

EARLY TIMES — BRITISH AND ROMAN REMAINS — THE POLDEN HILL MINES AND THE PHOENICIANS — PASSAGE OF JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA OVER THE PARRET — THE HOLY THORN.

IT is a matter for regret that comparatively little is actually *known* with regard to the town of Bridgwater in early times, previous to the Christian era. History proper is silent as to its aspect, its character, and its inhabitants in those far-away ages; and later, when the Roman legions, after many bloody struggles, conquered and subdued the hardy islanders, there is but scanty historic information as to our town.

As a set-off, however, we can gather much from legendary lore, even omitting what has been disproved or discredited by our modern archaeologists; and landmarks which exist or existed until recently also help us somewhat in conjuring up a picture of the ancient character of our town and vicinity. It may be regarded as tolerably certain that long before the mighty Caesar, thirsting for further triumphs, brought his Roman fleet to our shores, with the hope and intention of adding the unexplored island to his list of conquests (55 B.C.), there existed at this point a cluster of rude, wattled houses, tenanted by a few hardy, half-clad, painted Britons.

It may likewise be safely assumed that the muddy, turbid waters of the Parret bore up their cleverly-constructed *coracles*, or wicker canoes, in which they paddled up and down its winding course, snaring the fish from which they derived much of their sustenance — for as a rule, they sowed no corn, but lived on milk and flesh.

There are numerous signs of early British occupation in the neighbourhood, and the names of some of the parishes are of British origin. At Chisley Mount, Puriton, near the junction of the Puriton-road and the turnpike-road between Dunball and Pawlett, there are several rows of earthworks, forming, it is believed, portion of an ancient British camp. A mound, probably the remains of a fort, commands the river Parret, which at one time flowed immediately underneath it. It is also supposed to have guarded the approach by Polden Hill to the mines on the Mendips, where the Phoenicians, according to tradition, used to come for tin. The Phoenicians' trade with the British Isles began about 1000 B.C., the Phoenicians giving the Britons salt, skins, and bronze vessels (such as occasionally come to light, even now), in exchange for tin and lead. On a commanding point on the Quantocks, near Nether Stowey, is Danesbo-

rough, on which are evident traces of an entrenched camp overlooking the valley below and the bay and entrance to the river Parret. A secure harbour was thereby assured to the shipping employed in conveying the metals from Cornwall, Devon and Wales, and which, when smelted, were transported with the lead of Mendip to the Hampshire coast by a road to be traced along the ridge of Polden Hill, where it joins the road from Uphill. A deep fosse, with a lofty agger, formed of the materials dug from the trench, surrounds the whole, in many places 40ft. wide and 18ft. deep. This was a strong Belgic-British fortress, and three large stone hollows were apparently sites of fire-beacons. From its situation it must have been a strong position; and the traces of a road leading from the British trackway on the South may still be found. On the high ground west of the Parret there existed a line of hill-forts, running from Castle Hill, Stowey, to Rowborough, in the Parish of Broomfield, to Cothelstone, Norton Fitzwarren, Castle Neroche to Hamdon Hill. There are several tumuli and barrows on the Quantocks.

About 313 B.C. the Belgæ, a brave Gaulish people, but of Celtic origin, emigrated out of Gaul under Divitiacus (who was, according to Caesar, the most powerful Prince of Gaul), and coming to England, drove out of the district now called Somerset, the aboriginal inhabitants. The Cangi, "the posthumous tribe of those Belgæ," are said by many writers to have occupied the neighbourhood between Cannington and the Quantocks, giving the name, after many changes, *Cannington*. In the triads of the ancient bards the Cangi are mentioned as a class of men deputed to keep flocks and cattle.

The Parret was in those days a British border river, and was called "Y-Parwydd," or "Y-Perydon" — "the Divine waters," changing in after (Saxon) days to Pedridan. A writer in the *Bridgwater Mercury* a few years ago suggested that the former name might have been derived from the *triune* nature of the stream, composed of the Parret, the Ivel, and the Tone. An interesting legend indicates a *ford* over the river in very early times: — When St. Joseph of Arimathea had deposited the body of our Saviour in the tomb, he departed (A.D. 31) with some eleven companions, by direction of St. Philip, on a pilgrimage to teach the Gospel to the heathen in the remotest parts, and coming to England, he landed at Combwich, *passing through Bridgwater* on his inspired mission. Rejected by the King and his

people, the missionaries took refuge in the Island which then existed where we now know Glastonbury, but called by the Britons "Ynys-Gwydryn" — "the glass island" — and also "Avalon," or "apple tree island" (evidently from *aval*, Welsh for apple). Here he founded what John Leland, the noted anti-quarian writer, calls "The ancientest church in Great Britain," of which more later on.* In connection, with this event we may quote a curious legendary verse—

The good Saint Arimathean Joseph, home by the Parret's tide,
To Combwich, o'er the Mendips at length came to Glaston's
Hide ;
"Here I'll build a wattle church" — he planted a Christian staff ;
Twas Christmas now — at Christmas time the staff with
blossoms laugh;
"A miracle! a miracle!" — a miracle it turned to be,
That Christian Churches from that time should cover the
whole countree.
This staff was a thorn brought from the Holy Land, 'tis known;
The Christian Churches throughout England, from its branches
they have grown.

It is not difficult to draw a picture of Bridgwater as it existed in those times. Lying in the old British trackway, it was probably a place of some importance (assuming that a ford crossed the Parret at this point, and one must have existed not far off). On the banks of the stream, furthest from Devonshire, a cluster of wattled huts (the ancients being clever at wicker work), marking the habitation of a war-like tribe; from which point nothing broke the solitude of the peat-bogs which stretched up the Parret into the heart of Somerset.† On almost all sides was a dreary waste of waters, caused by the unchecked inroads of the sea through the various river-channels; and in the under-growth of the higher ground lurked beasts of prey, at once a source of sport and danger to the inhabitants.

Such was probably Bridgwater when the Roman legions marched through it on their way to subdue the other portions of the island.



*He was afterwards buried near this church, and William of Worcester speaks of a cross which covered his remains

†Green's *Making of England*