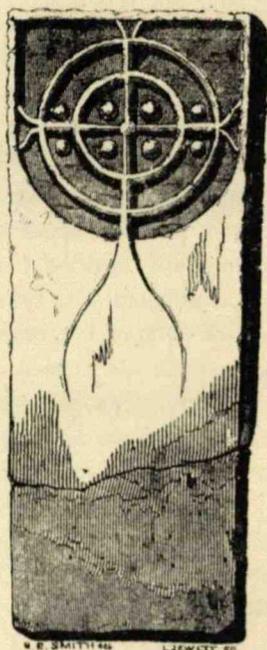




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NORMAN SEPULCHRAL CROSS,

found on Hilbre Island, Sep. 1864.

NOTICE OF AN EARLY CONVENTUAL CEMETERY  
IN WIRRAL.

By Henry Ecroyd Smith.

(READ 2ND FEBRUARY, 1865.)

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HISTORY supplies us with scant information relative to the islands of *Hildburgh-eye*, a name which has been contracted to Hillebyri, and finally to its usual present designation, *Hilbre*. Ormerod, for his valuable *History of Cheshire*, has evidently been able to glean but few particulars of the locality. It appears that, in a Charter granted in 1081 by the Conqueror to the Abbey of St. Ebrulf at Utica in Normandy, allusion is made to *the Church* on Hilbre, as having *previously* been given to this convent (together with that of West Kirby) by Robert de Rodelent, in whose favour William had founded, under the Earls of Chester, the extensive Barony of Rhuddlan, in which a large portion of the Hundred of Wirral was included. The church consequently existed in the Saxon period, when these islands were much more closely connected with the main than in more recent times, being probably only insulated at high water of spring tides and forming an elevated promontory running westwardly into Dee-mouth from a point of the shore opposite West Kirby, one of the oldest villages of Wirral. Again, the wear of sea and weather, to which they are peculiarly exposed, must have greatly reduced their size and consequent ability to support a population. The soil of the main island,

or Hilbre proper, is replete with *débris* of old buildings, the foundations of which appear to have all been "puddled" with the blue marl of the adjacent shore, in common with those of Ancient Meols (lying nearly a mile to the northward of the present village), one instance of the latter being visible so lately as 1862. The Hilbre buildings will range back from the salt works existent a century ago to the conventual buildings of the tenth to twelfth century.

Leland informs us "There was a celle of monkes of "Chestre, and a pilgrimage of our Ladye of Hilbyri."\* A light was maintained here for the same purpose as the present landmarks at a very early period, to which, in the twentieth year of Henry III, John Scott, the then Earl of Chester, contributed ten shillings per annum.†

Returning to the religious settled here, the question naturally arises, when and under what circumstances their allegiance came to be transferred from the Abbot of St. Ebrulf to that of St. Werburgh in Chester? whose successors, the Dean and Chapter, retained possession of the islands until about 1858, when they passed by purchase into the great Liverpool Dock Estate, and now bound to the westward our unrivalled port, although still remaining attached to the parish of St. Oswald's, Chester. In the absence of any specific record it may safely be surmised that the change was effected not later than the twelfth century, and probably occurred earlier. The Pilgrimage of "Our Ladye of Hilbyri" may have been sustained for centuries, although the mind now with difficulty pictures this isolated and mostly barren spot—this *Ultima Thule* of our now populous district—as the resort of devotees from all parts of Britain, and even the continent contributing its quota of pious visitors to this sacred island-shrine. In confirmation of the latter supposition and of the

\* Leland, *Itin.* v, 54.

† Hone's MSS., Chester Cathedral.

prevailing pilgrimage propensities and priestly inflictions of the dark ages, the writer may mention the occurrence upon the neighbouring shore of a "Sign of Our Ladye of Roc St. Amador," which must have been brought from that once celebrated shrine in the distant and ancient province of Quercy in France.\*

The existence of the church and religious establishment, however small, points necessarily to a burial place in the immediate vicinity; and so convinced was the writer, after the discovery of what may be termed a churchyard cross, or cross connected with the holy rood or sacred enclosure adjacent to the cell or oratory, of the ultimate discovery of sepulchral remains that he only awaited a convenient opportunity for commencing some investigation. The cross has been illustrated both in *Ancient Meols* and in the Historic Society's *Transactions*,† and is certainly of Saxon character. It was found by the telegraph keeper, Mr. Thomas Hughes, when breaking into the rubbly surface of the ground for stones wherewith to repair his adjacent roadway from the beach. He was similarly employed, within a few feet of the site of the old cross, when the writer, paying a visit to the island on 21st September last, took the opportunity of examining a little *lower* and *further*, when the side of a stone of considerable size was disclosed, and thought at first to be the foundation-stone or basement of the cross. Further examination, however, proved its sepulchral character, and on clearing the soil from the face of the slab, the ornamentation, though in low relief and rudely executed, was at once apparent. This, as usual, is on the upper end or head of the slab, and consists of a plain cross limbed at the extremities and continued through two concentric circles; a pellet occupies the centre and others the angles of the cross. The whole is bordered by an outer bead

\* *Vide* the writer's account in *Ancient Meols*, pp. 283-4, pl. xxvii, fig. 6.

