

“Little John’s Grave,” and the Lawful Village Perch.

By S. O. ADDY, M.A.

Sex acras terrae mensuratae per legalem perticam eiusdem
villae—Joseph Hunter’s *Fines*, i, p. 42 (twelfth century).

FOR at least 250 years the village of Hathersage has been famed as the birthplace of Little John. It is said that he is buried between two stones in the churchyard. The story reached Ashmole, the Berkshire Antiquary, who was born at Lichfield in 1617. It was known to Leonard Wheatcroft, the Ashover poetaster. Travellers and antiquaries came to see it, and the report of it was bruited far and wide. Yet Little John was no more buried at Hathersage than Robin Hood, as the story goes, was born in Hallamshire. Both are heroes of Pagan mythology who never walked upon the earth, or were buried in it. They were the creations of popular imagination, beautiful creations, no doubt, as Ivanhoe was a beautiful creation, but they were not historical. Many years ago Kuhn identified Robin Hood with the Norse god Wodan or Odin, and in an Anglo-Saxon charter of A.D. 972 there is a boundary called Hodes ác. Hood’s Oak, possibly Hodsock in Nottinghamshire. (There should probably be a long accent on the first syllable of *Hodes*).

It has often been observed that the Anglo-Saxon and Danish invaders of this country, including the men who came after them, gave mythical names to objects which they could not understand, or which had long been

forgotten. Big stones on the moors are said to have fallen from a giant’s apron as he flew through the sky. Strange buildings of unknown age were called *eald enta geweorc*, the ancient work of giants. Very many old monuments were attributed to Robin Hood, like the isolated stones called Robin’s Hood’s Picking Rods, described by Mr. Lawrance on page 118 above.

The “grave” at Hathersage is said to have been opened about 1780, but the only bones which were alleged to have been discovered were thigh-bones of the impossible length of $28\frac{1}{2}$ inches. (Rev. Charles T. Pratt’s *History of Cawthorne*, 1882). An earlier account says: “Dr. Moor, of Wakefield, who frequently came here to attend Mr. Ashton, of Hathersedge Hall, in his last illness, about the year 1728, caused it to be dug up. Nothing was found except bones of very great size, much larger than what is now found in graves, and having satisfied his curiosity, had it filled up again.—*Ex informatione Jonathani Oxley, de Leam, Gent.*”—Bateman’s *Ten Years Diggings*, 251, referring to John Wilson’s MS. These bones have never been produced.

Except this thing at Hathersage, I do not know another monument, big or little, which has ever been attributed to Little John. How was it that he became associated with this churchyard? The Robin Hood Ballads say that he was seven feet high, and it would not be an unreasonable guess to say that when the purpose of the stones came to be forgotten they began to be regarded as the headstone and footstone of a giant’s grave.

Little John was formerly impersonated in the May Game, which is still performed at Castleton in the Peak on the 29th of May. In the Churchwardens’ and Chamberlains’ Accounts of Kingston-upon-Thames there is an entry in 1508 of a payment for making “Little John’s cote.” The various items in these accounts mention payments for garments for the Morris Dancers; for

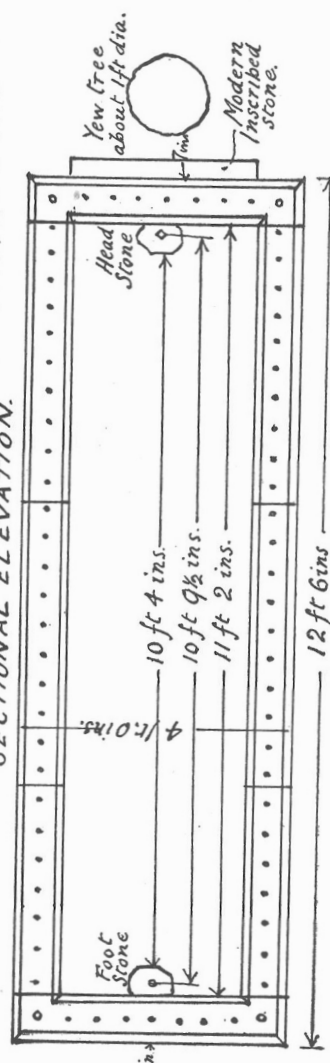
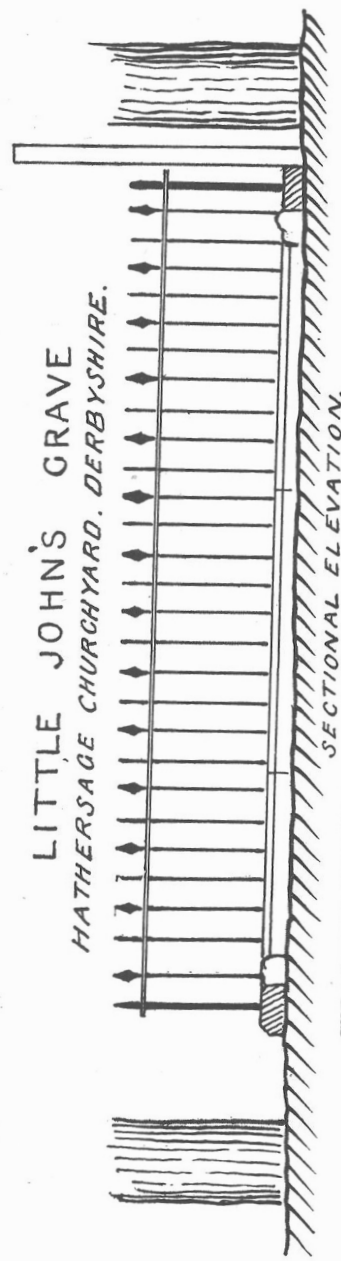
Robin Hood's coat; for Maid Marian's upper garment; and for the minstrels and pipers who took part in the May Game (Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, 1848, i, 248). Now we are told in one of the Ashmole MSS. (i, 1137, fol. 147) that a part of Little John's bow was hung in Hathersage church, and that his "cap remained hanging by a chain to a much later period than the bow" (Wood's *Tales and Traditions of the High Peak*, 1862, p. 149). We are therefore certain that a man who personated Little John formerly took part in the May Game at Hathersage, and that the bow and cap were part of his accoutrements. The King's coat (i.e. Robin Hood's coat) is kept at Castleton from one year to another, and also the framework of the crown which supports the huge garland of leaves which the King wears during the ceremony. Little John no longer takes part, as he must once have done, in the May Game at Castleton, but Maid Marian appears as the Queen, and Morris dancers have lately been introduced again. (See my detailed account in *Folklore*, xii, pp. 395-430, and further particulars about the King and Queen of May in *Church and Manor*, 336-9).

