

ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF LEEDS

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THOMAS WRIGHT

**ON THE EARLY
HISTORY OF LEEDS**

ON THE
EARLY HISTORY OF LEEDS,
IN YORKSHIRE,
AND ON
SOME QUESTIONS OF PRÆHISTORIC ARCHEOLOGY AGITATED
AT THE PRESENT TIME:

A LECTURE,
READ BEFORE THE
Philosophical and Literary Society of Leeds,
APRIL 19th, 1864.

BY
THOMAS WRIGHT, ESQ., M.A.,
F.S.A., F.E.S., Hon. M.B.S.L., &c.,
CORRESPONDING MEMBER OF THE IMPERIAL INSTITUTE OF FRANCE.

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ON THE
EARLY HISTORY OF LEEDS,
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The science of history is perhaps the highest of all the sciences, inasmuch as its object is to make us acquainted with man in the exercise of his most divine faculties, whether for good or for evil, with the progress of his mental culture, in a word, with the development of his destiny; it prepares him for the future by the knowledge of the past. Moreover, man seems to have a natural tendency to the study of history, he seeks with eagerness to trace the revolutions of peoples and kingdoms which are known to him, he is anxious to become acquainted with the history of his own country, and, to restrict still more the field of inquiry, who is there who is not curious to learn something of those who have inhabited in former times the place in which he was born, or in which he lives, and of the events in which they were engaged? It was for this reason that, when asked last autumn to read a lecture before our Philosophical Society, I chose for my subject the early history of Leeds and of the district surrounding it. Leeds has, during the whole known historic period, been a place of considerable importance. Beginning with the earthworks raised by a primitive people at some unknown date,—I will not venture to say whether Britons, or Romans, or Saxons,—which formerly crowned that part of the

town now covered by houses and lanes between High Street and Charles Street; your town appears to have been the resort of Anglo-Saxon princes; it was intimately connected with the first introduction of Christianity into these northern parts of Anglo-Saxon Britain; it was occupied by a Norman castle of some importance; and it took its full share in all the great political movements in the history of our country, until it has now become one of the principal centres of its wealth and national resources.

It is evident that to take this full expanse of your history, would require a bulky volume, and that it would be absurd to attempt to bring it within the narrow limits of this paper. I will, therefore, venture to take for our subject this evening only the earliest and least known portion of the history of Leeds, which, nevertheless, contains much which is interesting in relation to primitive monuments still remaining among you, and much which is intimately connected with the early glories of our Anglo-Saxon race. In tracing back our national antiquities to their earliest date, we were always obliged to halt at an indefinite period which it was not thought safe to place long before the time at which our island was first visited by its Roman conquerors; but at the present time new questions have arisen, as yet obscure and uncertain, but which we cannot avoid taking into some consideration when we treat of the antiquities of any part of our island. During the last few years, the antiquary has entered into alliance with the geologist, and out of this alliance new ideas have arisen, which are all embodied in the great question of the antiquity of man, whether he has existed on this earth only during the comparatively short period to which history seems to point, or whether he has inhabited it through a period stretching over a vast number of ages before time is known to history at all. It is a question of great importance, which is at present very far from

decided. The supposed evidence of this great antiquity is found, 1st, in flint implements, rudely formed, but certainly by the hands of man, which have been discovered in the drift gravels in the valleys of the Somme and the Seine, in France, and in some of the river valleys in England, associated with bones of animals which must have been extinct in these countries at a very remote period; 2nd, caves, in which objects made by man, and remains of man himself, are found intermixed with the remains of animals which also must have become extinct at a very remote period, while the caves themselves are supposed to have been removed by some natural convulsion out of their original position since these deposits have been made; 3rd, remains of objects made by man, found at great depths in the ground; 4th, ancient shell-mounds, or heaps of refuse from the eating of shell-fish, found chiefly on the coasts of Denmark and Scotland; and 5th, the ancient lacustrine villages, or groups of huts raised upon piles, which have been discovered in the lakes of Switzerland, and which have been ascribed to a period hardly less remote than that of the bone-caves.

