

DESBOROUGH CASTLE.

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THE ancient entrenchment vulgarly called "The Roundabout," but more properly Desborough Castle, is situated on a hill some little distance to the left of the main road between High Wycombe and West Wycombe, whence its outline can easily be traced.

Commencing our investigations at the eastern end of Gallows Lane, which runs immediately below Desborough Camp, we have before us the outer defence. The slope of the hill is cut away to the depth of fifty feet, so as to render the ascent in that part almost perpendicular. It may have been more perpendicular when first constructed, but the processes of agriculture, the washing down of the surface mould by rain, the crumbling caused by frosts, have, during the lapse of centuries, modified the original perpendicularity of the bank, and reduced it to a steep incline. Still there is quite sufficient remaining to give us a pretty accurate idea of its former character. From the appearance of the ground in the adjacent corner of Desborough Field, there is every indication of this outer work having at one time extended further in that direction than it does at present.

At some distance from the summit of the outer bank runs parallel with it what is apparently a remnant of one of the outer defences of the camp, and formed a terrace upon which men might be stationed to prevent an attack on the flank of the entrenchment. It was strengthened by an embankment in the front and rear, and at intervals had advanced posts for observation. As might naturally be expected, the banks and escarpments have been much modified and changed since their first construction; in some places they have become quite obliterated. What remains, however, is amply sufficient to enable the

student of antiquity to recall the probable extent and direction of the several parts of these interesting remains. The outer bank has a general height of four or five feet, which is increased in some places to fifteen feet. The inner bank in its highest portion has an elevation of seven feet, but is far from being perfect. A distance of sixty feet from thence will bring us to the edge of the camp proper, which consists of a double entrenchment, with a deep fosse on the outside, the inner slope of the ditch being raised so as to form a high bank towards the interior. The bank appears to have been considerably lowered in some places, and in others almost levelled; but if we take its original height to have been uniformly as it remains at the south-east corner, it must have been a position of great strength and importance at the time when it was constructed, or adapted for defence, if we consider the rude weapons of warfare then in use.

Actual measurement gives the following results as the dimensions of these remains: Diameter, 420ft., depth of the entrenchment from the exterior, 18ft., height of the bank from the bottom of the ditch, 22ft., ditto from the interior, 10ft., width of fosse, 20ft.

There can be little doubt that there was a building here at one time of considerable strength, as the remains of old tiling, hewn stones, and masonry plainly indicate. Whilst felling the trees which grew here about 1743, portions of stone Gothic work were dug up resembling the jambs of a church window.

Of the once famous Desborough Castle nothing now remains but the name, and the tradition that such a building once existed here.

Mrs. Matthew Hall, in her "Queens Before the Conquest," says: "To the period of these intestine divisions in Mercia may perhaps be referred the building of the ancient Castle of Desborough, in Buckinghamshire, which some think was named after Ethelburga, who is occasionally called Desburga." In a foot note she cites Camden as her authority. Ethelburga was Queen of Ina. King of Wessex, and the period referred to is about 720 A.D.

When this earthwork was constructed, by whom, for what purpose, or whence it acquired its present designation, are all alike shrouded in obscurity by the mists of

time, and are each a matter of conjecture. It has been supposed to be of British origin, and to have had some relation to the religious ceremonies of the early Celtic tribes, or to have been formed by them for defensive purposes. It has also been attributed to the Saxons, and upon the Ordnance maps it is marked as a "Danish Camp." Several narrow trackways or lanes converge towards Desborough; and there can be no reasonable doubt there were formerly others that have been destroyed during the course of centuries that have elapsed since their construction, and especially since the disappearance of the town, which occupied the site of Desborough Field. There was an ancient vicinal way which passed from the Watling Street, between Tring and Chesham, *via* Missenden, to Desborough (of which perhaps Green Street is a remnant), where it united with another old trackway from the Icknield Road from Bledlow through West Wycombe. It probably ran under Desborough, through Newland to join the Windsor Way, now occupied by the stream called the Dyke, crossing the old Marlow and Amersham Road near the Loke, and thence by the Roman Villas in the Rye, by Bassetsbury, towards Loudwater and Wooburn. The road through the valley from the ancient stronghold of Aylesbury, by Risborough and Bradenham, ran directly to Desborough, and not, as it does now, to High Wycombe. The present road was made by Lord De-spencer; but the course of the older road can be easily traced by a row of trees, from the Obelisk at the entrance to West Wycombe village, in a south-easterly direction until it emerges into Chapel Lane. This road is marked throughout its course by remains of earthworks. In this part of its course it connected the strongholds at West Wycombe, Desborough, and Keep Hill. It should also be noticed that the road wound round the foot of the hills, and that its course is directed from station to station. The locality to which all these roads tended must have been a place of importance. That is a conclusion which forces itself upon us with unmistakable significance.

