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The Moats Or Waterforts of the Vale of the Severn

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THE MOATS OR WATERFORTS OF THE VALE OF THE SEVERN.

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My paper will consist of a few short and discursive notes on that part of the Severn Vale which lies between the river Severn and the Cotswolds, limited to the north by a line drawn from Tewkesbury to the hills and to the south by another drawn from Gloucester to Birdlip. I shall first give the course of the streams of that portion which have their origin in the east from the western declivities of the Cotswold Hills. I shall then draw attention to certain ancient fortified posts which are to be found on their banks, and lastly the communications that formerly and still partly exist between them.

I may at once say that the historical period of this district, with which I shall deal, will be all pre-Domesday or pre-Norman.

THE STREAMS THAT WATER THIS DISTRICT.

The first, commencing from the north, and a very large one, is the Swillgate, commonly pronounced the Swillett; it falls into the Severn at Tewkesbury, and it was on its banks that the battle of Tewkesbury was fought. This river is formed by the union of three streams: (1) the Dean brook, the most northerly branch, arising at the foot of Nottingham Hill, at its north-west extremity and flowing due west; (2) the Hyde brook, which arises on the side of Cleeve Hill, and runs a westerly course; (3) and the southerly branch, Wyman's brook, which arises on the side of the Hewletts, and by its junction with the Hyde brook forms the Swillgate. The next river is the Chelt. It falls into the Severn at Wainlode, or the wagon lode or ford. It arises at Chelt head just

outside the western boundary of Sandywell Park, close by the western end of the railway tunnel that runs under the Park. It runs north-west, south-west, and west, and it receives no large branches throughout its course. One small stream that passes through Dowdeswell Court, however, falls into it just above the Cheltenham Corporation Dowdeswell reservoir. Another larger stream, arising above Bafford, in Charlton Kings, falls into the Chelt in the grounds of Charlton House. This word Bafford is probably a corruption of Berford—Ber meaning water,—and there are similar names in the county, one for example being Bar Bridge on the Chelt in Uckington. The third river is the Hatherley brook; this falls into the Severn at Longford. It arises on the side of Lockhampton Hill, just below Blackedge. It has a tributary called Norman's brook, which commences at Crickley, and flowing through Badgeworth falls into the Hatherley brook just by Brickhampton Farm. So far, we see, all the river and stream names are very ancient; but whether this one is called after the "North men," or simply takes its name from a man of the name of Norman, it is difficult to find out. The last and most southerly branch I shall deal with is Horsebere brook; it commences in the Witcombe valley and falls into the Severn at Longford, joining the Hatherley brook just before that point. Here again in this name we find "Ber" connected with water. In going over the names of these streams we may notice that we have three with wholly or partly Celtic names; viz., Wyman's brook (from "Wy" water and probably "myn" little), the Chelt, and Horsebere brook.

Having now pointed out the position, names and directions of these streams in relation to the hills and the river Severn, I want to draw attention to a series of forts or moats which are scattered throughout this area.

At first sight they appear to be located without any method, and without any connection with one another; but on studying them more closely, I think it will be clear that they have a regular design for a definite object, and more or less regular connection by roads. First of all, we

must consider what is meant by the word "moat." Skeat says that "it is a trench round a fort filled with water. Originally it meant either the mound thrown up, or the ditch dug out." In Ireland it is still the term given to the stone or the earthen mound, containing kistvaens or sepulchral chambers. Some of the court houses in England are called the moat, or mute, or moot hall. The public courts of the Saxon were called Witten mote. I must now point out to you the position of these moats.

On the river Swillgate, on the Dean brook branch, is the Gotherington Moat, and on the Hyde brook branch is the Prestbury Moat.

On the Chelt there are three—the Leigh Moat, the Boddington Moat, the Uckington Moat; and at one time a fourth, the Sandford Moat. On the Hatherley brook is the Sandhurst Moat, Bengrove Moat, the Down Hatherley Moat, and the Leckhampton Moat. On tributaries of the Hatherley brook are the Bentham Moat, the Urrist Barn Moat, and Hunt Court Moat. On the Horsebere brook is Elmbridge Court Moat.

What were these moats made for, and by whom? Are they Romano-British, Saxon, or Medieval? I hope we may be able to answer these questions satisfactorily, after we have considered the meaning of their names, their situations, and individual peculiarities. I will tabulate them by the origin of their names first. Those with British names are six in number; viz., Boddington, Sandford, Sandhurst, Bengrove at Sandhurst, Leckhampton, and Bentham. The Saxon are eight in number—Gotherington, Leigh, Prestbury, Uckington, Down Hatherley, Hunt Court, Urrist Barn at Little Shurdington, and Elmbridge. So we see that of these fourteen moats of which I am speaking, six have evidence in their name of being British, the remainder being Saxon.

