

TRACES OF ROMAN OCCUPATION NEAR PLYMOUTH.

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A DISCOVERY made at Hooe (Plymstock) during the spring of the present year adds an important link to the steadily lengthening chain of evidence, which goes to prove that the oldest permanent and continuous settlement of man on the shores of Plymouth Sound lay in the angle between the Sound and the Cattewater. It is needful briefly to recapitulate the general facts.

The first relic of high antiquity recorded for this immediate district was the finding, in March, 1832, by a quarryman at Mount Batten, of five gold and eight silver coins, which Colonel Hamilton Smith, F.R.S., pronounced to be British, of the earliest type. Since then other coins of the same period and character have been found in the same locality, both gold and copper.

Next came the discovery, in 1864, of the ancient British cemetery between Fort Stamford and Mount Batten, investigated by Mr. C. Spence Bate, F.R.S., and fully described by him in *Archæologia*.* The most characteristic articles then found have been identified as Late Keltic, without a trace of Roman influence, though some associated pottery is Roman.

Then followed the unearthing, in 1868, of a hoard of bronze weapons, undoubtedly Keltic, near Pomphlett, a mile east of Oreston, consisting of sixteen celts, a chisel, three daggers, and a spear-head.

The earliest attempt to identify the lost town, of which the Stamford cemetery affords such conclusive evidence, beyond a suggestion that it might have been the Roman

* xl. 500-10.

station of Tamara, was made by myself in 1885, when I pointed out that Stadio Deuentia of the Anonymous Chorographer of Ravenna was neither more nor less than an inflected form of Staddon; and that a settlement of some kind, and of some importance, must therefore have continued in the locality until at least early Saxon times, perchance to be partially represented at the present day in the modern village of Staddiscombe.*

Meanwhile, Mr. F. Brent, F.S.A., working in another direction, recorded—also in 1885—as the result of several years' investigation, in the "Report of the Committee on Scientific Memoranda,"† the occurrence on Staddon Heights of "many specimens of flint, consisting of almost all the varieties of the smaller implements . . . with a number of unwrought pebbles, and many fragments or pieces."

Finally, in 1887, I contributed to the Report of the same Committee‡ a description of what was then left of an extensive kitchen midden on the Batten isthmus, which had yielded no trace of metal, or of any stone implement or of man's handiwork, save fragments of rude pottery; and which therefore might be associated with the flints of the heights above, as affording proof of the residence of man in the locality in a condition of early barbarism.

We have thus evidence of the occupation of the eastern shores of the Sound through the Stone into the later Bronze age, and incidentally into Saxon times.

This covers the period of Roman intercourse. Now of more than the presence of the Romans in and about the estuaries of the Tamar and the Plym there never has been any satisfactory proof. As a matter of pure assumption, the elder antiquaries located in the vicinity of Plymouth the Roman station of Tamara, but evidence was utterly wanting. In my paper on "The Beginnings of Plympton History," I cite the statement of Mr. J. C. Bellamy (without acceptance), that the remains of a Roman galley had been found in excavating in Newnham Park; and express my belief that the Romans did find their way to the district, though disbelieving in their settlement.§ The discoveries to which I have now to call attention seem, however, to establish a more definite connection.

Until the present year—setting aside the very doubtful galley—the only traces of the Romans in the neighbourhood

* *Trans. Devon. Assoc.* xvii. 359.

† *Ibid.* xvii. 72.

‡ *Ibid.* xix. 58 9.

§ *Ibid.* xix. 367-8.

consisted of the casual occurrence of a few coins, and of the fragments of pottery associated with the Stamford cemetery, identified as Roman by Mr. A. W. Franks, F.R.S.

