

The Stone Circle on Withypool Hill, Exmoor.

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SOMERSET, as is well known amongst antiquaries, contains within its borders the remarkably fine group of three stone circles and outlying stones at Stanton Drew, a few miles south of Bristol. Of less important circles made up of smaller stones none, I believe, have been delineated on the Somerset ordnance maps or in the *Proceedings* of this Society. In the paper¹ on the "Rude Stone Monuments of Exmoor and its Borders," (part 1), by the Rev. J. F. Chanter and Mr. R. Hansford Worth; records of the existence of stone circles are conspicuous by their absence, and under the heading of "Circles" the authors say "we have at present no undoubted peristyle to record."

Whilst riding in a mist on Withypool Hill, nearly seven furlongs to the s.w. of the bridge over the River Barle at Withypool,—in 1898, the horse ridden by Mr. Archibald Hamilton, of the Western Circuit, stumbled against a small standing-stone among thick heather and other growth which covered this portion of Withypool Common at the time. On this occasion Mr. Hamilton noticed other stones which appeared to form segments of a circle without being continuous.

Withypool Common covers some 3,000 acres, and periodically the moors are burnt in different parts to free the underlying grass from being overshadowed by heather, gorse and other wiry growths. After the western slopes of Withypool Hill

1. *Trans. Devonsh. Assoc.*, Vol. XXXVII, 1905, p. 393.

were burnt a short time ago, Mr. Hamilton again visited the spot and believed it possible that the small stones might represent the remains of a megalithic monument of inconsiderable importance. As the stones were not marked on the 6-inch Ordnance Sheet of this area (Somerset, Sheet LVI. N.E.) he thought it highly probable that his accidental discovery might prove to be a "mare's nest!" Having communicated his observations to one of this Society's vice-presidents, Colonel Bramble, F.S.A., he was recommended to inform me, with the result that, at Mr. Hamilton's invitation, I visited Withypool last August, and had the satisfaction of finding that the remaining stones, nearly forty in number, enclosed a circular area about forty yards in diameter; and that there was no doubt that the site represented a "Stone Circle" of prehistoric origin, dating perhaps from the early Bronze Age.

Having complimented Mr. Hamilton on his "find," I proceeded to make a careful survey of the monument, with detailed notes of the position and dimensions of each stone; but the area was not contoured.

The circle is situated on the s.w. slope of Withypool Hill, 733 yards E.S.E. of Portford Bridge. The ground within the area of the circle sloped evenly and gradually from east to west, the fall, according to the eye, being about eight feet. The surface soil is of a peaty nature thinly overgrown with heather and stunted whortleberry-shrubs.

We must now deal with the topography of the circle. This part of the moor is seldom traversed except by staghunters, shepherds and whortleberry-pickers, and owing to the growth of the heather, etc.,—sometimes, however, checked by the ravages of moorland fires,—and to the fact that none of the stones exceed two feet in height, it is not altogether surprising that this ancient site was missed by those responsible for the ordnance survey of West Somerset, although the tumulus, at an altitude of 1307 feet above sea level and within 300 yards to the N.E. of the circle, was used as a trigonometrical station in con-

junction with similar stations in the vicinity, viz., at Brightworthy Barrows, Old Barrow, Porchester's Post, Bradley Hams and near Worth Wood.

After the completion of my plan, three bearings were taken by means of a prismatic compass, (1) from Porchester's Post, (2) from a point on the road above and to the west of Portford Bridge, and (3) from a corner of a field on Worth Hill, in order that the position of the circle might be determined on the 6-inch ordnance sheet. The circle's situation having been fixed, a check-bearing was taken from the centre of the circle to Brightworthy Barrows, and it is estimated that its position, as shown on the accompanying sketch map (taken from the ordnance sheet), is relatively correct.

