

II.

THE ANCIENT BATH AT BURGHEAD, WITH REMARKS ON ITS ORIGIN, AS SHEWN BY EXISTING BATHS OF THE SAME SHAPE AND DESIGN. By HUGH W. YOUNG, F.S.A. Scot.

The ancient Bath or Well at Burghead is a most curious and interesting work.¹ The whole of the chamber and basin are cut out of the solid rock, as well as the steps leading down to it, which are twenty in number, and measure from 15 to 18 inches broad. It faces the four cardinal points of the compass.

The space within the walls of the chamber is about 280 square feet, and the space for water within the basin is about 116 square feet. The annexed section (fig. 1) and ground plan will show the place better than any more elaborate account I can give of it. Much has been written about this bath, and I propose to compare it with undoubted Roman baths and wells, in a way which has never yet been done, owing, I suppose, to the scarcity of these remains in Scotland. I will carefully avoid the historical part of the question as far as possible.

That the Burghead "Well" is not a well is, I think, proved by the walk cut round about it inside. There is not a Roman well that has a walk round it that I know of; and I do not know of any small Roman baths without such a path. For the mere purpose of drawing water such a

¹ See the description by Dr James Macdonald, in the *Proceedings*, vol. iv. p. 351.

space running round it would be useless ; but for the purposes of bathing its uses can be seen at a glance. Yet, although at first made and

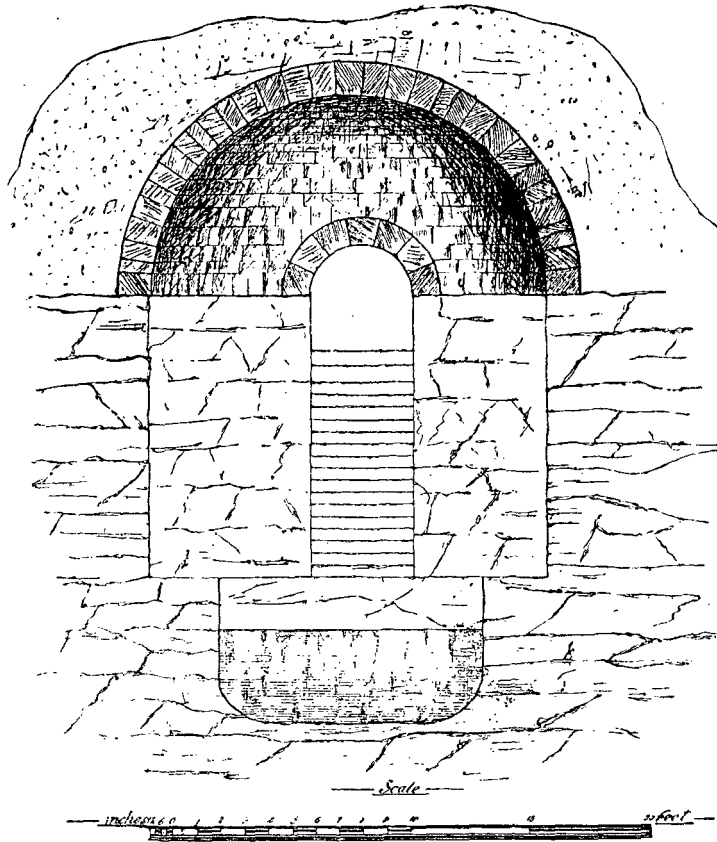


Fig. 1. Section of the Bath or Well at Burghead.

used as a bath, no doubt it came afterwards to be used as a well ; this is shown by the worn steps.

