

NOTES ON THE PRESENCE OF THE BEAR
(*URSUS*) IN THE BRITISH ISLES.

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THE railway under construction through the town of Warrington is carried upon a viaduct across the Bewsey valley, where extensive excavations were required in order to reach a rock foundation upon which the supporting pillars were laid. About twelve feet from the surface, a subterranean forest was cut through, from which was excavated a portion of the crania and maxillary bones of a bear; but the fossil is very imperfect, and belongs to a smaller species than the cave bear (*ursus spelæus*.) There is nothing remarkable in the discovery of this fossil, as remains of the bear have been found in deposits of the same age in other parts of England, and recent researches in geological science have shewn the animal to have been indigenious with other extinct mammalia which roamed the primæval forests of ancient Britain. Our knowledge, however, of the British bear is not extensive, and it may prove interesting to contribute the little we possess, as gathered from scientific and other authors, in a brief collated form.

The vast quantity of the fossil remains of the bear in the caverns of Germany early attracted the attention of the curious, and many authors spoke of them under the title of *fossil unicorn*.* Bristoe referring to the teeth of the

* *Cuvier's Fossil Mammalia*, p. 118.

German cave bear, remarks, that it formed for a long time part of its *materia medica* under the name of *fossil licorn*.* The first osteological notice of the cave bear was given by Hayn, in 1672, in a romantic and speculative work, under the title of *Ephemerides of Curious Matters in Nature*, in which he describes and figures many of these fossils under the title of "the bones of *dragons*." Vollgand, a succeeding collector, adheres to the same term, and even goes so far as to affirm that great dragons were then found living and flying in Transylvania.† About a century later, Bruckman discovered similar fossils in the Hungarian caves, and he appears to be the first who compared them with the bones of the bear. M. Espen describes and figures a considerable number of bones from the caverns of Frauconia, all of which he ascribes to the bear; but they were subsequently found to belong to the bear, tiger, wolf, and hyæna. In 1794 the celebrated anatomist P. Campen attempted a classification of these fossils, and was the first to recognize any distinction between the fossil species amongst themselves. His researches, assisted by Rossenmüller, an anatomist of Leipsic, resulted in 1795 in the publication of *Materials for the History and Knowledge of the Fossil Bones*, which laid the foundation of the fossil osteology of the bear.

Such was the state of this science up to the publication of Baron Cuvier's great work, who though remote from the actual locality of these bones, was fortunate enough, by his

* *World before the Deluge*, p. 424.

+ I have not been able to find any record which gives a description of these so-called "dragons," but an account of a great dragon slain by Valentine, one of the Knights of Malta, is recorded.—L'Abbe de Vertot, vol. ii, p. 250. Francis I, king of France, was presented in 1530 with a dragon, having seven heads and two feet, which for its rarity was said to be worth 2,000 ducats.—Chronic. Cromeor. Politic, Lib. ii, p. 349. Saint George of Cappadocia, who encountered and slew a great dragon about the middle of the third century A.D., has been elected as the patron saint of England, and his figure is one of the badges of the most noble Order of the Garter.—Dr. Heylin's *Hist of St. George*, part i, c. 5, s. 4; Spenser's *Faery Queen*, book i, c. 10, vol. ii, p. 157; Selden's *Notes on Drayton's Polyolbion*, p. 68.

access to valuable collections, to treat the subject in a manner infinitely more complete than any of his predecessors had done. He enters largely and minutely into a comparative anatomical examination of the fossils with living species, and the result of his observations led him to classify them under two distinct species. To the cave bear he gave the name of *Ursus Spelæus*, and the other *Ursus Artoideus*. All the others he considered varieties of these two.