With theoretical rather than practical exception these coins have mainly been found adjacent to the ancient shoreline, and I give as complete a list as is in my power. The site of the Millbay Railway Terminus, which originally formed the eastern shore of Surpool, the inner reach of Millbay, yielded several; but the only one I have seen thence was the second brass of Magnentius, dug up in Bath Street, recorded last year.* A few months since, however, I obtained from the Great Western Docks—found on the further shore of the inlet—a second brass Carus, in excellent preservation, worn by use but not in the least decayed. The Citadel Glacis has yielded a Faustina; Cattedown an Alexander Severus, a Hadrian, and an Antoninus Pius. At Mannamead—not immediately contiguous to the shore, but directly overlooking and within half a mile of Lipson Creek—five coins were dug up in one spadeful of earth (at Rockville), one of which, a Constantine, I have. A Probus, in excellent preservation, also in my possession, was found in Devonport Park, on the high ground commanding the Tamar. During the exploration of the Stamford cemetery, but not in connection with it, a coin of Antoninus Pius and another of Vespasian were found between the cemetery and the sea. Last year I added from the same locality, by the kindness of Mr. Darton, a first brass of Nero, which had fallen from the soil of the Batten isthmus on to the beach.† Since then Mr. Cecil Brent, F.S.A., visiting the kitchen midden with his brother, Mr. Francis Brent, has found near the same spot a much-decayed third brass of Constans. If we add to this list the five detrited coins found on the site of Plympton Priory, also noticed last year by me in the paper already cited, I think that all the known numismatological traces of the Romans on the shores of Plymouth Sound will have been set forth. There is enough to show presence and intercourse, but if such finds were ten times as numerous they could not fairly be taken to indicate occupation, so that we may make a very liberal allowance for our undoubtedly defective knowledge.

A discovery was, however, made in April last which comes into a different category. A bronze of undoubted Roman

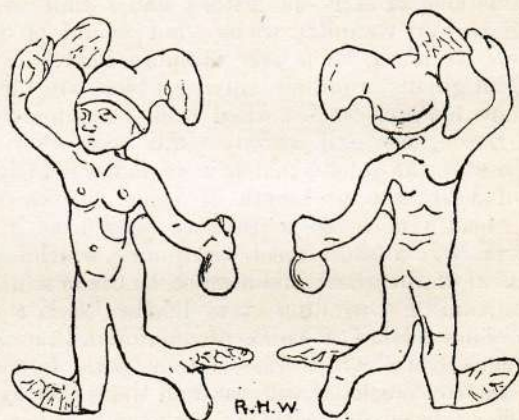
* *Trans. Devon. Assoc.* xix. 60.

† *Ibid.* xix. 60.

manufacture, the god in all probability of some Roman merchant, has been dug up in a garden at Hooe.

The figure is that of the Roman Mercury—god of merchandise and patron of merchants—and one of the most likely, therefore, to indicate the presence of a Roman trader. It is of bronze, $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches in height, $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches in extreme breadth over the extensions of the hands; while the thickest part of the body is just a quarter of an inch. It is light for its size, weighing precisely two-thirds of an ounce. The right foot has been long lost, but with that exception it is perfect.

The modelling is somewhat rude, but so far as the attitude goes, vigorous, and not without merit. The left arm slopes outwards and downwards, the hand holding the emblematic purse. The right arm is extended outwards and upwards, with the hand raised, and the fingers as in benediction.



The left wing on the cap is much larger than the right. The right leg is straight, the left bent as in motion, and the feet-wings are fixed on the outer sides of the calves, immediately above the ankles. The figure is for the most part thickly patinated. Some of the mould-marks are visible, but it appears to have been carefully trimmed after it was cast. The illustration is from a drawing by my son.

This find throws new light on the ancient topography of the locality. What is now the village of Hooe cannot be the original place of that name; for instead of being

a chief eminence, it is a low hill, commanded on every side. That the name was once locally applied in a much more extended sense is also evident from the fact that until the seventeenth century the Saxon name of Mount Batten was "Hoe Start" = Point. The name in fact has shrunk from that of the heights into that of the village on their flank, where the inhabitants chiefly concentrated after the practical abandonment of the town on the Staddon table-land—Stadio Deuentia—whose dwellers buried their dead in the cemetery below Fort Stamford.

Nor is it difficult to understand why Stadio Deuentia decayed. The Stone Age people no doubt chose the cliffs of the Sound for purposes of security, and until commerce developed there would be no adequate reason for a change. When traders began their visits, facilities would be required, and for these Hooe is singularly adapted.

Hooe Lake is a thoroughly landlocked little harbour, with great attractions to early navigators, whose craft would not only find therein complete shelter, but would be invisible from the Cattewater. The lake is approached by a narrow channel, originally running between two bold limestone bluffs—now more or less quarried back—about a couple of hundred yards long, and seventy yards wide. At the end of this passage the inlet expands east and west, but chiefly on the east, to a total length of some 600 yards. The average breadth north to south may be put at 250: but there is or was a short creek continuing southward from the south-western corner; and a much longer one into which a small stream falls, winding up to Radford from the south-eastern. These define a blunt promontorial shore line on the southern bank, which rises into a little hill midway between the two creeks or valleys; and upon this, extending up the slope from the water's edge, stands the village of Hooe.

