

Transactions

OF THE

BANFFSHIRE FIELD CLUB.



The support of The Strathmartine Trust toward
this publication is gratefully acknowledged.

www.banffshirefieldclub.org.uk

THE TAP O' NOTH.

Mr John Yeats, M.A., Banff, Treasurer to the Club, read the following paper on a visit to the Tap o' Noth :—

To a traveller approaching Gartly Station the hills appear to converge on either side of the valley of the Bogie, and to contract it into a comparatively narrow strath. On the east side of the stream, the range of hills comes down to within about 200 yards of the river bank, while on the west they are not more than 400 or 500 yards distant. The hill on the east side is called Corskie, and is a spur of the Foudland range. The hill, or rather hills, on the west are the hills of Noth. These hills form a remarkable feature in the landscape, rising,

as they do, abruptly, and to a considerable height. They have a rounded contour, and, though steep, present a smooth surface, pretty uniformly covered by a velvety coat of brown heath. What appears, at a distance, as rocks, are seen on a nearer approach to consist of mounds of rubbish, the debris of the slate quarries, which, before the opening of the railway led to the introduction of Welsh and Ballachulish slates, were largely used in the district for roofing purposes. These rubbish mounds are most plentiful on the east or Corskie side; perhaps because the slates were of better quality, but mainly perhaps on account of their greater accessibility. Slates are still quarried, at least on the west or Noth side, but to a much less extent than formerly. If you come across an old quarrier, he will tell you that the slates are better and cheaper than their imported rivals; but from some perversity in architects or their employers, the demand has greatly fallen off. The fact that the quarries are at a considerable elevation, and that the access is very steep and altogether impracticable for wheeled carriages, is no doubt one reason why these quarries are not more resorted to. How far these slaty strata extend westward it is impossible, without a more particular examination, to say. Slates have been quarried in various places for more than half a mile from the entrance to the Glen of Noth; and, to all appearance, if the upper surface of yellow clay and gravel be cut through to a depth of from eight to ten feet, slates can be found anywhere. It is worthy of remark that slates have been quarried, on a ridge of hills in the parish of Cabrach, lying not far out of the line of these hills of Noth, and some three or four miles farther west. But the rock is different, the Gartly slates being of a smooth texture and of a blue colour, while the Cabrach slates are a light gray, and present an open, scaly surface. On the east side of the Bogie, slate quarries have been wrought, as has been said, on Corskie, and also along the same range at Foudland, and in both places to a considerable extent. This fact seems to point to the conclusion that the same strata run through and form the backbone of both ridges, that in all probability the two ridges had originally been united, and that the comparative narrowness of the valley of the Bogie, at this point, is caused by the resistance of these strata.

It may be worth noting that, some six or eight miles farther south, there is a similar range of hills running parallel to these just described, where there are extensive strata of flagstones, which also appear to cross the valley of Kildrummy and reappear at the foot of the Buck range about the Clovas. These flags have been quarried to some extent on Correen, and are probably the prevailing strata in that range of hills, which commences from near Lumsden Village and ends abruptly with the Nether Tap of Bennachie, just as the northern range terminates in the Tap o' Noth. A further coinci-

dence that may be noticed is that the sandstone crops up a little to the south of each of these slaty strata, viz.—to the south of the village of Rhynie, where it is extensively wrought at what is termed the Auchindoir Quarries, about the boundary line between the parishes of Rhynie and Auchindoir, and near Kildrummy Castle, where there were formerly extensive quarries, but these are now less wrought, on account of the distance from a railway.

But to return to the hills of Noth. Leaving Gartly Station, and crossing to the west side of the Bogie, you find yourself on the turnpike leading from Huntly past the villages of Rhynie and Lumsden. A walk along this road for some three-quarters of a mile brings you opposite the entrance of a narrow glen running up an opening in the Hill of Noth. This is called the Glen of Noth, up the bottom of which is the easiest route to the Tap o' Noth. There is little of interest in this glen except the slate quarries before mentioned, which are seen on the hills on both sides, but are by far more numerous on the north or Huntly side. Near the head of the glen, however, beside some springs of beautifully clear water, an observant traveller cannot fail to notice some detached pieces of yellowish rock which have much the appearance of the yellow incrustation on black flint. But, on being broken—no easy matter, unless one has a good hammer—they are found to be of a clay formation. How they have attained their present hardness and solidity is a question for geologists to decide.

