PART II

PAPERS, ETC.

Somerset from a South Wales Viewpoint

BY SIR CYRIL FOX, D.LITT., F.B.A., F.S.A.

(*Being his Presidential Address at the Chard Meeting, 20 June 1950.*)

IT is a great honour for a stranger to your lovely and remarkable county to be elected President of so famous a society as the Somersetshire Archæological and Natural History Society, now entering on its hundred and first year of active and useful work. I am pleased to meet as your new Secretary a friend of mine, Mr. W. A. Seaby, who I am sure is serving you well and competently.

From my first year at the National Museum, Cardiff, 1925, the sight of Brean Down and the dark mass of Worlebury across the Bristol Channel; of Brent Knoll and Glastonbury Tor, the latter faint behind the others yet rising as it were out of the sea, had fascinated me. It was not long, therefore, before I made occasion to slip over to Taunton to study prehistoric material in your fine Museum, to renew an old friendship with Mr. and Mrs. St. George Gray, and to listen to his account of the researches of Dr. Bulleid and himself which have made Meare famous, and added lustre to the history of Glastonbury. May they both be spared to complete the record of the former, the first volume of which has happily been published.

Contemporary work in your county which fascinates those studying the interaction of man and nature in Britain, and which links up so fruitfully with the researches I have referred to, is that of Dr. H. Godwin, F.R.S., of Cambridge, and his associates. He has laid bare the botanical and geological history of the Somersetshire levels since Boreal times and shown us the reason for, and the date of, the corduroy roads

from island to island [1] ; roads first discovered by Dr. Bulleid, Mr. H. S. L. Dewar, Mr. T. Willis and others, made in part of broken-up house timber, doubtless of the homes on islands flooded by the worsening of the climate. There's drama for you ! worked out with all the heartbreak it must have caused to the dispossessed families, twenty-five and more centuries ago. Nature, ' heartless, witless Nature,' as Housman sang her, put an end, it seems, to a promising local advance from barbarism to civilization—the provision of rectangular, framed houses.

My principal, or at least primary, business this morning is to discuss the cultural interaction between the two shores of the Bristol Channel, with the southern shore, the greatest part of which is in the counties of Devon and Somerset, as the dominant partner. I shall illustrate this interaction by drawing your attention to three examples of a series of Bronze Age barrows in Glamorgan excavated by myself and my wife between 1937 and 1941. All are described in detail in accessible publications.[2]

Pond Cairn was very elaborate. A sacrificial rite involving the digging of a pit, and its filling with stones and the cremated remains of a child, initiated the ceremonial. On the ground nearby with a shallow charcoal-lined basin in front was an overhanging rim urn of the full middle Bronze Age, *c.* 1100 B.C., containing the burnt bones of one adult. This and the basin were enclosed and covered by a stone-heap and a turf-stack successively ; the stack was vertical sided. A stone ring carefully faced was constructed concentrically with the stack, an interspace being left, on which a ceremonial dance took place, amid a shower of charcoal. Thereafter a hollow was made in the dance floor, filled with products of the neighbouring soil : gorse, hazel, oak, hawthorn, bracken, mountain ash ; and on top : wheat, barley and—accidentally—chess (*bromus secalinus*), a weed of cultivation. A stone heap was built over this pit ; it was the last act of the ritual.

[1] On Meare Heath, Shapwick Heath, Westhay and Blakeway Farm. *Phil. Trans. Roy. Soc. Lond.*, Series B., ccxxxlii, Nos. 599 and 600 (1948), 233–86.

[2] Pond Cairn, Coity Higher Parish, Bridgend, *Archæologia*, lxxxvii (1937), 142 ; Six Wells 267′, Llantwit Major Parish, *Ant. Journal*, xxi (1941), 118, 122 ; Six Wells 271′, *Antiquity*, xv (1941), 142–61 (under the title ' A datable " Ritual Burial " in Glamorganshire ').

