

PRIMITIVE HUT, ATHELNEY (TYPICAL FORM).

Ancient Type of Huts at Athelney.

BY HENRY LAVER, F.S.A.

DURING the years, 1846 to 1850, I often visited Boroughbridge and Athelney, the latter frequently for the purpose of seeing that spot where King Alfred was said to have neglected the baking of the cakes, an event of special interest to children at this date.

Sometimes I went by river, a very convenient method, residing as I did, at Bridgwater. Occasionally on a holiday I did the journey on foot, and a most interesting trip it always proved. At the period mentioned, there was close to the village of Boroughbridge a factory for the making of ordinary long clay pipes ; the larger ones were the well-known " church-wardens."

Some men were employed in these works—in fact all the pipes were moulded by them ; but in some branches nearly all the work was done by women and girls, and as it was a light job, it could be just as well carried out by them.

I do not remember hearing how long this factory had been in existence, but it must have been going on for several years, as a raised path by the side of the road from the factory to the huts, I am about to describe, was formed almost entirely by wastrels and broken pipes, a considerable number of the latter being incidental to the manufacture.

The manufacture of clay pipes is a very simple art, but still it always interested me, but nothing to the extent the huts of the workers did. These huts were built on the road-

side, between the road proper and the broad marsh ditch which formed the boundary of the road at this part. This ditch was generally full of water, and it was very useful to these people for various domestic purposes.

The inhabitants of these huts were mostly employed at the pipe factory. They had a healthy appearance, and dressed as comfortably and as tidily as any other working-people in the district.

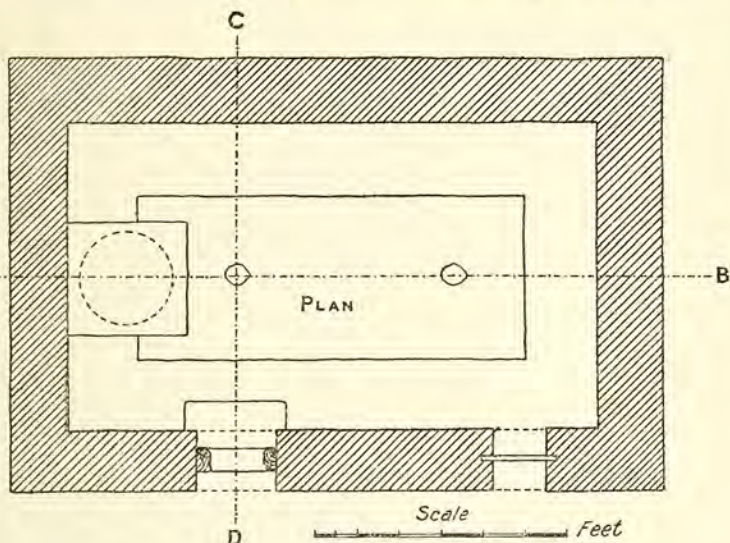
Probably, there would be little difficulty in finding indications of where these huts stood, if the roadside waste was carefully examined from the bridge at Boroughbridge to the site formerly occupied by the monastery, which is said to have been built on the spot where King Alfred neglected his landlady's cakes at Athelney. The manner of their erection is almost sure to have left sufficient indications for enabling their position to be recognized.

I have always felt interested in these dwellings, as they appear to me to be a survival of the huts of the Bronze and earlier Ages,—not an unlikely matter, when the races still inhabiting Devon and Somerset and other western parts are considered. Their mode of erection was this, and the illustrations accompanying this paper will make it very clear. First, a hole was dug in the ground of the size of the proposed hut, and the soil thrown out in this operation was piled up around the excavation, but a portion of the space set aside for the proposed hut had only the top spit or so removed, thus leaving around the space of the excavation a raised border to form a sitting or sleeping bank in the finished hut, the rest of the space being removed a foot or two deeper. There was a space, at one end usually, left on the same level as the sleeping or sitting banks, and this formed the hearth.

The sides of the hut, where necessary, were raised by a very strong and rough wattle or basket-work and daubed with clay on the outside.

