

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

Notice of Earthworks in the Parish of English Bicknor

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1879-80, Vol. 4, 301-312

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NOTICE OF EARTHWORKS IN THE PARISH OF ENGLISH BICKNOR.

By SIR JOHN MACLEAN, F.S.A.

Read at Bristol, 27th January, 1880.

THOSE who are familiar with the beautiful scenery of the lower Wye must be acquainted with Symond's Yat, and the wide expanse of which it commands a view. It is situate about midway between Ross and Monmouth, on the left bank, or Gloucestershire side, of the river, from which it rises very abruptly by precipitous cliffs, in places 50 or 60 feet perpendicularly, to a height of about 300 feet above the level of the stream. The term "Yat," we may perhaps be allowed to say, has several significations, such as a gate, or opening, and a road. In either sense it is quite applicable to this spot. On the east side of the rock, the river flowing in a south-western direction suddenly changes its course and makes one of those remarkable windings for which the Wye is celebrated, and, flowing for about a mile nearly north-east, it gradually curves round to the west, and returns to the foot of the rock on the western side, having enclosed a peninsula, $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles long, and $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile wide in its widest part, and containing an area of nearly 1000 acres. A portion of this is a farm called Huntsham, and the most part of the remainder common and woodlands. The whole is parcel of the manor of Goodrich, and, although on the left bank of the river, is in the county of Hereford. The county boundary crosses the isthmus under the rock from side to side. It is as being the gate, or opening, through this isthmus into the peninsula that we have said "Yat" signifies Gate.¹ In the sense of road, or way,

¹ Since this was written our ingenious and erudite member, Mr. Kerslake, has called the attention of the writer to an example of the use of the word "Gate" in circumstances similar to Symond's Yat: that is, to an instance in which the Severn, some four miles above Shrewsbury, after having made a bold sweep, forming a peninsula, or holm, again very nearly approaches itself. This peninsula is marked on the Ordnance map as "The Isle," whilst the neck, or isthmus, is separately described as "Isle Gate."—See Mr. Kerslake's "St. Ewen, Bristol, and the Welsh Border. pp. 14, 15.

it is familiar to us all by the old phrase of "gang your own gate," (go your own way). The ancient highway leading from Coleford to Ross passed through this opening, close under the rock, and through Huntsham, crossing a ferry, or in earlier times a ford, to Goodrich, and thence on to Ross. Of this we shall speak further presently.

Of the thousands of persons who annually visit Symond's Yat, and admire the diversified scenery from the top of the rock, very few indeed are conscious that they are standing within a fortification of very considerable strength, which at some very early date was held by our British ancestors against invading foes. Such, however, is the fact.

The place has been marked "Intrenchment" on the Ordnance map, and it has been mentioned in some local topographical works, but, so far as we know, it has never, hitherto, been explored or described. From the neck of the peninsula precipitous cliffs diverge on both sides at an angle of about 45 degrees, and the defences consist of five segmentary banks of earth, very roughly concentric to the neck of the peninsula, from which the innermost is distant about 175 yards. These banks extend to the precipice on each side. On the outer side of each bank is a ditch whence the earth was thrown up. As usual, the inner bank is broader and higher than the others, and the ditch consequently deeper. From the top of this bank to the bottom of its ditch it is now 14 feet, and the ditch is 12 feet wide. The banks are about 20 yards apart, the two outer ones somewhat more, and these are less curved than the other three. This is partly to take the shortest way to the edge of the platform and partly to avoid leaving an acute recess at the end of each which would afford shelter to an enemy. The ends of the second, third, and fifth banks on the eastern side have been destroyed.

