

Hamdon Hill.

BY RICHARD WALTER.

THERE are probably few objects in this part of the country which possess more interest than that to which I am about to direct the attention of the Society. Whether we consider the imposing outline of its features, so conspicuous for miles around, its geological formation, its extensive quarries, the produce of which is seen in the buildings of every town and village, or its importance as a relic of antiquity, which must give it a superior interest with the Archæological Society ;—I mean the spot so well known as Hamdon Hill ; of which, being a resident in its vicinity, and having been requested by some too partial friends, I shall endeavour to give some account, although I am conscious that it will be very imperfect ; and as many gentlemen may be present who are better informed than myself, I must crave their indulgence, if my remarks be considered too common, for the sake of some others who may not have had the same advantages.

The insulated position of Hamdon Hill, overlooking a flat country, from which it rises rather abruptly, gives it a bold character, and one is led to suppose its elevation

greater than it really is ; its summit being only about 240 feet above the level of the village of Stoke, below, and just 426 feet above the level of high water mark at Weymouth. The prospect from its summit is very extensive and beautiful ; looking westward over the richly wooded and fertile vallies that extend beyond the Tone, to the hills of Quantock and Williton ; on the north the Mendip chain ; on the east the Wiltshire hills, with the column called Alfred's Tower ; and from thence to the southward and westward, the undulating line of the Dorsetshire hills,—Pillesdon, Lewesdon, and Lambart's Castle, Whitedown, Snowdon, and Castle Neroche ; thus exhibiting a variety of prospect over the surrounding country, not often paralleled. From its loftiest point, a panoramic view of great distance is obtained, unbroken except by a small interruption of the plantations at Montacute Hill. One curious memorial of the olden time, is on the south-west side—a deep combe, now planted as an orchard and gardens, which was formerly the regular road from Taunton to Salisbury, and through which some of the old inhabitants of Stoke, now deceased, have informed me they have seen the old Taunton coach soberly creeping up, on its two or three days' journey to London* ; a not unpleasing contrast to the rocket-like speed with which we are now whisked away on the railroad, in only twice as many hours.

How often have I wished, when rambling over the venerable spot, that it were possible to draw aside the veil of antiquity, and bring to view some of the scenes of the past centuries. What an interesting tale might be told ! Imagination presents to us the simple, unclothed, and untutored Britons, calmly tending their flocks on the down

* This is corroborated by an old mile-stone by the road side, from the hill towards Odecombe, bearing the inscription " 127 miles to London."

near their settlement, at Stroud's Hill ; or engaged with their Druids in idolatrous worship of the heavenly bodies ; next in fruitless contention with their Celtic and Belgic invaders ; then roused to warlike, courageous, yet vain resistance, on their invasion by the better disciplined Roman armies. And who can tell the desperate struggles which have taken place for the occupation of this commanding position, which the Romans well knew the value of gaining ; and retained it, most probably, during their stay in Britain, about 450 years ; availing themselves of the already formed entrenchments, according to their regular plan of castrametation, which appears to have extended only to the quadrangular part of the hill, on the north-west ; where the men working at the stone-quarries frequently bring to light some long hidden relic, which has lain imbedded in the rubble or chasms of the rock, of which I shall have to speak presently.

Geologically considered, the formation of Hamdon Hill is worth notice, consisting, not as generally supposed, of an immense rock of building stone, so well known, and erroneously stated in some late accounts as nearly inexhaustible : for the greater mass of the hill is sand, which largely extends to the eastward, in which boulder stones of a considerable size are imbedded in layers ; and on this sand the masses of compact stone rest, varying in depth from about twenty to fifty feet, below which none has been found. So at no very distant period this valuable stone, from its extensive use, will become more scarce. I say *valuable*, notwithstanding the high and much respected authority of Professor Buckland has denounced it as a perishable material, and discountenanced its use for permanent building. This is a subject on which I would, under present circumstances, speak with delicacy ; only

remarking that the Rev. Professor was mistaken in stating that our ancestors had culled the best of the stone; for it is well known, and evidently to be proved, that formerly the rocks had been worked down to a certain depth only, and left covered up with rubble; below which the quarry-men are now cutting. And it is an experienced fact, that the most compact and durable stone is found at the greatest depth; and this, notwithstanding the denouncement I have mentioned, must still be esteemed a valuable material for massive or ornamental building. It has been classed as inferior Oolite. Its composition appears to be sea sand and minute fragments of broken shells, conglomerated and crystallized together, with carbonate of lime and iron; and occasionally entire shells of pectines, belemnites, and others are found, but usually at the bottom of the rock.

