

THE ROCK INSCRIPTIONS AT BEARDOWN.

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MRS. BRAY, in her book *The Borders of the Tamar and the Tavy*, says, after describing the down and the wooded gorge of the Cowsick above Two Bridges:—

“Such is Bair-down. All the trees were planted by my husband’s father, who built the house and the bridge, and who raised the loose stone walls as enclosures for cattle for many miles in extent; and, in short, who literally expended a fortune on the improvements and enclosures on this estate.”

Mr. Edward Bray, who leased the ground from the “Duchy,” was a solicitor of Tavistock, where his only son, Edward Atkyns Bray, was born in 1778. The lad was educated for a barrister, but about five years after his call to the Bar (in 1806) he quitted that profession and entered the Church. After ordination in 1811 he joined Trinity College, Cambridge, and the following year became Vicar of Tavistock and perpetual Curate of Brentor. In 1822 he graduated as B.D. Cantab, and he died at Tavistock in 1857. His wife, the authoress, was Anna Eliza, daughter of John Kempe, and widow of C. A. Stothard.

He, like his father, was much attached to the grand old moor, and began to record in his Journal, as early as 1802, the investigations into its antiquities which he was fond of making at every opportunity.

His wife says, in 1879:—

“It is but justice to state that my lamented husband, then a very young man, was the first who personally commenced those researches which have thrown so much light on the antiquities of the western limits of Dartmoor. Many have since followed, but he led the way. Mr. Bray’s notes and observations, with the sketches he made on the spot of several of these antiquities, will

be found in the following pages, and are now more than ever of interest and value, as it is much to be feared that many of the originals no longer exist, from the destruction which for the last few years has unfortunately been allowed on Dartmoor."

Would that, in *these* days, we had no reason to lament similar wanton destruction of the prehistoric monuments of the moor. That it is still going on, however, many can testify. Only last August 18th, on the occasion of an excursion of the Teign Naturalists' Field Club, it was seen that one of the large stones of the well-known Gidleigh, or Scorchill, circle had been recently thrown down, and an attempt made in the usual manner to split it lengthwise, in order to make a gate-post! In some unexplained way the attempt had been frustrated, but a well-known member of our Association took a photograph at the time; and thus there is on record incontestable evidence of one more instance of the shameful spoliation to which these memorials of the past are exposed by the Vandals of even these "enlightened" days. Would that the miscreants had been caught in the act! I, for one, would have willingly helped to give them a lesson—the Wallabrook is conveniently near at hand.

The Rev. E. A. Bray wrote many poems, a selection of which was published by Messrs. Longman in 1859, and he had a fancy "to give a tongue to the very rocks, so that there might be found, even in the midst of a desert:—

"Books in the running brooks;
Sermons in stones, and good in everything."

Writing in 1832, his wife says that he had partly covered with inscriptions:—

"Several of those enormous masses that arise, with so much magnificence, in the midst of the river Cowsick, that flows at the foot of the eminence on which the house was built by his father."

And that:—

"Some of these inscriptions are now so moss-grown, so hidden with lichen, or so worn with the weather and the winter torrents, that a stranger, unless he examined the rocks at a particular hour of the day when the sun is favourable, would not be very likely to discover them. Others, though composed by him for the same purpose, were never inscribed on account of the time and labour it required to cut them in the granite. . . . Some of these inscriptions were in triads, and engraved on the rocks in the 'bardic character' of the 'sprig alphabet,' as it is given by the Rev. Edward Davies in his *Celtic Remains*."

Mr. Bray himself states in his Journal, under the date 1802, that at first he intended to select passages from his favourite authors—some of the Latin and Italian poets—for the inscriptions on the rocks, but that many of the most appropriate passages were found to be too long. It then occurred to him that, though it was his plan to paint the letters first, and then to leave a mason to cut them into the granite, many mistakes would surely be made by the workman if a foreign language were used. This led him to alter his purpose, and he says:—

“I did nothing more at first than inscribe upon a few rocks ‘To Theocritus,’ ‘To Virgil,’ etc. . . . I then conceived that it would give more animation to the scene by adding something, either addressed to, or supposed to be uttered by, these fancied genii or divinities of the rock; and accordingly, for the sake of conciseness as well as a trial of skill, composed them in couplets” (in English).

Later on he says it was his intention to put upon the rocks of a certain island in the stream, which he named the “Isle of Mona,” none but inscriptions in “bardic” characters, in the form of triads, but he does not say that he actually carried out this part of his plan.

Last August I was staying at Beardown Farm, and as the weather was not such as to permit the completion of the investigation and mapping of the antiquities in the next section of the moor north of the area which I described in vol. xxxiii. of our *Transactions* (1901), I spent some of the time in searching for and copying Mr. Bray’s inscriptions on the boulders in the river and on the neighbouring hillside. I did not look for any “bardic” inscriptions in the “Isle of Mona,” for I had not with me the book containing the letters of that alphabet.

