

NOTES ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF TAVISTOCK.

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(Read at Tavistock, July, 1889.)

THE materials for the early history of Tavistock are singularly scanty. The first event definitely assigned is the foundation of the Abbey, said to have taken place in 961. The earliest contemporary reference is in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, where, under date 997, we read that the Danes, ravaging these western shores, went "into the mouth of the Tamar, and then went up until they came to Hlidaford, and burned and destroyed every thing which they met with; and they burned Ordulf's minster at Tavistock, and brought unspeakable booty with them to their ships."

This is the first firm step we can take in recorded Tavistock history, and it is as well to note that the earliest form of the name as given in the *Chronicle* is *Ætefingstoc*.

There is indeed a recital, by way of inspeimus, of a charter granted to the Abbey by *Æðelred*; but this has to do with the house rather than the town, and does not carry our knowledge of the local history any farther.

The next certain contemporary record is the entry in *Domesday*, which will be found in full in the *Devonshire Domesday* part for 1885, pp. 229-231. The general facts may be conveniently summarized as follows:

The manor had been assessed in the reign of the Confessor at three hides and a half, but there was land for forty ploughs. The abbot had half a hide and five ploughs in demesne, and his villeins a hide and a half and fourteen ploughs. There were sixteen acres of meadow in the low lands by the river; pasture extended ten furlongs in length and ten in breadth; wood two leugas in length and one in breadth. There were on the abbey lands twelve serfs,

seventeen villeins, and twenty bordars or cottagers. There was an abbey mill; and the live stock comprised 26 head of cattle, a packhorse, 12 swine, 200 sheep, and 30 goats.

This accounts for two hides. The remaining hide and a half, which had been held of the abbot in Saxon days by four thegns, was now divided between six men-at-arms, bound of course to succour their feudal lord—Ermenald, Ralph, Hugh, Robert, Ralph de la Tillaie, and Gosfrid. Each had his underlings—serfs, villeins, bordars, or coscets—and, with the exception of the first Ralph, each his proportion of live stock.

These are the Exeter figures. The only difference between them and the Exchequer is, that where the former reckons twenty bordars the latter has seventeen bordars and three coscets.

The manor was worth to the abbot twelve pounds a year, to the men-at-arms five; but there had been a falling off in value of five pounds—two pounds in the abbot's quota and three in that of the men-at-arms.

There are reasonable grounds for the belief that we can identify three of the four thegns' lands in the three "worthys"—Warpisworthy, shortened into Wapsworthy, and corrupted by polite etymologists into Waspworthy; Kilworthy; and Gulworthy. The distinctive character of a "worthy" as compared with a "ton," and its frequent personal association, point to this conclusion; while Warpsworthy in all likelihood preserves the name of its Saxon owner.

So far we have dealt only with the manor, not the parish, of Tavistock; and the possessions of the Abbey enumerated in *Domesday* include in addition to Tavistock proper [Taues-tocha or Tavestoc] Hurdwick [Wrdieta or Wrdiete], Rowdon [Raddona or Radone], Romans Lee [Liega or Liege, taking its prefix from Rumon, the patron saint of the Abbey], and Morwell [Willa or Welle].

Hurdwick had gelded at half a hide, could be ploughed by five ploughs, had eight acres of wood and twelve of meadow, was tenanted by one serf, six villeins, five bordars, twenty sheep, and six goats, and its value had risen from ten shillings to twenty. It was in the hands of the church itself.

William held Rowdon of the Abbey in succession to the Saxon Ulmer. It had gelded for a virgate, could be ploughed by two ploughs, had thirteen acres of meadow and fifty of pasture, was tenanted by one villein, and was worth only five shillings.

Romans Lee was held of the abbot by two under lords—Nigel and Robert. It had gelded for a hide, could be ploughed by ten ploughs, had thirty acres of meadow, sixty acres of pasture, and thirty-eight acres of wood. Nigel had the larger share; and between them Nigel and Robert had seven serfs, ten villeins, and ten bordars, with twelve head of cattle, sixteen swine, a hundred sheep, and twenty-seven goats. The value had increased somewhat, to forty shillings.

Morwell was held of the abbot by Grento, a man-at-arms, in succession to Archbishop Ældred. It had gelded for two hides, could be ploughed by eight ploughs, had four acres of meadow and twenty of pasture, was tenanted by four serfs, ten villeins, and four bordars, and had increased in value from forty shillings to four pounds.

The total acreage here given is 11,931, of which Tavistock manor gives 8696 acres; and as Tavistock parish is 14,018 acres in extent, and the Domesday measurements always fall short of the actual area, there seems no reasonable doubt that the whole of Tavistock parish is thus accounted for.

The total enumerated population, which does not include the monks, men-at-arms, or other free tenants of the Abbey, was 146.

When William's commissioners came round the abbot also held Walreddon [Olwritona], but that was taken from him, because, as the record states, "the English testified that it did not belong to the Abbey on the day on which King Edward was alive and dead."

Such then, I believe, are all the direct materials we have for forming definite conclusions as to the condition of Tavistock at and prior to the Norman Conquest. We may, however, venture somewhat further.

The legendary account of the origin of the Abbey states that the site was revealed to Ordulf and his wife by repeated dreams, and that it was miraculously marked by four rods set in the ground in a wood near his residence. Of course the inference would be—since the town of Tavistock clustered round the Abbey—that prior to the foundation of the house the site was unoccupied, and that the place originated in the monastery. But the name forbids any such assumption. "Tavistock" is distinctly secular—the "stock" or stockaded fortalice of the Tavy valley. Such a name would never have been given to a new ecclesiastical settlement, nor indeed would a "stock" have been founded in the low lands

by the river, however convenient their expanse might be for the seat of a monastic establishment.