The publication of Cuvier's work proved a great stimulus to the palæontologists in England, at which time comparatively little was known of the ancient ruminantia of the British Isles, and recent investigations have brought to light a large series of fossil carnivora, from the ossiferous caves and fissures in the rock formation of England, identical with continental species. A systematic exploration into most of the ossiferous caves then known was undertaken by Dr. Buckland, and the results of his interesting researches were published in 1823, in his *Reliquiæ Diluvianæ*. In Kent's Hole, near Torquay, Devon, were found the remains of bears, hyænas, elephants, &c.; and he considered it to have been inhabited by bears before it became a den for hyænas. Recent investigations into this repository of extinct mammalia have brought to light remains of the bear in great abundance.* The species found in this cave have been identified by Professor Owen, and were referable to *U. Spelæus* and *U. Priscus* (Goldf.) Owen remarks concerning the latter that its absorbent condition hardly permits a doubt that it is of the same antiquity as the remains of *U. Spelæus*. At Oreston, on the coast of Devonshire, teeth and bones of the bear were discovered in 1821 referable to *U. Priscus* and *U. Spelæus*.† Remains of the bear have also been found in the bone caves on Durdham

* *Proc. Geol. Soc.*, vol. iii, p. 386. *Trans. Geol. Soc.*, 2nd S., vol. vi, p. 433. *Reports Brit. Assoc.*, 1865 to 1870 inclusive.

† Owen's *British Mammals*, p. 103.

Down, near Bristol, and the cave at Paviland.* The Brixham cave, Torquay, was discovered and explored by Dr. Falconer in 1858,† and subsequently by others,‡ in which numerous mammalian remains have been found—amongst them the left hind leg of a bear.§ Similar remains are described by Professor Owen as having been found in Yelm Bridge cavern, and by Mr. Boyd Dawkins in the ossiferous caves of the Mendip Hills. Their remains have also been found associated with other cave animals near Kendal,|| and a cave at Kirkdale in Yorkshire has yielded some large remains of *U. Spelæus*. The huge size which the males of this species attained may be estimated by the upper canine tooth from the cave at Kirkdale described and figured by Dr. Buckland,¶ and from Kent's Hole, described and figured by Professor Owen,** the size of which extinct bear, Cuvier says, must have been equal to that of a large horse.

From the researches of palæontologists it does not appear that the remains of fossil bears are so numerous in this country as on the Continent. In the great bear cave of Kühloch in Germany, it is remarked by Dr. Buckland, that the quantity of animal matter within the cavern cannot be computed at less than 5,000 cubic feet; and that allowing two cubic feet of dust and bones for each individual animal, we shall have in this single vault the remains of at least 2,500 bears.††

Ursus Spelæus, along with the remains of other fauna, are said to have been discovered about Bedford, Grays in Essex, Whitstable; in the valley of the Severn, at Tewkesbury; in the pleocene deposits of Beeston, in Norfolk; in the fresh-water formation at Clacton, and in the river gravels at Illford

* Falconer *Palæon. Mem.*, vol. ii, p. 538. *Quarterly Jour. Geol. Soc.*, vol. xvi, p. 487.

† *Palæon. Mem.*, vol. ii, p. 486. ‡ *Quar. Jour. Geol. Soc.*, vol. xvi, p. 189. Lubbock, *Pre-hist. Times*, pp. 283, 307, 2nd edit. § *Geologist*, vol. iv, p. 154. Goodwin's *Archæol. Hand Book*, vol. ii. || Owen's *Foss. Mam.*; Anstead's *Geol.*, vol. ii, p. 142. ¶ *Reliquiæ Diluvianæ*, p. 261. ** *British Foss. Mam.*, p. 91. †† *Notes on Reliq. Diluv.*, pp. 138, 139.

and other places in that neighbourhood.* Mr. Boyd Dawkins, however, entertains a doubt whether any clear case of the remains of this species has been found in the river drift gravels. It is observed by Professor Owen that the latest ursine remains having any claim to be admitted into a record of British fossils are the entire skull and portions of the upper and lower jaws of the bear found in the Cambridgeshire Fen, and they belong to the existing European black variety of *Ursus Arctos*.† The oldest fossil referable to the genus *ursus* from British strata is the crown of a molar tooth which was found associated with the teeth of a hog, and a species of felis as large as a leopard at Newbourn, near Woodbridge in Suffolk.‡ The stratum is believed by Sir Charles Lyell to belong to the red crag; if so, the fossil in question is referable to miocene strata, and would give a pre-glacial occupation to the bear in the British Isles. Their remains have been found in the limestone caves near Settle in Yorkshire, imbedded beneath deep stiff clay.§ These caves were examined by me recently, and I have no doubt the overlying clay is of glacial origin, which presumably confirms its pre-glacial antiquity.

