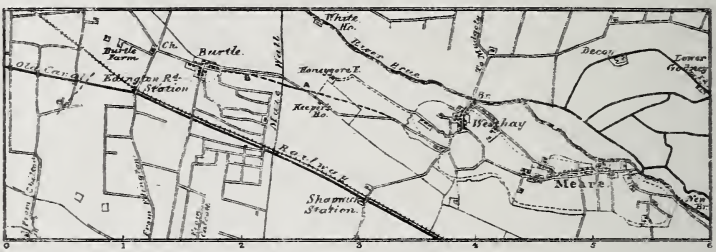
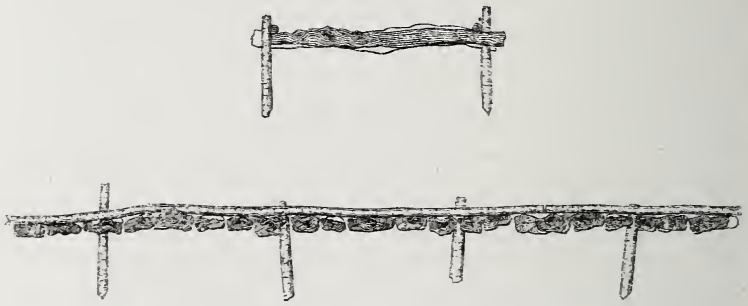
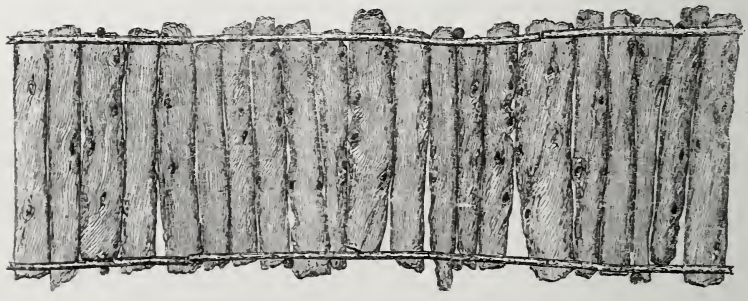
AN ANCIENT PLANK ROAD CALLED "THE ABBOT'S WAY."



SCALE OF MILES.





SCALE OF FEET.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

MEASURED BY C.W. DYMOND, C.E., 16TH AUG, 1873.

West, Newman & Co. imp.

The Abbot's Way.

BY C. W. DYMOND, F.S.A.

THE ancient timber-road in Glastonbury turf-moor, called "The Abbot's Way," of which a short length is delineated in the accompanying plate, though relatively an object of small importance, yet offers to the antiquary several interesting points for study, and one or two problems not easy of solution.

In the year 1873, the late G. S. Poole, Esq., kindly gave me an opportunity of seeing and measuring a section which had been freshly uncovered on Honeygore farm, Westhay Heath, in the parish of Meare: and, as it appears that no illustrated account of this relic of the past has yet been published, it may be well to place on record, or give references to, all the facts which I have been able to collect; and, where it is possible, to indicate their principal bearings.

The measured piece was exposed at a point, marked on the accompanying map by the letter A, in a meadow, close to the northern side of the road from Burtle to Westhay, rather more than half-way (about 350 yards) from the bridge by which that road crosses the rhine, marked on the Ordnance-map as "Maze Wall," toward the game-keeper's house at Honeygore. At that point, it bears N. 82° W., and S. 82° E. On the southern side of the road, at the time of my first visit, the track could be observed for a short distance westward, at points where it had recently been exposed in peat-cutting: but these traces are now invisible—the field having been nearly worked-out, and the spongy bottom having risen high enough to cover them. Still farther westward, indications may be seen, after a long spell of dry weather, in the ditch dividing two parallel droves which skirt the road to the east of Burtle, about half-way between that village and Maze Wall. Here, for sixty yards east of the hand-gate fixed across the inner drove, at B on the map, and also at one point a few yards to the west of it, the outer edge of the ditch coincides with the northern line of

