

NOTICE OF CERTAIN RELICS FOUND NEAR AYLESBURY ;  
WITH FURTHER REMARKS ON "RUBBINGS." IN A  
LETTER FROM VICE-ADMIRAL SMYTH.

*St. John's Lodge, 12—5—'59.*

MY DEAR SIR,

From your having drawn my attention to the vestigia discovered in this neighbourhood during the autumn of last year, I repaired to the site, which is on a farm tenanted by Mr. Edward Terry. By this, and an examination of the relics, I am able to state the following particulars; and however scant they may be, I hope they will be found accurate, since they may therefore form a link in the chain of evidence which research has procured, or may yet procure, respecting the ancient occupation of this vicinity. Besides correcting archaic chorography, such incidents also generally afford a partial insight into the state and condition of those who preceded us, by yielding unequivocal traces of their forts and dwellings, the money circulated among them, the utensils and implements which they used, the weapons they brandished, the remains of the very animals they subsisted upon, and finally their modes of sepulture. It is therefore imperative that every vestige brought to light by design or accident, should be duly substantiated and recorded, so that the *disjecta membra* may hereafter be embodied in a comprehensive whole.

Here I cannot but own to being somewhat perplexed that Aylesbury bears so slight a mention in our historic registers, seeing that according to the old Saxon Chronicle it was one of the strongest holds of the Britons: and it evidently must have been of capital importance, from its dominant position over the Vale to which its name is imparted. Yet we are encompassed with unmistakeable evidences of successive occupation by Britons, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, and Danes; the two last of which peoples are well known to have had most ferocious and sanguinary encounters at Halton, Bledlow (Bloody-ridge), and other hard-fought battle-fields, wherein indiscriminate massacre or hopeless slavery awaited the vanquished. Even of late

years, extensive 'finds' of coins, pottery, arms, fibulæ, armillæ, beads, tesserae, and mattoni, have occurred all around; as for instance at Prince's Risborough, Ellesborough, Weston Turville, Mentmore, Crendon, Little Kimble, Stone, and that severely-contested Saxon station Dinton, where tradition points to the *sambucus humilis*, or Daneswort, as a proof that the soil which nourished it had been drenched and saturated with blood of the Danes. This spot appears to offer promise to the excavator, but there is little to be marked above-ground; in the Vale, the boundaries for the greater part may have been formed of hedge-rows and ditches, which as my late friend Hallam remarked, are among our oldest antiquities: hence the little that offers to eye-search, the very ruins of the stations having disappeared—*ipse periere ruinæ*. But among the adjacent Chiltern Hills there are mounds, barrows, entrenched camps, and fastnesses of various kinds among its once impassible forests, which sufficiently prove the early consequence of that fine mountainous range; of these perhaps the most interesting is Belinus, or Kimble Castle, the reputed residence of the British King Cunobeline—Shakspeare's *Cymbeline*. This post is finely situated on a strong circular eminence above Velvet Lawn, and I can find no reason for doubting its traditional story. Indubitable certainty may yet reward inquiry; but I cannot suppress my own chagrin on being told in Ellesborough that a man had recently found a beautiful coin in this castle, when, dreaming of the gold galloping horse and wheel of Cunobeline, I found that it proved—after being unwrapped from its swathings—to be a trumpery brass Nuremburg Token! To return—

Last autumn, in draining a field called Benhill, situate in the hamlet of Walton, between the two roads to Tring and Wendover, and just beyond the new Cemetery, the workmen dug up a quantity of human and other bones, together with a corroded spear-head, and the neck of a terracotta vessel which has been painted black, and apparently of the form of one represented in Artis's "*Durobrivæ, Illustrated*" (plate xlvii, fig. 1), which was found at the Roman pottery-kiln, Normangate-field, Castor, in 1826: and I was also shown the fragment of what seemed to have been the handle of a coarse amphora, or perhaps of one of the mortuary urns called *ossuaria*. These remains were

found at about three feet deep, in a dark soil bearing an appearance as of burning having been practised,—a circumstance of no great weight in itself, since cremation and inhumation were cotemporaneously in use among the Pagan Anglo-Saxons; although there was a difference in the sepultures of the Romans quartered in Britain, and the Romanized population of the island. Such was the ‘find’; but the space was not disturbed beyond the furrows necessary for drainage, so that the extent of eligible excavatable ground is still unknown. Indeed after wandering over the whole site, I am not prepared to recommend any particular spot whereon to commence with the pick and the spade, except to continue the diggings as before, when the present crop of beans is off the surface.

