

## A Day in Cheshire

Taking a route through the old-fashioned town in a different direction from the former, we saw the "Bear's Paw," and noticed some ancient thatched cottages "Up th' Rock." A stranger passing along that pathway, after dark, runs the risk of falling several yards into the cartway below. When the place is pitchy darkness, in an evening, the female natives jog along, carrying before them their grand-dams' family lanterns. After ascertaining the owner of the aforesaid cottages, I merely remarked when passing any other of the name, "Chumley's (i.e. Marquis of Cholmondley) again". And I was seldom wrong. Truly this good old town has been stationary in more senses than one for centuries, and was even of more importance in days gone by. Several modern habitations are erected almost on the edge of a precipice. A couple in particular overhang a cleft in the rocks, from whence any uninitiated youngsters would soon break their necks. They rejoice in the name of Mount Pleasant.

We next passed over the Weaver, at Frodsham Bridge. Close by, many years ago, an unfortunate seal, which, I suppose, was going on an aquatic excursion to the salt-towns higher up, was ruthlessly shot. Along the Weaver canal bank we strolled. This "cut" is said to pay all the county rates for Cheshire, and is, indeed, (at least, so I was informed) a gold-mine to the owners. But, unfortunately for them, the government are to take it when it gets out of debt. It was near going once, for when the accountant balanced up the books there was only a penny due to the company; consequently, the trustees engaged men immediately to prevent that catastrophe -- not that any work wanted doing. Indeed, the canal people, as a rule, never do anything, or very little, in the shape of labour. They only "shirk" about to keep the talons of the government from off the prize!

Tramping up the hill towards Rock Savage, where are large old garden walls which look as if they had been formed with square and compasses, and a gateway, the vast stone ornamented pillars of which frown on the valley below, we turned and looked behind us. The tide in ancient times spread all over the low-lands, and when once the King of England (whose name is, unfortunately, not mentioned in history) stayed all night here with Earl Rivers, his Majesty, on looking out of his chamber window in the morning, spied the dreary waste, and he was, in an unguarded moment, prevailed upon by the cunning nobleman to give it to him for a place to shoot wild-fowl with the cross-bow in. That was the beginning of their great possessions. Passing by the side of an overhanging portion of a tower, or something of the kind, erected A. D. - (both the dates) - we emerged into the lane which had been planted with elm in the days when the house was in its greatest splendour, probably in the age when good Queen Bess was mistress of the ceremonies, we noticed the large trees on one side were all lying horizontal, and those on the other side were ready marked for the unfeeling axe. At last their time is come, and the wild warbling notes of the throstle will reverberate from their branches no more.

Crossing a cutting intended for a new railway (a junction from somewhere or other) we perceived a spring, covered over with a circular stone arch. This famous well, although hundreds of yards distant, has, no doubt, supplied Rock Savage with water in the days of old. Next passing an ancient farm-house, said to be modernised into the residence of a Manchester manufacturer, we came in full view of the ruins of Halton Castle in the distance. On the left were once in the memory of man some ridings (that is land covered over with brambles and trenches) which a former farmer gave to his men rent free for several years in order to bring the land into cultivation. This was the identical spot in which the sturdy old Oliver planted his cannon and peppered at Halton Castle.

Passing through a field, wherein the young lambs seemed near starved to death, we arrived at the ruins, and, having gained admission thereto through the Castle Hotel, we inspected the crumbling walls and what little else remained of the dwelling of Nigel, the foreman to the renowned Hugh Lupus. Although knights and ladies

no more join in the festive dance within its ruined halls, the more lowly peasantry of the neighbourhood at the present day move on the light fantastic toe upon its green sward. My ungallant companion remarked that more untruths had been told under the shade of its alder-covered arbours in modern times than ever were within its precincts in the days of old. There still remains an ancient loop-hole for cannon, which were then but pop-guns in comparison with their brethren of the present day. After leaving the old place, with its gorgeous peacocks, we descended the rock, and passed a rattle and daub cottage now uninhabited. No doubt its lowly inhabitants had once upon a time gone off for a holiday, while the gay cavaliers in the lordly castle above were temporarily made into a target for the round-heads to practice the science of gunnery upon. If any rampant antiquarian requires a suitable cottage to reside in, there are several in this neighborhood; but he must be prepared to stuff his old shirts in the holes to keep the wind out, and also put his clogs on or he will get the rheumatic by standing on the damp clay floors.

