, he bequeathed to his younger son his estate at Painshields in the parish of Shotley.¹ He was also to receive his father's freehold estate at Linsgreen and the water mill with it. On the following day a sequence clause was added, saying:

"I do appoint Francis Taylor of Hall Hill, in the parish of Shotley, and my sonne John, Tutors of the person and estate of my sonne Christopher till he come to the age of twenty one."

¹ Longstaffe MSS. no. 19, in the Cathedral Library, Durham.

This younger son was born in 1675 and educated at Keping Grammar School, Houghton-le-Spring. He then proceeded to St. John's College, Cambridge, which he entered as a pensioner in 1692. There his tutors were Thomas Brown, author of a work called *The Detection of the Falseness of the Nagshead Consecration*,² and Thomas Baker, whose sister Margaret had married John Hunter. Evidently the elder brother had taken his duties seriously, and he was able to keep more than an ordinary watch upon his charge. In these circumstances it is, perhaps, not wholly surprising that Hunter distinguished himself by the regularity of his conduct and by his severe application to academical discipline.³ At Cambridge he soon became the favourite pupil of Baker, and it is probable that it was from him that he first acquired or developed his interest in antiquities. In 1698 he graduated M.B. and proceeded to practise as a doctor at Stockton-on-Tees; having been granted a licence to practise "physick" by Dr. John Brookbank, the Chancellor of the diocese of Durham. In 1702 he married Elizabeth Elrington of Espersheales, who brought with her a landed estate. And having entered upon his own inheritance he transferred his practice to Durham where he settled in the Bailey.⁴ There he remained until shortly before his death. Having retired in the spring of 1757 he moved to his wife's estate at Unthank and died there on the night of 12th-13th July. In appearance he is said to have been slender, though well-formed; above middle height and extremely neat and plain in dress. He enjoyed good health to his last days, except for fits that occurred for but a few moments and then left him quite well. In character he was said to have been a pattern of simple and inflexible integrity, which he combined with remarkable moderation in his professional fees. He became temperate in his diet after suffering a severe fall from his

² There were many difficulties about the consecration of Elizabeth I's first archbishop. From this arose the fable that no consecration took place, but only a mock ceremony in a Fleet Street tavern.

³ R. Surtees, *History of Durham*, vol. 2, p. 287.

⁴ Sharp MSS. A22, Durham Cathedral Library.

horse one night when returning from a too-convivial evening. His consequent abstinence from liquor led him to immoderate coffee drinking. He was known to consume twenty-four cups a day quite frequently.⁵ How much can be deduced from handwriting has been, and always will be, a matter for dispute; but if a small, fine hand, written with perfect legibility and without alteration is any indication, then Christopher Hunter must be complimented for being as tidy in his work as in his dress.

Though far removed from the Society of Antiquaries of London, and devoid of the social life of scholarship, he met William Stukeley on the latter's northern tour, for we read:

"Dr. Hunter showed me a Roman head in the garden wall. If I be not mistaken it is of Marcus Aurelius. The Doctor has a great collection of antiquities. . . . He says that there was an aqueduct at Lanchester, many inscriptions broke there just before he went."⁶

Roger Gale⁷ was a closer acquaintance. Their correspondence reveals that their relationship had gone beyond academic fields. In a letter dated 3rd January, 1729/30, Roger Gale writes:

"I am much concerned that I was not sooner acquainted with your desire to have me putt a young man into the Excise for you. We are limited to a certain number every year and my share of it has been completed some time, so that I have been forced much against my will to refuse severall of my friends' already, and consequently must beg you also to excuse me, it not being in my power to serve you that way."⁸

⁵ R. Surtees, *History of Durham*, vol. 2, p. 287.

⁶ *Iter Curiosum*, vol. 2, p. 72. For Hunter's articles on Lanchester see *Philosophical Transactions* no. 354, vol. 30, p. 823; also *Diaries and Letters of William Stukeley*, vol. 2, p. 139 (Surtees Society); for draft of the letter and Gale's reply, Raine MSS. no. 117 (Durham Cathedral Library.)

