

## The Porlock Stone Circle, Exmoor

BY H. ST. GEORGE GRAY, F.S.A.

ANOTHER stone circle can now be claimed for Somerset. In 1906, I figured and described in the Society's *Proceedings*, lli, ii, 42-50, a stone circle situated on Withypool Hill, some of the stones of which were first noticed by the late Mr. Archibald Hamilton in 1898 while riding on the common on a misty day.

Now, another circle has come to light in the parish of Porlock<sup>1</sup> at a distance of  $6\frac{1}{2}$  miles in a direct line N. of the Withypool Stone Circle. In this instance Mr. E. T. MacDermot<sup>2</sup> of Lillycombe (about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles N.W. of the circle), who had known of the existence of some small standing and recumbent stones in long heather on Porlock Allotment for some years past, observed later,—when the heather had been burnt,<sup>3</sup>—other stones, clearly indicating that the whole represented the remains of a stone circle some 80 ft. in diameter, and therefore smaller than the Withypool example, the diameter of which is  $119\frac{1}{2}$  ft. (usually described as 120 ft.).

Knowing that I had made a full record and survey of the Withypool circle on the Somerset side of Exmoor, Mr. MacDermot kindly told me of his discovery, and has given me the opportunity of examining the site and the pleasure of making a survey, the result of which is seen in Plate XII. In the first

<sup>1</sup> The circle, although in Porlock parish, is only the following distances from the nearest point of four other parishes: Stoke Pero (S.E.), 580 yds.; Oare (W.), 1000 yds.; Exmoor (W.S.W., at Black Barrow), 1,500 yds.; and Exford (S.S.W., at Alderman's Barrow), 2,710 yds.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. MacDermot is the author of *The History of the Forest of Exmoor*, 1911.

<sup>3</sup> Periodically the moors are burnt in different parts to free the underlying grass from being overshadowed by heather, gorse and other wiry growths.

instance the permission of our member, Mr. R. W. Blathwayt, of Dyrham Park, Chippenham—owner of the property and lord of the manor—was obtained.

The circle is situated at an altitude of nearly 1,360 ft.<sup>4</sup> (see 6-inch ordnance survey, Somerset Sheet XXXIII, s.e.). The road from Porlock to Exford runs slightly to the e. of the circle, and the wonder is that the circle should have remained so long undiscovered, being quite near the road. As a matter of fact the w. margin of the road is only 116 ft. e. of the centre of the circle.<sup>5</sup>

Hawkcombe Head is less than three-quarters of a mile in a bee line to the n. of the circle, Porlock Church  $2\frac{3}{4}$  miles to the e.n.e., Exford slightly over 4 miles to the s., Dunkery Beacon  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles to the s.e., and Lucott Cross barely a mile to the s.

The circle was erected on a piece of moor which slopes slightly from n.e. to s.w. In the area covered by my plan this slope is represented by a fall of about 10·5 ft. The slope is rather greater towards the ford where the Colley Water<sup>6</sup> crosses the roadway, that is to the s.e. of the circle. Between the circle and the ford is a gateway on the w. margin of the road, the s. gate-post of which is 190·5 ft. from the centre of the circle. From this post, continuing in a s.s.e. direction to the middle of Colley Water on the w. side of the road a distance of 114 ft. intervenes. Between the gate and the e. margin of the circle is a small disused quarry for road stone.

At a distance of 555 yds. s.w. of the centre of the circle two stones stand close to the w. margin of a trackway. The ordnance map shows several other stones to the w., s.w. and s.s.w.

Barrows, or tumuli, are also fairly plentiful in the vicinity, the best known being 'Alderman's Barrow' (2,710 yds., s.w.), at the junction of the parishes of Exmoor, Exford, Porlock and Stoke Pero. Then there is 'Black Barrow', mentioned in

<sup>4</sup> The bench-mark a little to the s., at Colley Water, is 1334·9; and another on the roadside a short distance to the n. of the circle is 1366.

<sup>5</sup> The road is 13 ft. in width, and the distance from the middle of the w. wall or hedge to the w. margin of the road is 9 ft. (See Note on Plan, Plate XII).

