



The Lost Celtic Kingdoms of the British Borderlands

Story by Steve Melia

For 900 years, the Solway Firth has separated Celtic Scotland from English Cumbria - an ancient ethnic divide, you might imagine, but the truth is more interesting than that.

The Scots, who gave the country its name, were late arrivals from Ireland. For centuries after the Roman withdrawal, both sides of the Solway were ruled by native Celtic kingdoms, speaking Cumbric, a language similar to Welsh. Taliesin, the legendary Welsh bard lived in one of them, the elusive kingdom of Rheged.

Beyond Taliesin's epic poems, we know very little about Rheged. However, in 2017, archaeologists Ronan Toolis and Christopher Bowles published a book claiming to have found both its royal stronghold and its fate on a remote hilltop on the Scottish side of Solway Firth. Thus, Trusty's Hill was my first destination on a journey to discover three lost Celtic Kingdoms.

Dumfries, the regional centre where I was staying, is home to 33,000 people. It feels slightly run-down, with second-hand stores in the centre and fast-food outlets lining the main roads. It was the birthplace of Peter Pan and the resting place of Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns. Its few surviving older buildings are mainly made from local red sandstone, dark and solid.

A huge intercontinental-style bus serves the route, down narrow country lanes, towards Gatehouse of Fleet, the village near Trusty's Hill. The contrast is stunning; the small, terraced cottages lining the main street are like many in Dumfries, but these are beautifully maintained, and smart restaurants have replaced the fast-food joints. Britain is unique in this respect: to move to the rural countryside is a dream for many, but only a reality for the well-to-do.

Climbing a narrow track towards Trusty's Hill, my way was blocked by a fallen tree. Scottish access law is different from the rest of Britain; you can walk almost anywhere here, in theory, but that doesn't stop landowners erecting barriers of barbed wire. The detour took me over fences, though bogs and brambles, until I stumbled upon the path to the top of the hill.

An iron grill, protecting the carved stones I had seen in the book, indicated that I had found the site. Two rocks stand on either side of the entrance to the ruined fort. Beside



one of them is a basin carved into the rock, and it is here that Toolis and Bowles believe that the kings of Rheged were anointed. While the grill is now overgrown with moss, one can still make out the strange outline of a double disc and a sea monster amongst the doodles and graffiti of later generations.

Two things struck me while standing in the sunshine and looking across the hills towards the Solway Firth; compared to earlier Celtic hillforts, this site is very small. If this really was the royal stronghold, it was difficult to imagine a court meeting inside it.

“And, in addition, I will say one thing for the ancient Celts - they chose some beautiful places to build.”

During my descent, I spotted a herd of stoutly built horned cattle. They looked up, saw me, and charged. I didn't hang around, running around a hillock, out of their sight, towards the nearest wall, which was covered in barbed wire. Lacerated hands or trampling hooves - what a choice! I waited for a while, and they didn't reappear. Slowly, I edged back into their sight. They looked up, decided I wasn't worth the effort, and went back to chomping their straw.

I eventually found another track, leading down to the road, and another bus, towards Kirkcudbright, where the Stewartry Museum holds the finds from Trusty's Hill. Although there are only fragments on public display, the curator let me handle them through rubber gloves. Lumps of “vitrified stone” - melted through intense heat - reveal the fate of Trusty's Hill in the seventh century. Accord-

ing to Toolis and Bowles, additional wood was brought in to create “a spectacular advertisement of power and the total destruction of the defeated regime.” They believed that the destroyers were Anglo-Saxons from Northumbria.

But was this really the royal seat of Rheged? Others are not so sure.

Tim Clarkson is a historian who has written several books on this period. “The frustrating thing about Rheged is that we don't know where it was or indeed what it was. Although Trusty's Hill was clearly a stronghold for a sixth-century king, neither his name nor the name of his kingdom is known. ‘Rheged’ is certainly possible, but I don't think we can change ‘possible’ to ‘likely’ now.”

Whatever the status of Trusty's Hill, the Northumbrians certainly did extend their control during the seventh century. That was not the end of the story, however.

A visit to Dumfries Museum, on another hilltop overlooking the town, helps to explain what happened next. Part of its collection is dedicated to the Vikings, who attacked the Northumbrian coast in 793AD, gradually making their way around the Scottish coast.

There are weapons and carpenters' tools; they came to raid, but also to settle. Shifting relations between Vikings, Celts, and Anglo-Saxons would shape the history of this area for the next three centuries.

One room is full of carved stones, from Roman times to the Middle Ages. I recognized one of them as a small “hogback stone” as, a few years ago, I had visited the best-known and best-preserved hogbacks in Scotland, in Govan Old church, near Glasgow. These

arched and decorated stones are often associated with Viking settlement, though none have been found in Scandinavia. After a Viking attack on Dumbarton Rock, the native Celts retreated inland, creating a new capital at Govan, and a new kingdom: Strathclyde. The Govan stones were carved there, although by whom we don't know.

