

VII.

NOTES OF SOME RECENT EXCAVATIONS IN THE ISLAND OF UNST, SHETLAND, AND OF THE COLLECTION OF STONE VESSELS, IMPLEMENTS, ETC., THUS OBTAINED FOR THE SOCIETY'S MUSEUM. BY THOMAS EDMONSTON OF BUNESS, ESQ., UNST, SHETLAND.

At Norwick, situated on the most northern open bay—as its name implies—in the furthest north island in Great Britain, there seems to have been from the remotest times a not inconsiderable population; and, indeed, the whole island of Unst, its shores, hills, and valleys, are yet

¹ These inscriptions will appear, along with a selection from those in the churchyard of Cullen, &c., in a book upon Epitaphs and Inscriptions in the North-East of Scotland, now in the press, by the writer of this paper.

dotted with unmistakable evidences of the former dwellings and enclosures of the early inhabitants.

On the south side of what may be termed the village of Norwick is an ancient burial-place, which, by the accumulation of centuries, has been raised up in a mound of rounded shape. In the centre of this, some kind of building (in all probability a place for worship) has existed, the foundation-stones of which still remain, and the arched doorway in the gable (east), some twelve feet high, was standing until a comparatively late period, when, as I am informed, it was overthrown by one of the heavy gales so frequent in these northern latitudes. Due north of this place, and about a quarter of a mile distant, are the almost obliterated traces of another erection of apparently great antiquity, termed by the inhabitants "*Bardle's Kirk*," erected, as the local tradition has it, in honour of St Bartholomew. There is not now sufficient of the building standing to enable us to decide with any certainty as to its size or nature, but that the interior and its surroundings were used for purposes of sepulture is undoubted from the urns, &c., that have been dug up, and which are now in possession of the Society. Four large and two smaller stones are still standing, for the erection of which tradition does not presume to suggest a date. The first four of these stones are 8 feet in length and 2 feet 10 inches in girth, the two last 6 feet 6 inches and 5 feet 2 inches each in length, and of the same girth as the former. Situated west of the lower of the two stones are two smaller ones, which appear to mark a grave. By excavation at this place the following relics have been discovered:—1st, An entire stone vessel or urn; one large urn, with fractured section; one large rubbing stone, deeply hollowed at one end, measuring 3 feet 7 inches in length by 2 feet 7 inches in breadth, and weighing between one and two hundred-weight; two celts, one of which is hollowed out at one end to fit the thumb and forefingers, so as to afford a firm hold. Scattered through all the ground outside the four largest stones, and at a depth of three to five feet, are numerous fragments of broken vessels, &c. There are also numerous stones, many of them large, and of a different kind from those peculiar to the locality, and which must therefore have been brought from a distance. All the space between the four large stones, as noticed before, has not yet been examined, as to do so thoroughly

will involve the expenditure of a great deal of time and labour. Interesting results may be anticipated from a further examination of this spot. This is the more likely, as these stones have not been used to support any superstructure, and also from the fact that pieces of broken urns of steatite have been found here, containing what was believed to be human ashes.

About 300 yards north-west of "*Bardle's Kirk*" is another place called "*Fustrie's Knowe*." This is a high mound of decayed sandstone, also formerly used as a burial-place. Here some forty years ago the crofter, whilst delving about and around the mound, came, to his surprise, upon some thirty urns of different sizes and shapes, standing in rows; but as little or no interest was then taken in such relics, they have unfortunately been totally lost. At *Valsgarth*, a small collection of thatched cottages, situate about half a mile south-west from Norwick, is another mound, called by the natives "*Runie*" of *Valsgarth*, from the Norwegian word "rune," a heap or pile—a burial-place of great antiquity. Many large stones here show themselves above ground at intervals, which must have been so arranged by human hands in ages gone by. In the centre of these stones, some years ago, was laid bare the remains of a building that seemed to have been built square, and within was found the large stone vessel or urn, with the lid now exhibited. At the same time were found many pieces of urns of steatite, well made, but so thin and brittle that they crumbled at the touch. This place has been filled up and cultivated, but might be re-opened and more thoroughly examined.

Tourie, as its name implies, is a small hillock of apparently similar character, and has not been examined, but a knife-like stone and a steatite utensil with a hole in the bottom, have been taken from it.

"*Cross-Kirk*," due east from "*Valsgarth Runie*" about a quarter of a mile, is also interesting from the fact that old coins have often been found at and about it, although I have not been able to secure any of them. Tradition informs us that "once upon a time," a ship was labouring in a heavy sea and in imminent peril. The sailors in their extremity vowed to the Almighty that, if safely brought to land, they would build a place for his worship as near as possible to the place where they reached the shore. Hence this building, formerly called "*Santa Cross*." Its narrow aisles have never been explored.

Clisboe is a farm some 200 yards or thereabout from Valsgarth, where are some half-dozen places near each other, which have been used for burying the dead. A great quantity of small stones and earth are heaped up, forming mounds varying from four to six feet in height, and generally of an oval shape. Some of these mounds have been uncovered, but several of them have not as yet been touched. In those that have been examined, on the removal of the covering of earth and stones, large stones are seen beneath. Further search requires the exercise of great caution, as in using pick or spade the workman is apt to destroy the urns or other relics. At this place the graves are indicated by four and sometimes two large stones, about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet long and 2 feet broad. On a flat stone lying at the bottom, the urn, containing what is supposed to be human ashes, is placed, as also stone implements, rounded pieces of quartz, horses' teeth, and small pieces of charcoal. Often there are no stones set up to indicate the deposits, and no urns are to be found, but at a depth of four, six, or seven feet, resting on a flat stone, is found what appears to be burned bones, &c., with some of the before-mentioned articles, all covered in by another large flat stone. All the human remains found at Clisboe seem to have been deposited at a time when burning the dead body was the custom. Many pieces of broken urns, celts, &c., are found dispersed through the mounds.

Underground buildings have been found at Haroldswick and in the neighbourhood, and have been partially examined before now. It is, however, more than likely that patient labour would yet bring to light many relics.

At *Houlland*, the residence of Mr William Hamilton, was found the stone ladle now presented. This place is on the borders of the Loch of Cliff in a central part of the island, and an extensive peat moss adjoins. The ladle was dug up from the moss at a depth of some five feet. A larger one with a longer handle, found in the same place, has since been presented by the Rev. Z. M. Hamilton, D.D.

I trust that the Society will be satisfied with the result of my exertions in applying the sum placed at my disposal. Before closing, I feel it but common justice to acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr James Hay, a resident in Haroldswick. The intelligent interest he takes in antiquarian research induced him to make explorations, and to bring under my notice

these interesting relics ; and it is information supplied by him that has enabled me to draw up this short and imperfect sketch of his discoveries. Should the Society deem it expedient further to investigate the places Mr Hay suggests as likely to prove productive of interesting results, it will afford me great pleasure in any way to assist in bringing the researches to a successful issue.