Now Wick Barrow near Stogursey, excavated by Mr. H. St. George Gray, showed a circular wall surrounding the primary burials; so did three barrows on Mendip excavated by the Bristol Spelæological Society. A round barrow of the Chapman group at Parracombe in N. Devon yielded a closer parallel: turf stack and interspace were present as well as the ring of stone.[1]

The barrow at Llantwit Major, which we called Six Wells 267′ from the nearby farm and its height above sea level, showed a close-set somewhat irregular stake-circle, some 28 ft. in diameter, defined by holes up to 3–4 in. in diameter in the ancient ground surface, with entry on the west side. We may interpret this circle as a hallowed area defined by a wattled fence, the posts of which were driven in by a mallet like a modern sheep-hurdling. In the centre was a circular hole lined successively with yellow and grey clay making a smooth internal surface, domed over, and containing nothing but fine dark soil with clay above. Over all was the mound, in which no burial was found.

The clue to this structure was provided by its neighbour Six Wells 271′. It contained the same sort of hole, domed over at the centre, and was surrounded by a ring of stake-holes, this time very regular. A small gap in the ring, regarded as the original entry to the hallowed area, was blocked by a cist-burial, definitely contemporary. In the cist was an urn of Deverel-Rimbury associations containing the burnt-bones of an adult, *c.* 600 B.C. These ' ritual ' pits, as we regard them, are likely to be vehicles whereby an underworld (chthonic) Power was approached, consulted, or appeased by libations, and the burial was that of a votary. The Greeks and Romans had such ideas,[2] but it is remarkable that these should have reached the far west. Be that as it may, it is certain that through the veil of a much less adequate technique than we possess to-day, we can discern parallels, and probably precursors, in the Brendon Hills of west Somerset. A cinerary urn from Elworthy is the closest relative of our urn known to me and it came from a cist on ' *one side* ' of a circle of stones.

[1] (*a*) *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, liv (1908), ii, 1–77; (*b*) Inf. Prof. E. K. Tratman; (*c*) *Trans. Devon Assoc.*, xxxvii (1905), 93–4.

[2] References will be found in the papers referred to in footnote 2 (p. 54).

The position is significant and we may regard stakes and stones as interchangeable for ritual purposes, depending on the availability of the latter. As for the ritual pit, your *Proceedings* contain a record of another barrow in the Brendon Hills, like ours of turf, which had within a stone circle a hole ' containing no human remains '.[1]