It is clear, therefore, that Tavistock must have higher antiquity than is expressed by any record. Unquestionably it was an early Saxon centre of importance—the chief place in the valley of the Tavy. Nor is it difficult to suggest a far remoter origin. As I have said elsewhere:¹

“It is a fact that must have a meaning, if this can only be defined, that nearly all the ancient inscribed stones of Devon are found upon one parallel in the south-west of the county, between Stowford on the north and Yealmpton on the south, passing through Tavistock as a kind of centre. These all give traces of ecclesiastical influence; and two, by the Ogham writing which they bear, proof also of Irish intercourse. They probably indicate, therefore, a period of active mission work on the part of the Irish church, somewhere about the latter part of the fifth and first half of the sixth century.”

Buckland Monachorum, the next parish to Tavistock, south-west, yielded two of these stones—one with an Ogham duplication; a third was found near Tavistock.² Add to this that the adjacent parish of Whitchurch bears this same name in *Domesday*—Wicerce—and there is plenty of evidence of a strong ecclesiastical influence about Tavistock long before the Norman Conquest, the Abbey apart.

The only other material relic of probably equal antiquity in the immediate vicinity of Tavistock with which I am acquainted is the earthwork on the hill near the Kelly College, cut through by the new railroad. It is sometimes called the Roman Camp, but this name is purely fanciful. It has no definite Roman characteristics, and, so far as I can learn, no Roman relics have been found there. The suggestion that it *may* represent the original Tavy-stock should not, however, be hastily rejected. The site is suitable, and of some little strength. More than this one would hardly expect to find in the neighbourhood of such an important and well-defenced town as Lydford, where strong earthworks of unquestionable Keltic date remain, and where the church is believed, on reasonable grounds, to contain some traces of Keltic masonry.³

¹ *Hist. Devon*, pp. 178-9.

² These stones are in the vicarage gardens, where they were placed by the Rev. E. A. Bray: (1) DOBUNNI FABRI FILI ENABARRI (or NABARR only); (2) SABINI FILI MACCODECHETI; (3) NEPRANI FILI CONBEVI.

³ There are earthworks also at Brent Tor, defending the base of the cone.

The local nomenclature is mainly Saxon, but with several Keltic traces. We have woods, leys, hams, fords, tuns; the less familiar wick, worthy, and beer (Saxon, *beora* = a grove); hele, well, lake, burn (a northern type), and the doubtful combe, which may be either Saxon or Keltic. The Keltic elements are mainly compounded, as in *Crelake* and *Crebor*, *Gawton*, *Kilworthy*, *Lamburn*, *Morwell*, *Colcharton*, *Walla-brook*, and possibly *Grendon* and *Grenofen*. The chief peculiarity of the nomenclature is, however, the number of unusual names associated—*e.g.* in addition to those given: *Artiscombe* (? = Arthur's Combe), *Wilminstone*, *Woodovis*, *Crowndale*, *Chipshop*, *Hartshole*, *Sortridge*, *Grimstone* (= the boundary stone), *Ogbear*. There thus seem to have been strong local influences at work of a very distinctive character.

We will now attempt still less certain ground. We have seen reason to believe that Tavistock existed long before the Abbey as a Saxon settlement, and that the locality had some distinctive characteristics at a yet earlier date. Can we assign any reasons why this particular part of the Tavy valley should have become a centre of population in Keltic times?

I think we can, and that we shall find it in the fact that Tavistock is on the line of the Fosseway, which crossed Dartmoor from Exeter on its way to its Cornish terminus at Giano, or Marazion, and passed the Tamar at its lowest ford in the neighbourhood of Hingston Down, probably near Horse Bridge. I have elsewhere given reasons for regarding the great central trackway of Dartmoor as a relic of this road, and for placing the lost Tamara of Ptolemy somewhere in this locality.⁴

If I am right in the assumption of the local route of the Fosseway, the origin of Tavistock at the point where this great central line of communication crossed the Tavy is easily accounted for. The foundation of the Abbey perpetuated what intercourse had begun.

The *Saxon Chronicle* records a battle between the Welch or Cornish and the men of Devon at Gafulford (*not* Camel-ford) in 823, and that is more likely to have been near the Tamar and on the great roadway than elsewhere.

And in any case there can be no doubt that when Ecgbeht, in 835, defeated the combined forces of the Danes and West Welch at Hingston, he marched to victory through

⁴ *Vide* "Notes on the Ancient Recorded Topography of Devon." (*Trans. Devon. Assoc.* xvii. 345-366.)

Tavistock, though we may question the truth of the local couplet, which alleges that—

“The blood that flowed down West Street
Would heave a stone a pound weight.”

But the wealth of local legend is another argument in favour of the antiquity and early importance of Tavistock. We have its association with Ordulf, the Saxon Samson and giant, some of whose reputed bones may be seen in the church; with the story of the murder of Æselwold by Eadgar, in order that he might marry Ordulf's sister, Ælfryth, or Elfrida; and with the legend of Childe the Hunter, whose “lands of Plymstock” the monks are said to have obtained by burying his body in the Abbey when he died in the snow on Dartmoor, evading the Plymstock folk by throwing a bridge across the Tavy, thence called Guile Bridge. (It is strange that there are yet people who believe this story, in face of the facts that the Abbey held Plymstock before the Conquest, and that Guile Bridge is simply a corruption of Guild Bridge, so called from its builders, the Jesus Guild.) Worth little, even worthless, as history, still associations like these have their value when one is trying to bring together all that is known or may be inferred touching the beginnings of an ancient town like Tavistock.