A well having been sunk from the top of the hill, to the depth of about 120 feet; with the assistance of a respected friend, a young engineer, I have been able to make a section,* from which we learn that about 40 feet of *Ham Stone* is penetrated from the top; next about 80 feet of what is termed *Brim Sand*, with strata of rounded boulder stones; next beneath is the *Upper Lias*; then *Marl Stone*. Between the masses of rock are many fissures, or chasms, called by the workmen *Gullies*, running across the hill, which appear to have been formed by a lift from beneath, rending asunder the rock. These are of various width and depth, and lined with stalactite; in them have frequently been found iron and bronze implements, coins and armorial and organic remains. A considerable quantity came to light some years since, of great interest, which will hereafter be mentioned.

* Now in the Museum.

We have here a map of the hill, copied partly from that by a survey of my deceased friend, Crocker, in which I had the pleasure of assisting him. The whole brow of the hill, which is about three miles round, is entrenched, and that with no small labour and skill ; a great part being in fine preservation. To whom, then, are these extensive earthworks to be attributed ? To be enabled to answer this question, it will be necessary to take a retrospect of how this country has formerly been peopled, of which history gives but a very imperfect account ; but we learn that the very early inhabitants of our island were little better than simple savages, unskilled in the art of warfare, and unlikely to have accomplished so great a work. We are informed that the Celtæ, from Gaul, invaded and conquered the country, and retained it until about 350 years before the Christian Era ; and this was probably the age of Druidism, in which were erected those Megalithic structures at Stonehenge, Stanton Drew, Abury, and others of that character. Of these people are occasionally found interesting relics, called Celts—weapons, and utensils of bronze, and arrow-heads of flint, &c.

The Belgæ next invaded this country, *i.e.*, about three centuries before the time of Julius Cæsar, and divided it into sixteen states ; of which, not to mention others, the Belgæ held Hampshire, Wilts, and Somerset ; and as it is stated by historians that they were often engaged in warfare with other states, *i.e.*, with the Morini of Dorsetshire, and the Damnonii of Devon, it is very probable that those extensive fortresses of Hamdon, Lambart's Castle, Pilledon, Neroche, and many others, were then formed ; which are quite of a different character from those of the Romans, in their irregular shape, following the outline of the elevated ground ; whilst we know that the Roman plan of encamp-

ment was constantly quadrangular. But this warlike people in many instances availed themselves of the ready formed ramparts of their predecessors, as on the N.W. part of Hamdon Hill. On that eastern part of this hill called "Butcher Hill," was found, a few years since, a considerable number of iron weapons, long enough for swords, with a socket for a handle, or shaft rudely formed, apparently for spear-heads. These were probably Belgo-British; and here it was Sir R. Hoare's opinion that a considerable town had existed, and at the time the survey was made, the ground was, as I recollect, very irregular, with various excavations, now levelled by the plough. No Roman remains, that I have heard of, have been found in that quarter.

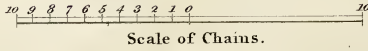
To this period may be attributed the formation of the various British roads and trackways through the country. One of which, afterwards the Roman fosse, and now the well-known turnpike, led from Bath, passing near Shepton Mallet, and through Ilchester to Petherton-bridge (then a ford), from whence it appears to have branched off in two directions; one through Stratton, to Dennington, White-down, Street, and Axminster; another to the right, through Watergore, Hurcott, Atherston, Broadway, and over the common to Neroche. This country was at that period in a state of hostility between the various tribes. The Morini being divided from the Damnonii by the vale of Honiton, appear to have defended themselves by a chain of forts, of which we may reckon Hawkesdown, Musbury, Membury, Lambart's Castle, Pillesdon, and Hamdon: and the frontier forts of the Damnonii appear to have been Woodbury, Sidbury, Hembury, and Neroche, from their strong entrenchments facing eastward—these being the opposing hills on each side of the Axe and the Yarty rivers.

