

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

Some Remarks on the Ancient Passage across the Severn

by Bishop Clifford
1878-79, Vol. 3, 83-89

© The Society and the Author(s)

SOME REMARKS ON THE ANCIENT PASSAGE
ACROSS THE SEVERN,

By the HON. AND RIGHT REV. BISHOP CLIFFORD.

Read at Blaise Castle, 31st July, 1878.

AT the distance of about three miles from Bristol stands the village of Henbury, close to which, in the beautiful grounds of Blaise Castle, is an ancient entrenchment, the size and position of which show that it must once have been a stronghold of considerable importance. Its origin, probably, dates back to a period anterior to the Roman conquest, but that the camp was occupied by the Romans is shown by the coins and other Roman remains that have been dug up within its precincts. A similar camp may be seen at King's Weston, rather more than a mile to the south, and others are to be noticed, at intervals, in a northerly direction, along the course of the Severn. There is every reason to suppose that these are some of the forts raised by the Roman General, P. Ostorius, about A.D. 50, to defend the line of the Severn, as Tacitus relates: "*Cinctosque castris Antoniam et Sabrinam fluvios cohibere parat.*"—Annal. l. II., c. 24. Not that we are to consider all these camps to be of Roman origin. The Romans naturally availed themselves of such British works as they found already in existence, but a portion of them were, without doubt, constructed by the Roman soldiers, or rather by the German auxiliaries under Ostorius, for, as Tacitus remarks, the legionaries had not yet come to the General's assistance. "*Sine robore legionum sociales copias ducebat.*"—*Ibid.* This circumstance of the camps having been raised by Germans may, perhaps, account for peculiarities in their construction, which some persons think not in character with Roman camps. The Severn did not long remain the boundary of the dominion of the Romans; they soon advanced into the country of the Silurians, and Caerleon (*Iscu*

Silurum), became one of the chief stations of the second legion, the Legio Augusta. The camps on the Severn, after this event, lost much of their importance as a military frontier, but the camp at Blaise Castle, and the one at King's Weston probably retained considerable value on account of their position on the military road which connected Caerleon with the central station, Silchester (*Calleva Atrebatum*). This road, as we learn from the Itinerary of Antonine, passed through Bath (*Aquæ Solis*), and went across the Severn to Caerwent, in Monmouthshire (*Venta Silurum*). The exact locality of the ancient Ferry has been the subject of much controversy amongst antiquarians, some placing it at Aust, others at Oldbury-on-Severn, others at Sea Mills on the Avon, others elsewhere; but the question still remains an open one. In the remarks I am about to make in elucidation of this point, I shall confine myself to the evidence afforded by the statements of the "Itinerary" compared with the present aspect of the country, and I shall draw attention to one or two points which seem, hitherto, to have escaped notice. I shall not refer to the work "De Situ Britanniae," imputed to Richard, of Cirencester, which is no longer regarded as authentic, but which has caused much confusion by statements which are at variance with the Itinerary of Antonine. The Itinerary itself dates, most probably, from the second century; it is certainly not later than the fourth, and is therefore an authority of the highest value. The edition I have used is that of 1848, in the "Monumenta Historica Britannica." That there are, occasionally, mistakes in the copy of the work which has reached our times it is natural to suppose, but the existence of such errors must not be lightly assumed. It is our duty, in the first instance, to accept statements as they stand, to compare them, if possible, with the localities as they now appear, and to reject or alter them only in cases where we find them at variance with undoubted facts.

The route now under consideration was one of two military roads, which led from Silchester to Caerleon.

That portion of it with which we are immediately concerned is described as follows:—

Ab Isca		From Caerleon	
Venta Silurum	m.p. viiii.	To Caerwent	miles, 9
Abone	m.p. viiii.	„	„ 9
Trajectus	m.p. viiii.	„	„ 9
Aquis Solis	m.p. vi.	To Bath	„ 6

