

BRIDGWATER UNDER THE ROMANS — DISCOVERY OF COINS AND ANTIQUITIES — THE SAXON INVASION — THE BRITONS DRIVEN TO THE QUANTOCKS — SOMERSET AND THE CONQUEST OF ENGLAND.

THE real Roman Conquest of Britain began A.D. 43, and when the principal portions of the country were subdued the Romans divided it into six districts, Somerset falling within *Britannia Prima*, comprising the country south of the Thames and the English Channel. The Belgic-Britons; according to Musgrave, their historian, call it "Gurlad-y-haf," or *country of summer*, comparing it with the frigid situations they had so recently abandoned. Herne translates the Celtic name as "laughing summer field," and the Saxons afterwards followed in the same strain by giving it a name indicating "the pleasant country." Some other writers are of opinion that the name of the county comes from "Somerton," and Asser refers to it as "Somertunshire."

The Romans were now slow to recognise the importance of the site now occupied by Bridgwater, in a direct line of communication between the western coast and the interior of the country, and therefore adopted it as a settlement, giving it, from the river on which it stood, the name of *Ad Uxellam* (the *Uzela* described by Ptolemy). There is a tradition, mentioned by Mr. Andrew Crosse before the Royal Archaeological Society, that Julius Caesar visited the highest point on the Quantocks, and that on beholding the splendid view around, he exclaimed, "Quantum ab hoc!" ("How much is seen from this"), which gave the range of hills their distinctive name—Quantocks. It is not known whether there is any foundation in fact for this tradition, but at the same time no other theory as to the etymology has been advanced.

Under the softening influence of Roman manners and refinements cities and towns rose up on all sides in Britain, and were joined together by an immense system of military and ether roads. Ptolemy, in his work enumerating the principal roads and towns of any considerable extent in the Roman occupation, refers to four towns in the territory of the Dumnonii—Isca (Exeter, Voliba, Uxela, or, Uzela (Bridgwater), and one other on the Tamar. The Roman roadway from Corinium (Cirencester) to Aquae Solis (Bath) continued its course southwardly from the latter place to another bathing place, called *Ad Aquas*, and now known by the somewhat similar name of Wells. Here the

road separated into two branches, one of which are visible at various points), and thence through Taunton to Isca, now Exeter; and the other to Ischalis; (Ilchester), and on to Moridunum, on the southern coast.*

As indicative of Roman occupation it may be mentioned that coins of several of the Emperors early in the Christian era, and other antiquities have been brought to light in various parts of the neighbourhood, including a silver coin at Chilton Trinity recently. What was supposed to be a Phoenician coin was dug up at Combwich about a dozen years since, but we have been unable to verify this supposition. Some years ago, in a field situated at the north edge of Polden Hill, a labourer in making a drain in a field found a large number of moulds used for making spurious Roman money, where they had probably been hidden for fourteen or fifteen hundred years, although only six inches or a foot below the ground. They were formed of clay, and by their use the casting of coins was evidently a very simple process. The moulds were of Severus and his wife Julia (about A.D. 190, 200), of Caracalla, Geta, Macrinus, Elagabalus, Alexandra Severus, Maximinus, Maximus, Plautilla, Julia Paula and Julia Mammæ (A.D. 235, 238). This "find" was regarded with much interest by archaeologists, and the spot (a meadow which bore no marks of ever having been ploughed) was visited by numbers of persons. A fine tessellated pavement was also dug up near the same spot, which is near where the old Roman road ran.

Ultimately the Romans, from a variety of causes, withdrew from Britain (A.D. 430) and the islanders were soon in a sorry plight, the country being over-run with different invaders, in addition to which the petty states weakened each other by civil factions. After some 20 years the Saxons, who had come to assist Vortigern, one of the native princes, against his enemies, were so pleased with Britain that they refused to leave it, and having invited over large numbers of their countrymen, turned their arms against the Britons themselves. The work of conquest on their part was carried on for some 150 years; the Saxon invaders seem to have pushed across the Avon, past the site of the future Bristol, and over the limestone mass of Mendip, whence they drove off in flight the lead miners, who have left their cinder-tracks to be seen even now along its crest, till they were checked by the marshes of Glastonbury.** The Britons fought bravely for their country,

but little by little they were driven into the mountain fastnesses of Wales and Cornwall, and almost entirely subdued. Their chief leader was Arthur, famed in connection with the "Knights of the Round Table," and who, according to numerous writers, was ultimately buried at Glastonbury together with Guinevere, his beautiful but erring queen.

The Saxons, following the example of the Romans, divided the country into several states, Somerset being included in the territory of the West Saxons (founded by Cerdic, A.D. 519). His descendants were not allowed undisputed possession: Leland† refers to a battle between Chenwalk, King of the West Saxons, and the Britons, in the seventeenth year of his reign (A.D. 658). The Britons were put to flight from Pennan as far as Pedredan (neighbourhood of Bridgwater), "and that day the offspring of Brutus [the son of the celebrated Trojan Prince Æneas, who was fabled to have visited this island soon after the siege of Troy, and who was the mythical ancestor of the Britons] received a wound that was incurable." ("Et fugati sunt a Pennan usque ad Pedredan, facta est super progenium Bruti plaga insanabilis in ilia die") Leland takes this extract from Henry of Huntingdon. Lingard corroborates it (see also "English Chronicles"), and states that Chenwalk (Coinwalch) then made the Parret the Western boundary of his kingdom. In 682 King Centwine drove the Britons from the banks of the Parret as far as the Quantock Hills; and his successor Ceadwalla endeavoured to drive the islanders still further west, but failed.

Ina was the next King of the West Saxons, and under his powerful sway his subjects became more united, the result being that further territory was taken — from the Quantocks to the Tone — from the British King Geraint, previously included in Dyvnant (Devon). The extent of King Ina's influence is in a manner indicated by Ealdhelm, the second Abbot of Malmesbury, who apostrophises him as the "Glorious lord of the western realm." ("Domino gloriosissimo occidentalis iregnisceptra gubernanti.")*** King Ina set up a fortress by the Tone, which grew to Taunton; and the tract of country then took the name of "Somersetas." Bristol then was not as yet, and only villages and hamlets broke the space between Bath and Exeter. The industrial works which the Romans had constructed for the drainage of the marshes that surrounded Bridgwater fell unheeded into decay; the sea broke through the neglected barriers, which had been erected at the mouths of the Parret and

the Brue, "and the height now known as Glastonbury Tor rose like an Ararat out of the dreary waste of flood and fen that stretched with but rare intermission "westward to the channel." Meanwhile King Ina, after over 30 years of a glorious reign, became disheartened at the continued rebellions of his subjects, and having built a stone church at Glastonbury, on the site of Joseph of Arimathea's, he sought repose and death in a pilgrimage to Rome.††

From this point the story is one of conquest on the part of the West Saxons, continued through successive generations, and their "golden dragon" spread terror to the other petty states of the country. Ultimately Ecgberht, one of the direct West Saxon line, subdued the remaining unconquered portions of the country, 829 A.D., and England was made, in fact, if not as yet in name.‡

It will thus have been seen that Somerset had an intimate connection with all the successive stages of the conquest of England, from the time it was founded by Cerdic, in A.D. 519, until Egbert mounted the throne and became the first King or over-lord of England.



* Wright's *Celt, Roman and Saxon*.

** Guest *Welsh and English in Somerset*

† *Coll. Ant.*, Vol iii, p.295

*** Stubbs and Haddon, "Councils," vol. iii., p. 268.

†† Baeda, H. E., lib. v., c. 7. J

‡ Green's *Making of England*.