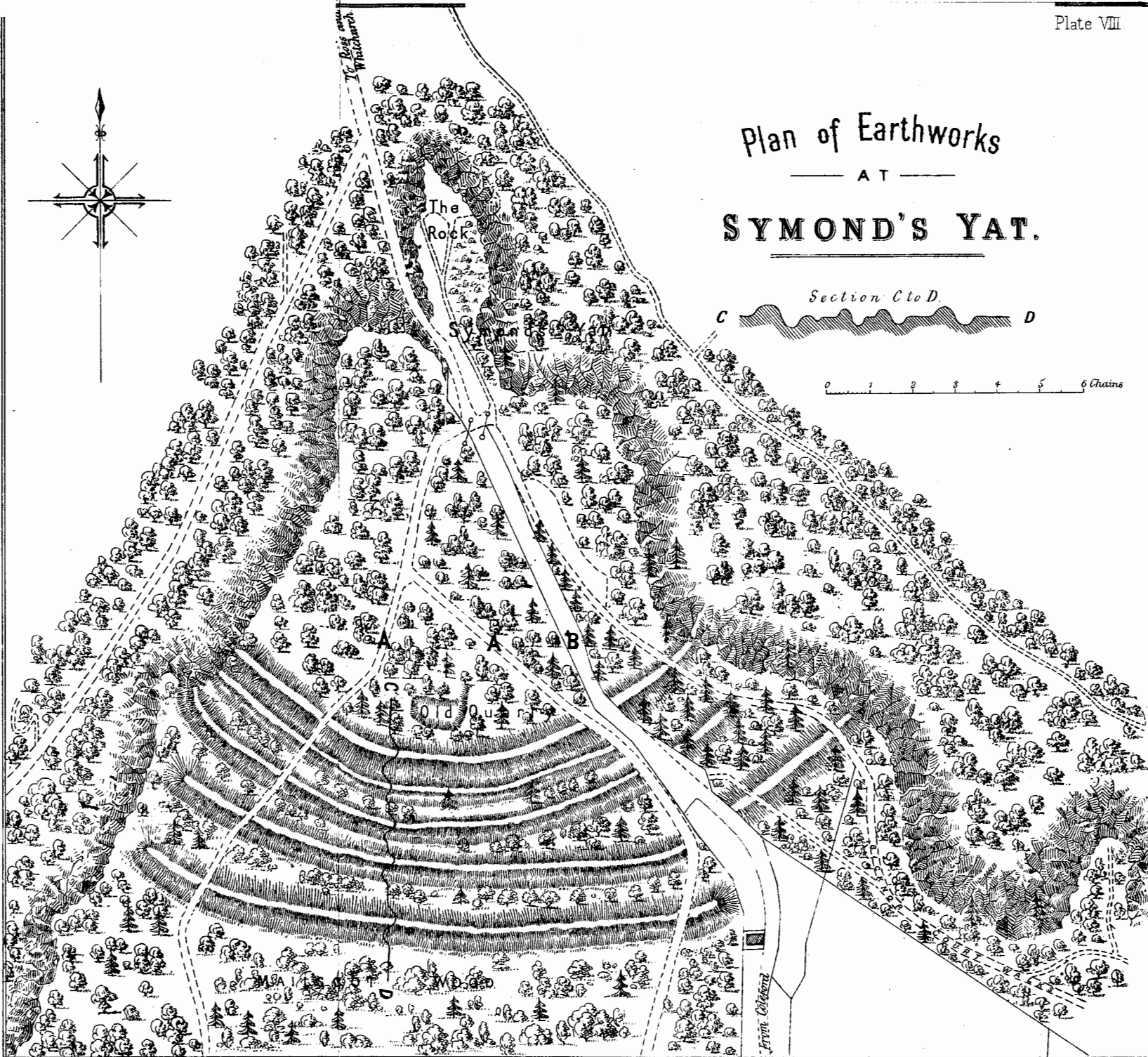
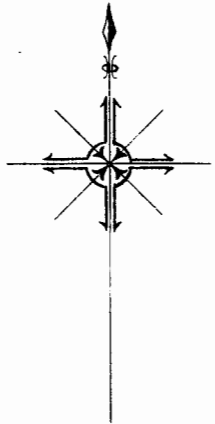
The position of the camp outside the peninsula, and with its defences towards the south, shew that it was intended for a defence against an enemy approaching from that side.

The original entrance to the camp is lost. The present roads so traverse the defences as to shew that they are of later date.

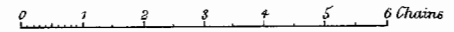
Plan of Earthworks

— AT —

SYMOND'S YAT.



Section C to D.



Those marked A A on the map (*Plate VIII.*), which intersect the embankment, are merely wood roads for hauling timber. The road marked B is a very ancient road, to which we have already alluded, being the highway from Ross to Coleford, by which the distance is a little over nine miles. There are, however, two ferries to cross,¹ but a new road having been made about a century ago from Lydbrook over Hangerbury hill, falling into the turnpike road from Gloucester, and the road down the valley of the Wye having been improved, the traffic has been diverted from the ancient road. The additional distance of about two miles is more than compensated for by avoiding the ferries, especially for wheeled vehicles. Pedestrians, however, still, occasionally, use the ancient road. The landowners are obliged, very unwillingly, to maintain the ferry boats, though the passengers are extremely few in number. This ancient road is evidently of later date than the entrenchments, which it intersects without any appearance of an outwork to defend the entrance.