Going down the adjoining lane, which had been made in as serpentine a form as possible, my companion suggested that when the country was a wild and uninhabitable forest, frequented by the wild boar and wolf, the pioneers had gone up the rivulets and formed the circuitous tracks which had gradually spread into the roads of the present day. He referred to the ravines of Mexico as an instance of the same transformation taking place in the present day. Next passing Hallwood, which is a very good house, and also outbuildings, therefore, we shall not condescend to notice it further, so we moved on towards the railway. Here lies a blue boulder, probably brought from Paenmaew, or some other "maur" in Wales, in an iceberg, as the geologists would say. After hazarding this conjecture my companion said we had better have another pipe on the strength of it. The woods are alive hereabouts with rabbits, pheasants, and other game, but they are almost impenetrable with underwood and brambles. My companion, when young, was once coming along this lane, and was getting over the hedge to get out of the way of what appeared to be a pack of dogs, but which, on approaching nearer, he found to be harmless hares at play. We passed along by the aforesaid lane, over the canal and river, the same way as we came, but, taking a short cut, came through a field where the economical tenant had planted cabbages in one spot, and that only where a great number of cows had been buried at the cattle plague visitation. Manchester market would have the benefit of those vegetables. After passing a few more thatched cottages we arrived at our destination, and were in good order for doing justice to a substantial dinner.

While engaged in conversation, I was informed that a family who had been ejected from their cottage in the neighbourhood had passed the winter (and a ruthless one it was) under the shelter of a natural hole in the rock, where they now resided, paying neither rates nor taxes, but as their hovel lay in a different direction from our next ramble, we did not inspect it; yet from the description given by eye-witnesses, it must be no better than the habitations of the ancient Britons. Refreshed once more, we started off for the Barron, or, as it is here pronounced, Barn Hill, visible in the distance, for we were informed that on the top of it there remained the relics of a Roman camp.

Passing along the hill side I broke a stick from off a raven tree and wakened up a mountaineer who was minding cattle. This man in youthful days had run away to sea, been shipwrecked, and with about a dozen others, had passed several days on a raft, subsisting on the body of a dead dog. Passing beneath the overhanging precipices, we noticed numerous wood-pigeons, and the gaudy jays seemed surprised at our appearance, and flew off to the woods in the distance. A great number of the trees hereabouts are mere sprouts, and only fit to pickle onions with. As this recipe is not found in the cookery books, the first thing to do is to get a manufacturing chemist to convert the wood into acid.

After getting to the top of the table-land, and passing Mickledale on the left, we ascended towards the top of the hill, where the expected camp was to be found. But gorse, growing to the height of above a couple of yards, with stems thicker than my arm, was all we saw, after getting badly scratched with creeping through the dense mass. About the centre of the place I ascended the witches' tree to make reconnaissance, for from the

ground we could see nothing but the dull sky above. From its branches I could discern what appeared to be a circle of mountain ash trees, but whether this was the camp or not, it would have taken heads more learned than mine to appreciate. As we were endeavouring to get out of this labyrinth we heard a shrill scream, probably some old fox disturbed from its lair. We looked round for the bones or other relics of a turkey which had been abstracted from a neighbouring farm house in broad daylight, but were unsuccessful. Next we came to an open space where the gorse had been lately cleared away for a firewood, and startling to relate, there was (I had not the least doubt about it) **an ancient British cairn**, which I conjecture neither Ormerod nor any other topographer had found out, because it had been from time immemorial covered with gorse. Shade of Caractacus, although my fingers were scratched till the blood ran down them, and my face was also in for it. I was well rewarded for all my sufferings and labour. Ascending the stones, I stood upon the grave of Barron, the hero of an hundred fights (or perhaps retreats), which are probably recorded in Ossian under another name. Here, **in sight of the broad Mersey**, had he desired to be interred, and here the painted warriors - I will not call them savages - had sung the funeral dirge over the grave of their departed chieftain, buried for ages before Cymbeline or King Lear ever winked their eyes when staring at the sun. I have been recommended to obtain volunteers, and exhume the old gentleman from his resting-place. Of course the blue dye has disappeared from his martial shanks long ago. Perhaps that valiant band who opened the **tumuli** called Cuckoo Knoll, unfortunately never recorded in history, would be willing to render their valuable assistance in this service, being experienced hands. I would guarantee they should not again come back with drooping tails. The last time they did not even find any rats' bones, which are often met with in old burrows. Never mind, let *nil desperandum* be their motto, better times are in store.