There are two Roman wells in existence in England, which I will here notice to show that the Roman wells were not perhaps very

different from those of our own country; one of these is in Lancashire, and is square in shape; the other is in Cheshire, and is circular, but neither bears the slightest resemblance to such a work as that at Burghead. These wells are considered by the best English antiquaries to be Roman.¹ The Lancashire well "was found 4 yards below the level of the field, and near the canal. It was square in form, and had four upright posts at angles closed in with other logs² not sawn but hewn, and 5 to 6 inches in diameter. It was within a few yards, and west of

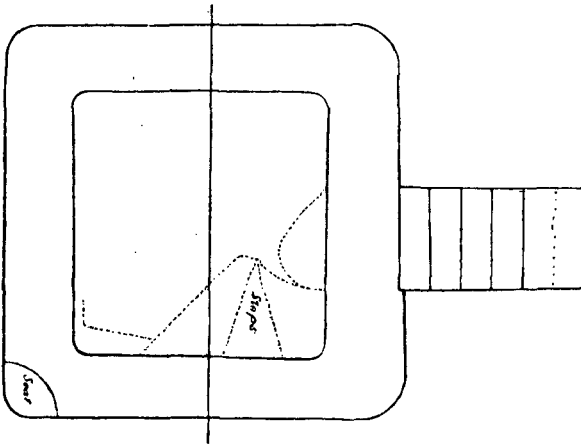


Fig. 2.

the Roman wall at Castlefield. A quantity of stones were in the bottom of the well, supposed to be intended for *ballistæ*." The Cheshire well, which is described as "a Roman circular well," was discovered "in Long Bank Field," and its lower tiers of stonework were found *in situ*. "The bottom of the well was 6 feet in diameter, and was 7 feet deep from the Roman level of the ground; 3 inches of black sand were at the bottom, which was dry. Some of the stones of the

¹ W. T. Watkin, *Roman Lancashire*, p. 109.

² The late Mr Young of Burghead discovered a similar pit lined with wood at Burghead which was used as a granary. It contained when found charred grain. This granary was found in 1809, and was probably filled up and destroyed.

upper tiers were thrown in. Each stone was rough hewn of a wedge shape to make the circle. Fragments of Roman pottery and the spout of a mortarium were found. The lower tiers of the well were removed and re-erected in the Town Hall Gardens. There they remain with some steps brought from another place, of which there is no record."¹

I think the foregoing should suffice to show that a Roman well was a very different affair from the Burghead bath.

I now propose to consider the characteristics of a few undoubted Roman baths;² one of these is in London and the other in Dijon, both Roman towns; the one the chief Roman station of England for a time, and the other the chief Roman city in south Gaul. The other two are upon the Wall of Hadrian.

It has been doubted whether Burghead bath had a roof in its original state, on the ground that the present roof is modern. I have no doubt it was originally roofed. Without a roof the water could not be kept clean and fit for drinking or bathing purposes.

The "Old Roman Spring Bath" of London is situated in a lane between the Strand and the Thames, and is fed by a rocky spring. "This Bath is a vaulted chamber, and is formed of thin tile-like brick, layers of cement, and rubble stones, all corresponding with the materials of the Roman Wall of London."³ There is no doubt that it is purely Roman work, and was most likely erected by the same builders as the London Wall. The London bath (fig. 3) and the Burghead bath are almost the same size, though the shape is different. The London bath is oblong, and from wall to wall of the chamber contains 286 square feet. The chamber of the Burghead well contains 280 feet. The difference in the measurement of the water space is even less,⁴ the cubic contents and depth of water being almost identically the same as Burghead.

The Roman Bath of Dijon, in France, perhaps has more resemblance

¹ *Roman Cheshire*, p. 264.

² I mean baths of a small size, and not bathing reservoirs such as at Bath, &c.

³ Timb's *Curiosities of London*, p. 37, new edition.