English Bicknor.—We will now turn to the other entrenchment which we propose to notice. This is situate about $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles distant from Symond's Yat, on the east. It is a regular moated mound of the 8th or 9th century, and, therefore, a work much later in date than that above described. It consists of a conical flat-topped mound, or motte, which was originally surrounded by a ditch, but this is now filled up, except on the western side where it is of considerable depth. The motte stands on a horse-shoe-shaped platform, also surrounded by a ditch which is connected with the ditch of the mound. Beyond this, again, extending to the north and east, is a second, and larger, platform, also defended by a deep ditch, which, as well as the former, unites with that of the inner platform and of the motte. It is usual with earthworks of this type to find the parish church near, and in this case it stands on the outer platform. Such we consider to have been

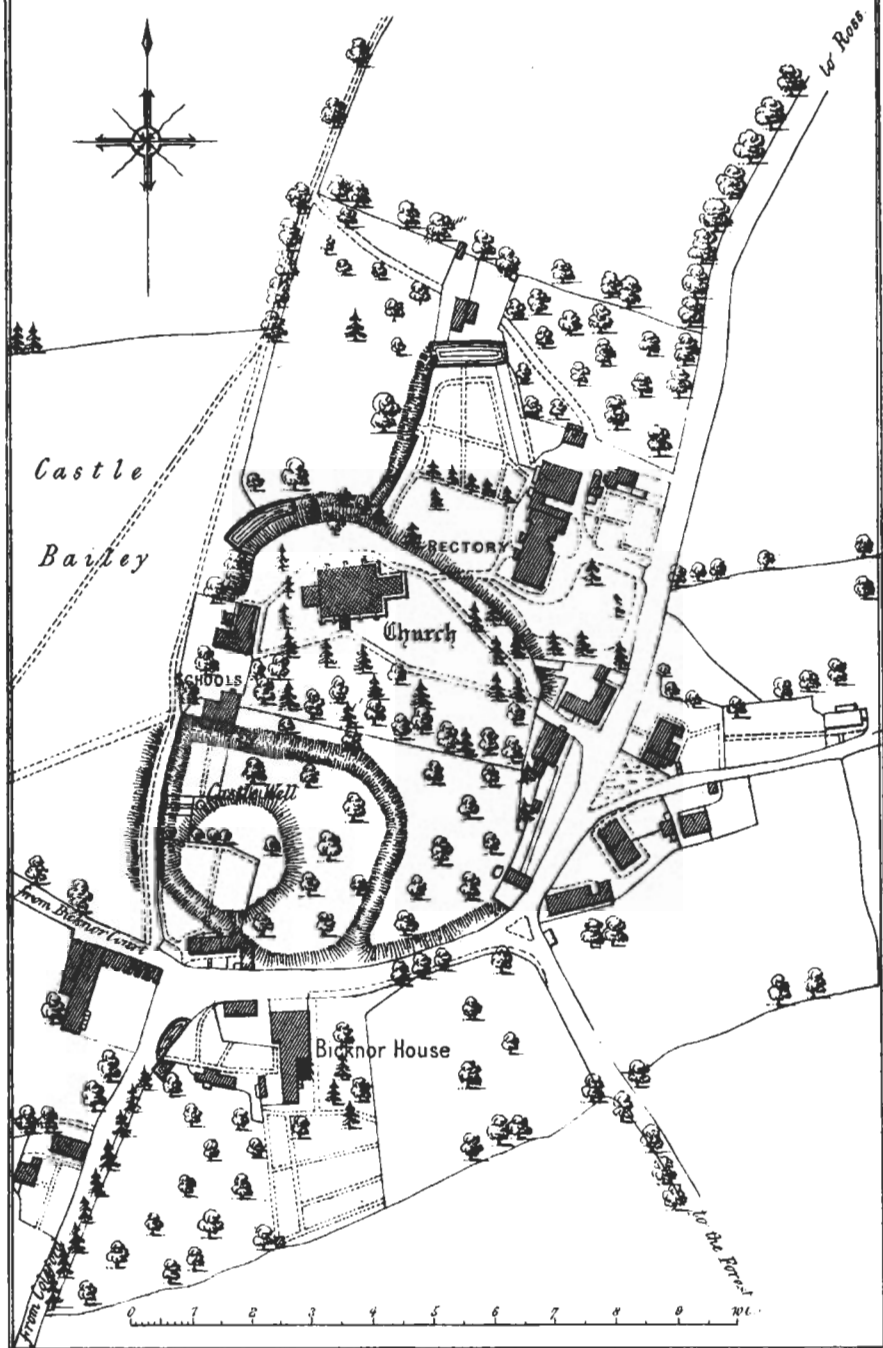
¹ Until the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth there were only two bridges over the Wye throughout the counties of Hereford and Gloucester, from Hay to Chepstow, one at Hereford and the other at Monmouth. Wilton Bridge, near Ross, was not built until about 1600. The Act of Parliament for its construction is dated 39th Elizabeth, Cap. 24.