The length of the road between Caerwent and Bath is put down as 24 miles, divided into three stages, the two first of 9 miles each, the latter one of six. The distance between Caerwent and Bath, "as the crow flies," is about $22\frac{1}{2}$ miles; the road, therefore, must have deviated but little from the direct line, as it was only about a mile and a half longer. This is what we should naturally expect. The Roman engineers always chose the most direct route compatible with the nature of the district they had to traverse. Caerwent is less than three miles distant from the bank of the Severn. If we follow a direct line from the town to the coast, in the direction of Bath, we come upon an ancient earthwork of great strength, with forts and outworks, known as "Sudbrooke camp;" it has been recognized as a Roman work; not more than half of it is at present in existence, the remainder has been carried away by the tide, the denuding action of which is plainly visible. The shore of the Severn, which is here raised some thirty feet or more above high water mark, and the lower part of which is alternately washed and laid bare by the tide, is composed of layers of limestone, with clay underneath. The alternate action of the tide and frost, is gradually undermining the upper layers of stone, which give way and lie as boulders on the shore, till they also, in process of time, are by the same agencies removed. The spectator, who stands on the edge of the embankment and contemplates the work of denudation still in progress, will readily understand that during the course of 1500 years and more, a very considerable portion of the coast must have been washed away, and that, consequently, when this fort was erected by the Romans not only was the earthwork complete on the river side but a considerable space of land, probably, intervened between the eastern front of the fortress and the bed of the river. He will also understand why no indications at present exist of what were the

conveniences for the anchorage of ships, and the landing of men and goods, at the period when the fort was built; all such works must long ago have disappeared; but the fact of a Roman fort existing by the river side, so close to Caerwent, and in a direct line to Bath, seems irresistibly to point to the conclusion that here must have been, in former days, the point of embarkation for troops and stores crossing the Severn.

Assuming Sudbrooke camp to be the western extremity of the ferry, the eastern terminus must next be sought for. The Romans, be it remembered, were well acquainted with the action of the tides, and availed themselves of it when navigating our seas. They were sure to do so in crossing the Severn, and, consequently, the corresponding landing place to that at Sudbrooke must be sought for at some spot not directly opposite, but either higher up or lower down on the left bank of the stream. Either Aust or Avonmouth would satisfy this condition, but Aust is a long way removed from the direct line to Bath, and the distance from Caerwent to Sudbrooke, Sudbrooke to Aust, and Aust to Bath exceeds by a good deal the 24 miles allowed by the Itinerary; this objection applies with still greater force to Oldbury. If, on the other hand, we suppose the transports to have *descended* the river from Sudbrooke camp, the deviation from a straight line to Bath is but small. The action of the tide, owing to the bend in the river, is very favourable for boats crossing the stream, and the whole distance is free from rocks; whereas between Sudbrooke and Aust the passage is less clear, and there is a strong current to contend with at the place known as "the shoots." Moreover, it seems that Aust was formerly an island, detached from the main land. If the Romans established a fort in the vicinity of the landing on one side of the river, it is presumable that they did something of the kind on the other side also, and, inasmuch as we know that Ostorius had established a series of forts along the left bank of the Severn, for the express purpose of repelling any hostile descent, it seems natural to suppose that the landing place was in the vicinity of one of these.

The earthworks forming the line of defence established by Ostorius are all on high ground, and at some considerable distance from the river, being separated from it by a wide tract of flat land; but the whole of this tract is a deposit of recent date. The gain of land caused by deposition from the muddy waters of the Severn on the left bank greatly exceeds the loss sustained by denudation on the right; this is chiefly due to two causes: 1st, the removal of a portion of the right shore by denudation has increased the rapidity of the current in that direction, and has slackened it in the same proportion on the opposite side. Where the motion of the water is retarded the deposit of mud previously held in solution necessarily increases. 2nd, the work of nature has been greatly hastened by the hand of man. As the water near the shore became shallower, it was found necessary to construct, at different distances, raised roads across the shallow waters, to reach the navigable part of the river. These acted as dikes to impede still further the course of the waters, and so increased the amount of mud deposited at each tide, which soon began to form tracts of marshy land. The value of the gift was soon understood. On all sides do we see dikes and sea banks constructed, at different periods, to check the action of the river, and prevent the newly-acquired land from being flooded or washed away; and thus, by the joint action of nature and man, a vast extent of what was originally the bed of a river became first a marsh, and finally a rich and fertile plain. This last stage was not reached till within a very late period. The absence of churches and villages plainly indicates that even a few hundred years ago this vast plain was a marsh unsuited for the habitation of man.