stringers. It is clear that this path was, in olden times, the connecting link between the island of Meare, on which Westhay is situated, and that at the eastern end of which is planted the village of Burtle; and, as we should expect to find, it evidently held a tolerably direct course between their nearest points, closely represented by the strong dotted line on the accompanying map. Many more traces would, doubtless, be discovered, if they were sought; but at present, the only ground along the belt which has been devoted to the peat-cutter, is that opposite to A, on the southern side of the road. In Chilton Moor, however, there are remains of another similar track, or, perhaps, of two others, of which I have been able to glean intelligible information with respect to one only. At the point C, in a croft behind the house of Isaac Tratt, rather more than half a mile west of Edington Road station, it is said that a short length was discovered, bearing one way toward Burtle farm, and the other toward Woolavington or Cossington. Another piece has been found in the peat-moor to the south of C; but whether it belonged to the line just referred-to, or branched from it; or whether it was a part of a totally distinct way, could not be ascertained. It is very probable that many similar tracks, once forming a slender network of communications between the habitable lands in and around the ancient morasses, may yet remain buried in the superficial strata, unsuspected by any but the ditcher and the peat-cutter: and it is much to be desired that some local resident, with sufficient leisure, should industriously collect, and carefully record, every new scrap of information likely to throw light on the events of the past in these levels.

At the point A, the Abbot's Way was found at a depth of seven feet from the surface; the whole of the cutting being through compact peat which extends, it is said, to a farther depth of eleven or twelve feet, making eighteen or nineteen in all. Traces of decayed reeds, in a thin layer, were found at the level of the planking. At B, the road is only two feet

below the surface; the soil consisting of black peaty mould. Whether this difference of five feet in the depth of the road is due partially or entirely to a corresponding difference of superficial level, can be settled only by instrumental observation.

The illustrations clearly show the mode of construction. Rude slabs, split out of the tree with wedges, and averaging four feet nine inches in length, six to nine inches in width, and two to four inches in thickness, were bedded closely together transversely, with the flatter faces uppermost, and held down by two lines of stringers, of small whole timber, varying from one inch and a quarter to two inches in diameter, and three feet six inches to four feet apart, laid end-to-end with flat butt-joints, and kept in place by pegs of the same diameter, twenty to twenty-two inches in length, with flat heads, and rudely pointed at the lower ends, as with a blunt axe. These were driven into the peat at intervals of three feet, along the outside of the stringers, which were probably attached to them by means of withes, as no trace of nail-hole, pin, or necking is visible. The width across the road, between the centres of opposite pegs, was found to vary from three feet ten inches to four feet four inches. The pegs and stringers were of birch: some of the slabs were also of birch, and others perhaps of alder. Much of the bark still enveloped the round timber: pieces of the same were also found adhering to the under-sides and edges of the slabs. Most of the wood was somewhat decayed, spongy, and brittle—the smaller scantlings especially; but portions of the cross-pieces, kept till they were dry, proved tolerably sound, exhibiting, when cut, the natural color, grain, and texture. The round timber was generally flattened to an oval section by pressure of the superincumbent soil.

When we have gathered up all that is known on the subject, it will be seen how narrow is the basis whereon to build a theory as to the time when, the people by whom, and the purposes for which, this road was constructed; also as to the circumstances, and the date of its abandonment. At first sight,

the name seems to promise some clue to a rough approximation as to time, pointing to the term during which the Abbots of Glastonbury held the manor of Meare,—viz., from the year 670 to the dissolution of the monastery in 1545.[1] But an inquiry into the history of the appellation leads to the conclusion that it would be unsafe to found any presumptions upon it. Mr. Laver, the tenant at Honeygore, who has been on the farm since 1824, informs me that the path was accidentally discovered between forty and fifty years ago, during the life-time of his father, in cutting a rhine near A ; but it remained known only to the farmer and his men until Mr. Poole's attention was casually drawn to it in 1864, in the autumn of which year this Society visited and inspected a length which had been uncovered. This appears to have been about four years after the ownership of the estate had been transferred from the Phippens of Badgworth Court to a member of the Poole family; and nearly thirty years after the path had been found. Nine years later, the second length—that from which I took the measurements herein recorded—was laid bare. Mr. Laver states that he has always heard the name, *Abbot's Path* or *Way*, applied to the track since its discovery; but he cannot say whether such, or any distinctive name, was, before that event, traditional. If the title be ancient, it is not a little singular that it should have survived the long inhumation—certainly of several centuries; and if it be not, it is almost equally difficult to imagine how it can have been given to an object known only to those who would not be apt to hit upon the designation, who were ignorant of its bearings, and who regarded the discovery as so unimportant that they did not reveal it for nearly a generation.