the original character of the work. It forms an irregular circle about 150 yards in diameter. It is evident, however, that after the Norman Conquest the site was utilised by a Norman Baron, who erected a small stone-built castle, or keep, upon the mound. When, about 4 years ago, certain excavations were made into the side of the mound for the purpose of filling the ditch to make a garden for the schoolmaster, a small room, about 12 feet square, was discovered, constructed of Norman masonry. It was nearly all removed before the writer saw it, but he succeeded in preserving a small piece, which may still be seen. At the time this walled castle was erected a further addition was made to the fortification by the formation of a quadrilateral enclosure, or barbican, on the north side, by means of a deep ditch. This now forms the site of the parsonage-house, garden, and grounds. The field on the west side is known as the "Castle Bailey," another indication of the Norman adoption of the work.

Making a circuit of the entrenchment, and beginning on the western side of the mound, we find the ditch of considerable depth, and in it, at the foot of the mound, still remains the castle well, supplied by a never failing spring. On this side, external to the ditch, is a continuous bank, but it never was defended by a moat. Possibly this may have been intended for the security of the well, but we fail to see how it could have been effective. Around the mound the ditch would seem to have been obliterated by the *debris* of the castle, which had for centuries formed a quarry for the neighbourhood, and was possibly used for the same purpose in the erection of the existing church. The second ditch, throughout its entire length, is very distinct. Passing the end of this by the school premises, the bank has been, to a considerable extent, levelled down and the ditch filled. Within the recollection of persons now living, there was a wooden bridge by which people passed over the ditch to and from the church, and there was also a similar bridge crossing the ditch between the churchyard and the parsonage. Beyond the school-house is a portion of the ditch still open and filled with water, but its course farther followed the churchyard fence through the rectory grounds to the Lich-gate on

Plan of Earthworks at ENGLISH BICKNOR.

Plate IX



the east side of the churchyard but it has been filled in recent times. From the Lich-gate the ditch has been destroyed, and the site is occupied by a cottage and garden, and for a part of the distance by the highway, but the bank inside the ditch may be traced, bordering on the road, as far as the cottage now used as the Post Office. This portion was open and filled with water, until recently ; a person, now living, aged about 70 years, remembers falling into it when a boy and being nearly drowned. From the back of the Post Office the ditch may be traced to the well where we began our circuit.

On the north side the ditch of the barbican branches off nearly at right angles, following the fence of the western side of the rectory garden. This portion was, to a considerable extent, filled up during the incumbency of the late rector. At the north-west corner of the garden the ditch turns at nearly right angles towards the east, and this portion, which is 15 feet wide, is always full of water. We now lose all trace of it. After extending a short distance eastward, it, doubtless, turned again southward, before the front of the parsonage-house, uniting with the older ditch near the Lich-gate before mentioned (*See Plan, Plate IX.*)