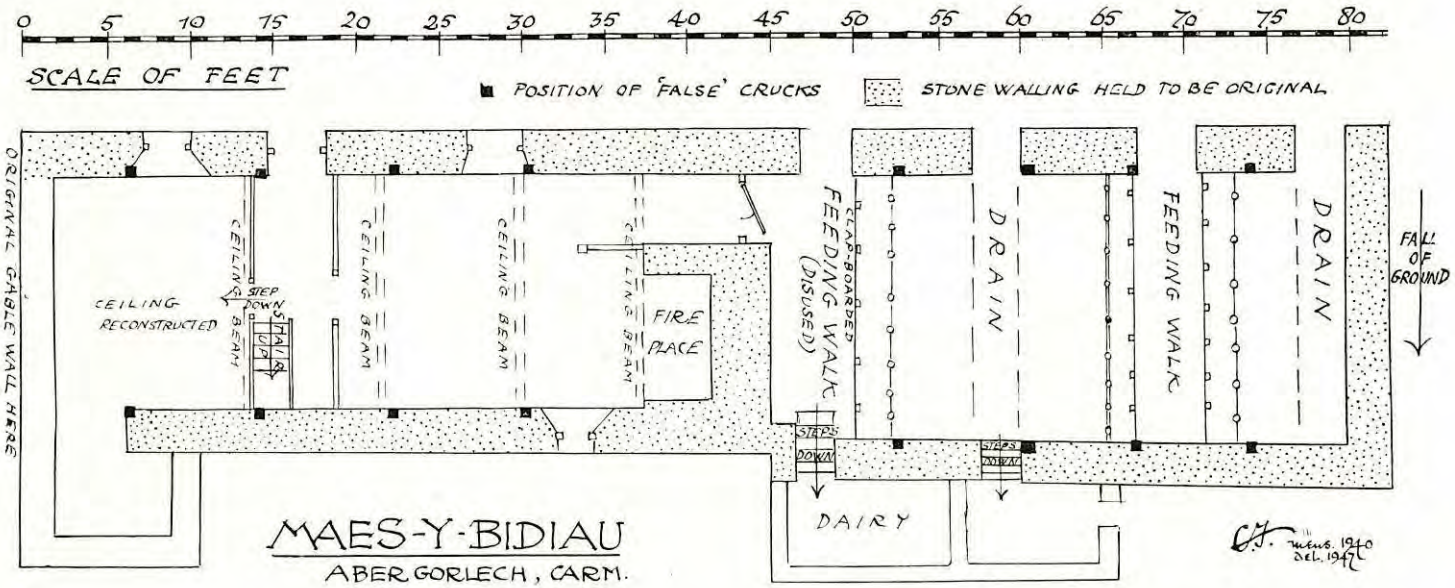
I did not, of course, confine my research work during my residence at Cardiff to the South Wales sea plain, and aspects of the Bronze Age in Somerset early attracted me. In 1941 I published a paper on the non-socketed sickles of Britain [2] giving particular attention, as was their due, to the remarkable examples present in the hoards from Edington Burtle, Taunton, Sparkford and Batheaston. These had special devices for attaching, in a rigid manner, the wooden handle : elongated, and paired knobs. The only parallels in Britain or Europe are in the lake dwellings beside Lake Constance (Boden See). The users of these sickles could hardly have come by any other route than that along the limestone escarpment which stretches from the Swiss border to the south side of the valley of the lower Loire ; thence they took, doubtless, the Atlantic seaways to Somerset. This heavy importation suggested indeed that in the seventh century B.C. a mass exodus of West Alpine folk, possibly flooded out from their lakeside homes, took place, and that the habit of making crannogs in the moors may have been, not introduced, but rather taken over from them, by the Celtic folk of Glastonbury and Meare. These sickle-users again, probably introduced the framed rectangular house, indicated by Professor Godwin's finds on the corduroyed road and the mortised timbers re-used in the Glastonbury Lake Village foundations.[3]

In recent years I have been interested in the problem presented by the ' South-western B ' culture of the Early Iron Age. This culture, as is well known, presents a high technical standard in the crafts and prolific artistic invention, during the last hundred years of Celtic freedom. The works of art

[1] *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xxix (1883), i, 46 : and xlii (1896), ii, 22–3.

[2] *Arch. Camb.*, xcvi, pt. 2 (1941), pp. 136–62, esp. p. 142, paras. 4 and 5 and p. 153.

[3] Clapham and Godwin, *loc. cit.*, 251–2 : *Glastonbury*, i (1911), 53, 324–7 ; the reference to these timbers in the text (p. 53) misunderstands their significance, regarding them as part of the Celtic round-hut tradition.



Notes. { Later work sketched in, not measured. Ceiling beams thought to be original, not inserted, which makes the loft a contemporary feature.
Existing partitions and "front door" to House, modern; also Stairs

MAES-Y-BIDIAU, CARMARTHEN. A 'long-house'.

then created in the south-west are widely spread, thanks no doubt to the social order of the time—an ' Heroic Age ' in which a chariot-using aristocracy controlled the wealth of the country, and in which artist-craftsmen, as Dr. Paul Jacobsthal has implied, were peripatetic,[1] attaching themselves to the households of landed men willing to employ them in making decorative fittings in enamelled bronze for their equipages and mirrors for their ladies. The craftsmen I have in mind were, I believe, principally if not wholly of the Dobunic tribe : centred in Gloucestershire, but spilling over into adjacent counties, in particular, northern Somerset. If you ask me for characteristic examples of their art at its best I would say for Gloucestershire the Birdlip mirror, for northern Somerset the red-enamelled harness plate from the Polden Hill hoard : both well illustrated in Mr. Leeds' *Celtic Ornament* (Fig. 9 and Pl. I, 4). The western folk, it is to be remembered, not only in the Dobunic region but also at settlements in Dorset, Devon and Cornwall, show themselves in this period to be adept in the minor art of pottery decoration ; but the finest work in this field is in Somerset. Not the least of Dr. Bulleid's claims to our high appreciation is his draughtsmanship ; I refer my readers to his drawings illustrating the work of the new master potter at Meare.[2]