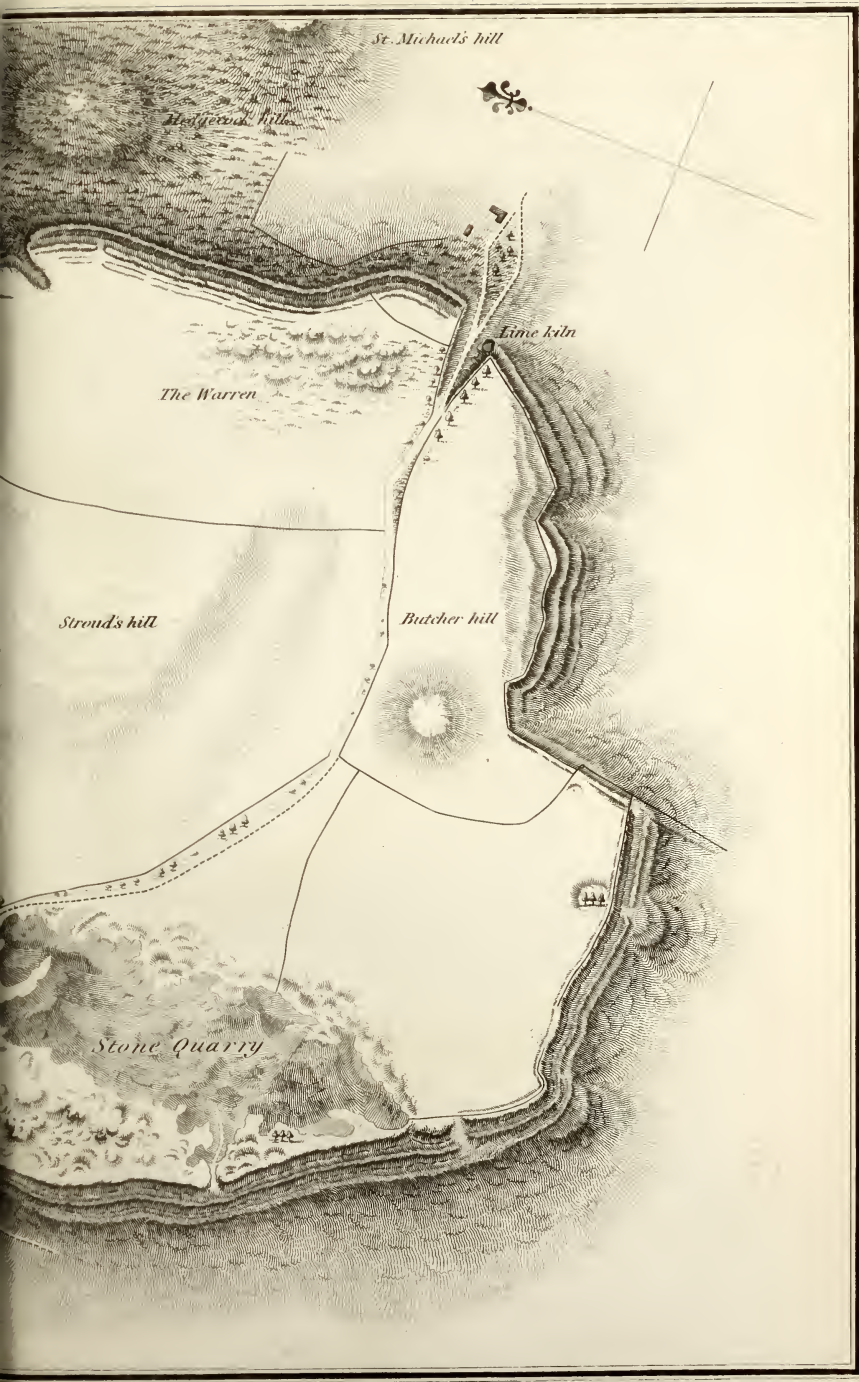
Various other British roads or vicinal ways, may clearly be traced through the country ; several having branched off from the British town on the hill, one in particular, eastward, towards the Montacute plantations ; and another, as I think, from the valley on the hill, called "The Combe," northward, passing near a spring of water, called Wambury Spring ; which, no doubt, was resorted to by the inhabitants of the hill above. Also, one westward passing through the village of Stoke, to the trackway from Ilchester to Ilminster, and probably passing on through the eastern part of Martock, over a common called *Beerly*, or *Badley*, at which place is a remnant of an old road, which points in that direction.

We come now to the more interesting period of invasion by the Romans ; first by Julius Cæsar, who does not appear to have interfered much with this part of the country ; which was afterwards visited by Claudius in the year A.D. 43 ; who for some years remained in Britain, and with Vespasian conquered and retained great part of the S. W. of this island ; and to this era, and the more peaceful sway of Ostorius, may be attributed the various Roman works still evident around us. Their well disciplined armies, it seems, did not so much depend for safety on the strength of their fortifications, as on their excellent discipline and mode of encampment : but where they found a commanding position already entrenched, like that of Hamdon Hill, they appear to have availed themselves of, and in this case to have occupied it, as far as consistent with their usual plan of encampment, which seems to have extended only as far as the quadrangular portion on the N.W. side ;—but where the vallum has been obliterated by the quarry workers. Here exist some interesting remains ; amongst which a circus or small ampitheatre, well-known to pic-nic parties,

CAMP ON HAMDEN HILL.