Eighteen hundred years ago the waters of the Severn washed the foot of the heights, on the top of which stood the forts of Ostorius, guarding the landing places, and preventing the passing over of the Britons from the opposite shore. The camp at Blaise Castle was one of these forts, and so was the neighbouring camp at King's Weston; in the valley below these, on the bank of the Severn, was a landing place, as is indicated by ancient causeways, extending across the marsh; these causeways were

not constructed till after the new land had been formed, but they, no doubt, are continuations of roads which previously led down to the water edge, and so indicate the direction where the old landing places must have been. The causeway below Blaise Castle bears the name of Chittering Street. The station of Abone, like the modern Avonmouth, probably derived its name from the river Avon; but the mouth of the river in those days did not extend beyond Pen Pole Point. As the station of Venta (Caerwent) was at some considerable distance from the landing place at Sudbrooke, so it is not necessary to suppose that Abone immediately adjoined the landing place on the opposite shore. Abone probably stood by Weston Park, the distance of which from Caerwent agrees well with the Itinerary, and the landing place was either below Blaise Castle or King's Weston. The latter situation is perhaps the most probable. Sea Mills, where Roman remains have been discovered, was, in all likelihood, a port connected with Abone; but it cannot have been the spot where troops embarked for Caerwent, as some writers have supposed. Transports going down the Avon *with* the tide would, after reaching the Severn, have to ascend *against* the tide, in order to reach the landing at Sudbrooke. The landing place must have been on the Severn, and not on the Avon, in order that the passage might be made in one tide. Moreover, the distance from Caerwent to Sea Mills is greater than that stated in the Itinerary. The distance between Weston Park, where I suppose Abone to have stood, and Bath is a little over 15 miles, and the Itinerary states that it was divided into two stages, one of nine, the other of six, miles. Bitton is believed to mark the site of the intermediate station, which view is confirmed by the fact that traces of a square Roman camp are there visible. The camp at Bitton is rather more than nine miles from Blaise Castle, and only five from Bath, but the station may have been at some little distance from the camp. This station is called in the Itinerary *Trajectus*, a name which seems better suited to a station near the *Passage* over the Severn, and, consequently, many learned antiquarians have conjectured that, through an error in the copy we possess of the Itinerary, the names of the stations have been

transposed, and that we ought to read *Venta, Trajectus, Abone, Aquæ Solis*, instead of *Venta, Abone, Trajectus, Aquæ Solis*, as at present. This conjecture is plausible, and has been adopted by learned men; but it is, after all, only a conjecture, and conjectural emendations of a text ought not to be easily had recourse to without necessity. No such necessity appears to exist in the present instance. *Abone* is a name well becoming a town at the mouth of the *Avon*. On the other hand, that there was a passage, "*Trajectus*," across the river *Avon*, not far from *Bitton*, in British times, seems exceedingly probable. South-west of *Bitton* may be seen the druidical circle of *Stanton Drew*; stones of a similar description, though on a smaller scale, exist near *Tracey Park*, three miles north-east of the same spot; whatever may have been the use of these stones, they clearly mark British places of importance, and as such they were, without doubt, resorted to by the Britons, even before the Roman occupation. A road, or track, between them would cross the *Avon*, near *Bitton*; a settlement would naturally grow up near the Passage, whence it would derive its name (as the neighbouring village of *Salford* does from the *ford*), and this the Romans would translate *Trajectus*. The word *Trajectus* is used to signify not only a ferry, but a bridge of boats, such as we see sculptured on the columns of *Antoninus* and *Trajan*, and which were in use till of late years on the *Rhine*, when they were superseded by suspension bridges. *Mæstricht*, *Utrecht*, *Frankfort-on-the-Maine*, and *Frankfort-on-the-Oder*, all bore, anciently, the name of *Trajectum*, and all seem to have possessed bridges of this description. The Romans may well have established such a bridge at the site of the old British ford, or ferry over the *Avon*, for at *Keynsham*, on the opposite side of the river to *Bitton*, many indications have been discovered of Roman residences. I do not, therefore, see sufficient reason for rejecting the reading of the *Itinerary* as it has reached us, placing *Trajectus* near *Bitton* and *Abone* near the mouth of the *Avon*.