The narrow, winding course of all these roads, and the evident lack of that scientific construction which the formation of Roman roads invariably displays, seem

to indicate that they are of British origin, and formed the lines of communication between this district and the Ickniel Street in one direction, and the road Romanized into Watling Street in the other.

If then these old roads leading from different points toward Desborough were pre-Roman in their origin, it is but reasonable to infer that the place to which they led was also in existence in an age anterior to the Roman occupation of Britain, because all these roads would owe their formation to the traffic to and from the localities they connected, and would, consequently, be later in their origin than the strongholds between which they ran.

It is well known, too, that the Saxons almost invariably fixed upon the locality of British strongholds as sites for their towns, and, since Desborough was the head of the Saxon Hundred, it must, at that early period, have been a place of note, which again points to the probability that the spot, which the English settlers in this part of the country adopted as their headquarters, had held a position of importance in the district previous to their arrival.

All these considerations seem to point strongly to a British origin of the village of Desborough, if not of the Camp also. Desborough Field is, no doubt, the site of a British and Saxon village, and perhaps of a Roman settlement, for coins of the empire and other Roman remains have been found in it.

Although we have no direct evidence that a road was constructed by the Romans through this valley, we have ample indirect evidence that an important thoroughfare ran in this direction, during their occupation of Britain; and the discovery of remains of undoubted Roman origin, such as urns, pavements composed of tesserae, coins, etc., in the neighbourhood, leads to the conclusion that they had a permanent settlement here. The reason that there are no signs of a Roman road apparent along our valley may, perhaps, be accounted for by the fact that they found, in the old trackways of which I have spoken, ample accommodation already provided.

At the establishment of the Heptarchy, Buckinghamshire at first formed part of the Kingdom of Wessex, but was afterwards included in Mercia. At that time,

Desborough, though now depopulated, was a place of importance, as the name of the Hundred was taken therefrom, and there the Hundredary held his court.

The formation of this earthwork has also been attributed to the Danes, and though we may be loth to run counter to popular conceit, its position and form suggest that it was intended by its constructors for defensive purposes, and this considerably weakens, if it does not destroy, the probability of its being the work of the Danes, who were mostly acting on the aggressive. If it possesses any association with them at all, it is from its having been constructed by the English against the ravages of those fierce depredators.

Langley thinks that from its double fortifications, it may be of Saxon origin, and that its position near the grand road to London might design it as a check to the inroads and devastations of the Danes, who more than once made excursions this way. There is scarcely any doubt, whatever may have been the early origin of the circular entrenchment, whether British or not, the Camp, as we see it at the present time, is of English formation, and was designed to resist an attack from invaders passing along the road beneath, and that an assault from the opposite direction was not expected; and, further, that it was constructed so as to be able to resist an attack directed upon it from the east. This is exactly what we should expect to find, supposing it to have been formed as a defence against the Danes, marching along the ancient trackway which passes immediately below; and the occasion which answers most closely to this description, was that of 1010, when, Florence of Worcester expressly states, they passed through Chiltern to Oxford. I think, upon due consideration of all the circumstances of the case, we shall not greatly err by fixing upon that date as the time when it was brought into the form it now presents, if not primarily constructed then. On that occasion the Danes must have passed through this valley, as it lay directly in their route from London to Oxford.

As Desborough was the head of the Hundred to which it gave its name, it will not be out of place, if I give an account of the constitution and powers of the Hundred among the Anglo-Saxons, and trace their cor-

responding authority in our present system of government.

The political institutions of the Anglo-Saxons were extremely primitive and homely in their character. Local self-government, which is still the distinguishing feature of England and the safeguard of our liberties, was the foundation of all their civil organizations. The country was divided into a number of concentric circles, of which the Hall was the inner, and the Kingdom the outer ring—the county was the unit of which the aggregate was the whole nation. There is scarcely a modern language which has a corresponding term to the English word “Home,” and the trait in our character which has invested it with its peculiar significance we derive from our Saxon forefathers and their customs.