⁷ Roger Gale, 1672-1744; eldest son of Thomas Gale, Dean of York. Fellow of Trinity College Cambridge. M.P. for Northallerton 1705; Commissioner of Stamp duties 1714; Commissioner of Excise 1715; displaced 1735 to make room for a friend of Walpole's. He was an enthusiastic antiquary; good epigraphist and numismatist. Published with notes of his own his father's edition of *Antonini Iter Britanniarum* (London, 1709).

⁸ Raine MSS. 117.

He seems to have corresponded too with John Horsley about Hadrian's Wall and its forts. From Horsley's references Hunter seems to have visited Chesters, Birdoswald, Carvoran, Carrawburgh, Chesterholm, and Corbridge;⁹ while it is certain that they corresponded about the fort at Lanchester.¹⁰

Lest it should be imagined that Hunter's interests were confined to Roman antiquity, he is to be found working on the papers and manuscripts in Durham Cathedral Library. Here he found great pleasure, for he declared that "The unknown and neglected antiquities of this church and county" had given him "the most diverting pleasure, having the happiness to be admitted as well by my Lord Bishop as by the Dean and Chapter to search into all their records".¹¹

From these researches came two books and proposals for two more. Having read Daniel Neal's *History of the Puritans*, he decided to shew the Durham Puritan, Peter Smart, in his true colours; and "An illustration of M. and D. Neal's *History of the Puritans*, in the article of Peter Smart, A.M., from original papers and remarks" was published. Hunter wrote:

"As we have a press in Durham as soon as paper proper can be got, I fancy to print it here more convenient than to have it done in London."¹²

His other work was an anonymous edition of Davies's *Rites and Monuments with considerable additions*. Surtees assures us that it was by Hunter, for he writes that he had seen the manuscript in Hunter's own handwriting.¹³

His other attempts at publication were less fortunate.

⁹ John Horsley, *Britannia Romana* (1732), pp. xxi, 106, 107, 217, 218, 219, 225, 236, 245, 246, 247.

¹⁰ R. Surtees in *History of Durham*, vol. 2, p. 287, writes that this will appear under Lanchester. Unfortunately it did not, and now seems lost.

¹¹ *Reliquae Galeanae*, p. 179, no. xlvi.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 162, no. xxxix. The name of the printer was J. Ross.

¹³ R. Surtees, *History of Durham*, vol. 2, pp. 287-8.

The Bowes Correspondence of Sir Robert Bowes, Elizabeth I's ambassador in Scotland, and of John Bowes, Knight Marshall, his brother, had been entrusted to Hunter for purposes of reference and editing. As a result of this he wrote to the *Gentlemen's Magazine* in August 1736 with a proposal for publication. Interest, however, was not forthcoming and the project was abandoned. Somewhat bitterly Hunter wrote:

"The disappointment in publishing my volumes of Sir Robert Bowes and Mr. John Bowes's letters during their service to Queen Elizabeth appears indeed to be a plot of some of the nobility unwilling to have the behaviour of their ancestors to Queen Elizabeth known, which My Lord Bishop knows very well tho' he was prevailed with to dissuade me, but at present is very desirous they should be published."¹⁴

In 1743 Hunter again wrote to the *Gentleman's Magazine* with a proposal to publish a history of County Durham, a proposal which again did not materialize. Hunter also reveals that he had thought of publishing an edition of Richard de Bury. Unfortunately he had to inform his correspondent, Dr. Grey:

"My Lord Bishop has justly thought the present age unworthy of, if not generally bent against such early works, as promoted the restoration literature."¹⁵

Reading between the lines it would appear that Edward Chandler, the Bishop of Durham, was used by local people to prevent some of Hunter's cherished literary schemes.