Since this paper was written, an excellent article by Mr. Boyd Dawkins, on British bears and wolves, has been published in the *Popular Science Review* for June, 1871, in which he describes *Ursus Spelæus* having been found at Buxton in a deposit of pre-glacial origin; and it is the opinion of Mr. Dawkins that the bear is one of the few British mammals which survived the changes characteristic of that epoch.

* *Prestwich Phil. Trans*, 1864, p. 284. "Quaternary Mam." in Lubbock's *Pre-hist. Times. Paleon. Mem.*, vol. xviii, p. 22.

† The Fen bear was discovered five feet below the surface, and is now preserved in the Woodwardian museum. The upper and under jaw of the same species, and from the same locality, is in the possession of Sir P. de M. Grey Egerton, Bart. In size the Fen bear appears to have been little inferior to the great cave bear.

‡ *Morris's British Fossils*, p. 362.

§ *Archæologia* xxix, pp. 384, 385. *Athenæum*, 1851, p. 718.

During the historic period the bear existed in the South of England, the Midland shires, the North, in Wales, and in Scotland. It was common till about the end of the third century at least.

There are several collections of historical Triads still extant in the Welsh language, which Mr. York, in his "Royal Tribes," supposes to have been compiled about the year 650. The most complete of these Triads have been published in the *Myvrian Archaeology*, from which we learn that, when the tribe of the Cymry first settled in the island, it was full of bears, wolves, and horned cattle, &c. Plutarch relates they were transported to Rome, and were held in great estimation on account of their superior fierceness. The learned author of the *History of Manchester*, quoting from Claudian, says that amongst the wild beasts which infested the forests of Britain was a numerous breed of bears. It is also reported of the Emperor Claudius, who, upon his return to Rome from the conquest of Britain, exhibited, amongst other concomitants of his triumph, combats of British bears.* In the excavations of the hypocausts at Cilurnum on the Roman wall, the tooth of a bear of large size was found, perforated with two holes, by which it had probably been suspended and worn as a badge upon the person of its captor. A bear hunt is recorded in the Chronicles of Winton as having taken place in Scotland, A.D. 885; and Martial makes allusion to the same practice. The records, however, relating to its existence in historic times are very scanty, and not always reliable.

Amongst the legends blended with historic narrative in the writings of Boece, he relates that the son of Alexander Bois,

* Such was the extent to which this passion was carried by the Romans, that about the beginning of the third century, during the consulship of Gordianus, an incredible number of wild beasts were conveyed to Rome for the amusement of the people, and no less than one thousand bears were hunted and killed in one day.—Goltz, p. 102; Gordianus, p. 158; *Universal Hist.*, vol. vi, p. 391.

who with his mother had been preserved when the castle of Urquhart was taken by Edward I, killed a mighty bear that infested the country, and in memory of the event received the appellation of *For-beast*, which afterwards came to be pronounced *Forbes*.*

A similar legend is associated with the name of Gordon, who, in 1057, is said to have slain a fierce bear that wasted the country. The tradition relates that upon the occasion of a royal hunt, a bear of unusual size suddenly turned at bay, and made straight for the king, who headed the pursuit. The royal train stood paralysed, or fled: one veteran retainer alone stood unappalled, and, rushing in, when the bear was attacking the king, by dint of strength *gored* him down to the ground: hence *Gordon*.† Such is the tradition of the Huntly bear, which had no foundation in fact.‡ The Gordons obtained their names from Gordon-in-the-Merse, where their ancestor, an Anglo-Norman, first settled in the reign of David I.§

A singular story is related by Siward Earl of Northumbria in giving an account of his grandmother, the daughter of a Danish earl, who, as she was walking one day in the wood near her father's house, accompanied only by her woman, a large bear, rushing from among the trees and frightening away her attendant, carried off the young lady alone, &c.||

It would be difficult at this date to pronounce with any degree of certainty whether the Saxon word *arth*, which signifies bear, has been derived from the representative of

* The surname of Forbes was derived from the lands of Forbes *v.* Aberdeen, granted by Alexander II, about the middle of the 13th century, to the progenitor of this noble family.—*Burke's Peerage*.

† Ferrerius' *History of the name Gordon*. Buchan's *Ancient Ballads*, vol. ii, p. 312.