To this Gloucester-north Somerset region then, I assign outstanding works of Celtic art found in South Wales such as the Llandyssul collar and the Trawsfynydd tankard.[3] If you would have some idea of the active trade in metal-work carried on by Dobunic craftsmen in this period consider the export picture provided by the great Llyn Cerrig Bach find in Anglesey [4] or the south-western coastal distribution of mirrors related to the Birdlip mirror.[5]

The influence exerted by the dwellers on the southern side of the Bristol Channel did not cease at the Roman Conquest

[1] In Saxl and Wittkower, *British Art and the Mediterranean*, p. 2, para. 3.

[2] Bulleid and Gray, *Meare*, i (1948), p. 17, Fig. 4 ; Pl. IV, P. 238 ; Pl. XII, P. 131 ; Pl. XIII, P. 212 are examples of his complex patterns and technique.

[3] *Guide to the Collections illustrating the Prehistory of Wales*, by W. F. Grimes, Nat. Museum of Wales (1939), Pl. VIII.

[4] *A Find of the Early Iron Age at Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey*, by C. Fox, Nat. Museum of Wales (1946), p. 62, Fig. 34.

[5] Cyril Fox in *Arch. Camb.*, c, pt. 1 (1948), p. 37, Fig. 10.

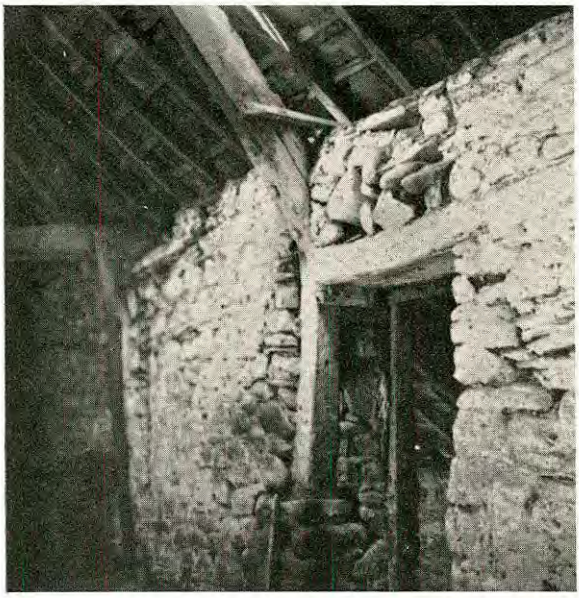
—or at the Norman Conquest! For example, I used to see every day in Cardiff the typical fifteenth-century Somersetshire tower of our parish church of St. John. Your superiority, or lead, as the case may be, does not, I must now assure you, spring *necessarily* from a higher capacity among your people; it is the geographical relationship which is all-important. Somerset is part of lowland Britain; the western end of it, true: but still part. South Wales is in the highland zone. The archæological and historical evidence indicates that the culture of the former tends to be higher than that of the latter (and is certainly different) for reasons which have been set out, I hope convincingly, in a book of my own.[1]

Consequently, if we find a novel technique or cultural feature of medieval (or renaissance) date in South Wales it is as well to look for parallels first of all on your side of the water. When I was working on Long Houses of the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, I came across queer false-crucked roof trusses at Maes-y-bidiau, Abergorlech, Carmarthenshire.[2] As these are not published I illustrate the plan (Pl. III) and photographs (Pl. IV); the reader will notice that the trusses seen respectively in a bedroom of the house, and in the cow-house, are not single curved timbers, but are each built up of two pieces of wood joined (scarfed) at the curve. My wife and I took the earliest opportunity to cross the Channel and look round the Brendon Hills, finding, in a day or two, just what we sought, the scarfed trusses of a medieval house of the early sixteenth century at Wootton Courtney, of which I provide a drawing (Fig. 1). You will know whether the type is common or rare in the region.