All the inscriptions which could be found are given below, but it is highly probable there may originally have been more upon boulders, since destroyed or mutilated, to furnish material for repairing the bridge or for some other purpose. In fact, I found that the lower part of the surface of one boulder, upon the upper part of which is inscribed “To Horace,” had been split off, for there is a long groove, semi-circular in section, on the lower portion of the stone, such as is left when a rock has been bored by the iron tool and then split in the usual manner; and as the boulder which is contiguous has two completed couplets on it dedicated to Cicero and to Atticus, it is probable that the inscription to Horace

had also been finished upon the lower portion, now missing, of the other boulder.

In Mr. Bray's Journal of 1831 he mentions the difficulty even then of finding some of the inscriptions. We read:—

“On crossing the bridge which was erected by my father over the Cowsick, Mrs. Bray expressed a wish that I would point out to her some of my inscriptions on the rocks below, which, from some strange circumstance or other, she had never seen; and even now I thought that without much search we should not have found them, not recollecting, after so long a period, where I had placed them. But on looking over the parapet she observed, on one of the rocks beneath, the name of her favourite, Shakspeare. Perhaps under other circumstances it might have altogether escaped notice, but the sun was at that instant in such a direction as to assist her in deciphering it.”

In another place we read:—

“Perhaps I had fondly anticipated that, long ere this, on seeing these inscriptions, some kindred being might have exclaimed, ‘A poet has been here, or one at least who had the feelings of a poet.’”

But he tells us that no one ever seems to have noticed the inscriptions, or at any rate if they had done so it had never reached his ears.

Though the inscriptions are now about a century old, I found that, with the aid of a stout twig to scrape the moss and lichen out of the grooves, all the letters in the various inscriptions could be quite definitely made out, with the exception of the first two of the word “*named*” in the couplet to Cicero.

In the second field south of Beardown House, on the steep slope above the Cowsick River, near the upper hedge, are three big boulders close together. On the largest of these there are three inscriptions. On its *south* face, which is inclined about 60° to the horizon, is the following:—

TO THEOCRITUS

THOU BIDST, SWEET BARD, TO FANCY'S WOND'RING
EYES,
 'MID BRITISH WILDS SICILIAN GROVES ARISE

The letters of the first line are 4½ in. high and the others 1¾ in. The lengths of the lines are 5 ft. 7 in., 5 ft. 10 in., and 4 ft. 10 in.

On the *west* face, which is practically vertical, and written

obliquely down the rock at an angle of about 60° to the horizon, south, is:—

TO VIRGIL

BID CEASE THY TRUMPET, SING
NOT HERE OF ARMS
BUT TUNE THY REED TO NATURE'S
PEACEFUL CHARMS

The letters of the first line are 4 in. in height, those of the second line $2\frac{1}{2}$ in., and the rest about $2\frac{1}{4}$ in. The lengths of the five lines are 2 ft. 11 in., 5 ft. 9 in., 3 ft. 2 in., 5 ft. 9 in., and 3 ft. 2 in.

On the *north-west*, vertical, face of the same boulder is:—

TO GESSNER

HELVETIA'S FROWNING
ROCKS SO WILD
WERE SOFTEND AT THY
STRAINS AND SMILED

The letters of the first line are rather less than 4 in. high, and all the rest are about $2\frac{1}{4}$ in. The lengths of the five lines are 2 ft. 9 in., 3 ft. 6 in., 2 ft. 4 in., 3 ft. 6 in., and 3 ft.

On a second boulder, a few feet west of the previous one, are inscriptions on three surfaces also. The one on the *south* face is as follows:—

TO TASSO

NEER BE IT MINE ARMIDA'S ARTS TO
PROVE,
BUT LIKE AMINTA SHARE FOND SILVIA'S LOVE

The first line of this is on a narrow surface inclined about 45° to the horizon, but the surface below on which the couplet is carved is nearly vertical.

The letters of the first line are $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. high, those of the second line $2\frac{3}{4}$ in., and those of the last line only $2\frac{1}{4}$ in. The lengths of the lines are: 3 ft. 2 in. for the first, 6 ft. 3 in. for the second (not counting the isolated word), and 7 ft. 7 in. for the third.

On the *north* face of the same boulder, which is vertical, is:—

TO BONARELLI

No couplet follows. The inscription is 3 ft. 1 in. long, and the height of the letters is 3 in.

On the *south-west* face, which also is nearly vertical, is:—

TO GUARINI

Here also is no couplet. The letters are $2\frac{1}{2}$ in. high, and the length of the line is 2 ft. 9 in.

The last of the three rocks in the group is the smallest, and it is close at hand, south of the last-mentioned one. It has two long sloping surfaces, each inclined about 45° . On the *west-south-west* surface is inscribed:—

TO RAMSAY

in letters $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. high, the length of the line being 3 ft. 1 in.

On the *east-north-east* face, towards its southern end, is:—

TO SIDNEY

The letters are $3\frac{1}{4}$ in. high, and the length of the inscription is 2 ft. 5 in. No couplet follows either of the last two.