We will now proceed to consider the period when, and the purpose for which, these ancient earthworks were constructed. Fosbroke calls that at Symond's Yat *Roman*, but it would seem to us that a glance at its form on the plan will dispel any idea of its being of Roman construction. Moreover, we have never been able to discover that anything has been found, in the nature of Roman coins or other remains, to shew that the place, like many other British fortresses, was ever occupied by the Roman legions. That they occupied the fortifications on the top of the "Coppet hill," immediately on the east of the camp, on the further side of the river, is indisputable. Many coins and other Roman antiquities have been there discovered. It was there that the very curious bronze dodecagon was found, which we had the pleasure of exhibiting in the Museum of the Society at Bristol in 1878, of which an illustration is given in the third volume of the Transactions of the Society. On the Little Dowart also, on the south-west

side of the river at Symond's Yat, Roman coins have been found. Fosbroke says, there is here a tripple circular British camp, but this description is inexact. The entrenchment is an oval, whose axis lies north east and south-west, and it has only a single vallum following the form of the platform of the hill, except at the north-west end, where there is an outwork. At the opposite end there is a quadrangular enclosure, which is probably a Roman addition. Even though the Romans may have occupied the entrenchments on the Coppet hill and the Little Dowart there can be no doubt that they were previously British works like those on the Great Dowart and Symond's Yat. Upon the Great Dowart there is a circular entrenchment about 160 feet in diameter. The fortifications at Symond's Yat were undoubtedly raised to resist the crossing of the Wye by an advancing enemy, and it seems to us to have been admirably placed for such a purpose. On the loop of the river, which we have before described as branching off from the Yat, there are now no fewer than six fordable places, indeed the river here is at present particularly weak as a defensive boundary, whatever it may have been 1500 years ago. Besides the fords we have mentioned, there are two others in the river within a mile upwards from the Yat, and an equal number, within the same distance below. Opposite the lower one, on the Gloucestershire side, on the rise of the hill, is a place called "the slaughter"—signifying a battle. The name probably arose from the defeat, or destruction, of a British force which had crossed the Wye at this ford for an hostile purpose.

The former three of the works above-mentioned are doubtless of very great antiquity. The addition to the camp at Little Dowart shews the original entrenchment to have been pre-Roman, and it is possible that they may all reach back to a period before our ancestors had emerged from a semi-savage condition. This must have been very long before the Roman invasion, 54 B. C., for Cæsar speaks of the Britons as possessing a degree of civilization indicating several centuries of organized government, and Strabo bears witness to their commercial enterprise. We do not, however, attribute the Symond's Yat works to so remote a period. The

Britons, as savages, could not, we conceive, have possessed any higher degree of social organization than patriarchal or tribal, and in such a condition we doubt if any tribe would be likely to raise so formidable a defence against a sept like itself. The Yat defences, from the great labour bestowed upon them and their strategical character, would seem to shew in their constructors more of a national than tribal organization, and that, being open at the back, their object was to defend the peninsula and prevent the crossing of the Wye by a potent advancing enemy.

Who then, is it probable, were the people, whose advance the fortification at Symond's Yat was designed to check? Were they the Romans? We think not. We are not aware of any determined resistance being made to the Roman arms in this district. The Silurians were more easily subdued and romanized than their more northern countrymen. Moreover, the operations against them were conducted by a direct communication across the Severn to Caerwent, so that the fortress under consideration would have been taken in the rear. We conclude, therefore, that it must have been against the Saxon invaders that it was intended to be a defence.

The history of the Saxon Conquest of the district lying between the Severn and the Wye, south of Gloucester, is buried in obscurity; and even the date at which it occurred is only vaguely conjectured. According to Welsh legends, as early as 577, when Ceawlin conquered the east side of the Severn Valley, he also extended his power to the banks of the Wye.¹ Mr. Kerslake considers it probable that this occurred on Ceawlin's second expedition seven years later. This difference of date does not much affect our enquiry, though, probably, the later is more likely to be correct, and, possibly, it was in anticipation of this advance, and to check the further progress of the invaders, that the fortifications under review were raised. The Britons were driven across the river and the Forest district was, probably, re-peopled by a West-Saxon settlement, for the fact of such a settlement is shewn, we think, by the common speech of the district. By this conquest, the

¹ Trans. III., 109.

area now lying between the Severn and the Wye was added to the sub-kingdom of Wiccia, under the government of the West Saxon monarch. The arrangement, however, did not continue long, for we learn from the Saxon Chronicle that in 628 Cynegils and Cuichelm, joint Kings of Wessex, fought against Penda, King of Mercia, at Cirencester, and then made a treaty.¹ By this treaty a portion of Wiccia was ceded to Mercia. Whether or not the Forest district was embraced in this surrender we are unable to say, nor does it much matter, for 50 years later, in the reign of Offa, the whole of Wiccia had become subject to Mercia.