<sup>6</sup> The Colley Water is a feeder of the Weir Water, which hereabouts divides Oare and Porlock parishes, and is one of the head waters of the Lyn.

footnote 1.<sup>6a</sup> Two tumuli, known as 'Bendels Barrows', situated on Exford Common, are nearly  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles to the s.s.e. of the circle. Eastwards from 'Bendels' in the direction of Dunkery one meets with the 'Rowbarrows', and again n.e. of Dunkery Beacon the 'Kit Barrows' and the three cairns on Luccombe Hill.

On the e.n.e. side of the Porlock circle is an ancient monument which may prove of greater interest than any other in proximity to the circle. I refer to Berry Castle 'camp';<sup>7</sup> situated in Berry Castle Wood (s. side), the nearest part of the earthwork being just over 7 furlongs from the circle. The camp is intersected from s.w. to n.e. by the boundary dividing the parishes of Porlock and Stoke Pero. This is a small promontory camp artificially fortified on the w., but without any stone bank on the e. owing to the very steep slope of the ground. As yet I have not had an opportunity of visiting this site, but it has been briefly described.<sup>8</sup>

These items almost exhaust the topographical details necessary for record here, and it remains now to describe the circle itself. The marginal lines of my plan have been delineated true n. and s. and e. and w.<sup>9</sup>, and enclose an area of 0.4 acre. It will be readily seen that the remaining stones and stumps are circularly arranged, or nearly so, with a diameter of 80 ft.,<sup>10</sup> and a circumference of about 252 ft.

<sup>6a</sup> Further west one finds 'Kittuck Barrow' marked on the ordnance map. Mr. MacDermot tells me that this is certainly not an artificial mound, but a shapeless stony hillock, and that there are two or three others near by. (See Exmoor Perambulation, *History of the Forest of Exmoor* (E. T. MacDermot), p. 422.)

<sup>7</sup> This name is rather a common one for earthworks in West Somerset. There is *Oldberry*, or *Old Burgh*, on the n.w. of Dulverton town, *Bury Castle* in the parish of Brompton Regis (see description, *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* lxi, xxi-xxiii), and *Bury Castle* on the high ground above Selworthy Church.

<sup>8</sup> *V.C.H. Somerset*, ii, 479; A. H. Alleroft, *Earthwork of England*, 207; E. T. Burrow, *Ancient Earthworks of Somerset*, 62.

<sup>9</sup> The magnetic variation at Porlock Allotment, Exmoor, on October 1, was  $14^{\circ} 17'$  w.; annual decrease  $12'$  (not constant). This information was kindly provided by the Director-General of the Ordnance Survey.

<sup>10</sup> The 'central picket' on the plan represents the surveying centre from which in beginning the survey the base-line was set out and all chief measurements were made. The spot immediately to the n.w. represents the centre of the circle subsequently described on the plan.

The stones remaining consist of ten standing-stones and broken-off stumps<sup>10a</sup> and eleven prostrate stones. Of the latter only six come on (or are quite near) the periphery of the circle, as shown on the plan,—these stones being on the N., N.E., E. and S.E. The five recumbent stones on the S. and S.W. are outside the true circle to the extent of from 1 ft. to 3 ft. (that is to their nearest margins). One cannot of course be sure that all these stones (five) originally belonged to the circle, but they may have been removed from their holes and thrown outwards. For instance there can be little doubt that Stone 5 once stood in a hole on the line of the circle (dotted on the plan).

It is quite probable that originally the standing-stones remaining were originally exactly on the line of the true circle, and the slight gradual displacement of some of them, such as Stones 4, 6, 11, 17 and 20, may have been caused by what is known as 'soil-creep'. The prehistoric builder would have had no difficulty in designing the circle by means of a central stake with a rope as radius.<sup>11</sup>