In the first and lowest place there was the Court of Sac and Soc, or Hall-Mote, the assemblage of the Lord and his free tenants for the regulation of the affairs of each principal estate; then came the Burgh-Mote, Folk-Mote, or Town Council, over which the Borough-Reeve presided. After the Conquest he was called the Mayor (Latin, *Major*, through Norman-French). Next in extent of jurisdiction was the Hundred-Mote, forming the stepping-stone through the Trything to the Shire-Mote, under the Shire-Reeve, whom we now call the Sheriff. Including and combining all these little republics was the Witana-Gemote, or assembly of wise men under the King for the whole country, occupying the place of our Parliament.

It is not known for certain how the term Hundred was first applied, nor has it been exactly determined what was its origin. It is, however, supposed that, in the first instance, the Hundred was composed of ten tithings—that is, one hundred families, each tithing consisting of ten. Some authorities, on the other hand, contend that the Hundred was a territorial division, not of the population, but of the land. By a careful analysis of the records given in Domesday Book, it has been proved that, as regards Bedfordshire, the Hundred anciently consisted of one hundred hides of land, and the same is asserted by Baker to have been the case in Northamptonshire.

The Hundred-Mote was held monthly, under the pre-

sidency of the Hundredary, who was generally, if not always, a thane or nobleman residing within the Hundred. All the members of the Court came fully armed, in imitation of their Teutonic ancestors, and this custom gave rise to the name of wapentake, from *wapen*, arms, and *tac*, take, a term which is still preserved in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. Before the business of the Court commenced, all the members touched the Hundredary's spear with their own, an outward acknowledgment of his authority, their willingness to submit to his ruling, and readiness to fight under his command; for the Hundredary was captain of his district in time of war, as well as civil magistrate in time of peace. In these Courts, the archdeacon, and sometimes the bishop, presided, in conjunction with the Hundredary, and they took cognizance of all matters relating to the Hundred, both civil and ecclesiastical, within the bounds of the district; but they did not possess the power of inflicting capital punishment, and an appeal lay from them to the Trything and the Shire-Mote.

Among the Anglo-Saxons every species of crime, even murder, was punishable by fine, and the Hundredary received, for the performance of his duties, one-third of all fines inflicted in his Court. The petty sessions for the Hundred have grown out of this jurisdiction. But the usefulness of this Court extended beyond its strictly judicial proceedings. In times when the art of reading and writing was confined to comparatively few of the population, the stability and correctness of pecuniary transactions depended greatly upon oral testimony. All sales, transfers, conveyance of property, etc., were publicly attested before the Hundred-Mote, and its decision upon all points of disputed rights or privileges was deemed conclusive. Occasionally we find the authority of the Hundred referred to in Domesday Book. For instance, the account of Toweridge, in West Wycombe, which was held by Roger, the ancestor of the Dayrell family, concludes:—"A vassal of Archbishop Stigand held this land, and could not sell or give it out of the Manor of Wicumbe, as the Hundred witness." The same is recorded in reference to the manor afterwards known as Temple Wycombe, which was then held by a certain William, of the Earl Moreton, uterine brother of the Conqueror.

Sometimes adjacent Hundreds associated themselves together, and had one joint mote to which the separate courts might appeal. Buckinghamshire appears to have been divided into several "three Hundreds," or Trythings, as Aylesbury (Elesberie, Risberge, and Stane); Newport (Bonestou, Moulesho, and Sigelai); Ashendon (Essendene, Votesdone, Tichesele); Cottesloe (Coteslai, Mureslai, and Elai); Buckingham (Stoldfald, Rovelai, and Le Merse).

In the south part of the county, the three associated Hundreds were Stoke, Burnham, and Desborough. These, the Chiltern Hundreds, have been by privilege annexed to the Crown, and still have their own separate courts. The steward of these courts is appointed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, with a salary of 20s. and all fees belonging to the office, and since it is an appointment of profit, the steward must vacate his seat in Parliament.

