

IV.

NEWHILLS CROSS, ABERDEENSHIRE. BY JAMES
CRUICKSHANK, F.S.A.Scot.

Newhills Cross, and the other subjects to be here referred to, lie on the main Aberdeen-Inverurie-Inverness road, in the parish of Newhills, and distant about 8 miles from Aberdeen. To assist in describing them it may be well to give a short historical setting, the materials for which are fairly ample.

The Celtic kings appear to have favoured the neighbourhood of Aberdeen, and held considerable Crown territories there, chiefly the conjoined hunting forests of Stocket, Cordyce, and Kintore, a serpentine stretch nearly 20 miles long, all of which in due time came into the hands of King Robert the Bruce. King Robert either did not find time for the chase so far north, or the long wars may have left him without means to support the forests, or these may have afforded the readiest method of rewarding some of his chief lieutenants: at any rate, he proceeded soon after Bannockburn to divide them among his faithful friends. The town of Aberdeen was given the Stocket, Sir James de Garioch obtained Cordyce, and to Sir Robert Keith was assigned Kintore.

It is with Cordyce that our subject is concerned, a ridge about 3 miles in length and some 8 miles in circumference. Its upper levels have never been reclaimed and have for long been well wooded, which accounts for its prehistoric remains being unusually well preserved, these embracing a stone circle quite unspoiled, various round cairns of the Bronze Age, a large number of tumuli, and traces of very old roads. On its southern slope there are evidences which support the tradition that a castle, with a chapel near by, stood here, its name being Binghill Castle—perhaps a royal hunting-seat or a residence of the Gariochs. On the summit plateau is a mineral spring which used to be noted as a May Day wishing-well. From all sides a wide view is obtained, which is assisted by modern view-towers at two points. Adjoining Cordyce on the south-west lay certain other Crown lands known as the three Clintertys, one of which, known as Bishop's Clinterty (to-day Bishopston) was bestowed on the Bishop of Aberdeen at a still earlier period; the other two being given by Bruce's son David II. to Donald Bannerman, his physician. This grant to the Bishop carried with it the neighbouring southernly height of Cordyce, which for identification had at some previous date been marked by a large flat cross of stone and turf—doubtless an emblem of the sacred nature of the possession.

In drawing up the charter in 1316 to Sir James Garioch for the main portion of the ridge, care was taken to safeguard this episcopal section, and a copy of the Latin charter was lodged with the Bishop, which has been preserved with the episcopal charters, whereby a clue is given to much that would otherwise be mystifying. Among many place-names, most of them now untraceable, mention is made of this cross "in viâ regia," as also a large rock near it, a recumbent stone at another point, and certain boundary walls. These objects still exist, but the ground having been in wood for generations, all knowledge of them has been forgotten, and they have thus escaped notice in old parish records. During the late war a large area of trees was cut down which brought these objects to notice once more; and as the new landowners, the Forestry Commission, have just replanted this area, the present

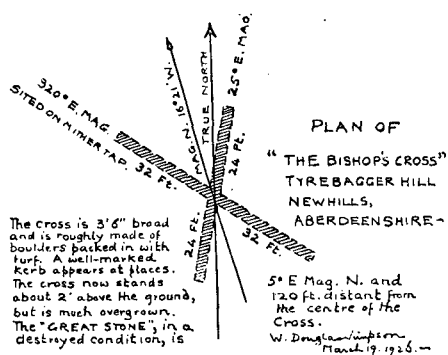


Fig. 1. Plan of the Bishop's Cross, Newhills, Aberdeenshire.

seems a fitting time to record them before they again become obscured. The cross (fig. 1) from its position, and by its mention in the charter as a landmark then well established, is clearly intended to fix one end of the episcopal property. It had been carefully measured out and compactly built, with an attempt at kerbing. It has suffered but little during the seven or eight centuries of its existence, only one arm having been broken into, evidently in an attempt to find out what lay beneath. Its head points directly

to Benachie, while at the other end it is broadened out to give the effect of an imaginary base. It may be explained that in Central Aberdeenshire different kinds of prehistoric remains, such as forts, camps, cairns, etc., command a view of the large fort on the Mither Tap of Benachie.

The large rock (*magnum lapidem*) adjoining the cross, while being clearly recognisable, has suffered much in the surface quarrying which is evident all over the hill. The recumbent stone (*lapistratum*) marking the north-western boundary is quite whole. Most of the walls or dykes appear to have been renewed, but at the extreme upper end the hoary appearance of the dyke warrants the belief that it represents the wall as it was in 1316. A marshy lake referred to as lying in the hollow has since been drained and the land cultivated, but its location is easily traceable. In a recent geological work reference is made to it: "At Clinterty is an erosion basin clearly the site of a vanished lake"—

a theory amply verified by our charter. Near the margin of this basin is a gravel mound in which, in 1897, a stone cist was found, the varied contents of which are now in Marischal College Museum, Aberdeen. A reference in the charter to the old waggon road (*veterem viam plaustrorum*) would indicate a stage of progress which must have receded in the centuries following, since we are told by various modern writers that wheeled traffic did not come into being in Aberdeenshire till the middle of the eighteenth century.

When at a later stage parish boundaries came to be definitely laid down, the then north road seems to have been made the dividing line between Newhills and its neighbour Dyce, in which latter parish Cordyce lies, and although much of this road has vanished, its line still marks the boundary, explaining the reason why the division often appears unsatisfactory. But one exception to the road boundary fell to be made: following the custom of the times, that part of Cordyce attaching to the Bishop's lands was brought within Newhills so that all might be in one parish, and so it remains to this day, as shown by the map (fig. 2).