‡ Notes to Barber's *Bruce*, New Edit., p. 450; Pennant's Notes in Lightfoot's *Flora Scotica*, i, p. 15; Laing's *Scottish Seals*, pp. 55, 56.

§ Chambers's *Caledonia*.

|| Brompton's *Chron.*, p. 809, 945. Spelman's *Life of Alfred*, p. 16. Notes to Rappin's *Hist.*, vol. i, p. 134.

the northern bear, which was an object of worship under the ancient mythology of Britain, or whether in part due to the fabulous Arthur of romance, or the traditional retreats and haunts of the bear. Certain it is that the names of many of our mountains, woods, and rivers may be ascribed to one or other of these causes. Less uncertain is the Roman name *Urswick* applied to a district in Ulverston, near the old Roman road to Carlisle, signifying "the place of the bear." *Urspeth* is the name given to a district in Chester-le-Street, Durham, and is probably a contraction of the words "Ursus path." In the mountainous districts of Westmoreland and Cumberland, which doubtless contained large herds of bears, we have no records handed down to us; but in the early ages, before the introduction of letters, the achievements of heroes were perpetuated by rude sculptures on stone: to such probably the antique monument in the churchyard of the ancient town of Penrith belongs. The legend connected with it relates that a Sir Owen Cæsarius, a famous warrior, killed so many wild bears, which infested the country in great numbers, that the monument was erected in honour of the execution he made amongst them.

The passion for hunting which actuated the Saxon kings and thanes doubtless contributed to a large extent in rendering their existence very scarce for at least a century before the close of the Saxon period. Mr. Newman, in his paper on *The Death of Species*, considers the bear to have died out about the year 1041, or 1031. This appears to be about the date which Camden and other writers assign to the Caledonian bear; but Mr. Newman gives no particulars as a reason for fixing upon those dates, and they are probably assumed from the passage in Domesday, in which it is recorded that the town of Norwich, in the time of the Confessor, furnished annually one bear to the king, and six dogs for baiting it. I think it more than probable the Norwich bears must either

have been imported, or they were the remnants of British bears preserved for the purpose of baiting. The hunting of the wild bear was one of the royal sports; and having, shortly before this period, become exterminated, the Confessor imposed a tribute to the support of his amusement, in the maintenance of a certain number of bears and dogs for the purpose of being baited; and, so far as history permits us to form an opinion, was the first to introduce the Roman sport of bear-baiting.* There is presumptive evidence that it died out at an earlier period than that assigned to it by Mr. Newman. The Poenitential of Archt. Egbert, (*Monumenta Ecclesiastica* in "Ancient Laws and Institutes of England,") which was drawn up about the year 750, speaks expressly of the bear as being at that time a denizen of the forest. In the Laws and Institutes, ascribed to Howell Dda, which were drawn up about two hundred years later, while enumerating the wild animals then existing in the forests, no mention is made of the bear; and the subsequent Danish laws are also silent regarding them. This evidence leads to the probable conclusion that the animal, as a British species, died out in its wild state in England and Wales about the close of the ninth or the beginning of the tenth century.

In the extensive Caledonian forests it probably survived till a later date. It is stated by Camden, on the authority of Plutarch, that the Caledonian bear maintained its existence, in spite of the huntsman, to the middle of the eleventh century at least.

* For several centuries after the times of the Confessor this barbarous custom prevailed in England. When Erasmus visited it, in the reign of Henry VIII, he found many herds of bears maintained for the purpose of baiting! Henry Algernon Percy, fifth Earl of Northumberland, kept his bearward, whose annual pay was 20s.—*Chetham Papers*, vol. xxxv, p. 201. Mr. Beaumont, in his learned History of the Botelers, Lords of Warrington, found in the rent-roll of Sir William le Boteler, who died in 1380, the name of Geffison recorded as that of bear-ward. This office appears to have existed in Lancashire so late as 1638. In that year William Fox, of Garstang, bear-ward, was indicted at the Preston sessions, to answer for an assault, when Francis Clark, another bear-ward, became security for his better behaviour.

Such is the brief and imperfect outline I have attempted to sketch of this interesting species of our ancient quadrupeds, which long survived the decay and ultimate extinction of the more huge mammalia of palæolithic times; and its congener, the harmless badger, and last representative of the genera, is fast disappearing from amongst us, though not extinct at the present day.