The natural characteristics of Hooe are therefore a protected harbour, some 40 acres in area, approached by a narrow and easily-defended channel; and on the further side of this, opposite the entrance, a hill, guarded by the lake and its arms north, east, and west, and with a valley continuing on from each creek round the hill on the south, affording fair defensive capabilities there also. The position was thus equally convenient and secure; and there seems to me adequate reason to believe, that it was one of the chief spots—if not the chief—where the commerce of the port was carried on in early times; and that it

may have been the residence of Roman traders, though we can hardly regard it as the actual site of a Roman settlement. It would, however, be quite analogous to modern practice to consider it the site of a Roman trading post. From the way in which discovery of late has followed discovery in this direction, with cumulative force, I do not despair of obtaining more direct evidence hereafter.

It is possible that in Hooe we have also the site of the Saxon Plymstock, which cannot be directly represented by the modern "church town" of that name; and it is certain that the village retained some importance in the early middle ages, from the provision hard by of the Early English Chapel of St. Ann, now in decay, whence the modern and more distant village of Turnchapel takes its name.

Whether the antiquities which I have next to describe have anything to do with the presence of the Romans in the Plymouth area I shall leave to some extent an open question, setting forth the simple facts, which are sufficiently curious. It is years since this discovery was made; and but for the kind interest and untiring energy of Mr. Stenteford, of Hooe, who accidentally obtained a clue and followed it up to the end, probably nothing would ever have been heard of it. Since, however, he procured the information from the men concerned in the affair, I have been able to test some of their statements from another source, and the two accounts agree so closely that I am satisfied the narrative is substantially accurate. The sketch plans are from actual measurements made by Mr. Stenteford, in company with the workmen, on the ground.

One of the oldest parts of Stonehouse is Newport Street, which runs along the southern shore of Stonehouse Creek from the Quay towards the west. The street is only a few feet above high tide; and in the main must follow pretty closely the level of the ancient beach, embanked here next the water for wharves and foundations of buildings. On the south the land rises steeply, and in parts precipitously, in the limestone promontory upon which stands the church of St. George, and once stood the mansion-house of the lords of the manor. The houses on the south side of Newport Street are, therefore, more or less built into the hill, and the gardens behind are in some instances at a much higher level.

Before the Stonehouse Bridge was constructed the ferry

used to cross to Newport Street; and at the landing-place there was a break in the line of houses. In 1882 this was occupied, as it long had been, by a shrubbery, through which access was obtained to a dwelling much out of harmony with its surroundings, the late residence of Captain Beckford, R.N.; now let out in apartments. To utilise the portion of the shrubbery next the street as the site of four cottages, the late Mr. Perry, builder, of Stonehouse, early in 1882 engaged a couple of workmen, father and son, to excavate it to the level of the street over a breadth of about fifty feet (a side passage-way being left to the old house) backward into the hill, for a length of sixty-five feet.

The shrubbery was bounded next the street by a wall between eight and nine feet high, the ground within which was three to three and a-half feet above the road. Between two and three feet within this wall, and about the road level, the excavators came upon some rough slateslabs, rudely squared at the sides, forming a kind of pavement, which had been originally at least seven feet wide, but was not then continuous. It lay in patches, and about half seemed to be missing. Some of the slabs were four feet by three feet, others four feet by two feet; and as they were in good condition, they were carefully removed.