We come now to another discovery which the removal of the woods has made possible. In the charter the cross is described as lying "in viâ regia," the king's highway, and we are thus able to speak with assurance regarding this second feature of the subject. Here we have now revealed three roads running side by side for nearly a mile, and

to give them a name these may be called the parallel roads of Tyrebagger, the modern name of the Cordyce ridge (fig. 3). At the lowest level is the modern turnpike formed in 1800, known to motorists for its steepness. At a still higher level is its predecessor, formed in the middle of the eighteenth century at a time when road reform was much in the air, and when the ancient tracks were being widened to admit of wheeled traffic. At this section the ancient track, perched on a hillside, could not be widened, and a new loop at a lower level became necessary. Its period of usefulness would be limited to half a century before the making of the turnpike lying below it, and it is now grass-covered and neglected.

Highest of all is the *viâ regia* of the charter, with the cross on its upper side—a stretch preserved to us because the nature of the ground did not admit of its being widened. Here, then, we have an example—

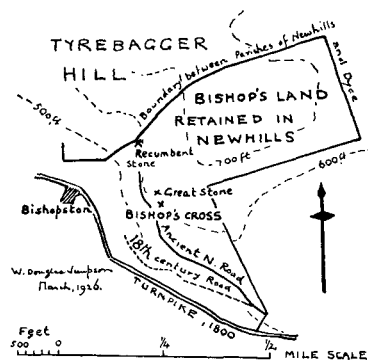


Fig. 2. Map of Bishop's Lands in Newhills parish.

probably almost unique in that its authenticity is certified—of a section of the king's highway as it existed in the times of the Celtic kings, and possibly long before their day. While its eighteenth-century successor has long been discarded, this old track has continued in use as a near approach through the woods to the crofts further ahead, which had been set down near the highway. It is less than 6 feet wide, has a solid, well-preserved bottom, and is almost level the whole way, being formed as a kind of shelf in the brow of the hillside.

A wealth of historic interest comes into view in standing near this ancient Kingsway. The Celtic kings would probably all have trodden it, Robert the Bruce would be familiar with it, various of the earlier Stuart rulers may have used it, and certainly Mary, Queen of Scots, on her northern tour in 1562. James VI. coming from his punitive expedition

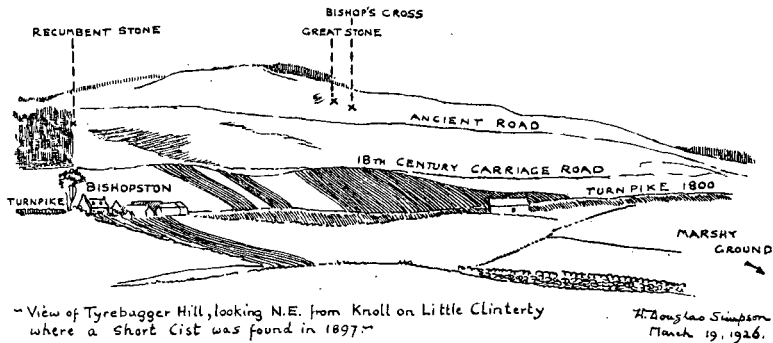


Fig. 3. View of Tyrebagger Hill, showing Roads and position of the Bishop's Cross.

to Huntly in 1594, and Charles II. returning from Holland in 1650, had to pass this way. The men of Aberdeen, led by their Provost, would march over it on their way to the battle of Harlaw in 1411, and would return a victorious but diminished host, bearing their leader "famous, calm, and dead." Time and again through the centuries the unruly gentry of the county made their fierce descents over it on the town of Aberdeen. Montrose passed by on his victorious career, and returned by it in his hour of ignominy; and the successive nobles of the house of Huntly must have constantly been journeying here. Certain of Prince Charlie's forces are recorded to have marched this way, and an old lady, not long deceased, used to tell that her grandmother saw the passing of Cumberland's soldiers on their way to Culloden. Bishops, statesmen, judges, scholars, younger sons intent on a continental career, the rich man and the beggar, all make up a goodly company to give colour to this bare hillside; and a further touch of realism is found near by in the "Robber's Cave."

One feature cannot have escaped the notice of even the most callous of all the long roll of noted travellers, and that is the glory of the view. In the foreground lie the rich plains of the Lower Garioch and Lower Deeside, and beyond a circle of noble hills, including noted peaks such as Benachie, Morven, Lochnagar, Mounts Keen and Battock, Clochnaben, and the Lower Grampians, with many a height of lesser renown.

To-day, inspired by this striking view, one may speculate on the former glories of the now silent king's highway, and by way of contrast turn to its modern substitute lying far beneath, to gaze on an almost endless chain of motor-cars, whose throb arises to disturb the peace of this heritage of the ages.

A reprint of the Bishop's copy of the charter of 1316 will be found in *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis* (Spalding Club), vol. i. pp. 43-4.

The original, given to Sir James Garioch, was extant in 1574, in which year it was exhibited in Court in connection with a boundary dispute. (See *Aberdeen Sheriff Court Records* (New Spalding Club), vol. i. p. 262.)

I am much indebted to Dr Douglas Simpson, who has kindly drawn the illustrations and has given other valuable help and guidance.