⁴ The spring flows out of, and the bath is partly cut into, the solid rock. The modern parts are the present entrance, and the roof. The rest is all, I believe, as it was originally made. The floor is paved with thin tiles and cement and so is the bath. The original door (see plan) is in the south side.

to that at Burghead than any other. I visited this bath and bathed in it in the year 1872. At that time I took no interest in antiquities, but still I was much struck with the likeness the place bore to Burghead. I have spared no time or trouble during the past six months to get information about it, and I have completely failed. I am obliged therefore to rely on my memory, which at a distance of seventeen years is not very fresh, and I may make mistakes. The Dijon Bath is subterranean,

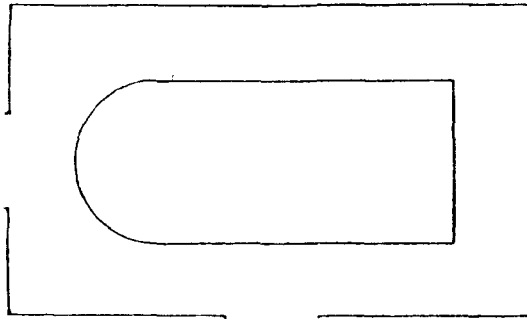


Fig. 3. Ground-Plan of Roman Bath at London (same scale as figs. 1 and 2).

but well lighted; it is in a cave of rock, but whether natural or artificial I cannot now say. The door opens in the rock as at Burghead, and a flight of stone steps leads into a large chamber, in the rocky floor of which are cut two square basins with straight lines and rounded angles.

The basins, like the whole place, are on a larger but quite as rude a scale as Burghead. The depth of water must have been about 4 feet 6 inches. The basins are divided by a wall, and now used, one for women bathers, the other for men. I think this wall is merely a modern screen. There are steps down into the water as at Burghead. I cannot remember how the basins were supplied with water, but it must have come up through the rock in some way as I cannot recollect any flowing water. The water was of the greatest purity and coldness. The baths are considered in Burgundy to be Roman, and are called "the Roman baths of Dijon." I am afraid to trust my memory further.

Perhaps one of the most curious of Roman baths is that known as

the Well of Procolitia on the Wall of Hadrian. Whether it is a well or a bath seems uncertain. Dr Collingwood Bruce, in his map of Procolitia, calls it a bath. In his *Handbook to the Roman Wall* Dr. Bruce says:—"In Horsley's day a well was noticed here cased with masonry. The people," he says, "called it a cold bath, and rightly judged it to be Roman."¹ As it bears certain points of resemblance to Burghead a short notice of it will not be out of place.

In the first place the basin is almost a perfect square as well as the outer chamber; from north to south the basin is 8 feet 4 inches and from east to west 8 feet 2 inches, but the space between the basin and the outer wall is very much larger than Burghead, the chamber measuring 40 feet by 38 feet, thus giving a great space round the water. I had difficulty in getting it measured owing to the danger of falling into the water, but I find Dr Bruce's measurement is correct as above.

The depth of the basin was 7 feet and there would be 4 feet of water in it when I saw it. Another point of resemblance to the Burghead bath is that there is a pedestal in one corner. When the place was discovered a statue stood on this pedestal dedicated to the goddess Coventina. This pedestal is quite unlike that at Burghead, being an oblong square, but it proves that the Romans did put pedestals in their baths on which statues were placed. As at Burghead the pedestal is in one corner. This bath is in a low valley quite outside the castellum, and when opened it contained many altars to the goddess Coventina. The statue bears an inscription which reads in English "To the Goddess Coventina Titus Domitius Cosconianus, prefect of the first cohort of the Batavians (dedicates this) willingly to a most deserving object."

The place is a ruin, and only the foundations of the chamber can be seen; the wall of it was 3 feet thick. The garrison could not be dependent on it for water, as it is quite outside the fortifications. No less than fifteen thousand Roman coins and several altars were found when it was discovered.² They were at the bottom of the bath. The basin of the bath and the chamber are all built of large blocks of hewn freestone.

¹ Bruce, *Handbook to Roman Wall*, p. 124.

² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

There is also a small Roman bath noticed in the *Proceedings of the Archaeological Society of Somerset* as found at Bath, which measured (I quote from memory) 18 feet by 14 feet, and had a stone seat or pedestal, as at Burghead, 18 inches broad by 16 inches high.