We are now coming into full view of the Tap o' Noth, which appears to lie at no great distance, and, as if by gradually ascending the ridge, of which it forms the western termination, in a slanting direction, its summit could be gained without any extraordinary effort. Let the tourist, however, take a long breath, and a draught from one of the clear cool springs, for he will find the ascent longer and steeper than he expects. Leaving the track along the green strath that we have hitherto been following, we must now take on to the heathy mountain side. We are so far favoured by a depression in the ridge opposite this point, as if nature, in forming the chain of hills, had somewhat relaxed her efforts to put forth a grand final spurt for the finish in the 'Tap,' which from this eastern side appears like a conical hill rising on the summit of another hill.

On this hollow part of the hill, the soil, which is of no great depth, consists of a mixture of peat and sand, with a slight tendency to damp, and for the first 300 or 400 feet of ascent the heath is intermixed with bent and other plants requiring moisture. But further up, where the soil is drier and lighter, these disappear, and the surface is covered by heath embedded among a thick undergrowth of long yellow moss, with perhaps here and there a plant of the common red cranberry. The heath, though of moderate length, has a weather-beaten ap-

pearance, and is laid almost flat uphill, very much like a field of grain after an autumn storm. One might suppose that this arises from the elevation being so great that only such hardy plants could grow, and even these with difficulty. But the Tap o' Noth is before him, rising several hundred feet higher, and covered with verdure to the very summit. Some other explanation of the phenomenon must therefore be looked for. It may be due partly to the nature of the soil and subsoil, to the winter snows lying longer and deeper on this comparatively hollow part of the mountain, and, what is more probable, to the north and north-west winds from the open glen of Kirkney finding this their easiest course towards the south. About the middle of this hollow is a narrow green strath, some three feet deep, and perhaps three or four yards wide, running about due north from top to bottom of the ridge, and opposite, or nearly opposite, a ravine falls down the south side, forming the head of a small rill. The one on the north side has little or no water in it, at least in summer; and it is difficult to believe that at any time sufficient water could have collected at the place to have hollowed it out. If it showed any traces of being formed artificially, one would at once conclude that it had been intended to bar the approach of an enemy to the fort on this its most accessible side. But for such a purpose it would likely have been placed nearer the foot of the cone. This and the ravine on the south side of the ridge form between them a sort of dividing line between the 'Tap' and the range lying to the east.

The 'Tap' itself now claims our whole attention. Its summit is seen to be occupied by an immense mound of stones, and its grassy sides are thickly strewn with small stones. They lie much thicker, however, in a line passing round near the base of the cone, and suggest the idea that at one time this must have been the site of some sort of wall. Directing our steps then to a somewhat level spot, where the stones seem to lie thickest, we find a line of rough stones, sufficient to form materials for a dry stone fence of some eight or ten feet in height. This line of stones can be clearly traced round the east, north, and west sides of the mountain, and had no doubt formed an out-work of the fort. The south side is very steep, and perhaps there had been no wall required there, or if there had ever been any such the stones may have tumbled down the steep face and got so scattered as to be no longer traceable.

From this line of stones, the summit of the mountain seems almost within speaking distance; but the climb will still be found to try both legs and lungs pretty severely even after all devices to cheat the declivity by zigzagging and otherwise have been put in practice. A short and sharp struggle, however, brings us to the top, when it is found that the mound of stones before mentioned encloses a level space of considerable extent. It is of an oval shape, its longest diameter lying from

east to west, in which direction it measures about 130 yards, while its greatest breadth from north to south is about 56 yards. The mound of stones, which completely encloses this level space, has an average breadth at the base of some 30 or 35 yards, and its average depth might be about 20 feet. The stones of which it is composed are of the same sort as those on the face of the mountain, and are all of small size, none of them being larger than a strong man could conveniently carry, and, apart from the Herculean task involved in collecting such an immense pile, there is no difficulty in supposing that they may have been brought hither by hand labour alone. They seem to have formed a single wall of immense thickness, enclosing the level elliptical space before mentioned. They everywhere show marks of the action of heat; and, although the surface presents a mass of loose stones, a closer examination discloses large masses firmly fused together, or what is called vitrified.