BRITISH-NAMED MOATS.

Boddington has a British prefix, "Bod," meaning a dwelling, as we find in Bodmin and Boscawen. Sandford

and Sandhurst both have the prefix "Sand," a corruption of "sarn," a pavement or a road; both are on ancient roads. Sandford is on the old Chelt and Bath road, for which Mr. Sawyer has adduced good evidence of being Romano-British and paved; whilst Sandhurst is on, or close to, a Romano-British road running north from Gloucester, and which once formed part of the western trackway which runs north and south along the eastern shore of the Severn. Bengrove Farm Moat is another one in the parish of Sandhurst; the prefix "Ben" is not uncommon in this part of the county, there being Ben's Tump on Cleeve Hill and Bentham, where there used also to be a moat; but whether we are at all justified in thinking that this is the Ben which means a headland or hill, I very much doubt; more probably it was a family name, and therefore it might prove to be Saxon. Another illustration of the name Ben is to be found at Bensey, near Warrington, Lancashire. In the church of Warrington is a monument to Sir John and Lady Butler, Knight; the murder of the former in 1463 is thus related in a Bodleian MS:—"Sir John Butler, Knight, was slaine in his bedde by the procurement of Lord Stanley, Sir Piers Legh and Mister William Savage joining with him in that action (corrupting his servant), his porter setting a light in a window to give light upon the water that was about his house at Bensey. They came over the moate in leather boates, and so to his chamber, where one of his servants named Houlcroffe was slaine, being his chamberlain: the other basely betrayed his master—they payed him a great rewarde, and so coming away with him they hanged him at a tree in Bensey Park." Leckhampton has a British prefix of "Lec," a stone.

I am afraid it will be thought that I have rather stretched the point in wishing to show a British origin for these moats. At any rate, it is easy to prove the early Saxon origin of most of them from their names.

"Leigh," a clearing: Boddington and Uckington have the Saxon patronymic "ing"; Prestbury the Saxon "burgh," an

earthwork. Leckhampton moat, besides its Saxon ending, is next to the Bury Farm, if not actually part of it. Hatherleigh, Bentham, Elmbridge, and Hunt Court have all Saxon as part of their names; also, Urrist Barn, which probably is a Gloucestershire provincialism, Hurst being Saxon for wood or thicket.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MOATS.

GOTHERINGTON MOAT

Is nearly all filled in now and a farm-house stands on it. It was apparently square and of a large size, the platform not being appreciably raised above the surrounding land. It is on the Green Lane from Nottingham Hill, which runs east and west.

PRESTBURY MOAT

I described in a communication to the Cheltenham Natural Science Society, but must give a short *resumé* of it. Before doing so, I may suggest the probability of its being British in origin, for to it leads a Romano-British road called "Shaw Greenlane." A Prestbury street also leads to it from the south, called "The Burgage," and I see no reason why this is not only a corruption from Burgege, the Bury-way, any more than Stanwege means Stone-way and Horsage the Horse-way. It was probably here stood the "fayre moated house," mentioned by Leland in his *Itinerary*. This bury or moat is situate near the northern boundary of the parish, at the eastern extremity of Prestbury Park. It consists of a large piece of land surrounded by a broad and deep ditch; to the east of it are the remains of another moat, not so large and complete, and a less deep ditch. The western one is square, and it is either Celtic or Saxon, whilst the eastern one is probably a medieval extension. I suggest, then, that the western portion is the original Bury of the Saxons, either constructed by them or existing there on their arrival, and probably used by them; then a medieval house was built on the spot, and finally it was destroyed, leaving only the

foundations. The shape of the fort is all but square, the north and south fences being 100 yards long and the east and west fences 112 yards. The ditch is 36 feet wide and 4 feet to 6 feet deep. In the centre are the marks of the foundations of an old house, divided into four compartments, and in the S.E. compartment or room is an old well, which is covered over, and the cover seven inches below the surface. The eastern earthworks are evidently an addition of later construction; the northern fence is not continuous with the north face of the Bury itself, but at right angles with the eastern one, striking it to the south of the northern face. It is 93 yards long and is 6 feet deep. The eastern face is 134 yards long, and is from 4 feet to 6 feet deep.

THE LEIGH MOAT

Is situate in the Leigh parish, on the western trackway; it is 70 yards square, with a raised external bank on the east, and has a distinct raised platform: on it now stands a modern farmhouse.

THE BODDINGTON MOAT.