It was the rule among all northern nations to hold their courts in the open air, either upon a natural eminence, or upon an artificial mound, and their descendants continued the custom after their settlement in this country. The account which I have given of the Hundred-Mote, and the mode of its procedure, is necessarily brief; but I think it contains sufficient information to enable any one who has cultivated his imaginative faculties to picture to himself the scene which might have been witnessed here at Desborough a thousand years ago. As we look upon this historic spot, the mind, in a second of time, if stored with the requisite knowledge, can retrace the extent of centuries, repeople the scene afresh, and re-enact the doings which have rendered it famous. But, as Carlyle observes, "the eye sees what it has the power to see," and it is the habit of observation and association which enables the man of taste and learning to detect the beauties and catch the inspiration of a scene which will escape the notice of the ordinary and uncultivated mind.

Near here, too, was one of the numerous places of execution where the robbers who formerly infested this district were hung. The name "Gallows Lane," which has been perpetuated to our own day, brings most vividly before our minds the former lawless character of the inhabitants of the hill country—"Ciltria," as Matthew

Paris calls it. During the reign of the feeble Henry III., freebooters flourished here amazingly; but in the time of his son and successor, Edward I., very severe laws were passed for their suppression, and the better protection of the inhabitants of the adjacent lowlands, and travellers passing through the district. The steward of the Chiltern Hundreds found his office anything but a sinecure, and so vigorously were the laws enforced against the hordes of banditti, that for a time they were almost extirpated; but during the unsettled times which followed, especially in the reign of Richard II., they again became numerous, and it was not until almost within living memory that the neighbourhood was thoroughly freed from the terrorism of the highwaymen, who rendered this part of the country a byword on account of their frequent and daring robberies, not uncommonly accompanied by murder, which they committed.

As I have before hinted, the remains of masonry which have at various times been discovered within the camp plainly point to the former existence of a building of some sort, but not, I think, of the character assigned to it by Mrs. Hall. Its position and form exactly answer to the description of a fortified British village given by Roman writers. It was the custom of the Britons to select a spot within a forest, clear a space by felling the trees, and, in the space thus formed, to erect their huts, the whole being surrounded by a ditch and stockade. We have in this locality three such spots—West Wycombe Hill and Keep Hill, each with decided British remains, and Desborough between them, with a camp as well as fortifications. Thither the inhabitants of the district fled for safety and protection, when the glare of the watchfires gave notice of the approach of their enemies.

The field in which this entrenchment is situated is called Ald-Hollands, a term which refers to the ancient hollows or ditches on the high ground. The word Desborough is written in Domesday Book "Dustenberg" and "Dusteberge," and in the Charter of 21 King Henry III. (1237) to Wycombe borough, and also in its confirmation by Edward I. in 1285, we find the name of "Ric. de Dusteberg," as one of the twenty-six burgesses of Wycombe who ratified that document on behalf

of themselves and their fellow-townsmen. In 25 Henry III. (1241), the name of "Andrewe Dusteleberwe" occurs in an account of lands at Little Missenden.

These references indicate that Desborough was occupied as late as the thirteenth century, although even at that period the population was gradually drifting eastwards towards Wycombe, leaving the older site vacant. It is rather a significant fact that the modern development of the town is gradually approaching the ancient ground, and once more covering it with buildings, and that one of the streets should have been dedicated by the name of "Desborough," so that now the newly-built cottage may occupy the exact site of an aboriginal hut. It is somewhat doubtful whether the new roads will ever extend beyond the limit of the parish of High Wycombe; but still it is within the range of possibility, and in such a case Desborough may yet be repeopled, and become an important suburb of Wycombe, although in a different parish.

The latter part of the word, "burg," "berg," or "borough," signifies a hill fortress; but the derivation of its descriptive member is entirely unknown, and altogether a matter of conjecture. Langley, the historian of Desborough Hundred, says:—

"To me it appears probable that the name of the place took its rise from the two towns Wycombe and Marlow, 'Duo burgi,' and the Saxon would agree with this derivation."

Mr. Delafield, as quoted by Langley, remarks:—

"Its round form and double fortification would induce one to think it a work of the Saxons. And its situation near the grand road to London might design it as a check to the inroads of the Danes. From thence, perhaps, it might get the name of Danesborough, Densborough, now shortened to Desborough, as being a fortress on the hill designed to put a stop to the ravages of that barbarous people. For I can hardly allow myself to imagine that it got its name from them as being their work."