The circle is situated at an altitude of 1250 feet above the mean level of the sea (see 1-inch ordnance sheet, No. 294), in the parish of Withypool, from the bridge of which village, crossing the River Barle, it is 1497 yards¹ in a s.w. direction. The tumulus on the top of Withypool Hill is the nearest landmark to the circle, being only 286 yards to the n.e.; but the summit of the tumulus cannot be seen from the circle. The Brightworthy Barrows (three) are distinctly seen from the circle, the eastern one, with an altitude of 1399 feet, being one mile 597 yards in a n.w. direction; Green Barrow is seen one mile 500 yards to the w.n.w. of the circle; Old Barrow, with an altitude of 1277 feet, to the s.s.e., at a distance of one mile 267 yards; the Twitchen Barrows (altitude 1285 feet), 2½ miles in a s.w. direction; the Wam Barrows (three) on the summit of Winsford Hill (altitude 1405), 2½ miles distant in an e. direction; the tumulus on Sherdon (altitude 1455 feet) may be seen with glasses nearly 3¼ miles off to the w.n.w. Of other ancient sites, etc., the following distances are measured from the ordnance sheets:—Cow Castle, 3½ miles n.w.; Road Castle (near Exford), 2½ miles n.e.; Tarr Steps, 2½ miles s.e.;

1. All the distances are given as the crow flies.

and the "Caractacus Stone"¹ on Winsford Hill, 3½ miles E.S.E. From neighbouring towns and villages the circle is situated as follows:—Dulverton, 6½ miles S.E.; Winsford, 4½ miles a little N. of W.; Exford, 2¾ miles N.N.E.; Dunster, 11 miles N.E. The nearest farmhouses are Waterhouse, Blackmoreland and North Batsom, each about 1200 yards distant in N., N.E. and E. directions respectively, whilst Worth Farm is at a rather greater distance to the S.E.

These items pretty well exhaust the topographical details, and it remains now to describe the circle itself. The marginal lines of the plan have been delineated true N. and S., and E. and W.,² and enclose an area of nearly 0·37 acre. It will be readily seen that the 37 remaining stones and stumps are circularly arranged, or very nearly so, with a diameter of 119½ feet, and a circumference measuring about 375 feet (or rather more than half-a-furlong). To account for the enormous gaps, especially on the N. and W., from which stones have been taken, we can only conclude that they have been carted away for road metal. It is true that a large number of stones remain, but until we calculated that the circle originally included something approaching a hundred stones on its periphery, the extent of vandalism that has taken place could be only estimated vaguely. It is extremely difficult to suggest even the approximate number of stones the circle consisted of originally, but it seems probable that they were set up at an *average* distance of 3½ feet apart. Probing might perhaps reveal stumps of other stones not marked on my plan, but probing, apart from actual digging, I regard as on the whole rather unsatisfactory.

Of the stones that remain only a small proportion can be

1. *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, Vol. XXXVI, ii, pp. 82-87.

2. The magnetic variation at Withypool, viz., 17° 10', was obtained from the Director-General of the Ordnance Surveys, Southampton. He also informs me that the convergency of the sheet lines of the 6-inch Ordnance map, Somerset LVI. N.E., from the true north is 53' 33" on the W. side and 50' 20" on the E. side, both convergencies being towards the east.

as being even fairly complete. A descriptive list of stones with dimensions forms an appendix to this paper ; the found useful for reference and especially if the circle is further mutilated. No stone exceeds 2 feet in height (as 2 ft.), and the average height of the standing-stones again is only 1·03 ft. The widest stone, No. 11, is 2·3 ft. at the base, the average width, calculated from all the including stumps, being 1·19 ft. In thickness the stones are 0·59 ft.

Compared with our more stately and better known circles the simple appears, from a superficial examination, to be of less importance, although, of course, its plan and structural details should be placed on record. It is quite probable that it may have served the same purpose as similar circles on Dartmoor supposed to have done, viz., as 'sacred circles' devoted to devotion or for funeral feasts. Considerable numbers of barrows are situated near to, or in sight of, the circles which have been investigated by the Dartmoor Exploration Committee. As previously stated, Withypool circle is bounded by the highest surrounding ground, and it is quite possible that the remains may have been cremated within the circle before being finally deposited in the adjacent barrows. There are no standing monoliths, as far as I am aware, in the immediate neighbourhood of the circle.