Of this moat little remains. It lies to the south of the river Chelt. A fine medieval mansion stands on the site.

THE UCKINGTON MOAT

Lies on the banks of the Chelt, and a modern house stands on it. It is not rectangular: its north face is about 100 yards long, south face 170 yards, and east and west 150. The platform is raised, especially towards the south. There is an outside bank at the southern side. The southern ditch has been probably enlarged.

THE SANDFORD MOAT, CHELTENHAM.

An old resident in Sandford Terrace told me that he personally knew that a moated house stood on the land behind the terrace, and that it was not all filled up when he was a boy,

sixty years ago. It was on the south side of the Chelt, near to the Sandford, on the Sandford Street, or Old Bath Road.

SANDHURST MOAT

Is on the Hatherley brook (north side) and has a farmhouse on it. The south and west faces have been filled in, the northern trench drained, but there is water in the western face. It must have been about 60 yards each way, and the platform is not raised.

BENGROVE FARM MOAT,

Also in the Sandford parish, has also been much altered. The northern trench has been prolonged to make a pond, and all the other faces filled in; but the western face can still be traced. They were 50 to 60 yards long. The old house was pulled down some years ago. The platform was slightly raised. These moats lie one on either side of the Sandhurst Lane.

HATHERLEY MOAT.

By the courtesy of Mrs. Jones, I was able to make a full inspection of Down Hatherley moat. It is perhaps the most remarkable of all these that I am describing. It is by far the largest of all, enclosing several acres of land. Half of it has been filled in and levelled, the northern and eastern faces, however, being intact, and a fragment of the western one. The northern side is fully 150 yards long, and the eastern face is almost double that length. They say it was once divided into two by a trench running across the centre from east to west, making a northern and southern fort, the house standing on the southern one. There is no history or sign of walls or towers around the moat.

LECKHAMPTON MOAT,

In the field opposite the west end of the church, is one of peculiar interest, as being recognised by archæologists as of very ancient date, and probably pre-Saxon. It is an

irregular four-sided fort, with a raised platform. There is some evidence of medieval buildings having once stood there. It stands on the western side of the old Sandford and Shurdington road. Some consider it to have been a village fortress.

BENTHAM MOAT

Has all been drained and mostly filled in. It is possible, however, to trace the old line of the ditch; and Miss Bubb, who resides in the very interesting and quaint old mansion that stands on it, very kindly showed me round and pointed out where it used to be. It was about 100 yards along each face; the angles are not true right angles; and the platform could have been but slightly raised. It is on the Crickley brook, a branch of the Hatherley brook.

URRIST BARN MOAT,

Near Little Shurdington, is, in my opinion, the most pathetically interesting of all. It is on the western side of a very ancient lane, which is more or less the continuation of the road from Sandford, *vid* Leckhampton, to Shurdington, and on to Bentham. There it remains, deserted, uncared for, a picture of desolation, its silence covering probably whole chapters of history never to be read or unfolded. It is the smallest of all I have seen, each face measuring only 50 yards, but having a markedly raised platform. There is no evidence of any house having stood on it.

HUNT COURT MOAT.

No house stands on this one, but a farmhouse is by its side.

ELMBRIDGE COURT MOAT,

On the Horsebere brook, is a perfect example of a moated house. It measures about 90 yards each way; the platform is slightly raised and on it stands a new house, which has recently supplanted an old one. Some remarkable earth-

works are to be seen in an adjoining field, but what their object was is not clear.

Had these moats any connection with one another, or use in common, or are they simply placed by chance, without any connection, but simply isolated units? My own opinion is that they do stand in very close relation to one another with one common object, and for the general benefit of the vale tribes. Just notice that the Great Western trackway runs parallel with the Severn and close to it; that the ancient trackways from the hills ran more or less along the course of the streams; that these moats command the course of these streams, and that the most important lines of communication had the greatest number on them; that those furthest from the base, namely, the Severn, were most numerous, and lie close up to and under the very foot of the hills, the borderland or marches of the vale.

One other point of interest is worth noticing, that every moated fort at the foot of the hills is a counterpoint to Romano-British and British forts on the hills: thus Gotherington lies under Nottingham Hill with Cockbury; Prestbury is under Cleeve Cloud Camp and Hewletts; Sandford moat is opposed to Battledown and Leckhampton; Leckhampton moat to Leckhampton Hill Camp; Urrist Barn and Bentham to Crickley; Hunt Court and Elmbridge to Churchdown.