Towards the north end of the last sloping surface there are the words "TO CARLYLE," with letters 5 in. tall, but cut in a very shallow manner on the rock. Mrs. Kennard, the lessee of Beardown Farm, told me they were cut by an old gentleman who was staying there about four years ago. He intended to add some laudatory lines, but found the work would take far longer than he had thought.

In the same field, but some distance away, near its westerly end, are two other boulders. The north-easterly of the two has upon its south-south-west surface, which is nearly vertical, the following words, in letters about 3 in. high, and forming a line 2 ft. 7 in. long:—

TO HORACE

The lower ends of both "R" and "A" have been slightly shortened, evidently by the splitting off of a portion of the boulder, for just below the level of the line is a nearly vertical groove 1 ft. 8 in. long, semicircular in section, showing where a hole had been bored by an iron tool preparatory to splitting the rock. It seems very likely that there was a couplet engraved upon the piece broken off.

The second of these two boulders is a little nearer the bridge than the other. Its easterly surface is nearly vertical, and upon it is the following inscription:—

TO ATTICUS

FAR FROM THE FORUM'S NOISY STRIFE
THOU LOVEDET TO SPEND THY RURAL LIFE

The first line is 2 ft. 4 in. long, and the letters are about $2\frac{1}{2}$ in., or rather more, high. The second line is 5 ft. 1 in. long, and the third 5 ft. 8 in. The letters in both are $1\frac{3}{4}$ in. high. This is the only inscription in which the mason has made a mistake. The last letter but one in "lovedst" appears as an "e" instead of "s."

The *south-south-east* face of the same boulder is also nearly vertical, and upon it is the most weather-worn of all the inscriptions. It is impossible to be certain what the fourth and fifth letters in the first line of the couplet are, but I conclude they must be "N" and "A":—

TO CICERO

THO' NAMED THE FATHER OF IMPERIAL ROME
YET WAS THY TUSCULUM THY FAVORITE HOME

The first line is 2 ft. 4 in. long, and the letters are 3 in. high. The second line is 5 ft. long, and the third 5 ft. 10 in., and the letters in them are $1\frac{3}{4}$ in. high.

On the south bank of the river, just above the road bridge, are two big boulders under the shade of a fine beech tree. The south-south-east face of the one nearest the trunk is inclined about 45° to the horizon, and on it are the words:—

TO BEATTIE

The letters are 3 in. high, and the inscription is 2 ft. 5 in. long.

The second boulder is north-north-east of the preceding, close to the masonry of the bridge. An inscription on its nearly vertical *south-south-east* face is 2 ft. 4 in. long:—

TO COLLINS

The first letter is 3 in. high; the others are $2\frac{1}{2}$ in.

On the same (south) bank of the Cowsick, but east of the bridge and only two or three yards distant, is the first of three huge rocks. Its upper surface is nearly horizontal; and on the *south-south-west* face, which is nearly vertical, is an inscription 2 ft. 4 in. long, with letters 3 in. high:—

TO BURNS

On the *south-east* face of the same, which also is vertical, are the words:—

TO SPENCER

The space occupied is 2 ft. 7 in. long, and the letters are 3 in. high.

The second boulder, an enormous one, also with its upper surface nearly horizontal, is close by on the east side of the preceding one. On its vertical *north-west* face is an inscription 3 ft. 9 in. long in letters 3 in. high:—

TO SHAKESPEARE

The third of this group of boulders is elongated in shape, and is close by on the south of the first one. Its *south-east* face is not far from vertical, and on it is:—

TO THOMSON

The letters vary from $2\frac{1}{2}$ in. to 3 in. in height, and the length of the line is 2 ft. 9 in.

The eighteenth and last of the inscriptions is upon a largish rock overhanging the stream on the north (or left) bank, a little way below the bridge. It is the first big boulder on the verge of the water, as the course of the stream is followed down. Its *south-west* surface is inclined about 60° to the horizon, and upon it, in letters varying from $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. to 4 in. in height, is the following inscription, 3 ft. 5 in. long:—

TO MILTON

Although eighteen poets are thus honoured by their names being engraved on the rocks in this romantic valley, yet only six of the many couplets which Mr. Bray composed for them and many other men, seem to have been actually added.

In the 1879 edition of *The Borders of the Tamar and the Tavy*, vol. i. chap. 5, Mrs. Bray quotes about fifty of her husband's verses of different lengths, and among them I find those he intended for (1) Burns, (2) Shakspeare, (3) Spenser, and (4) Thomson. They are as follows:—

- (1) "Long as the moon shall shed her sacred light,
Thy strain, sweet bard, shall cheer the cotter's night."
- (2) "To thee, blest bard, man's veriest heart was known,
Whate'er his lot—a cottage or a throne."
- (3) "The shepherd, taught by thine instructive rhyme,
Learns from thy calendar to husband time."
- (4) "To Nature's votaries shall thy name be dear,
Long as the seasons lead the changeful year."