Nor do physical indications, so far as they are yet known, help us much. Dealing with what we find, it is equally difficult to fix the time when the road was laid down, and that at which it ceased to be used. If we knew that the superincumbent peat had accumulated under uniform conditions, and if we had

(1). Notes at end.

any trustworthy scale of growth to apply to it,[2] we might then calculate very nearly the date at which the way was abandoned, by counting proportionately backward, and adding to the result the time that has elapsed since the peat has ceased to form, in consequence of the drainage of the level. But it is plain that the growth of the peat has been intermittent; for the Abbot's Way is buried in the middle of its thickness. It is also equally clear that, if we are guided (as we ought principally to be) by the *greatest* depth at which the road was found, (seven feet,) we shall have to show how it happened that at another spot, only half a mile off, the depth is reduced to two feet. Here is a discrepancy which, while unexplained, upsets all estimates built on such a basis; and, to solve the question, it will be necessary to disentangle the order, and evolve the duration, of the events which have marked the physical history of the turbary. I am, however, convinced that it is not yet possible to do this; for, on referring to the slight records of observations which are at our disposal, and to the theories of writers who have essayed the solution of the problem, it is abundantly evident that we must ask for a presentment of facts much more copious and complete than has yet been offered, before we are in a position to make a safe induction. The existing data, and past opinions, may be gleaned from the works and articles referred-to in the subjoined note,[3] to which reference is here made, that those who wish to pursue the investigation may know where to glean the information which is already available. As a proof of the uncertainty which hangs around inquiries of this kind, playing upon a slender stock of facts, it is only necessary to remark that the estimates of the Rev. W. Phelps and of Professor Boyd Dawkins as to the age of the forest-bed overlying the Abbot's Way by several feet, differ by untold centuries.

But, amid all this obscurity as to time, a few points stand out clearly as land-marks in the sea of speculation. It is certain, for instance, that the Abbot's Way was laid down

after that part of the level had been flooded by stagnant fresh water long enough to grow nearly twelve feet of peat, and when it had been so far drained as to permit the use of a highway across it. It is equally certain that, to account for its preservation, we must assume that it was somewhat suddenly again laid under water, sufficiently deep, and for a sufficiently long period to allow of the growth of a protecting stratum of peat; and, whether by a continuance of these conditions, or by intermissions, it is clear that this peat afterward accumulated to the level of the forest-bed where its formation was arrested, and was resumed, after an interval marked by the age of the trees, added to the time required for either natural or artificial planting. And, furthermore, when it is recollected that these turf-moors are several (I believe about seven) feet below the level of the land at Highbridge, which itself, but for the sea-banks, would be overflowed by the waters of the Channel at the highest spring-tides; and that there is no record of silt having been found interlaid with the peat; it seems impossible to escape the conclusion, startling though it may be, that these lowlands were at a very early age protected from the sea by banks and sluices: for I can conceive of no conditions that, in this region of high tides, would be capable of sealing up the mouths of the rivers by natural causes, so that none but fresh water should have access to the areas of greatest depression. The theory of the pre-Roman embankment of the Somersetshire levels, hitherto, I believe, unsuspected, derives support from the fact, asserted by county historians, and corroborated by the existence of an ancient British camp on Brent Knoll, with which communication must have been maintained, that a British track-way traversed the marshes from Cross, by the back of the Knoll, to Highbridge, and onward. This was succeeded by a Roman road following nearly, if not exactly, the same course; and, afterward, by the modern road. Now, almost the whole of the present surface, on the line traversed by these roads, is still below the level of the highest tides: yet

the Roman road was found at, or near Highbridge, six feet deep in the alluvium, and nearly, or quite, on the top of the subjacent peat. It is most unlikely that the Romans would make a road liable, at almost every high tide, to be deluged with silty water; and it is only less improbable that the earlier British inhabitants should have committed the same mistake. Some may attempt to explain the matter by assuming a great subsidence of land during historic times: but, even if facts did not clearly contradict this, we should find ourselves face to face with difficulties not less than those arising from the former hypothesis.[4]

NOTES.

(1). Even if this theory of its origin be the true one, the use of the path must have been chiefly secular, and not to enable the monks to travel on their preaching expeditions; for it is recorded that the only churches belonging to the abbey which they personally served were those of Chilton, Catcot, Edington, Greinton, Sutton, Stawell, and Moorlinch,—all on the ridge south of the turf-moor, and directly accessible from head-quarters without crossing the marsh.

(2). The growth of peat is believed to vary enormously under varying conditions. The average rate is generally considered to be about six inches in a century; but I have received trustworthy information that it sometimes amounts to as much as two feet in the same period.