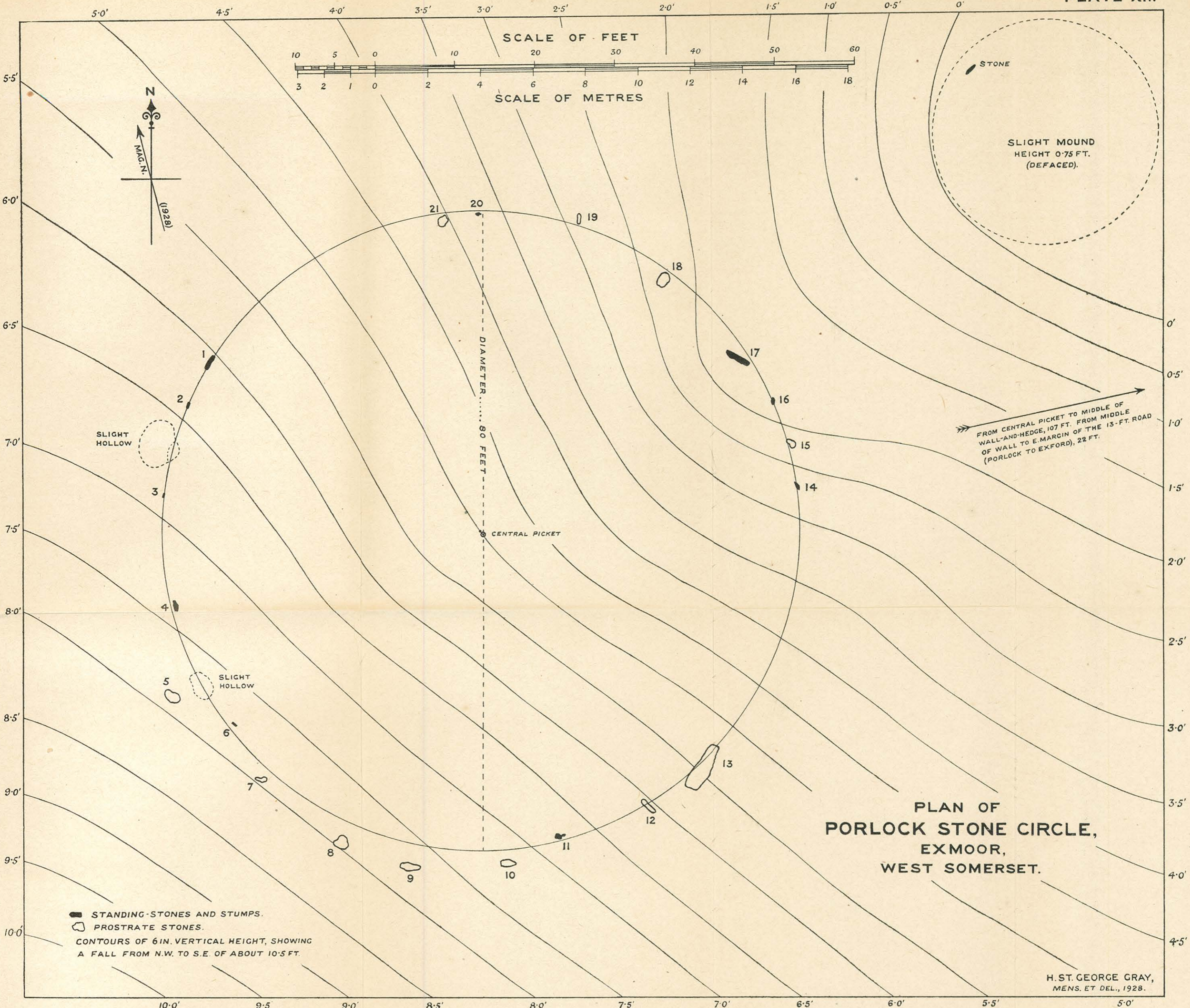
The largest gaps from which stones are entirely missing are on the N.W. and E.S.E. of the circle. We can only conclude that they have been carried away for road material, and probably the best stones were removed.

It is extremely difficult to suggest what the original approximate number of stones was. In the case of the Withypool Circle I calculated that the stones had been set up at an average distance of 3.5 ft. apart (for several of the remaining stones were divided by that distance). In the case of the Porlock Circle, if one bases one's calculations on Stones 1, 2 and 3, and Stones 14, 15, 16 and 17, and reckons that no stones stood between these (except between 2 and 3), then the centres of the stones of the circle would originally have been about 6 ft. apart, and there would have been about forty-three stones.

The size of the stones varies considerably, as will be seen by

<sup>10a</sup> Very few of the remaining stones of the circle can be regarded as complete.