Area.....210 Acres.
Circumference...3 Miles.





St. Michael's hill

High ground hills

The Warren

Stroud's hill

Butcher hill

Stone Quarry

Lime kiln

by the euphonious appellation of the "frying-pan," to which, by the way it bears no small resemblance on a hot summer's day ; in which many a gay dance and scene of jollification are held : and some of my fair hearers may there have "tripped on the light fantastic toe." In front of its outlet (or the stem of the pan) is a level space of considerable length, probably a circus, where public games or courses were exhibited. Near this are some parallel rows of stones, extending to a considerable distance, the design of which is rather mysterious, and not easily to be accounted for ; each of them projecting some few inches above the surface (which is here on a considerable declivity), is perforated with an aperture of about two inches in a square or mortice shape. The rows and the distances of the stones which are in rather irregular lines, seven or eight in number, are about twenty feet asunder. Sir R. Hoare, in his paper in the *Archæologia**, dismissed this subject too hastily, and very unsatisfactorily, jumping to the conclusion that they were used to tie up the cavalry. This I consider quite improbable. The situation, exposed to the cold N.E. wind, would render it dangerous to the health of the horses ; and the ground, sloping in some parts as much as at an angle of thirty degrees, would be inconvenient for that purpose ; also the distances between the rows of stones, are much more than would be required. It is also well known that in the Roman mode of encampment, the cavalry were generally in the centre of the camp, surrounded by other troops. Another suggestion is, that these stones were for barriers or seats for spectators to view the games or contests in the amphitheatre. This is open to the objection that several of the rows are so far distant, that the circus itself could not be perfectly seen by persons

* *Archæologia*, vol. xxi.

so placed, nor would the seats be so far asunder for that purpose. Were the stones, then, placed for fastening the cords of the tents? This is more feasible; but so very sloping a surface would scarcely be desirable as a domicile for the soldiers. And then, why are the mortice holes square, when the most obvious mode of making a perforation is by a round aperture? There appears to me a choice of difficulties in deciding this point, and I have as yet heard no satisfactory reason given for these stones, nor is it in my power to account for them. I shall be most happy to hear the opinion of our friends who are about to visit the hill.

I have mentioned that about thirty-five years since some very interesting remains were found in a chasm between the masses of rock on the hill, which were noticed by Sir R. Hoare, in the *Archæologia*, amongst which were the fragments of a light car or chariot; the periphery of the wheel was formed by a single piece of wood, apparently ash, bent into a circle, and bonded with an entire ring of iron, like our modern carriage wheels; the wood part was fossilized or petrified. Various spear-heads of iron and bronze, and parts of harness and military dress were also found; such as spurs of a peculiar make, with a chain attached thereto, bits of bridles, &c. There were also some curious articles of bronze, which had been gilded, that were supposed to be lamps; but on referring to some drawings of Roman harness, I think it pretty certain that such were placed on the front of the saddle as ornamental studs, where we fasten our bearing rein. With these relics were several human skulls and other bones, all partially covered with stalactite; they were mostly taken to Montacute House, and it is sadly to be regretted that they are not now to be found. But the hill still retains in its bosom treasures, (not of gold,) which, as I have mentioned, are

occasionally exhumed by the quarry-men. A fissure or chasm was laid open a year or two since, in which were found many bones of animals and some human skulls; one of which was taken out by a party of our Society in their excursion on the hill, and is now deposited in our Museum at Taunton. It is the opinion of Dr. Thurnam, an eminent ethnologist, to whom it was sent with a fragment of pottery, that it was either a Roman or an auxiliary in their army. In the same fissure, which is still open, within the last few months, a considerable number of animal and human bones were found; of the latter, portions of no less than five distinct human bodies lay in a mingled mass; they were of various ages, one of a child about two years old, and another of about the age of twelve, the others adults. With these were some remains of a horse, many of canine species, the frontal bone of a goat, and some others.

One of those human skulls is curious as a surgical specimen; there being on its left side the mark of a blow, indenting the outer bone, or tabula dura, with a circular fracture, and driving in the inner or brittle table on the surface of the brain, which no doubt was the cause of death.