But when the student at Cardiff crosses the Channel and enters the county whose hill-outlines are so familiar, whatever his immediate motives may be he seldom leaves without visiting the Levels out of which Brent Knoll and Glastonbury Tor actually rise; and visiting them, he soon realizes that the profoundest influence exerted by dwellers in Somerset was not on South Wales but on South Britain; not in the field

[1] *Personality of Britain*, Nat. Museum of Wales, 4th Edit. (1948), *passim*.

[2] For a study of the type, and a photograph of Maes-y-bidiau, see I. C. Peate, *The Welsh House*, Liverpool (1944), chap. IV and Plate 25; for the problems of the history of the type, Cyril Fox, *A Croft in the Upper Nedd Valley, Breconshire*, *Antiquity*, xiv (1940), 363–76.



(a) Scarfed principal in Cow-house.

Phs. National Museum of Wales.

(b) Scarfed principals in attic over hall.

MAES-Y-BIDIAU, ABERGORLETH, CARM.

of the arts and crafts, but in the field of politics and war. This was the area that came into the limelight in A.D. 878. How curious it is, then, that I cannot obtain a clear and accurate map of the remarkable basin of the Parrett and its sister streams the Brue and the Axe, to which reference has

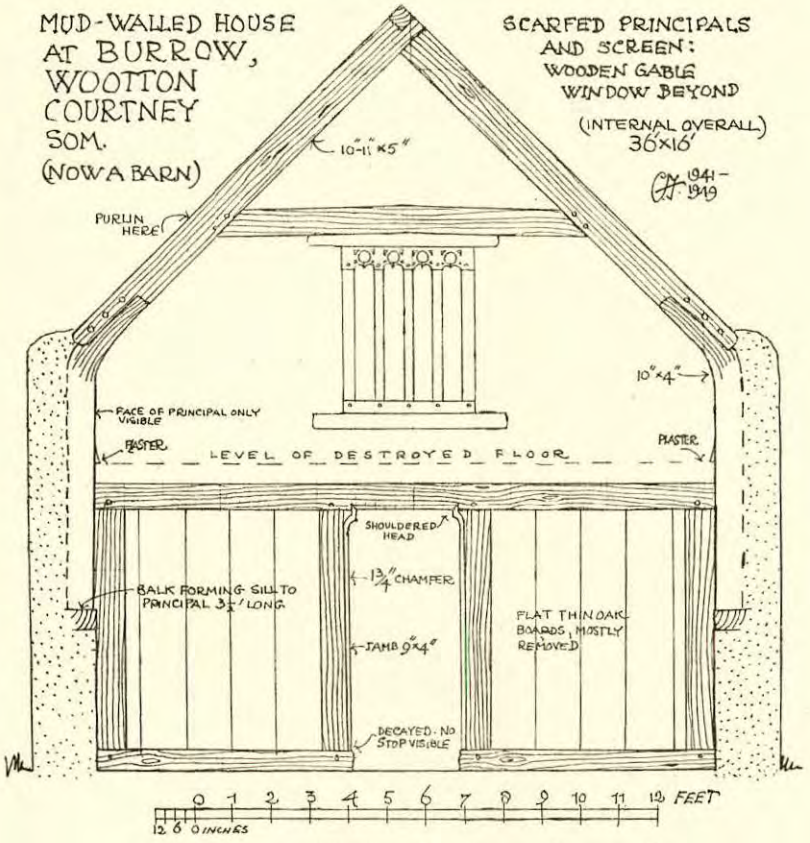


Fig. 1. Burrow, Wootton Courtney. Cross-section.

already been made in this Address; a map indicating the *exact* limits of the peat (the 'moor') and the dry peninsulas and islands of Keuper Marl or Lower Lias, each with its village(s) or hamlet(s) of Saxon foundation, respectively. What is the Geological Survey doing? Our Society should exert and maintain pressure on the authorities until the 'Drift' edition of the County is completed; how can the historical geography

of the County be properly taught without accurate maps which only the national survey can provide ?