In examining the ‘find’ in detail, the human bones and teeth were found to be in very fair condition, and indeed some of them perfectly sound: and there were parts of the antlers of two stags, an entire stag’s head, some boar’s tusks, and other intermingled bones,—most of which were collected and submitted to my inspection by Mr. Field, of Aylesbury. No coins, medals, implements, tesserae, or foundations were discovered in the very limited extent which was opened; but the spear-head above-mentioned offers a clue upon which we may reason pretty positively. Being nearly flat, and no less than eighteen inches in length, it must be considered Danish; that people using spear-blades even longer, insomuch that they were more like swords on shafts than the usual spears. As it is unlike the pilum of the Lower-Empire Romans, the angon of the Franks, the spiculum of the Anglo-Saxons, or the javelin of the Teutonic races in general, it may be accepted as an evidence of a fallen Dane; and it is therefore indicative of a fact and a period.

The name Ben-hill is no doubt derived from the long eminence which commands the valley between it and the Chilterns; *Ben* having been widely applied to elevated ground. The situation as a post is excellent, looking over the town of Aylesbury to the N.W., and the village of Weston Turville—where many Roman relics have been found—to the S.E.; and it commands a view of the country immediately surrounding it. Not far below, in the Friarage fields, Roman coins have been repeatedly found; some of which, picked up only last year, were brought here for

my inspection. These pieces, however, afford a very slight testimony as to the former occupants, for Roman money having been the currency of the country for upwards of 400 years, it may equally as well have been hidden or lost by the Britons or Saxons, as by the Romans. Herein the ceramic art lends a powerful aid in determining the time and degree of civilization of a people whose history is lost; for fragile pottery has proved even more durable than brass, thus countenancing Sir Thomas Browne's fine assertion that "Time conferreth a dignity upon everything that resisteth his power." It is to the plastic vases of the Etruscans and Greeks that chronology, art, and history are so deeply indebted; and the specimens found about here—although inferior—cannot but be very useful to inquiry. From what has already been exhumed, it is clear that the use of pottery continued among the Romanized Britons and Anglo-Saxons after the departure of the Romans: but instead of the usual red lustrous wares of the latter, the domestic utensils of the former are rather inelegant, exhibiting no great marks of much preparation before use; and they are generally made of coarse clays impressed more or less with zig-zag lines. Still occasionally the better fictile productions of the Romans are turned up in the neighbourhood, as, for instance, among the relics exhumed at Weston Turville in 1855, two pateræ and a caliculus were found of the red so-called Samian ware; but both the glaze and paste, or body of the material, render it doubtful whether they were fabricated in England.

Except that in cases like the present, wherein every incident ought to be brought forward, I should hardly have mentioned that, among the bones found at Benhill, were several specimens of the little fossil nautilus, of the Foraminifera kind approaching to the nummulite. Of these Mr. Field has preserved a good specimen.

On the whole the 'find' offers as yet very little to reason upon; but still from this accidental discovery a probable conclusion may be arrived at, namely, that the hill was once the site of an encampment, very likely Anglo-Saxon; that outside this camp an engagement with the Danes had taken place, after which the slain men and horses were buried in the trenches where they fell; and that the bones of the deer, boars, and other ruminant

creatures, indicate the pagan sacrificial death-meals—in which even horse-flesh bore a part. Hence the quantity of edible animals' relics found at all the cemeterial openings in every part of Pagan Saxondom, at which so many antiquists have gazed and marvelled. On this point my late regretted friend, Mitchell Kemble, speaking of the identity of the Anglo-Saxon obsequies with those of the Saxons who remained at their old seats on the Elbe, somewhat indignantly remarks—"There has been a good deal of nonsense talked in England about sacrifices and the like. Once for all, let it be known that the sacrificial flesh of the Germans was boiled, not roasted, and was eaten on the spot by those who partook of the sacrifice; which, at stated seasons, the chiefs and kings, if not the whole people, were expected to do. When Hakonr the Good was in bad odour with the Northmen, on suspicion of Christianity, he was made to pass the *broth of boiled horse-flesh* under his nostrils, and the people consented to take this as evidence that he had communicated according to the heathen rite."

The position of these grounds, in a military point of view, may have been of great moment in the intercommunication of a former day; for the great road called the Ichniel Way—the Icenhelde Stræt of our early Chronicles, and the Acknal Way of the locality—ran between the Chiltern Hills on the south, and the Benhill eminences on the north. Nor was it only in far by-gone times that the site was thought eligible for contention, though the notices as yet hunted up are very scant.