It is stated in the Chronicle of the Princes of Wales that in a certain summer, (the year not very clearly understood), the men of South Wales devastated the territory of Offa, and Offa caused a dyke to be made as a boundary between him and Wales, to enable him the more easily to withstand the attack of his enemies, and that is called Offa's dyke from that time to this day; and it extends from one sea to the other, from the south, near Bristol, towards the north above Flint, between the monastery of Basingwerk and Coleshill.²

It has been suggested by Fosbroke as possible that the Earthworks at Symond's Yat may have had some connection with Offa's dyke. Without entering upon the question of the course of Offa's dyke in this district, which we may deal with on a future occasion, we may here remark that the dyke, though not intended for a fortification, had for its object the prevention of the incursions of the Welsh, whereas the earthworks at the Yat are obviously intended for a directly opposite purpose, and are, moreover, we conceive, much earlier than the time of Offa.

We shall now return to the Norman Castle of Bicknor, and shall endeavour to trace the history of the manor during Norman times. Its early devolution is somewhat obscure.

William Fitz Norman held Bicanofre and Dene at the time of the Domesday Survey, and the former from him passed to Ulric de Dene.³ In our notice of the Manor of English Bicknor (Trans.,

¹ Anglo-Sax. Chron. Mon. Hist. Brit., p. 309.

² Brut y Tywysogion. Mon. Hist. Brit. p. 843.

³ Hugh, son of William Fitz Norman, rendered an account of the taxes (*Censu*) for the Forest of Dene, in 31st Henry I. (Pipe Roll.)

Vol. I., p. 70.) it was with considerable hesitation we accepted the identity of Bicanofre with Bicknor, as claimed by Atkyns. Further researches, have, however, led us to think that Atkyns was right. In the article referred to, we stated that we were not able to recognise in Testa de Nevil the name of Bicknor, or Bicanofre, in the Hundred of Westbury (under which it appears in Domesday), but we have since discovered, under the Hundred of Cheltenham, the name of "Bykenture." *In villa Bykenture ix. Carucate.* As this name stands between the names of St. Briavel's and Staunton, and as, afterwards, under the same head appears Dene and Abenhall, we see no reason to doubt that Bicknor was intended.¹ Probably the names of the manors got misplaced in making up the record. It is not shewn, however, by whom the Manor called Bykenture was held, hence we have no assistance in the name of the tenant in the identification of the place.

Early in the 12th century Bicknor had fallen in the hands of King Henry I., who, by his charter, granted "to Milo, my Constable of Gloucester, in fee and inheritance, the land in Bickenouer which belonged to Ulric de Dene. (post, page 318). This charter is undated, but among the names of the witnesses is that of "Geoffrey the Chancellor," who was made Bishop of Durham in 1133, and as Walter, Milo's father, was Constable of Gloucester as late as 1120, the charter must have been made between those dates.

The frightful disorders which prevailed in this country during the reign of Stephen are notorious. Every Baron built a castle where he would upon his own manors,² and filled it either with his own vassals or with licentious foreign mercenaries. Besides the public war the barons quarrelled among themselves and made war upon each other. The soldiery preyed upon the people and England became one scene of violence, dissolation, and blood. There were no fewer than 1115 such castles built in England between the accession of Stephen in 1136, and the compromise

¹ Testa de Nevill, p. 79.

² They acted like petty Sovereigns, each within his own domains, setting up mints and coining their own money, lighter and more debased than the debased regal money of the period.—(See *Rashleigh, Numismatic Chronicle*, 1850, p. 181.)

with Prince Henry in 1153, a period of 17 years. We believe that Bicknor Castle was one of these. We are told by Roger of Wendover that Henry II., "as soon as he was made king began to resume the possession of the castles, cities, and towns which belonged to the crown, to destroy the rebellious castles and to depose the pseudo earls."¹ Accordingly, most of the adulterine castles, as they were called, were destroyed in the first year of Henry II. (1154.)