The archæologists of Somerset, of course, know all about the area and have done something to emphasize its interest ; but neither Phelp's *History of Somerset*, nor Dr. Dina Dobson's *Archæology of Somerset*, nor the Introduction to *Glastonbury Lake Village*, volume I, by Dr. Bulleid and Mr. Gray have been insistent enough on its essential character to influence the national historians, engaged in re-writing, each for his own generation, the epic of King Alfred. Allow me to summarize the events that took place in this countryside in the fateful year, as recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.[1]

A.D. 878. This year the heathen army during mid-winter overran the land of the west Saxons ; they subdued the greater part of the folk except King Alfred, who with a small band (*litle werede*)[2] retreated to the woods and the moor fastnesses (*morfaestenum*). At Easter King Alfred with the same band built a fort at Athelney (*worhte geweorc*) and from that fort, with that part of the men of Somerset which was nearest to it, from time to time he fought against the army.[3] In the seventh week after Easter he rode to the east side of Selwood where by arrangement all the men of Somerset, and the Wiltshire men, and such of the Hampshire men as had not fled overseas, met him, and on the third day they fought and put to flight the heathen army. Three weeks later, you will remember, King Guthrum came to him with twenty-nine of the most distinguished men in his army ; he was baptized at Aller near Athelney, and his chrism-loosing was at Wedmore. Guthrum was twelve days with the King.

Now the modern historians talk enough of Athelney, but it is not easy to learn from them that it was but the smallest of a complex of islands ; that Aller and Wedmore were settlements on two of these ; nor do they suggest what is highly

[1] Earle and Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, i (1892), 74–6 and ii (1899), 92–4.

[2] The Ealdorman Ethelweard, a later member of the royal family, states in his Chronicle that the *litel wered* consisted largely of the '*famuli qui regoi pastu utebantur*', which is likely enough ; they would have been dispossessed by the flight from Chippenham, a royal vill. See Earle and Plummer, ii. 93–4.

[3] After the invaders of Devon, in his rear, had been destroyed.

probable, that these areas surrounded by streams and marshes contained untouched stores of grain and cattle, and that was the reason why the Northmen were entertained on them. When the resources of Aller that could be spared were exhausted, the party moved on to Wedmore (a royal vill).

What then does J. R. Green, most geographic-minded of historians, say of the background to this episode of Guthrum's admission to the Christian body in his *Conquest of England* ? He does not mention Aller at all ; Wedmore to him is ' a village north of the Polden Hills ' (p. 125).

It was, I suggest, the untouched fen islands and peninsulas, providing resources in men and material, rather than the deep forests of Selwood, giving security but not resources, which made possible the renascence of the West Saxon kingdom. Let us see then what our latest historian, R. H. Hodgkin, says of this region of moor and island, of land and water in connection with the drama we are studying. ' The marshes stretching inland for about 20 miles ', he comments, ' were what the Chronicle calls moor-fastnesses. They changed from swamp to lagoon according to the rainfall and the tides and therefore could hardly be approached either by water or by land.'[1] Dr. Hodgkin here ignores the plain meaning of the Anglo-Saxon word *mor-faestenum*, which is moor-strongholds, the fortified places in the moor, not the moor itself. That is, surely, on the islands. It has not been said and it ought to be said if only to provoke fresh discussion of an episode inadequately studied geographically that the suggested isolation of Athelney with its few faithful men round the King is an over-dramatization ; to be frank, ' Court history '. The ' men of Somerset ', with whom directly the ' work ' at Athelney was completed the King collaborated, were primarily the unraided occupants of the *mor-faestenum* at Aller, Wedmore and many another island (and the peninsulas such as Polden Hill). Athelney surely was but a strong-point for the Commander-in Chief at the rear of a front full of men ; his proper place while the reorganization which he inspired was going on, and while the building-up of lost morale, among those of the inhabitants who had been in the fighting, by means of raids, was being carried out. This was completed in the surprisingly short time

[1] *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, 1935, p. 564.

of seven weeks ; the King was then able to secure a concentration of the fighting men of the kingdom (Devon apart, which had done its bit) at a rendezvous as far away as ' Egbert's Stone ', not less than 25 miles *east* of Athelney. I suggest that the untouched resources of the Levels and its borders made this possible.

This trespass into history is, I recognize, a bold move for an archæologist. It will be my only indiscretion, for with it I bring this Presidential Address to an end.