In examining the fields about Walton, I am inclined to view the locality as the spot where Prince Rupert was stricken by Sir William Balfore, as reported in a rare quarto pamphlet printed by the Parliament in 1642, under the title of "Good and Joyfull Newes out of Buckinghamshire." It opens with a rather unexpected sneer at the prevalent appetite for news being supplied without much regard to fact—"every man speaking according to his fancie and wishes, and divers sons of audacity and impudence, confidently committing many illegitimate conceptions of their owne to the publike view, which have no more affinity with truth, than the opinions of Copernicus of the motion of the earth."

So much for the Benhill Field! We now turn to staid

common-place facts, and among them I request for a word more in regard to the importance of ' Rubbings.'

In my former letter to you, while jotting down the Dinton Inscription, it struck me that its orthography, cutting, characters, diphthongs, and points, were so like to those of the doggrel lines upon the great Shakspeare's tomb in Stratford Church, that the artists of the two must have *flourished* contemporaneously—and even a suspicion arose whether the two productions might not have been by the same hand? On referring to Chalmers's edition of Shakspeare in 8 vols. 1826, I find it thus—in a form calculated to deceive, because the irregularities in the size and form of the letters induce an implicit belief that they must have been very scrupulously traced—

Good Friend for Iesus SAKE forbear

To digg T-E Dust EnclOAsed HERe

Blese be T-E Man † spares T-Es Stones

And curst be He † moves my Bones.

and this is exactly copied by others, even down to the recent edition of Charles Knight: while, as an example of the inefficiency of eye-copying in these instances, the Rev. Alexander Dyce, so lately as 1857, not perceiving the ligature mark of coalition of letters which a rubbing would have made manifest, also prints *blese* for *blest*.

It is probable, that Chalmers borrowed the inscribed lines from Malone's well-known publication in twenty-one volumes, wherein they appear as above, with this remark:—"On his grave-stone underneath is the following inscription, expressed, as Mr. Steevens observes, in an uncouth mixture of small and capital letters." Here we have a curious proof that Steevens—the malignant Puck of Shakspearian Commentators—could not have seen the monument which he so dogmatically described.

Not being, however, in the habit of giving in against my conviction, and feeling quite sure that there was no such unmeaning confusion of great and little characters on the actual slab, I wrote a few weeks ago to my excellent friend Edward Fordham Flower, Esq.—of the Hill, Stratford-upon-Avon—requesting him to procure me a rubbing from the original; and he kindly furnished me

with the one I now forward, through you, for the Society's acceptance. Though the printer's types will necessarily differ from the *Artist's* cut-letters, the following is a pretty fair reduction of the true inscription:—

GOOD FRENDE FOR IESVS SAKE FORBEARE,

TO DIGG THE DVST ENCLOSED HEARE:

BLESE BE  $\bar{Y}$  MAN  $\bar{Y}$  SPARES TIES STONES,

AND CVRST BE HE  $\bar{Y}$  MOVES MY BONES.

Poor Shakspeare: what had he done to deserve having this senseless request and imprecation, served up in such sorry verse, fathered upon him!

To what I have already advanced respecting the necessity of accuracy in inscriptions of every kind, I may close this communication with an illustrative incident in proof. My remarks in the last number of the RECORDS OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE having been read by the Astronomer Royal, George Biddell Airy, Esq., that gentleman informed me of the recent wanton destruction of a Church-monument at Playford, near Ipswich, which was of such local interest as to have been figured by Gough, in his "Sepulchral Monuments of Great Britain." This letter was dated from the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, December 30th, 1858; and by the next morning's post, I received another missive from him to this effect:—

I omitted at the proper time to mention the following instance of the great value of a *rubbing* for an inscription, as preferable to any copy by the eye.

A few years ago, when I decided on restoring Halley's Tomb, I first had the inscription carefully copied by eye, and the date thus given for Halley's death was—

MDCCXLI

Some qualms of conscience came over me, and for perfect restoration of the inscription, faults and all, I had a very good rubbing made. The date of death now came out—

MDCCXLI ..

The two dots at the end would not have caught any lady's eye. But what could they mean? My good angel suggested that possibly the event occurred while custom was yet uncertain as to beginning the year

in January or in March, and that possibly Halley died either in January or in February : and that the Sculptor intended to cut

MDCCXLI II

or as we should say in figures

1741-2.

And so it was. Halley died in January or February (I forget which), 1742, by present reckoning. And but for this care, I should in the restoration have cheated Halley of a year of life.

Hoping this animated correction may act as a caution to those who are inclined to run and read, I am,

My dear Sir,

Your's faithfully,

W. H. SMYTH.

*The Rev. Charles Loundes, F. R. A. S.,  
Hon. Sec., &c.*