The bath at Housesteads (Borcovicus), however, bears a greater resemblance to the work at Burghead than any other well or bath on the Wall of Hadrian, and is worthy of careful study. When in a perfect state it must have been a beautiful piece of work, although much smaller and not so elaborate as the Burghead bath. I was told that I would have difficulty in finding it, and when found it might be choked up with weeds. It lies in a valley below the great Roman Castellum at Borcovicus, the grandest station on the wall. It is directly to the north of where two magnificent altars were found dedicated to Mars Thincsus, and two statues of female deities.¹ To the south-west of it is the site of a temple and semi-subterranean cave dedicated to the worship of Mithras, and found in 1822. Both temple and cave are destroyed, and I could find no trace of either. "Some considerable temple," says Dr Bruce, in his *Roman Wall*, "stood on the Chapel Hill, near this well (the well in the cave), and many altars have been found, but very few traces of it now remain."²

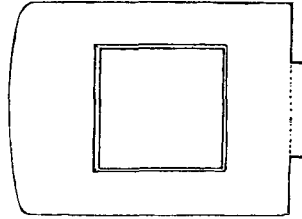


Fig. 4. Ground-Plan of Roman Bath at Housesteads (or Borcovicus) (same scale as figs. 1, 2, and 3).

On finding the bath I was in search of I was much annoyed to see the place choked full of large water weeds 2 feet high, and the edges of the chamber a bank of tall nettles, &c. It had not been cleaned for years. I cleared out the weeds as well as I could and beat down the nettles, and revealed a beautiful bath so far as to be able to see and measure it. The depth of the basin might be 4 feet or more, but I could not measure it as it was full of fine gravelly stones. The basin was formed of four great

¹ *Arch. Æliana*, vol. x. p. 148.

² *Handbook to Roman Wall*, p. 153. I desire here to record my thanks to Dr Bruce for his kindness, and also to Mr Blair, Secretary to the Society of Antiquaries at Newcastle, for the trouble he took when I called on him.

freestone slabs, each slab forming one side and finely jointed into each other to appear, as it did, like a solid rock. The bottom must have been rock, because it was apparent in the valley around. The square was an inch or two longer on one side than the other. The slabs rose 4 inches above the path round the water, and the path had likely been paved with tiles or flat stones. The measurements are as follows:—The basin was 5 feet one way by 5 feet 2 inches the other. The chamber, which was square at one end and rounded at the other, measured 9 feet 2 inches from east to west and 10 feet 10 inches on the sides from north to south, the rounded end being 1 foot 6 inches more, which, added to the 10 feet 10 inches, gave the total length 12 feet 4 inches. The path was 2 feet broad; except at the rounded end, where of course it was more (see Plan). The spring was pure and cold, the clearest water imaginable. The bath in its original state must have appeared as if cut out of the solid rock. The chamber, as far as it appears, was built of masonry.

The sides of the basin were very smooth. Dr Bruce is of opinion that this bath had nothing to do with the worship of Mithras, and I think he is right. The temple had its own well, and was a long way off. This bath lies in a valley between the Chapel Hill, where the Temple of Mithras stood, and the great camp of Housesteads. It is too far from either to be of use as a well, especially from the camp. The camp had ample supplies of water from two Roman wells, one on the north and one on the east side. One of these wells, which I carefully measured, was 6 feet by 5 feet inside, and built of stone in the usual Roman style.¹ I could not find its depth, as it was choked with stones from the upper tiers having fallen in. There was still water above the stones, and the original supply must have been large. As far as I could judge from the state of it the corners had been rounded angles, and it had three steps, or they may have been projecting stones, perhaps, for it was a ruin.