During the course of his work in the library of Durham Cathedral he seems to have arranged numerous letters and to have collected a good deal on his own account. He acquired, we know not how, a very fine medieval manuscript. It is a composite volume, finely written, of nones and ides and Saints' days compiled for use in the monastery. Towards the end of the volume there is a section devoted

¹⁴ *Reliquae Galeanae*, p. 181, no. L.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 179, no. xlviij.

to medical matters that contains some excellent drawings. And there is also a list headed *Expositio herbarum. per modum Alphabeti*, consisting of the Latin names for plants and fruits with their eleventh-century English equivalents. During his lifetime he seems to have acquired a good library, but on his death it was bought by one Richardson for £360 and the books were dispersed by sale. His collections and manuscripts, together with his coins and inscribed stones, were purchased by the Dean and Chapter of Durham for the bargain price of £40.

It cannot be said that Roman antiquities were dominant in his antiquarian studies, but it is fair to say that in the few years following his settlement in Stockton-on-Tees he did make an interesting contribution to Roman studies: At the turn of the century he seems to have made a number of journeys to Hadrian's Wall and beyond. His reports were published in *Philosophical Transactions*, the journal of the Royal Society, in 1702 in the form of letters sent to Martin Lister. The first, chiefly concerned with Ebchester, has an interesting passage. He writes of it:

"The passage in the second book of Ptolemy's *Geography sub Elgovis et Olludinis ad utraq maria habitant Brigantes in quibus urbes Epiacum, Vinnovium, Caturactionium, Cataltum, Isurium Rhigodunum, Olicana Eboracum* seems to persuade me that this may probably have been the Epiacum of the Romans, especially if it can be granted that this author mentions only the Eastern parts of this province (and only Ebiacum if placed at Papcastle and Rhigodunum if at Ribchester thwart this assertion). And indeed I am apt to believe that Ptolemy begins his enumeration of the place nearest *Hadrian's Wall*, and has advanced in order (tho' with the some omissions to Eboracum, the chief town of the province)."¹⁶

The attempt to site the various names need not detain us, the point here is the use of the term *Hadrian's Wall*. It is the earliest use that the present writer has met, and it is tantalizing to wonder whether Hunter realized what he was

¹⁶ Letter dated 12 April, 1702, *Philosophical Transactions*; vol. 23; p. 1129.

saying. It is most unusual to find the wall ascribed to Hadrian in an age when it was commonly described as the *Pict's Wall*, and thought that the Emperor who was responsible for the wall was Severus. Why a discussion never developed about it can only be explained by the fact that the antiquaries were far more interested in finding something to copy down or carry off than they were in the true ascription of the ruins to their proper builders. In his second letter Hunter gives an account of his visit to Chesterholm, where he was one of the first to do so; having been beaten by a short head for first place by Thomas Machel, rector of Kirkby Thore, Westmorland. Though he found the site at Chesterholm overgrown with bushes he reported that:

“Some years ago on the West side of this place, about fifty yards from the wall thereof, there was discovered under a heap of rubbish a square room strongly vaulted above, and paved with large square stones set in lime, and under this a lower room whose floor was supported by rows of square pillars about half a yard high; the upper had two niches like (and perhaps in the nature of) Chimneys on each side of every corner of the square, which in all make the number sixteen; the pavement of this room as also its roof were tinged black with smook. The stones used in vaulting the upper room have been marked as our Joyners do the Deals for Chambers; those I saw were numbered thus X, XI, XIII. The man who farms this ground presented me with a winged image; it has been about three inches (? feet) long, but now want the Head and Feet.”¹⁷

In a draft of this letter, Hunter has this passage which did not find its way into the final production:

“I met nothing worth observation till we came at the Housesteads 'tis a ground adjoining upon Hadrian's or the Roman Wall, which is for a considerable space cover'd with the Ruins of houses destroy'd, among which I found several pedestals. . . . I was to take a view of the wall which stands up on a high precipice, it has been two yards thick at least, and as I was told has been defended by a square tower at every mile, on the inside

¹⁷ Letter dated 15 May, 1702, *Philosophical Transactions*, vol. 23, p. 1131.

of the wall, which they say goes along from one end to the other tho' just within the wall. And at some distance within the wall is a large double ditch, a single one without. Lower down towards Walwick I saw two Towers which stood so as the wall past as it were through the midst of them; whereas the rest were set on the inside."¹⁸

On two scraps of paper Hunter has written:

"These inscriptions were discovered at the Fort in Northumberland called the Bower (*see Philosophical Transactions* No. 278). I take this to be the Vindolana mentioned in the Notitia, the station of the fourth Cohort of Gauls; the only reason of I have for it is that in defaced inscription the word GALLOR only remains of the first line."