This line of easterly moats are all united by continuous and ancient roads running along the foot of the hills, commencing at Gotherington and passing through Woodmancote, and in times gone by to the east of Pigeon House Farn and Southam Chapel, to the west of Southam de la Bere, through Prestbury, Bouncer's Lane, Hales Road, Old Bath Road, Leckhampton, Shurdington, Bentham, and then into the "Ermine Street." I have marked it on the map as the "Eastern Trackway." Roads of communication ran from this road westward to the great Western Trackway of the Severn. The first most northerly is one from the Green Lane, Gotherington, *viâ* Tredington, into the Hoo Lane, and

so to the Severn near Deerhurst. The next from Southam, Cate-gate Lane, *viâ* the Hyde and Swindon, and Old Gloucester road. The third from Hewletts, called the Greenway, passing through Cudnall, Cheltenham, and Old Gloucester Road to Gloucester. The fourth, another Greenway from the Crippetts, by Shurdington, *viâ* Badgeworth, Norman's Bridge, and Churchdown; and the fifth, the "Ermine Street."

The westerly moats lying on or contiguous to the great Western Trackway are, the Leigh, Sandhurst and Bengrove. The intermediate moats are, on the Chelt, Boddington and Uckington, and on Hatherley Brook, Hunt Court. A good description of a vale moat is given by the Rev. T. Melland Hall, M.A., Rector of Harescombe, in a paper on "Haresfield, its Manor and Church," published in the *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archæological Society*, volume xix., part ii., 1894-95, pages 280 and 281. I take the liberty of quoting it verbatim:—"On the north side of the Church, and adjoining the churchyard, is a very striking entrenchment, the work probably of the Saxon, or the Dane. [I may note here that this work lies at the foot of the Haresfield Beacon, on which is a very powerful Romano-British Camp.] It consists of a mound somewhat in the shape of a horseshoe, standing nearly 10 feet above the level of the adjoining land, measuring 78 yards from north to south and 68 yards from east to west. This mound (now used as a garden) is surrounded by a moat or ditch, 18 feet wide and still 9 feet deep. In the centre of the mound is a level platform about 35 yards square, standing 2 feet and 6 inches high, and between this central platform and the main moat, running parallel with the latter, is a slight ditch and bank, which was probably surmounted by a stockade, the whole work forming a strong vale fort very similar to that of Leckhampton, near Cheltenham." Clarke, in his *Medieval Military Architecture*, says: "These works, thrown up in England in the ninth and tenth centuries, are seldom, if ever, rectangular. First was cast up a truncated cone of earth, standing at its natural slope from 12 to even 50 or 60

feet in height. This mound, 'motte,' or 'burrh,' the 'mota' of our records, was formed from the contents of a broad and deep circumscribing ditch."

By this we see that Mr. Melland Hall accepts Clarke's statement, that moats are the remains of Saxon strongholds. It is a very interesting question as to whether they are so in every case, and to what age they really belong. I believe that many of them are older, and are probably Romano-British in origin. I have heard that Mr. Bellows believes that every Roman signal station on the hills had an outpost in the vale, and I have pointed out to you already the juxtaposition of the vale moats to the hill camps, and their connections by road. So that it is possible that these moats played a part in the Roman story of our country, and were afterwards found useful by the invading Saxon.

Probably a good deal more evidence as to their age could be obtained by a careful cleaning out to a great depth and examination of the contents of these ditches. In the *English Illustrated Magazine*, 1888-9, page 372, in an article on "Moated Houses," by W. W. Fenn. Speaking of Stokesay Castle, in Shropshire, he says: "The average width of the moat is 20 feet, with a depth of 6 feet, probably at one time more. Cleared out some years ago, a few interesting curiosities were discovered, in the shape of coins, tokens, china, &c., and a somewhat mysterious stone implement, or, as some supposed, a Saxon dial, pierced with a central hole for a gnomon, and six holes in circumference, the latter indicating, it is assumed, the divisions of time according to the Saxon reckoning. These articles are carefully preserved in the buildings."

A great deal might be gained by clearing out these moats to a depth of eight or nine feet, or even more, and I hope an opportunity may arise when I shall be able to get at least one so examined.

In conclusion, I would ask any that are interested in history to do each one his little share if the opportunity arises of recording ancient monuments and describing their

present condition; also gathering up and saving every scrap of tradition and folklore; that during excavations a watch be set for whatever is turned up by the spade. Nearly all the Romano-British history of these islands and the history of the periods immediately antecedent and subsequent to it are mostly buried under the soil at varying depths, and is from time to time unearthed by chance in the construction of modern buildings or works. With regard to these moats in particular, I find that very little has been written about them; it is apparently virgin soil for the archæologist, and a great deal is to be done by a more careful and extended examination of them throughout the country.