The New History of Aberdeenshire, 1875, apparently following the New Statistical Account, 1843, gives the following brief description:—'On the summit of Noth, there are the remains of a large vitrified fort, where the walls are, in some parts, more than 10 feet in thickness, with the cementation as perfect in the centre of the walls as on the outsides, and free of fissures of any kind which would have arisen had it been of volcanic origin, and more crystalline in the middle or inside than on the outside. But here the whole mass of the walls appears to be of the same age and consistency of structure without crack or crevice.'

The writer of the old statistical account (1797) thus cautiously mentions the matter:—'On the top of Noth are, according to Mr Williams, Dr Anderson, and others, the remains of a vitrified fort. Some, however, are of opinion that this is only the mouth of an extinguished volcano. The conical shape of the hill favours the idea of a volcano; but the stones and remains of a building are rather favourable to the supposition of a vitrified fort.'

Douglas' Description of the East of Scotland has the following:—'A mile distant from the Castle of Craig stands the great hill of Noth—from its high conical summit commonly called the Tap of Noth—on which, overlooking an immense tract of country, are the remains of an ancient fortress, formerly thought to have been the mouth of a volcano, but now known to have been one of those forts constructed of stones vitrified by the force of fire, of which kind many have lately been discovered in Scotland.'

The writer of the short article, 'Vitrified Forts,' in Chambers's Cyclopædia, says that about 50 have been discovered in Scotland, and chiefly in the Northern division, and mentions Noth and Dunnideer in Aberdeenshire, Craig Phadrick, Fordoun, and Glenever, in Inverness-shire, Knockfarril in Ross-shire, Creich in

Sutherland, Dunskeig in Argyle, and Finhaven in Forfar.

Various opinions have been advanced on the subject of the vitrification of these forts. The idea that they were of volcanic origin, once generally held, has now been abandoned, at least by all having any pretensions to science. Some, while admitting that it is due to human agency, have maintained that the vitrification was a mere accidental result and no way intended. Their explanation is that it arose from the frequent use of fires used for beacons, for sacrificial purposes, for roasting oxen at great feasts, and such like. Perhaps some such accidental circumstance may have suggested the idea, but we cannot but believe, when we see such a mass of vitrified stones as that on Tap o' Noth, that it was the outcome of careful design, and not the product of mere accident.

It has also been suggested that the vitrification was caused by the destruction of the forts. Those who advocate this view suppose that they were erected by piling up wood and stones together, the walls being first marked off by two strong palisades of wood, which served the purpose of keeping them in shape. An enemy attacking such a fort would naturally endeavour to set it on fire, and in the conflagration vitrification would ensue. This theory might suit some cases; but such a pile of stones as we have on Tap o' Noth, if mixed with sufficient wood to cause vitrification, would have made a second Tower of Babel.

It has also been suggested that the walls were constructed of rough stones, and the interstices filled up with some sort of ore, or other fusible material, then wood piled on the building, and kept burning till the fusing of the ore cemented the whole mass together. Another idea is that some sort of mould for the walls had been erected, such as two parallel mounds of earth placed all along the site of the wall, and the space between them filled up with alternate layers of wood and stones, much after the manner of a lime kiln, and the whole mass set on fire. This theory pre-supposes that the stones used were capable of vitrification, or that at least a mixture of such stones was used.

In the case of Tap o' Noth, the stones used seem to have been the ordinary stones of the mountain; and a probable conjecture is, that they had been first piled up in a rough sort of rampart, and immense piles of wood kept burning upon them till the vitrification was effected. The fact that wood contains a considerable quantity of alkaline ingredients, which, by the application of heat, would unite with the silica in the stones, would go far to explain the phenomenon, even though the stones contained no fusible ingredients in themselves. The country around has long been singularly destitute of wood; but it is certain that the bogs, and perhaps most of the low-lying grounds, were at one time covered by dense forests of wood.

In discussing theories of vitrification, we must bear in mind that different methods may have been adopted in different cases. The forts were not all erected in one day; and it is but reasonable to suppose that the architects would make such improvements on their methods as experience might suggest. They would also alter their plans to suit the materials at their command, the nature of the site, and the purposes for which the erections were intended.