"Procolita	Coh. I	Batavor	Carrowbrough
Borovicus	Coh. I	Tungrorum	Housesteads
Vindolana	Coh. IIII	Gallorum	Chesters "

(The fact that Hunter calls Chesterholm Chesters need cause no trouble, as the site was known by a number of names; of which Chesters, Chesters parvus and the Bower are three.)

On another scrap of paper he has the following list:

"Tinmouth Castle; Walls End; Red Barns; Benwell Hills; Rutchester; Winchester; Portgate; Silchester; Walwick Grange; Carrowbrough; Housesteads; Chesters parvus; Chesters magnus; Carrvoran; Glenwolt; Willowford; Byrdissol; Trodorman; Castlesteads; Warwick; Cambeck; Chester on Sands."¹⁹

Though he does not state what was the object of the list, it appears as though it was meant to be the names of the forts and road crossings on the Wall. And he has them substantially correct, even though there are a number of superfluous names; due perhaps to mistaking some of the milecastles, for forts, if that is possible!

In his third letter Hunter records a visit to Redesdale.

¹⁸ Raine MSS., Durham Cathedral Library, no. 117.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*

Travelling through Ebchester and on to Corbridge he noted:

"I found Watling Street very visible from near Ebchester to Corbridge." From Corbridge "I travelled upon this street almost to Resingham; it is very visible all this way; about a mile south from Resingham there is a pillar of about eight feet in length which has stood by the wayside but is now fallen." He then mentions that he was given a "Brass Medal which was found here a year ago". He wrote that the name of the Emperor was worn out but that AUG PIUS was very legible; on the reverse there was a wolf without any inscription. "The next Roman town I visited was Rochester; Watling street is very visible some part of it, but how far I cannot tell, not having traced it. . . . I cannot say this is the largest but think that it has been one of the best fortified places the Romans have been Masters of in the North; and indeed it stood in need of being so, since it was not only a frontier town but as Maesstricht is at present surrounded by enemies."²⁰

Again in a draft that was never published he gives an insight into the attitude of the Redesdale folk to the objects that they found:

"I was surprised to meet with so little in Redesdale, but have been told the people there especially at Rochester are afraid of tainting the titles of their estates by communicating these inscriptions which they cannot but find upon turning over the ruins of a place which tho' not the largest I make bold to say has been one of the best fortified the Romans have had in the Northern parts."²¹

It is pleasing to note to-day that there has been a remarkable change for the better in the temper of the residents of Redesdale.

These drafts and letters do show us that at least one antiquary earlier than Horsley was thinking about the names and sites of the forts of the Wall; and was prepared to ride as far north as High Rochester to search for inscriptions and other objects. Perhaps they were intended for his own

²⁰ Letter dated 29 May, 1702, *Philosophical Transactions*, vol. 23, p. 1132.

²¹ Raine MSS., Durham Cathedral Library. These loose papers are not catalogued, but have been placed together in a folder.

collection, but at any rate he published the details of what he saw and found—a point which is being insisted upon still in archæological studies. It is true that many of the antiquaries, Hunter included, were rather apt to be rash in their identification of sites with names in the *Itinerary*, but there were some, of which Horsley was the chief, who were able to come to more reliable conclusions and make the right use of the evidence they saw in their field work. Of these on a humble scale Christopher Hunter must be accounted. He must also be accorded a place among those who were prepared to go out and see what they could, find what they could, and record what they saw; men whose studies of Roman times took place not in the library, but under the

“dawn and sunset on moors and windy hills”.

These men were our first field-workers who still have their part to play to-day. We cannot claim a high place for Christopher Hunter but we can at least claim a niche for a helper of the great John Horsley, and agree with the epitaph written on his tomb at Shotley Bridge: that he was

“a learned and judicious antiquary”.