The tumulus on the top of Withypool Hill may have been much higher in early days (it shows signs of considerable pile) but I doubt if it were ever seen from the centre of the circle.

Observed from the circle's centre the sun would rise behind the tumulus at, or about, the time of the summer solstice; but neither my time nor my instruments afforded me the means of making the necessary calculations.

There is some similarity between the Withypool Circle and other larger stone circles in Cornwall which I have more recently (September 1906) surveyed for the British Association. I refer to the Fernacre Circle and the Stannon Circle on the

moors near Rough Tor and Brown Willy. Neither of these circles, however, approximate nearly so closely to the line of a true circle as the Withypool Circle; but in the general irregularity of the stones themselves and in their arrangement, there is a marked similarity between the three circles. The Withypool Circle, as previously stated, has only 37 stones remaining, whereas the Fernacre and the Stannon Circles have about 70 and 80 respectively, either standing or prostrate.

It is highly probable that the Withypool Circle was originally a true circle and that the prehistoric builders planned it out by means of a central stake with a rope as radius. The stones which do not now fall on the line of the true circle are not far removed from what might have been their original position, and it is quite possible that if any gradual displacement has taken place, it has been caused by what is known as 'soil-creep.'

Many of the stones of the Withypool Circle are conspicuously veined with quartz, but I am not sure that all the remaining stones of the circle come from the same local beds. I brought home a specimen of one of the typical stones and this has been examined by Mr. W. A. E. Ussher, F.G.S., of the Geological Survey. He says that it is "a specimen of hard pale grey grit with flakes of white mica; a local rock probably from the Pickwell Down grits, in the area to the south of Withypool. The blocks of the Tarr Steps are from the same formation which is generally regarded as the basement division of the Upper Devonian."

SHORT DESCRIPTIONS OF THE STONES.

No. 1.—Small stone, or large stump, with flat top. Max. width 0·7 ft.; thickness 0·35 ft.; height 0·45 ft.

No. 2.—Standing-stone, much veined with quartz, leaning inwards at an angle of about 60° with the ground. Stands in a deep depression on S. and W., the stone on these sides being partly supported by a tussock. Max. width 1·9 ft. on the N.N.E. face; max. thickness 0·75 ft. near the base; approximate height when standing erect, 1·5 ft.

No. 3.—Stump, just showing above the ground. Width 1·2 ft.; max. thickness 0·35 ft.

No. 4.—Small, sharp stump, 0·23 ft. above the ground; max. width 0·35 ft.