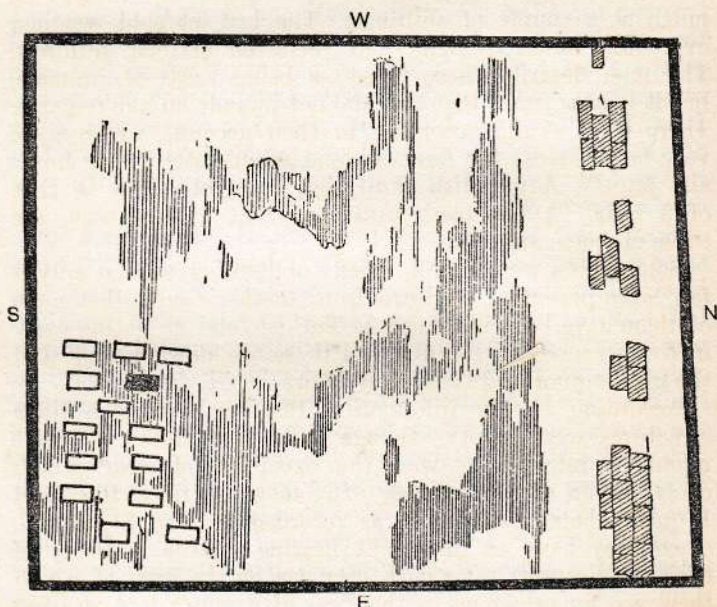
Soon after passing this pavement the men came upon some pebble pitching (or "causing") laid at about the same level. This had evidently at one time been continuous, but had been removed in places, so that what remained was in patches of varying size, partially connected by narrow strips. This pebble-paving was found up to the farthest limits of the excavation, which was eventually stopped by the natural limestone rock, forming a low shore cliff, fourteen feet in height, buried beneath the soil. The pebbles were of red-brown sandstone or grit, four to eight inches in length, and four inches deep, worn smooth on top.

About twenty feet before reaching the cliff, the men uncovered a little structure which they at first thought a diminutive pigstye. It was built upon flat slabs of limestone, still at the same level. The sides and ends were formed of bricks, which at once attracted attention from their peculiar size, being only some six inches in length by three in width, and two and a half inches in thickness. It was covered by one large slate stone. The bricks were much decayed, and the pebble pavement continued up to and around the base.

Eventually fourteen or fifteen of these structures were

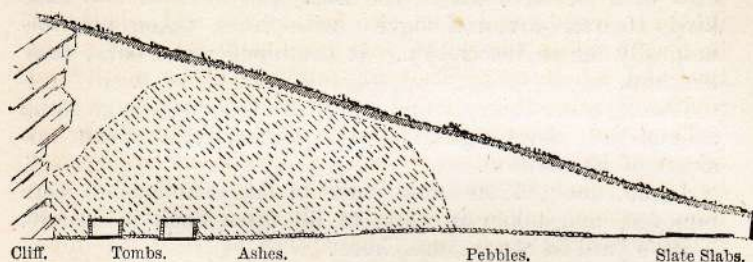
found in close contiguity. All were of the same materials and character; but some had slate bottoms, and they varied a little in size, ranging from four feet to four feet six inches in length, and from two feet to two and a-half feet in height, while the width was practically constant about two and a-half feet. They all ran lengthwise north and south.

They were moreover grouped together in the south-east corner of the excavation, within an area about twenty feet by thirty; and for the most part roughly arranged in two rows. Some, however, were so disposed as to alternate in what should have been the spaces between the rows, after the manner shown in the plan, which is from a sketch made on the spot by Mr. Stenteford, directly from the information of the men.



The material excavated was in the main the ordinary made ground of the locality, and consisted of clay, earth, small stones, etc. When the men had dug back, however, between twenty-five and thirty feet, they came upon a mass of black ashy stuff, containing broken pottery (grey and red), and a quantity of bones. This ash-heap continued to the limestone cliff, and reached a little way up its face; but

the soil next the cliff was chiefly earthy *débris*, which also covered the whole, as shown in the section below.



The quantity of bones was so great as to be very profitable. The men collected and sold them, on some days making as much as a couple of shillings. The last lot sold weighed over four hundredweight, and produced sixteen shillings. The men describe these bones as being those of animals, but it is not certain that they did not include human remains. There were skulls, according to their account, which were very broad across the forehead, and others with "long noses and jaws." A roundish skull they thought might be that of a bear. A few teeth preserved, that I have seen, are those of horse and boar.

Some coins were found, chiefly obliterated, so that only a few were preserved. I learn from another source that some of them have been identified as Turkish, and as dating early in the seventeenth century, but these are now missing, and the men cannot find those they kept.

According to my information the whole of the little structures were empty—though some had traces of what might be interments—with the exception of one,* which contained an earthen vessel. The men described this (and I quote their exact words as recorded by Mr. Stenteford, since they have an important bearing on the accuracy of their recollection) as "a dark grey jar, on the front of which there was an ornament in the form of a man's face wearing a long beard, beneath which was an inscription which they were unable to read. While in the men's possession they fancy they broke a handle off from it, but they think there is one handle on it now."