It would seem that the chasm having been open at that period, though now closed in at the top, served as a depository for dead bodies and rubbish, thrown in without care, as the bodies lay in various directions.

The rock here, as indeed in most parts of the hill, had been quarried, but not to any great depth, and the rubble of fresh quarries had been thrown thereon. Roman coins are frequently found in the neighbourhood. About forty years since, a large earthen vase was turned up and broken to pieces by the plough, at some distance south from the hill, which contained a large number of such coins, some of which I possess. They are small, mostly of copper,

some of a base white metal, probably tin and copper. A few are well executed, but generally they bear very coarse impressions of the heads of the latter Roman Emperors, *i.e.*, Gallus, Tetricus, Philippus, Posthumus, Valerian, Gallienus, Claudius, Quintillus, Probus, Victorinus, Maximian, Constantine, and a few others. These coins appear to have been little worn by circulation, having probably been coined, and some cast in moulds, for paying the troops in this country; and had been deposited not long before the evacuation of the country by the Romans. There are also frequently found deposits of smooth pebble-stones, such as are seen on the sea coast, which no doubt were used for slinging, and must have been dangerous projectiles to have come in contact with a human cranium.

There are various outworks, which I think may be clearly traced in the country around. On the south side of the fosse, now the turnpike road, near *Venn Bridge*, and not far from the section of the new railway, are two parallel lines of entrenchment, in good preservation, about seventy yards in length, not far from a field called *Stanchester*, which was probably an out-station of the Romans, although there are no remains visible, except stones burnt by fire, turned up by the plough; but tradition speaks of there having been buildings thereon. In a field above *Brimpton*, and near a spot called *Camp*, appear some raised lines of earth, much like ramparts, which I think worthy of being more carefully examined. These are near the road leading eastward from Hamdon Hill towards East Coker; near which was found, some years since, the beautiful fragment of tessellated pavement, lately kindly presented to our Society by W. Helyar, Esq., which is now in our Taunton Museum. I must here mention that in the same field from whence it was exhumed, bearing the name of "Chesils,"

or "Chedzils," still remain, at least one, and probably more pavements.

A part of this interesting spot I am happy to announce as having been just laid open by our Yeovil friends, within the last week, and will be one of the subjects of this morning's examination. No doubt this spot was the site of an officer's villa or country residence. Of such, many have been discovered in this country, and are usually at some few miles distant from the military camp, affording a pleasant retreat to their possessors from the din of war. Of the Roman roads in the neighbourhood of the hill, I am sorry not to be able to give a very luminous account. I have mentioned the British trackway, afterwards the Roman fosse, which led through Ischalis (Ilchester), westward, and is now the turnpike-road. At Ilchester, which is said to have been an extensive station of the Romans, other roads met; one from Dorchester (Durnovaria), another from Glastonbury, within a few miles of which the beautiful villa at Pitney was found. That to Dorchester may, I think, be clearly traced for many miles; *i.e.*, to Vagg Hill, where it crosses the turnpike and leads to Preston; then near Furzy Nap, on the Yeovil and Crewkerne road, which it crosses and goes on through Barwick, &c. At Ilchester, some years since, was found a massive and valuable gold ring, bearing a fine head of the Emperor Severus, I believe; it is now in the possession of J. Moore, Esq. Several others have there been dug up, and many coins of Antoninus Pius, Constantine, and others: indeed, the town is still rich in Roman remains, and worthy of antiquarian research. Portions of a causeway crossing the ford are still visible in the bed of the river, a few yards below the bridge. I think it questionable if many truly military roads were formed by the Romans in this part of

the country, though they largely adopted and used the British trackways already formed, which suited their purpose.

On contemplating those remains, the work of men whose bones for many centuries have mingled with the dust, and on witnessing those vestiges of military skill, which was requisite when this country was in a state of warfare, the mind is led into an awful yet pleasing feeling of veneration. This classic spot, Hamdon Hill, which once resounded with the clang of arms, and the clamour of sanguinary strife, is now the retreat of rural quiet, and silence, unbroken, except by the tinkling of the sheep-bell, the simple strains of the shepherd boy attending his flock, or occasionally by the merry music of a pic-nic party. It is a matter of grateful felicitation that we are now living in an era when the progress of civilization, the march of intellect, and, above all, the benign influence of Christianity, have rendered such fortresses no longer necessary ; for in this favored country, once the scene of idolatrous superstition and savage life ; and since that of civil warfare and intestine commotion ; we are now allowed to sit each "under his own vine and fig-tree," and enjoy the bountiful gifts of a kind Providence in peace and safety.