The stone implements found in the drift have all the appearance of being as old as the drift itself. As they possess no peculiarities which point to any definite date, we can only suppose that they are contemporary with the drift, and wait for further means of ascertaining the period at which the latter was deposited. It does not appear that there is any reason for believing that these flint implements necessarily belonged to the same period at which the animals lived, bones of which are found in the same drift. The only implement made by man, as far as I know, which has hitherto been found in the shell-mounds in this island, is a rather rudely worked bronze pin, which is ascribed with little hesitation to the ninth century of our era. The objects found in the lacustrine villages, are very

numerous and varied, and belong to different periods, but chiefly Roman, or presenting forms which fix no date, and therefore may be older than Roman, or they may be more recent. Other objects found in these pile-works, show that they must have been inhabited after the Roman period, for rather numerous examples of pottery which I have seen in the engravings accompanying the publications of the Swiss antiquaries are certainly Germanic, and belong, probably, to the fifth or sixth century. Now, I can understand that these Swiss lakes may have been inhabited during several centuries by a people, or peoples succeeding each other, who lived on them much in the same manner, but I consider it most improbable that such a continuance should have lasted thousands of years; and I think we may fairly put the question, whether those who advocate this extreme antiquity, instead of giving any good reasons for disturbing our previous archaeological views, may not be building upon assumptions without any real foundations.

As none of these discoveries have occurred within the range of our present subject, I will enter into no further investigation of them; but the case is different with the two other classes of evidence. The caves are peculiar to the hilly country a little beyond the north-western limits of the district formerly included under the name of Leeds,—in the wilder district of Craven; while the discovery of objects of ancient art at great depths under the present surface of the ground, under circumstances which would lead us to suspect that they had been deposited there at a very remote period, have occurred not unfrequently within the immediate neighbourhood of Leeds itself, and you have several examples of the objects thus found in your own Museum. Some twelve years ago, in the course of excavations at Wortley, in the valley of the Aire, a deposit of bones of the very early extinct animals, among which were the hippopotamus and mammoth,

was met with, and, as it is stated, in rather close association with them, an object of stone, which was judged to be a quern, or hand-mill for grinding corn, and two pieces of broken pottery. An account of these was given in the Report of the proceedings of your Geological and Polytechnic Society for 1856, by Mr. Teale, who expressed his conviction of the accuracy of his information that these objects lay at a depth of five feet in a six-foot bed of undisturbed clay. Of the two fragments of pottery, one has the well-known glaze which is considered to be not older than the Norman period, with an ornament which is characteristic, although rude, of the Anglo-Norman pottery of the twelfth century, to which period, at the earliest, I believe it belongs. This, therefore, could have no relationship with the fossil bones of the *Pachyderma*. The object in stone appears to me to have been formed from the frustrum of a small Roman column, which had perhaps been used afterwards for some other purpose.

Again, in the same Report of the Geological and Polytechnic Society, our excellent friend, Mr. Denny, has described an iron implement which he terms a "leister,"—in fact, an implement for spearing fish—which was found in 1851, in excavating for the terminus of the Leeds sewerage, on the south side of the Suspension Bridge, below Knotrop, at the depth of ten feet, in a bed of gravel, with some other articles which displayed man's handiwork, and he thought it might have belonged to some Scandinavian fisherman. Fortunately, your museum possesses this object also, and a glance at it will convince us that it is the work of a later period than that of Danish rule in the North of England. And, while speaking on this subject, I would earnestly impress, not only upon the members of the Philosophical Society, but on others also, how useful it is for the promotion of true knowledge that objects like those I have been describing should be

collected together into one place, that they may thus be easily available for comparison and study, and how desirable it is that some means should be employed by which all such articles found in this part of the island should be brought to this museum as soon as discovered. It appears from Mr. Denny's account that other articles in metal were found with this leister, but they were afterwards dispersed, whereby we have probably lost the means of ascertaining more exactly the date of the deposit.

You have in your museum another object, in many respects of still greater interest, and which I believe you owe to the zeal of my friend, your late secretary, Mr. O'Callaghan—I mean the curious ancient boat, or canoe, formed out of the solid trunk of a tree. It was found, I understand, lying on the rock, under six feet of soft laminated clay, at a place called the Tarn, in the parish of Giggleswick, which is understood to have been the site of a lake, now drained. There is no mark about this boat to give us the slightest help in identifying its age, which may be very remote, and certainly cannot be very recent. Ancient boats of this general character have often been found at considerable depths in many parts of our island, but, as they are somewhat heavy, and must have been lost in lakes or rivers, we may suppose that, falling upon mud and clay, which was soft from being under the water, they would gradually sink by their own weight, and thus add to the depth they would gain by the subsequent deposit from the water. I believe that such boats were in use in some parts of the country down to a comparative late date, and the interesting specimen to which I am alluding possesses peculiarities which seem to show that it is not a very early example.

Giggleswick, where this boat was found, is closely adjacent to Settle, where some of the most interesting of the Yorkshire caves are met with, and which must, in early times,