- No. 5.—Stump. Width 0·9 ft. ; thickness 0·35 ft. ; height 0·4 ft.
- No. 6.—Stands in slight depression, with tussock surrounding the stone ; flat face ; leaning a little inwards. Max. width at base 1·2 ft. ; max. thickness 0·4 ft. ; height above tussock 1·1 ft.
- No. 7.—Standing-stone with triangular base and three faces, tapering to a point at top. Basal width on inner side 0·7 ft. ; thickness from inner face at base to sharp angle on E.N.E. 0·7 ft. ; height 1·1 ft.
- No. 8.—Perhaps a complete stone, but probably a stump ; flat top, 1·1 ft. by 0·35 ft. It leans a little inwards.
- No. 9.—Large stump, or stone fallen in a S.E. direction ; three-quarters of the surface are overgrown, the remainder seen 1 in. above the ground. Width (or length ?) obtained by probing 1·75 ft.
- No. 10.—Stump tapering to a sharp edge at the top. Width 0·95 ft. ; max. thickness at base 0·5 ft. ; height 0·5 ft.
- No. 11.—Standing-stone, the widest in the circle. Depression on inner side and tussock ; stands nearly upright. Max. basal width along E. side 2·3 ft. ; max. thickness at base 0·6 ft. (narrower at top) ; height above tussock 1·55 ft.
- No. 12.—Small stump, just showing above the ground. About 0·4 ft. across.
- No. 13.—Small stone, or stump, with clean fracture at top ; quadrangular section ; leans inwards. Width 0·9 ft. ; thickness 0·4 ft. ; max. height 0·3 ft.
- No. 14.—Small standing-stone, or stump (?), probably the former. Max. width 0·6 ft. ; max. height 0·55 ft.
- No. 15.—Stump of a fairly large stone ; partly overgrown at N. Width 1·2 ft. ; max. thickness 0·35 ft. ; max. height 0·25 ft.
- No. 16.—Small stump, just showing above the ground.
- No. 17.—Very thin portion of a stump, the remaining thickness having been split off. Width 0·6 ft. ; thickness 0·07 ft.
- No. 18.—Stout stump ; ragged fracture on the top. Max. width 1·4 ft. ; max. thickness 0·6 ft. ; max. height 0·6 ft.
- No. 19.—Small stump, loose, only 0·15 ft. above the ground. Width 0·55 ft. ; max. thickness 0·35 ft.
- No. 20.—Perhaps a big stump, but probably a small weathered stone. Width 0·75 ft. ; thickness 0·5 ft. ; height 0·5 ft.
- No. 21.—Stump of oblong plan 0·8 ft. by 0·55 ft., almost covered by heather ; it does not show above the ground in any place more than 0·15 ft.
- No. 22.—Small upright stone much veined with quartz ; it tapers to a rounded top. Width at base 0·7 ft. ; thickness 0·5 ft. ; height 0·7 ft.
- No. 23.—Prostrate and loose slab of stone which appears to belong to the circle. Max. length 1·45 ft. ; max. thickness 0·3 ft.
- No. 24.—Upright stone with slight depression and tussock on inner side ; tapers towards the top. Width at base 2 ft. ; max. thickness 0·8 ft. ; max. height 1·25 ft.
- No. 25.—Stump, portion of which just shows above the ground. About 0·5 ft. across.
- No. 26.—Stump. Width 1 ft. ; thickness 0·3 ft.
- No. 27.—Standing-stone leaning outwards to a slight extent ; it tapers from all sides to a fairly sharp top. Max. width 1·3 ft. ; max. thickness, taken obliquely, 1 ft. ; present height (as leaning) 0·9 ft.
- No. 28.—Upright stone, standing in slight depression on inner side, but no tussock ; tapering towards the top to a certain extent. Width at base 1 ft. ; thickness 0·45 ft. ; height 1·2 ft.

No. 29.—Rough stone veined with quartz; leans outwards in a W.S.W. direction. The line of the width of the stone runs in a N.W. and S.E. direction. Max. width at base 1·6 ft.; max. thickness 0·6 ft.; max. height 1·05 ft.

No. 30.—This is the highest of the remaining stones of the circle; leans considerably outwards at an angle of about 35° with the ground; depression round the stone on W., N.W., and S.W., with tussock. Max. width at base 1·4 ft.; max. thickness 1·15 ft.; height 2 ft. (not measured vertically, but along the face of the stone).

No. 31.—Narrow stump. Width 1·1 ft.; max. thickness 0·25 ft.; height 0·2 ft.

No. 32.—Upright stone, tapering towards the top, which is fairly sharp; veined with quartz. Width 1 ft.; max thickness 0·5 ft.; height 0·8 ft.

No. 33.—Stump (?), on level with the ground and showing very slightly.

No. 34.—Stone almost prostrate; in depression clearly marked on the N., N.E., and N.W.; it rests on a tussock at an angle of about 15° with the ground. Width at base 1·25 ft.; max. thickness 0·65 ft.; height, measured along the inner face of the stone, 1·8 ft.

No. 35.—Small standing-stone leaning outwards to the extent of about 60° with the ground. Width 0·95 ft.; thickness 0·3 ft.; height on slope 0·7 ft.

No. 36.—Stump leaning a little outwards. Width 0·85 ft.; thickness 0·25 ft.; height 0·4 ft.

No. 37.—Rough stump showing above the ground to the extent of 0·2 ft. Width 0·8 ft.; thickness 0·55 ft.