The north well was a large one also, and a stream of water flows

¹ It is most difficult to convey by pen or picture any idea of different Roman works. To be fully understood they must be seen and compared mentally. Burghead Bath has been called a rude piece of work but is far finer work than many undoubted Roman baths.

round the camp. Both camp and temple therefore had an ample water supply of their own, and could not require the water in the bath at the bottom of a deep valley. The situation is retired from the camp and suitable for a bath. To the student of Roman work this place has many points of great interest. It shows a complete mingling of the features of the Burghead bath with those of the London bath, and seems to unite the square of the former with the sharp outlines of the latter, and a careful study of these three baths shows exactly the Roman work in its different styles and shapes, but always the one school and formation.

The bath in the cave of Mithras at Housesteads, described by Mr Hodgson,¹ had two layers of thin natural freestones running round the top of the path. At Burghead one row of thin natural freestones also ran round the top of the path; these were about 13 inches square and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick.

It has been said that nothing Roman has been found in Burghead beyond a soldier's wine token in the bath.² But Professor Stuart, of Aberdeen, who visited the place in 1809, when the works were going on, says he saw Roman pottery, bricks, &c. Professor Stuart writes³:—"This curious spot (Burghead) was visited by the author in 1809, soon after a Roman bath was said to have been discovered in it, and he not only found the above description fully confirmed, but, besides the immense fortifications or defences towards the land side, he found a very large rampart, consisting of the most various materials, surrounding the whole interior of the fort, viz., masses of stone with lime, cement, pieces of pottery, and baked bricks and tiles, half burnt beams of wood, broken cornices and mouldings of well-cut freestone, along with the outlines of figures of various animals tolerably well represented in many of them." As this is the only contemporary account we possess, as far as I know, I think it entitled to great respect.

Professor Stuart further speaks of "niches" at the angles of the well, meaning no doubt pedestals. A careful examination of the north-east corner shows remains of what appears to have been a second

¹ *Archæologia Æliana*, vol. i., first series, p. 263.

² Dr Carruthers' *Highland Note-Book*, p. 163.

³ *Archæologia Scotica*, vol. ii. p. 310.

pedestal or niche. It seems to have been cut away, but enough of the rock rising above the level of the path remains to show that the professor was likely right when he spoke of more than one niche.¹

The ramparts at Burghead now existing are perhaps Celtic, particularly those parts where the wall has been found built with oak logs and stones in alternate layers. Such walls, I believe, are still to be found in France on the sites of some of the Gaulish *oppida*.

The Roman ramparts, if there were any, are in ruins, or may possibly be now no more. The Celt, the Dane, the Scot, and the Saxon have swept them in successive waves, and altered them to their own uses and ends; but the bath still remains indestructible as the rock in which it is cut. It is different from any antiquity yet found in Scotland, and shows the workmanship of a race high in the possession of knowledge and civilisation.

Until a similar work can be shown, undoubtedly made by any native race in Britain, or even in Europe, with the straight lines and the rounded angles in which the Roman people delighted, the matter may rest. The fact that boring must have been resorted to, to even ascertain the presence of water in such a place, is quite against a native theory of its construction.²

The days for setting one historical writer against another in these matters I think are gone. To prove the origin of a work of such antiquity it must now be one fact against another, one bath against another, and one wall against another wall whose history is known. The Bulls and the Clavie at Burghead will probably remain mysteries, but the riddle of the "Well" should, I think, be easily read, with the light we now have on such subjects.

¹ The late Mr Fraser, postmaster, Burghead, used to say that there were four pedestals, one in each corner, and that he had often seen them. This is contradicted by others, but I think that there is no doubt of at least two niches or pedestals being in the angles of the bath. The curiously cut hole in the north-west corner appears to be a modern piece of work. The statement made by Professor Stuart, Mr Anderson, and others, that when found the walls of the chamber of the Burghead Bath were coated with plaster, is probably quite correct, although no plaster was visible a few years later. It is well known that neither Roman plaster nor cement stands exposure to the air after being buried; like the bones of an old skeleton it dissolves into dust.

² See *Notes on Burghead*, by Robert Young, p. 13.