A space was left for a door, but none for a window: some

had however a bit of glass for light, and this had no frame ; it was simply kept in position by the clay-daubing. It was not usually required, as the chimney being very broad and low, let in a sufficiency of light, when for any reason, it was necessary to close the door in the day-time. This chimney was also of

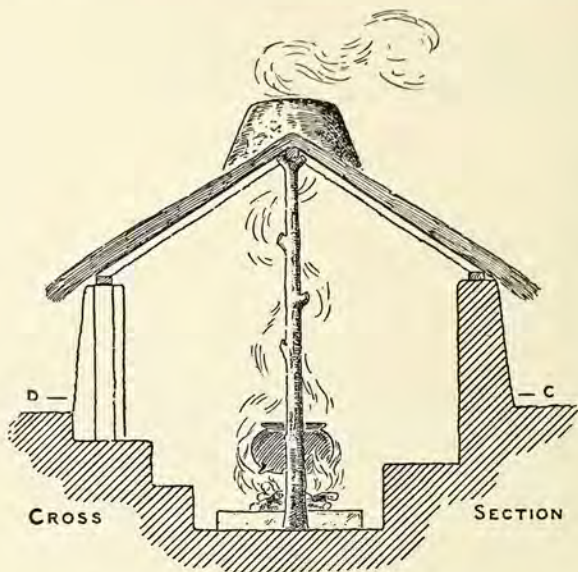


PLAN OF PRIMITIVE HUT, ATHELNEY (typical form).

wattle daubed with clay inside and out, and in this respect differing from the sides of the hut which usually had daubing on the outside only. The chimney was only carried a little above the roof, and this latter had a good, heavy, but rough thatch, projecting somewhat considerably beyond the walls, for the eaves were not trimmed, but left rough, and so giving greater protection to the walls against rain. The fuel used was, as might be expected from the proximity of the peat-moor,—peat, in all its forms. This was by far the best fuel for their purposes, as it is much less risky than wood, with all the thatch about.

The supports of the roof were small trees, with the branches not trimmed closely, thus forming convenient pegs extremely useful, for hanging kettles, frying-pans and other articles on.

The insides of these huts were often quite black from smoke, their low chimneys frequently not keeping them clear of it.



PRIMITIVE HUT, ATHELNEY (Cross Section).

The door was a very simple contrivance, being simply a flat piece of wattle-and-daub, fitting the door opening fairly well, and when in use, it was kept in its place by a strand of rope, yarn or string, or occasionally with a withy. When the door was not in use it was tilted up against the wall of the hut, and protected from the rain by the overhanging thatch, which for obvious reasons extended all round the hut.

All the huts were not square,—some were round, others oval,—but in all cases the chimney occupied the middle of the hut. In every respect the square huts seemed much the most

convenient. From this description it might be imagined they were uncomfortable dwellings, but it was not so. The position of the doorway near the fire, left a large part of the hut always clear of draughts, and on enquiring whether they were comfortable dwellings, I was informed by some of the inmates that they were born in a similar hut and had always found them comfortable and healthy. In many parts of Somersetshire these huts might be found, in the middle of the nineteenth century. There were several on the Quantocks; their inmates were makers of heather- and birch-brooms and in the season used to come into Bridgwater and Taunton with whortleberries. That they were survivals would seem very probable, as a very similar arrangement is found in excavating ancient hut-circles on Dartmoor and Exmoor, and other parts of Britain. There was little room for furniture, but this was a matter of small importance; seats and beds were provided in the raised bank left around when excavating for the hut, and on the whole it is questionable whether the thin damp walls of a modern brick cottage are much improvement on these snug, dry and comfortable dwellings.

Those mentioned as having been made on the Quantocks, were built in exactly the same manner, and I have often heard these people say that if you could build one of these during the darkness of one night, that is between the evening and the morning, it was yours, and no one could make you pay any rent. I never heard of the claim being made, but that it was an article of belief among the people is very certain. Whether any of the inhabitants of the Quantock district still hold this idea would be of interest to discover, and it would be of still greater interest to know how such an idea originated. Some years since, in answer to an enquiry, what had become of these Athelney huts, it having been stated they had been removed by the sanitary authority, this statement was confirmed. If an insanitary condition prevailed, which I can readily believe, and if this was the cause of their removal, but little can be said

against such action of the authority ; but still as antiquaries we may much regret that such an interesting survival, if so it was, had disappeared from amongst us. After many enquiries, but at this distance (Colchester) from the locality, perhaps I do not approach the right person, as one on the spot might be enabled to do, I have never been able to find anyone who has any remembrance of these huts being in existence. This seems very remarkable, but it is astonishing how soon events apparently disappear from the majority of minds.