**After descending to the lower valley, we perceived in the distance "Robin Hood's oven,"** where, by creeping on your belly like a serpent for several yards, you come into a spacious cavern, said to have been once occupied by an outlaw. How he enjoyed getting in and out I don't know, but I wonder whether he ever met any animal in the lobby trying to make its exit when he was going in. I suggested that my companion should enter, and root out of the sludge any old bones; probably the relics of a Mega, or some other therium, though not so large, might be discovered, and his name might be handed down to posterity like the great Belzoni's, who almost got suffocated by squeezing up a kind of sewer into a pyramid. But my friend would not be prevailed upon to explore. Perhaps he wants to go stealthily by himself, and earn all the honour. If he does he can send the bones to Professor Humbug, the anatomist, who, by seeing merely the relics of the stump from a donkey's tail, can set up the skeleton of a complete "hanimal;" or by the aid of a strange bone make the figure of something or other that never was created not ever will be.

Sitting down on a rail, **we enjoyed the scenery** and solaced ourselves with a pipe. Of course my friend (who is an inveterate smoker) remarked that it deserved a pipe for going up a hill, and another for coming down, one to keep our noses warm when we were standing still, and another for company as we trudged along. Without boasting, he would have smoked Sir W. Raleigh into paroxysms. The short clay was never properly out of his mouth. I fully expected a whiff between potatoes and pudding at dinner. **Passing along the footway homewards by the edge of the wood,** we came across a solitary cowhouse, erected far away from any human dwelling, stable, or other shippon, when the murrain was at its height in this neighbourhood, which suffered severely. One farmer was mentioned as having lost part of his stock, and when I inquired how many there died, I was informed above four score. The pest house, thank God, was empty. It remained, however, a sad monument of days gone by, but probably it will not be required again for at least a century to come.

Here, across our path, lay a huge block of stone, many tons weight, squared on one side as if by human hands. Still it had not been quarried. It had never felt a chisel, was not a piece of rock, but had been created in a detached mass at the beginning of the world, or in ages so far remote as geologists would say, that the mind cannot conceive the space thereof. Here and there the creeping ivy, with wiry stems thick as my arm, grasped and fought with the giant oak. Slowly, but surely, it would kill the monster, and, after revelling on its decaying

body, fall like a gorged glutton to the ground, to be trampled and torn to pieces in turn by the tiny schoolboy to make a bonfire. The sweet honeysuckle was coming into leaf, and entwined around the branches of the trees for many yards in height. Still it gave not the embrace of death - it merely held on for support. The cud, or disgorged refuse from the stomach of the owl lay about on the grass, but those birds had not yet commenced their nocturnal depredations. The squirrel skips among the tree branches hereabouts at the proper season. Several rabbits were now gambling in the twilight. The flachey (pied finch) had given it's farewell chirp. The disturbed ouzel screeched and winged its flight along the brookside as we passed. The shades of evening were quickly spreading round us. As we came along I could almost fancy the form of Old Lowndes rocking to and fro in the distance; and although the cold evening March winds whistled through the tree branches, many a couple were off for an evening ramble to the wild woods, where no ears can listen or prying eyes can see, and where their forefathers (and foremothers) have no doubt been before them in days that are past. Night is said to bring the crows home, consequently we arrived at the cottage.

The candle was lighted, the blinds drawn, tea over a farewell pipe, and off to the train. Many of the village windows in quiet nooks and corners glimmered with the taper's light as the giant engine moved on, and tore me away from the scenes I had never looked upon but for one day in the whole course of my existence. Still in the whirl of an artificial city life, flashes of memory will at intervals suddenly strike up and remind me of days that are gone, yet not one recollection sparkles with greater brilliancy than that short space spent among the hills and vales in the neighbourhood of Frodsham.

The above was sent with the email below from Peter Winn SRT 26.7.2020

NB Key words & phrases highlighted