(3). List of works and papers referred-to; with summary of their chief points.

i. Leland's *Itinerary*, Vol. II, fol. 44. Description of Meare Pool.

ii. Phelps' *History of Somersetshire*, Vol. I, pp. 50, 51; 486-490; 568-570.

iii. *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archæological and Natural History Society*, various papers and notices, as under:—

(a). On the Turbaries between Glaston and the Sea, by W. Stradling, Vol. I, ii, pp. 48-62. The author supposes that the sea, which anciently flowed up to and around Glastonbury, was, at a very distant era, recalled to its present boundaries, and kept there by natural causes;—consequently, that this was effected long before the Romans embanked (as is believed) the river Parret. He thinks a convulsion severed the Steep Holm from Brean Down; and that the ruins of the intervening land were washed into a bank along the sea-board below. At a subsequent period, a vast fresh-water lake extended from near Woolavington to Glastonbury, and was probably used as a fishery and a highway by the ancient Britons, and the Phœnician settlers. He proceeds to describe the objects found in the turbaries; but gives hardly any clue to locality or depth.

These discoveries are thus deprived of much of their value; and it is clearly unsafe to base any important theories upon them. Coins, and other remains, shew that the Romans inhabited the villages on Polden Hill, near Edington; and they probably drained a portion of the turbary for the sake of utilizing it as fuel. Before this was accomplished, the author supposes that a hurricane uprooted, and forced into the bog, the oak and yew trees imbedded therein at about a foot from the surface. In detailing researches at the pottery-mounds, where fragments of Roman ware, and coins, from A.D. 180 to 395, were found at depths of one foot to a foot and a half, apparently on an underlying bed of peat, some essential particulars are omitted.

(b). On the Geology of Somerset, by W. Baker, Vol. I, ii, pp. 127-139. See pages 136 and 137. Sandbanks, with recent shells, at Westonzoyland, Chedzoy, and other places, prove the existence of estuaries extending over the levels in recent geologic time. A bone of a mammoth was found at Chedzoy. Beds of peat occur at different depths under the alluvium, and are also superficial over large areas. They are found in the clay-pits, and other excavations near Bridgwater, from twelve to sixteen feet deep, which contain animal-bones, horns, shells, and trunks of trees. Mr. Anstice and the author found similar remains, and some pottery, mixed with sand, flints, grauwacke and gravel, nearly thirty feet below the surface, at Huntworth, near Bridgwater.

(c). On Llongborth, of Llywarch Hên's Elegy, by Rev. W. A. Jones, Vol. IV, ii, pp. 44-59. See pages 48 and 49. Westonzoyland, Chedzoy, and Middlezoy stand upon red-marl prominences, slightly raised above the level of the surrounding marshes, with banks of sea-sand resting against them. The same features are seen at Huntspill, Pawlet, and Chilton Trinity. At Chilton, the shell-sand is two or three feet below the surface. Most of the alluvial deposit in the district consists of a bluish clay and sea-silt. Near Crandon bridge, on the Parret, the alluvial deposit is from èight to ten feet deep over the peat. At Boroughbridge, the alluvium was found to be sixteen feet deep, on a fourteen feet bed of peat, resting on marl.

(d). On the formation of Peat-bogs and Turbaries which extend from the Bristol Channel into the central parts of Somersetshire, by Rev. W. Phelps, Vol. IV, ii, pp. 91-98. In this interestiug paper, the processes by which the Somersetshire levels have been formed, and brought into their present condition, are thoughtfully, and, in the main, accurately traced. It should be carefully studied in connexion with the matter in hand.

(e). On the formation of Marsh-peat, by Rev. W. Phelps, Vol. IV, ii, pp. 98-107. This valuable paper describes the composition and formation of peat; and throws much light on our subject. The author refers to the discovery of heaps of Roman pottery and coin-moulds on a stratum of indurated peat, under seven feet of alluvium, at Highbridge; and says that traces of the Roman road from Cross were found in Brent Marsh at the depth of six feet from the surface.

He then notices the fact that a number of oaks, and other forest-trees, lie prostrate, imbedded, about two feet deep, in the superficial peat; and, in theorizing upon the causes of the overthrow and submergence of this forest, suggests, with great probability, that it grew during the period which elapsed between the draining of the lowlands by the Abbots of Glastonbury, at an early and uncertain date, and the dissolution of the monastery in 1545, after which the drainage-works were neglected, the water spread, and the trees decayed at the roots, and fell.

(f). A young Turf-cutter's find in the Turbaries of Somerset, by W. Stradling, Vol. V, ii, pp. 91-94. This paper, which is illustrated, describes the discovery of a box containing several bronze knives, rings, armlets, &c., in the peat; but there is no record of the spot or the depth at which the treasure was found.