<sup>11</sup> The Cornish circles on Bodmin Moors, which I have surveyed and published, bear some resemblance to the Exmoor circles, particularly those nearest to Rough Tor and Brown Willy,—the Stannon and Fernacre Circles,—and the three others towards the S.—Leaze Circle, Trippet Stones and Stripple Stones. (*Archæologia*, lxi, 1–60.)



**PLAN OF  
PORLOCK STONE CIRCLE,  
EXMOOR,  
WEST SOMERSET.**

■ STANDING STONES AND STUMPS.  
 □ PROSTRATE STONES.  
 CONTOURS OF 6 IN. VERTICAL HEIGHT, SHOWING  
 A FALL FROM N.W. TO S.E. OF ABOUT 10.5 FT.

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MENS. ET DEL., 1928.

the Plan and the detailed description below.<sup>12</sup> By far the largest of the stones, now recumbent, is No. 13, having a length of 6.3 ft. and a maximum width of 2.2 ft. Of the standing-stones, No. 17 is the largest with a width of 3.42 ft. and a height above the moor of 1.45 ft. No. 1 is also a comparatively fine stone with a width of 2 ft.; its height above the slight depression surrounding it is 2.65 ft.<sup>13</sup>

Some of the stones were too much covered by moorland growth to ascertain their outline without digging, and the existence of others was revealed by means of the spade. Digging was also systematically carried out at other intermediate points (intervals of about 6 ft.), in the hope of discovering still more stones than those delineated on the plan.<sup>14</sup>

As the Plan, Plate XII, shows there is a slight mound<sup>15</sup> on the N.E., towards the road, having a diameter of about 28 ft., and a central height of about 0.75 ft.<sup>16</sup> On its N.W. margin a small standing-stone, height 1.2 ft., length (N.E. and S.W.) 1.7 ft., maximum width 0.6 ft., rather sharp at the ends and on the top also. The distance from the central picket to the nearest margin of this stone was 82.8 ft.

A little excavation was also done during the last hour of our second visit at the centre of the circle, where about a dozen slabs of stone, averaging about 1.5 ft. in length were revealed, but no 'relics' were found nor any charcoal. The stones may not have had any special significance; at any rate they were not laid out in any special order, but the area dug was small.<sup>17</sup>

The stones of the Porlock Circle are Green Micaceous Sand-

<sup>12</sup> This list is important in case of any further mutilation.

<sup>13</sup> At Withypool no stone exceeded 2 ft. in height.

<sup>14</sup> The digging was done by Mr. MacDermot and his son and Mrs. St. G. Gray. This was carried out on my first visit, 24 September 1928.

<sup>15</sup> There was the faintest trace of another mound of very slight elevation to the E. of that above mentioned, partly cut into by the roadside wall. The area was covered by small whortleberry-bushes and other growth.

<sup>16</sup> The mound (that marked on the plan) was much covered with the usual growth which partly obscured the stone. There were one or two hollows to be seen in which some digging *may* have taken place. Mrs. Gray cut a small trench here but without any archæological results.

<sup>17</sup> The real purpose of such a circle as this is unknown, and in this connection those interested might refer to *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* lii, ii, 47 (Withypool paper). Systematic excavation might prove of value.

stone presumably of Devonian age, and probably of local origin.

Dr. H. H. Thomas, F.R.S., petrographer to H.M. Geological Survey, tells me that the stone in quality and texture bears a remarkable similarity to the altar-stone at Stonehenge.

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#### SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE STONES

No. 1.—Standing-stone—the highest in the circle—leaning very slightly to the E.; tussock round the stone in which some whortleberry-bushes grow, especially on the E. side. The E. face is flat, so is the W. face to half-way up,—then it recedes towards the top (width 0.35 ft.). Width at base 2 ft.; max. thickness 0.55 ft.; height above the slight depression surrounding it 2.65 ft.

No. 2.—Standing-stone (or stump), small, practically upright. Height above turf 0.7 ft.; width 0.7 ft.

No. 3.—Standing-stone (or stump), very small, showing only 0.5 in. above the surface. After probing and digging the stone at a depth of 0.75 ft. was found to be only 0.5 ft. wide and 0.2 ft. in max. thickness. A few small packing-stones were found at the bottom.

Between Stones 2 and 3 a hole was noticed from which a stone had probably been taken, and adjoining it, on the W. side, a depression about 6 ft. by 4.5 ft. (see plan).