† Vol. iii, N.S., p. 233.

at the edge of the stone, the dimensions of which are—length, five feet four inches; breadth at head, twenty-one inches; shoulders, twenty-two inches; foot, seventeen inches; thickness varying from five to six inches. The weight was found to be so great, that removal at the time was out of the question; and the superincumbent *débris* proving so bad to excavate, it was necessary to be contented with a careful examination of the soil beneath the slab, sinking below it on the side first exposed.

Thus operating, several deposits of human remains were encountered; in one case of a child of eight or nine, and in another of a young person of some fifteen years of age, and their burial may have disturbed the repose of the more important skeleton under the stone, which was found to be very imperfect, not through decay, although by far the earliest inhumed, but from some early displacement, most of the rib-bones and vertebræ being wanting and the skull much crushed and projecting forward from the rest of the skeleton. The only perfect skeleton was a fourth, which proved by far the most recent interment—possibly of some drowned person, buried within the last two or three centuries; it lay in a diagonal direction as regards the slab. This, depicted in the accompanying plate, was placed east and west, and still remains *in situ*. Its ornament or configuration betokens an eleventh or twelfth century date, with which the condition of the sub-incumbent osseous remains agrees; the natural animal gluten having almost wholly disappeared. These bones have belonged to a full-grown man, whose skull was of unusual strength and thickness; and such were admirable qualites when might rather than right held sway throughout the land. The cutting-teeth which remain are worn very obliquely flat, implying a vegetable diet.

Not the slightest trace of any coffin appeared in connection with these interments; and the animal fluid had, as usual

under similar circumstances, blackened the underlying soil in each case. Singularly enough, the soil improved the deeper dug into, and a fine black vegetable mould, of much greater depth than could reasonably have been anticipated in such close proximity as we were to the bare rock overhanging the beach, had evidently been taken advantage of for sepulchral purposes. A few small bits of charcoal proved the only traces of fire noticed. Not a single coin or other piece of metal was seen, despite the most careful manipulation of the out-turned soil; and the only relics of man's handiwork observed were a few pieces of earthenware,—fragments of a red jar and large water crocks of the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries, with a piece of flat slate-coloured ware of doubtful use. With the exception of an odd piece found by the writer upon a former visit, this mediæval ware had been previously unnoticed upon the island. The other archæological products of the place are all of a much earlier character, being, with the exception of the Saxon cross and a few primeval flints, of Roman workmanship or imitation, pointing to the period when Hilbre was at times a place of call on passing up the Dee to the important colony of Deva. I believe these last-named objects were all found upon the shore here, which they must have reached from the island top through the abrasion of the cliffs by the sea. They comprise a large sized fibula in bronze, the upper portion of which still retains most of its original blue enamel; two double buckles of different sizes, also in bronze; a spindle whorl or perforated disk of light coloured terra-cotta; and, lastly, a fine bead of blue glass, ornamented by intertwining enamelled threads of yellow and green, which, having been thrown up from a deep burrow by a rabbit, strongly confirmed, in the writer's opinion, the probability of early interments hereabout—such beads having been found, in Kent and elsewhere, in connection with smaller ones, round the necks of skeletons of females. These

large beads, mostly now believed to be of Roman manufacture, were highly and most deservedly valued by both Saxons and Danes, not only for their strength, but more especially for their rich and beautiful colours. As yet no one has delved into the sandy ground in which the burrow is situate (some twenty yards from the tombstone), and the probability is that the ancient cemetery (of which the writer has now confirmed the existence) may extend in several directions from his little opening trench. One strong conviction, however, remains with him after two days' excavation, namely, that a thorough examination of the archæological remains beneath the Hilbre sod will necessitate the employment of a gang of men for weeks, if not a couple of months, and he much doubts whether anybody will undertake the trouble, even if leave could be obtained, to make such an investigation.

In conclusion, it may be mentioned that a proposition has been to some extent entertained by the Dock authorities for quarrying stone at Hilbre; but it is to be hoped so suicidal a project will not be realized, as the reduction of these islands would remove the only rocky bulwarks against the strength of the tidal current and high seas—the only natural break-water off this angle of Cheshire.