(g). On the Wookey Hole Hyæna-den, by W. Boyd-Dawkins, Vol. XI, ii, pp. 197-219. See pages 217 to 219. After picturing the state of things during the later Pleiocene bone-cave period, the author contemplates a blank of enormous duration, during which the lion, bear, hyæna, rhinoceros and elephant became extinct,—a period of submergence, followed by an upheaval, still, he thinks, progressing, during which the shingle and sand fringing the levels were formed, and, afterward, the alluvial clay and the peat, the latter containing the remains of canoes, weapons, and other traces of man.

(h). Note of a visit to the Abbot's Way, and the Westhay sand-banks, by the Members of the Society, Vol. XII, i, p. 67.

(i). Notice of raised-beaches at Burtle, Vol. XV, ii, p. 49.

(k). On the Ancient Geography of the West of England, by W. Boyd-Dawkins, Vol. XVIII, i, pp. 26-31. After describing the situation of the sub-marine forest visible at Porlock, Minehead, and other spots on the coast of W. Somerset, in which worked flints have been found, he (somewhat hastily, as I think) identifies and connects it with the forests whose remains are found in the peat and alluvium of the Somersetshire levels. While prostrate oak-trees are very abundant in the ditches in the peat near Middlezoy, at Boroughbridge a forest is struck at the depth of eighteen feet. The author attributes its destruction to the silting-up of the rivers, by which their beds were raised, and the surrounding districts became flooded. Then the peat grew, and killed the trees, which were blown down: meanwhile the alluvium of the vales of Taunton, Bridgwater, Highbridge, and Weston-super-mare was deposited by the rivers, where their currents impinged upon slack-water; while around Shapwick, the peat, which is at least sixteen feet deep, comes to the surface. He states his belief that the forest to which reference has been made was destroyed at least as early as the neolithic age; and to an early stage in that period he refers the human traces in the submerged surface at Porlock and Minehead; but he cannot carry them back beyond the neolithic age, because remains of the bos longifrons, an animal not known in Europe at an earlier period, have been found in the same forest-surface near Barnstaple.

It seems to me that these conclusions as to the extreme antiquity of the turbary forest are not only not supported by the evidence of acknowledged facts,—few and fragmentary as these are,—but are directly disproved by some of them. *En passant*, I note that Mr. Boyd-Dawkins appears to make an assumption which I do not find borne out by Mr. Stradling's papers, that the neolithic weapons, whose discovery is recorded by him, lay at the bottom of the peat, and on the sub-turbary marl.

iv. *On the Manor-house, Meare, Somersetshire*, by Alexander Nesbitt; *Archæological Journal*, No. 38, June 1853, pp. 130-140. The mere or lake existed on the north side of the village until the beginning of this century. The manor came into the possession of the Abbey of Glastonbury in the year 670. In a terrier, dated 1517, the mere is said to be one mile in length, and three-quarters of a mile in breadth; while, in a survey made in 1539, the mere is described as being five miles in circuit, and a mile and a half across. The author of the paper explains this discrepancy by assuming that the former estimate was made in summer, and the latter in winter, quoting Leland, who says of the mere that it was "in winter a 4 miles in cumpace. When least 2½, most commonly 3." At that time, vast areas of the manor were almost valueless, about 85 acres on the west of the mere being frequently under water; and on the north side was a moor, containing 3300 acres, which was chiefly covered with heath. In 1547, the manor was granted to the Duke of Somerset. "The most important event in the modern history of Meare is the drainage of the lake. Before the dissolution of the Abbey, great care was taken to keep in proper order the water-course called the *March Yeo*, which was cut in very early times from the Brue into the Axe, and which discharged the superfluous waters of the mere. When the lands in Meare, and in Brent Marsh, had passed into different hands, the due maintenance of this cut was neglected, and the lake extended itself over the neighboring moors. It was not till 1801 that effectual measures were taken to drain this district: an Act of Parliament was obtained; and, by deepening the outfalls of the rivers, and digging new cuts, a complete drainage has been effected."

(4). It may be interesting to compare the Abbot's Way with another ancient timber-road which was discovered at the depth of eight feet in the Kincardine Moss, in Scotland. Seventy yards of it were exposed to view: and it was found to be constructed "of trees about twelve inches in diameter, having other trees, of half this thickness, crossing them; and brushwood covering the whole." This work, which has been attributed to the Romans, traverses the moss "northward from a narrow part of the Forth towards a well-known line of Roman road which has been traced from a ford on the river Teith to Camelon on the Antonine Wall." Wilson's *Archæology and Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*, p. 34.