"This very place might be designed as a Folk-mote, *i.e.*, a place for the meeting of the folk or people to consult about their mutual defence in a more than ordinary danger, upon the apprehension of the invasion of an

enemy. It was from this original design, we may presume, that this place, upon the setting out of Hundreds, was continued to be the place of meeting of the people. This conjecture being admitted, may it not have been called Desborough, *quasi* Deys or Daysborough, *i.e.*, the place of borough or judgment? Day or Dey (saith Dr. Kennet) in the Saxon tongue signifies the administration of justice."

In another place this quaint old writer says:—

" Might it not be called Dwysborough, from its double entrenchment, *dwy* in the ancient British being *duo*, or two. Or else, perhaps, it might have a religious relation from the British *Diw* or *Dyw*, Deus; or from Dis, the first fabulous people of this island. So that Disborough, in this sense, will be a sacred fortification."

These derivations are very ingenious and fanciful, but are not to the point. The most probable is "Deysborough," the place of justice; and in the north of England, daysman signifies a judge or arbiter, and in this sense it is used in the Bible, "Neither is there any daysman betwixt us" (Job ix. 33). If the name had been derived from the Danes, we should have expected to find some indication of its origin in its orthography; but the name, as far as my knowledge extends, never once occurs under either of the suggested forms. As to his last suggestion, it is evident that the Saxons would not derive their names from Celtic roots; an English "borough" of the British "Dys," or "Dis," is an etymological absurdity.

None of these derivations will explain the name as anciently written, though the one is supported by the local tradition which assigns the formation of the camp to the Danes, and the other by the undoubted historical fact of its being the head of the Hundred; for, while giving a plausible etymology of the modern form of the word, they entirely fail to explain the old name. Langley himself, although he derives the name from the Danes, is unwilling to assign the work to them, but supposes it to be of more remote antiquity.

There is a village in Northamptonshire called Desborough, which is written *Deisburg* in Domesday Book; but it would appear that, although the two names are now identical, they were not so formerly, nor is it pro-

bable that they had a common origin. There is a further explanation I can offer, though I must confess it does not seem quite satisfactory; still, as the whole is a matter of conjecture, there is room for another suggestion, which may probably account for the origin of the name.

If *Dusteberg* is the original name (and, from the quotations given above, extending over two centuries, it appears that *duste* was the accepted form of the first syllable), and *Desborough* a corrupt modification of it, then we must certainly look to the former in order to trace out its derivation and meaning. This being so, the root from which it acquired its designation was an old Teutonic adjective, *duster*, signifying "dark," "gloomy," from its having been, at the time of the Saxon settlement, a gloomy spot in that extensive and almost impassable forest which anciently covered the whole of the Chiltern district. That our forefathers frequently, nay, almost invariably, named their towns and villages from the natural features of the spot, is well-known to all who have studied the local nomenclature of this country.

There is a local tradition that two armies were encamped in this vicinity, the Saxons on *Desborough Hill*, and the Danes on *Castle Hill*; and that a fierce struggle took place between them in the valley below. Human remains, such as skulls, leg bones, etc., are said to have been discovered in the meadow adjoining, and also near the banks of the stream. It is likewise asserted that an old sword was turned up by the plough in *Desborough Field*. Another tradition makes it the burial place of an ancient religious house formerly standing here, but of this there is no confirmatory record.

The hill has a romantic history. Here we gaze upon an entrenchment which probably dates from the earliest dawn of our history. Here the startled aborigines in all probability sought shelter and defence when the valley beneath glittered with the spears of the invading Romans. Here, too, when superior military science prevailed, as it always does ultimately, over mere valour, the victorious Roman placed his cohorts to command the surrounding country. Beacon fires blazed here when the English first penetrated this beautiful valley, and afterwards their scouts doubtless watched here for the

coming of the scourge of the land—the dreaded Raven of the Dane.

Considering the interesting character of these remains, and the many historical associations with which they are interwoven, it is somewhat singular that no full account respecting them has hitherto been given in any of the local or county histories dealing with this district.

And yet there is not a more striking monument of antiquity within a circuit of several miles. I trust, therefore, that the account which I am able to give of it will excite the attention of those interested in such matters, and be the means of inducing some one who has more leisure at his disposal than I, to devote his energies to the elucidation of its history. We ought, I think, to be thankful that modern utilitarianism has not destroyed this ancient curiosity among our local antiquities ; and it is incumbent upon the present generation to preserve intact all such relics of the past, and to perpetuate whatever traditions or facts may be known respecting them.