No. 4.—Standing-stone leaning very slightly inwards, having tussock and small whortleberry-bushes round the base. It stands 1.47 ft. above a slight surrounding depression; width at base 1.4 ft.; thickness at base 0.7 ft.

No. 5.—Stone, prostrate, lying some little distance westward of the line of the circle. Length 2.3 ft.; max. width 1.35 ft. Near this position and on the line of the circle is a depression measuring about 3.5 ft. N.W. and S.E. by 2.25 ft. N.E. and S.W. (see plan).

No. 6.—Standing-stone (or stump), small, upright, showing only 1.5 in. above the surface. Excavated to 0.4 ft. below the surface. Width 0.75 ft.; max. thickness 0.2 ft. Round about it, two slabs of stone about 1.3 ft. by 0.7 ft.

No. 7.—Stone, prostrate, not so far outside the line of the circle as No. 5. Length 1.4 ft.; max. width 0.85 ft.; max. thickness 0.32 ft.

No. 8.—Stone, prostrate, as much outside the line of the circle as Nos. 5 and 9. Max. length 2 ft.; max. width 1.8 ft.; max. thickness 0.32 ft.

No. 9.—Stone, prostrate, as much outside the line of the circle as Nos. 5 and 8. The E. end showed slightly above the turf; the W. end 0.25 ft. below the surface. Length 2.8 ft.; max. width 1.18 ft.

No. 10.—Stone, prostrate, at about the same distance from the line of the circle as No. 7. A thin, flat slab found in digging; only a small portion reached the level of the present surface. Length 2 ft.; max. width 0.95 ft.

No. 11.—Standing-stone (or stump), damaged and irregular, the highest part remaining being 0·75 ft. above the level of the moor. The w. part was squarish at the base and ran up to a rough point on the s.e. side. Dimensions across about 1·5 ft. by 1 ft.

No. 12.—Stone, prostrate, long and narrow, found in digging, lying obliquely. On the n. 1·35 ft. below the surface; on the s. 0·25 ft. deep. Length 2·35 ft.; max. width 0·47 ft.; thickness unobtainable.

No. 13.—Stone, prostrate, the largest in the circle; fairly flat and smooth upper surface; surrounded by slight tussock with small whortleberry-bushes; small thorn-bush on the w. side of the stone. Max. length 6·3 ft.; max. width 2·2 ft. max. thickness ascertained by digging 1 ft.

No. 14.—Standing-stone (or stump), without tussock; small upright stone, tapering from the base to a sharp edge on the top. Height above ground 1 ft.; width at base 1·18 ft.; thickness about 0·5 ft.

No. 15.—Stone, prostrate, found in digging, and probably a stone of the circle; a rather thin slab just below the surface, 1·3 ft. by 0·85 ft.

No. 16.—Standing-stone (or stump), small, leans slightly towards the centre; s. edge somewhat squared; n. end pointed. Height above the surface 0·7 ft.; max. width 1 ft.; max. thickness 0·45 ft.

No. 17.—Standing-stone, large compared with the others; leans very decidedly towards the centre; stands in hollow probably worn by sheep; sharp-edged on the top especially at the higher or w. end. Height above the moor 1·45 ft., above the depression 1·67 ft.; width 3·42 ft.; max. thickness (near e. end) 0·7 ft.

No. 18.—Stone, prostrate, a thin slab, 2 ft. by 1·4 ft., having an old crust upon the upper surface; this and another piece of stone in one rather large depression. The second stone was about 1·75 ft. by 0·7 ft. and showed little until dug for; it is very doubtful if this piece of stone can be regarded as a stone of the circle; and it has not been counted separately.

No. 19.—Stone, prostrate, found in digging—a small long and narrow slab (not thick), the highest part 0·18 ft. below the surface. Length 1·5 ft.; max. width 0·5 ft.

No. 20.—Standing-stone (or stump), small, leaning slightly towards the centre of the circle; sharp-edged and somewhat pointed at the top. Height 0·6 ft. above the moor; width at base 0·75 ft.; max. thickness 0·35 ft.

No. 21.—Stone, prostrate—a flat slab, 1·75 ft. by 1·38 ft.

Between Nos. 19 and 20 and towards the n. are three loose slabs of stone lying on the moor within 12 ft. of the line of the circle.