As Viking attacks weakened Northumbria, Celtic Strathclyde was able to expand. How far south their kingdom stretched remains uncertain, but my next destination offered a clue.

Penrith, on the edge of the English Lake District, is a small town, half the size of Dumfries.

“Penrith hosts an array of historic sites, including two medieval castles, a fortified manor house, a Roman fort, and three neolithic henges.”

Outside the railway station stand the sandstone ruins of Penrith castle, built in the later medieval period. As the jewel in Penrith's historic crown, it has been beautifully landscaped, with a dedicated park by its side.

The older buildings along its high street are also built of red sandstone, giving it a similar feel to Dumfries, although the hills are closer to the town here. The next site I had come to visit was tucked behind the high street, in the graveyard of St. Andrews church. The Giant's Grave is an arrangement of two tall crosses, with their arms broken off, and four hogback stones, dating from the tenth century. Beneath them is reputed to lie Owain Caesarius, legendary King of Cumbria. Nineteenth century drawings show intricate carvings of spirals and circles on these stones, although time and rain have since eroded them.

What was the relationship between the Celtic kingdoms of Strathclyde and Cumbria? The few written sources are confusing and contradictory. Most historians believe Strathclyde changed its name to Cumbria as it expanded southwards, into what is now England. Some think they were two separate kingdoms, while others note that Northumbrian rule survived here for longer.

Clarkson believes all three scenarios are possible but feels that “the conventional view” - that Strathclyde expanded - “offers a more plausible interpretation.” Either way, Cumbria (or “Cumberland,” as part of it be-

came known) was named after “native Britons whose language and identity survived throughout the Northumbrian period and beyond.”

Here, near the village of Eamont Bridge, Athelstan - the Saxon King of England - convened a peace conference in 927AD with the kings he had allegedly defeated. Amongst them was one Owain, whose kingdom is uncertain. Who does Clarkson believe Owain was?

“Our oldest source is a version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle written in the eleventh century. It named one of the attendees as 'Owain, king of the people of Gwent,' in South Wales. Later, in the twelfth century, the English writer William of Malmesbury described Owain as 'king of the Cumbrians.' I tend to favour William's identification of Owain, seeing the Eamont meeting as primarily for northern rulers rather than their Welsh counterparts. If Strathclyde had expanded into Cumbria, then Owain was its King.”

A medieval stone bridge now spans the River Eamont, which may have marked the boundary between Celtic Cumbria and Athelstan's England. It is too narrow to carry all the traffic, which must wait for a signal at either end. Most historians believe the treaty was sealed somewhere around here, at that spot or one of the other historic sites nearby. I decided to explore two of them: a neolithic henge called Arthur's Round Table and another called Maybury Henge. A single stone stands there today, high above the village, with Penrith in the distance.

My final destination, Carlisle, is where the separate Celtic identity of Cumbria came to a violent end. On the English side of the border, Carlisle is the only city for miles around.

The city centre is currently under heavy construction, moving traffic away from the citadel, which acts as a gateway to the centre. On the opposite side of the centre, Carlisle Castle stands high above the River Eden and the parkland, which lines its floodplain.

“Carlisle is Britain's most besieged castle, resisting or surrendering to 10 sieges between the Norman Conquest and the Jacobite Risings.”

When William of Normandy conquered England in 1066, Cumbria lay beyond his



Steve at Stewartry Museum

control. Whether the Lords of Carlisle owed any allegiance to the King of Scotland is another disputed question. Clarkson believes the Northumbrians were back in control, but we know the Cumbric language was still being spoken here. It took until 1092 for William's son, William Rufus, to conquer Cumbria and create the lasting border between England and Scotland. He built the first castle on this site shortly afterwards.

A volunteer guide, David Troughton, welcomed me to its inner keep. Unlike the other sites I had visited, Carlisle Castle has survived intact. It has been extended, repaired, and rebuilt many times. The first castle was thrown up in haste, using earthworks and timber. The inner keep was built to replace it 30 years later, by Henry I.

If you visit Carlisle, take one of the guided tours of the castle - while the rooms are empty, the guides know the stories that each one conceals. In the dungeons beneath the keep, some of the stones have been hollowed out, and licked, by Jacobite prisoners, desperately seeking any drops of moisture. In one of the rooms above, the same rock has been carved into curious images, of people, beasts and heraldic symbols, by a medieval guard who may have dreamed of becoming a stonemason. They reminded me of where my journey began - Trusty's Hill.

Cumbria's Celtic past has now faded from popular memory. Today, most Cumbrians would consider themselves to be English. All that survives of the Cumbric language are place names and a few numbers. Only poems and legends, passed down to us by the bards of medieval Wales, preserve the memory of the Old North, where Celtic warrior kings once fought to defend their precious independence.