I have since seen this jar, and it answers the description in every particular, save that it had only one handle—

* This is the black one in the plan.

broken. It is a sixteenth-century Flemish "greybeard," holding about a pint and a half, with the bearded head of a man on the front of the neck, and beneath it a rude kind of quasi-armorial device with lines, taken not unnaturally for an inscription. It contained some dark, ashy material.

Among other things found and preserved was a large stone cannon-ball, about eight inches in diameter, but I am not aware of its position.

In all, about 1700 cubic yards of *débris* and ashes were removed, and taken in carts to fill up a dock in Messrs. Elliott's yard in Stonehouse Creek.

Such then, without inferences, are the facts of this singular discovery, as related, and as definitely ascertained. We have on the southern shore of Stonehouse Creek, between the ancient low limestone cliff and the water, less than six feet above high-tide level, essentially on the beach, an area paved with pebbles, known to have been at least fifty feet square, with a pavement of slate slabs bounding it at a little distance on the north. In one corner of this area is a group of little structures of brick and stone, arranged in rows, which can be nothing else than tombs.

Upon this pebble pavement, and covering these tombs, we find, under ordinary made ground, a heap of ashes containing an enormous quantity of infra-human bones, and the usual broken pottery and other constituents of an ancient refuse heap, some of the contents of which date themselves of the early part of the seventeenth century.

Now the first point to observe is, that the two things—the pebbled area with its tombs, and the overlying refuse heap—have no necessary connection. The area would not be paved, or the tombs built, with the purpose of being covered in any such way; and the patchy character of the causing shows that it had been partially broken up before it was finally buried, presumably approaching three centuries since. From this we may very well infer also that the tombs had been disturbed about the same period, which would account for the presence of the "greybeard."* It is quite natural that the sepulchres should be found empty,

* Not infrequently similar discoveries have indicated the existence of practical joking among mediæval masons and others. Dinner-baskets and tools, &c., have been found built up in walls, and clearly not by accident. Or it may have been hidden and forgotten. Originally the tomb could have had nothing to do with the jar.

but I must confess to having had a doubt whether they did not yield a contingent of the profitable bones, either in 1882 or, it may be, when they were originally ransacked.

Seeing then that we have here the remains of an ancient place of sepulture buried beneath the accumulations of long subsequent years, can we form any conclusions as to its origin and date?

The first significant fact is, that the tombs lie north and south—a position not unusual in Roman interments in this country, but wholly at variance with Christian practice. The next point is, that they are not big enough for interment by ordinary inhumation. They are indeed merely kist-vaens, differing from ordinary kist-vaens less in size or form than in the fact that the sides and ends were built of thin tiles or bricks—again an approach to Roman characteristics. Sepulchral chambers of similar dimensions, and built, in part or wholly, of brick, have been found in Roman cemeteries, containing urns and various articles of pottery, and sometimes remains of bodies uncremated.

The evidence, on the one hand, is thus against the idea of Christian interment; while, on the other, the structural character of the tombs forbids us to assign them an earlier date than that of Roman intercourse. In the unavoidable absence of personal investigation, it would be unwise to give positive judgment; but it is certainly permissible to point out that there is nothing to militate against the possibility of our having here the remains of a late Roman ustrinum, such as was brought to light many years since at Litlington.* These ustrinæ were simply places where bodies were burnt and interred. They were not large, averaging about 300 feet in compass, and the Stonehouse area certainly exceeded 200.

If this hypothesis be accepted, all that is required to account for the appearances now recorded is, that the spot should have fallen into oblivion and been covered over by soil, like nearly all other structural remains of Roman Britain; and that when it was rediscovered, some three centuries ago, it should have been ransacked after the customary fashion in search of treasure, the contents of the tombs and the remains of the old funeral fires jumbled up together, and the place made a receptacle for refuse, finally being sloped to a level and turned into a garden and shrubbery.

The quantity of bones is remarkable, but so far as ascer-

* Vide *Archæologia*, xxvi.

tained they are just such as are commonly found in considerable quantities near Roman dwellings.

If this was a Roman burial-place, we have the first distinct evidence of Roman residence in the Three Towns' area (a point on which I have had and expressed grave doubts), and we have also a clue to the very remarkable distinctive name of Stonehouse, the occurrence of which, so early as *Domesday*, shows that the spot must have had an edifice far in advance of any of its neighbouring manors. The remains of a Roman dwelling would supply an adequate interpretation.