The question of who erected these forts is still matter of controversy. They are generally attributed to the Norsemen. If no such forts are found in Scandinavia, that fact would go a long way to discredit this theory. But, before deciding against it, we would need to make sure that that point had been properly investigated by competent observers. The necessity for this will be more evident when it is remembered that very little notice was taken of these structures in this country till within the last hundred years. But, even should no such remains be found in Scandinavia, that circumstance would not be quite conclusive, as the Norsemen, like other nations, had to adapt their measures to the peculiar nature of the circumstances with which they had to contend. Because the British do not use mountain guns or construct laagers when engaged in European conflicts, that is no reason why they may not use both when they have to contend with Afghans and Zulus.

There are still traces of what seems to have been a road winding round the mountain and terminating on the summit on the east side, where the entrance to the fort seems to have been. Inside the enclosure, and at or near what may be termed the eastern focus of the ellipse, is a well containing, at all seasons, a supply of clear cold water, to account for which is a matter of no little difficulty. It never overflows in wet weather, or diminishes in quantity in the most protracted drought. A tradition in the country is that it is conveyed in a pipe from Buck, a mountain about four miles distant. This is possible physically, as the height of Noth above sea level is only 1852 feet, while that of Buck is 2368. But against this theory we must put the facts that the hollows between the two mountains have been dug extensively for fuel, and that there is a considerable extent of cultivated land, with its usual accompaniment of roads and ditches, so that it is next to impossible that any such pipe could have existed without being interfered with by the hand of man, to say nothing of the waste of time and the immense strain of resisting the pressure of water passing through a valley many 100 feet in depth. The rainfall within the area of the fort might be sufficient to fill the small well at times; but it is clearly insufficient to account for its permanence during the droughts of summer. The most probable explanation is that the water is supplied from some of the higher mountain ranges by natural causes,

though, with the exception of the Buck, already mentioned, there are no hills within a good many miles of sufficient height for the purpose. The fact that the water escapes without overflowing is less astonishing; but the following account from the second volume of 'The Antiquities of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff,' issued by the Spalding Club, is too good to let pass unnoticed. 'The Tap o' Noth is a very remarkable hill here. It has a fountain on the very summit, without any current from it on the outside; but, if a taper rod be put into the vein of the fountain, it comes forth in twenty-four hours at a large issue called Coull's Burn, after being carried three miles by the force of the current.'

On the nether top of Bennachie are the remains of a fort, or, at least, an enclosure of some sort, one side of which is formed by the natural rock, and the other built of large stones not vitrified or cemented in any way. Within this enclosure is also a well, but not, as in the case of Noth, on the very summit, though sufficiently near it to render it an object of some curiosity.

None of the works quoted deal with the derivation or signification of the name 'Tap o' Noth.' Probably it is Scotch, and means nothing more than the highest peak of the hill of Noth. But there is a mountain in Wales called Tap Nyth, signifying *Top Nest*, a name that would agree very well with the appearance of the hill. That there is some connection between the words Nyth and Noth is all the more probable from the fact that the letters o and y in Welsh are sometimes interchangeable.

Near by is a large cairn called Mildewne, said to mean the grave of a thousand. Accounts differ as to the site of this cairn; but perhaps the ordnance survey map, which places it about due north from Tap o' Noth, is the most reliable. Near the cairn are marked some tumuli.

Lutach, the son of Macbeth, is said to have been slain here by Macduff in 1058. Not far distant is Leerachie Laar. Donald of the Isles is said to have passed this spot on his way to Harlaw in 1411. Each man stuck a willow wand in a bog, and on their return each survivor pulled one out. When they saw the extent of their losses from the number of wands left standing, they set up a lamentable wail. The country people did not understand Gaelic, and hence they called the place Leerachie Laar.

The remains of the old castle of Lesmoir stand to the south-west of Tap o' Noth. It stood in a marshy hollow, and was defended by a rampart and a moat, both of which are still pretty entire, but the castle itself has mostly disappeared. It was a seat of the Gordons, as was also the castle of Craig, some two miles farther south. Both of these must have witnessed some stirring scenes at the time when the Forbesees had their chief seat at Druminnor, lying a few miles to the east, as the Gordons and Forbesees were often at feud.

On the motion of Rev. Mr Geddie, Banff, seconded by Rev. Mr Walker, Banff, the thanks of the Club were cordially awarded to Mr Yeats.

Arrangements were made for holding four excursions during the season between June and September. These will be—to Craigston Castle and Tap o' Noth, for archæology and geology; to Portsoy, for geology; and to Dufftown for archæology and geology. The council will make arrangements for these excursions..