Milo de Gloucester, to whom we have seen a grant of the land of Bichenouer (Bicknor) was made by Henry I. in the latter end of his reign, was, we know, like his father, a great castle builder; and we think it exceedingly probable that during the troubles in Stephen's reign, in which he took a very active part, he erected the Castle of Bicknor. Maud, in 1139, granted to him the Castle of St. Briavel's and the whole Forest of Dene, and in 1141, upon obtaining a temporary ascendancy over Stephen, created him Earl of Hereford; but, upon the ultimate failure of the cause of the empress doubtless neither the dignity nor the grant of the forest were recognised by Stephen. Milo died in 1143, and Henry II., upon his accession, found the Forest of Dean and the Castle of St. Briavel's in possession of the crown. Henry confirmed to Roger, Milo's eldest son, the Earldom of Hereford, which had been granted to Milo by Maud, but upon Roger's death,² soon afterwards, he would not allow Roger's brothers to succeed to the dignity. The king also, by charter, granted to Roger all the lands between the Severn and the Wye, which King Henry, his grandfather had held, except the Forest of Dean, the Castle of St. Briavel's, and the Town of Newnham. It would, therefore, seem to be very probable that Bicknor Castle was built by Milo de Gloucester and destroyed in 1154 by King Henry II.

There is, however, one further point for consideration. In one instance only do we find any mention in the Public Records of a Castle at Bicknor, and that is nearly a century later than the date

¹ Vol. II., p. 523.

² Roger, Earl of Hereford, was alive on 29th Sept., 1155, when he witnessed the charter of the king to the Abbey of Shrewsbury (Itin. Hen. II., p. 12), but we do not find him mentioned afterwards.

of its supposed destruction. How these lands passed from Roger, Earl of Hereford, to Ralph Avenel, we, at present, know not, but in 1191, Ralph owed the king (Richard I.) one hundred shillings and eleven marks for the land of Bickenowre, and liberty to marry whom he pleased;¹ and on the 22nd Nov., 1223, William Avenel made fine with the King, Henry III., in 40 marks, to have the lands of his father, Ralph Avenel, which he held *in capite* with the Balliwick and *Castle* of Bicknourc.² Whether the castle was in a defensive state at this date or whether it had been slighted and the site and ruins only remained there is nothing to shew. If the former, it must have been destroyed in the war between Richard Mareschal, Earl of Pembroke and King Henry III., which broke out in 1233 under the ministry of Peter de la Roche, Bishop of Winchester, after the fall of de Burgh. Of the details of this campaign we possess too little information, but the contest was very severe in this district. In any case the existence of the castle must have been very brief.

Upon the death of William Avenel, in the 20th Henry III. (1236), an inquisition was taken of how much land he held of the king in the Forest of Dene, by what service, how much it was worth by the year, and who was next heir. The jurors, among whom we find the name of William de Dene, found that he was seized of two carucates of land in Bickenore, and that it was worth in rents, villanages, and other issues, £23 6s. 1d. per annum, and that Dulcia his daughter, was his next heir³ On the 24th May, in the same year, we find Robert de Muscegros made fine with the king in 200 marks for having custody of the lands which were William Avenel's until the full age of the daughter and heir of the said William, and to have the marriage of the said heir; and a writ was issued to the Constable of St. Briavel's to give seizin.⁴

There now arises a perplexing difficulty as to the descent of the manor. The next tenant of whom we have any knowledge

¹ Rot. Pip., 2nd Richard I. ² Rot. Fin., 8th Henry III.

³ Inq. p. m., 20th Hen. III. No. 11.

⁴ Rot. Fin., 20th Hen. III., m. 9.

was Cecilia de Muscegros, who died, in 1301, seized of the manors of Bykenore, Langford, Teinton, &c., in co. Gloucester, and the question is, was this Cecilia and the above-mentioned Dulcia identical. Cecilia was the heir of a William Avenel, and as far as the descent of the Manor of Bicknor and the history of the castle are concerned it is not very material; nevertheless, as the question is of no small interest we offer a few points for consideration in an appendix to this notice.

In writing our previous paper on the Manor of Bicknor (Trans. Vol. I., 69) we were under the impression that Cecilia was a second wife of Robert de Muchegros, but it appears from an entry in the Close Roll, 3rd Edw. I., that she was the wife of John, his son. She died in 1301, as above stated, and in the inquisition, taken after her death, it was found that, *inter alia*, on the said Manor of Bykenore there was a capital messuage, with easements, houses, and curtilages of the value of 12d. per annum, and that Hawysia, wife of John de Ferrers, was her nearest heir, upon whose death, in 1350, the said messuage was returned as being worth, with appurtenances, 6d. per annum, and that John de Ferrers, aged 19 years, was her nearest heir. He died in 1367, when, the jurors say, "there is one messuage which is of no value," and subsequently it was always described as a site worth nothing.