I turn from mythology and Pagan ceremony to archæology. In 1919 Mr. W. H. Elgar of King Edward's School, Sheffield, kindly made a survey for me, and he gives the following account of "Little John's Grave":—

"It is on the South side of the Churchyard, opposite to the centre of the South aisle of the church, and about seven feet from the Southern boundary, which is formed by the wall of a cottage.

A low stone curb, measuring 11 feet two inches by two feet seven inches surrounds the space containing the two ancient stones, and a plain iron railing affords protection. The whole lies between two yew trees of about the same size, namely about fifteen feet high and a foot in diameter, but, as their trunks are obscured by numerous small branches, it is difficult to be accurate. The tree to the East is one foot three inches from the outside of the curb, and that to the West only seven inches therefrom.

LITTLE JOHN'S GRAVE
 HATHERSAGE CHURCHYARD, DERBYSHIRE.



W. H. Elgar
 Sept. 1919

Between the western tree and the curb is a plain equilaterally-arched slab of stone bearing the following inscription:—

HERE LIES BURIED
LITTLE JOHN
THE FRIEND AND LIEUTENANT OF
ROBIN HOOD.
HE DIED IN A COTTAGE (NOW DESTROYED)
TO THE EAST OF THE CHURCHYARD.
HIS GRAVE IS MARKED BY THE
OLD HEADSTONE AND FOOTSTONE
AND IS UNDERNEATH THE OLD YEW TREE.

A. GILMAN, 39 City Rd. Shefd.

There is no date, but "City Road" is not earlier than 1893 when Sheffield was made a city.

"No traces," said Mr. Elgar, "were observed of any old yew tree as mentioned in the inscription." As regards the age of the two trees which Mr. Elgar noticed, Mr. Walter Johnson, in his *Byways in British Archæology*, 1912, has written much about the yew in churchyards, and the methods of estimating its age. Some observers give a foot for 75 years, whilst others make it as much as 144. Mr. Johnson thinks that the truth lies between the two extremes. Perhaps we should not be far wrong in estimating the age of these Hathersage yews at 100 years.

I have noticed three published measurements of the length of the so-called "Little John's Grave."

- (1) In 1685 Leonard Wheatcroft, of Ashover, writes:—
"This year being Feb. 27 my son Leo and I went to Hathersage where we beheld the grave where they say Little John was buried, which is 14 foot in length" (*Journal*, xxi, 46).
- (2) John Wilson of Broomhead Hall, near Sheffield (1719-1783) says:—"Little John's Grave in Hathersage churchyard, at the back of the clerk's house, is distinguished by two small stones set up at each end, and is 4 yards 10 inches long betwixt stone and stone." (In Bateman's *Ten Years Digging*, 251).

- (3) In 1783 William Bray, F.S.A. speaks of "the stones in the churchyard which they show you on the spot where Little John, the friend of Robin Hood, is buried. They are 13 feet 4 inches distance, and mark the length of his grave, if not of his person" (*Sketch of a Tour into Derbyshire, etc.*, 245).

Mr. Elgar, as will be seen on his plan, shows that the distance between the two stones, measured from their inner faces, is now 10 ft. 4 inches. Harry Hems, an apprentice in Sheffield, went to Hathersage one moonlight night "in the fifties" and on his own published confession "dug up the footstone, and then making a hole a foot or so further eastward, fixed the stone therein, thus surreptitiously adding another cubit." (*Notes and Queries*, 9th S. viii, 348). So that for the length we have to depend on the earlier accounts.

The average of the old measurements is about 13 feet 4 inches. This comes very near to the perch of $13\frac{1}{2}$ feet by which the short acre of 3240 yards was measured. An acre of this size was known within comparatively recent times in Sussex, Hampshire and Cumberland; and early in the last century there was a very remarkable custom at Puxton in Somerset, in accordance with which certain acres, called Dolemoors, were set out by the length of the church nave, which was 54 feet, or four perches of $13\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length. This custom, which was very picturesque, but is too long to be described here, must have been very old. (See my *Church and Manor*, 1913, pp. 345-7).

In 1703 the churchyard of Threlkeld, near Keswick, was walled about with stone and lime, according to the proportion of $4\frac{1}{2}$ yards to every tenement (Bishop Nicolson's *Miscellany Accounts for the Diocese of Carlisle* p. 108). Here the churchyard wall was measured by a perch of $13\frac{1}{2}$ feet, which must have been the perch by which the lands in the village were measured. There are numerous cases in

which the churchyard wall was measured in this way, though we seldom know the length of the perch. I have published in this *Journal*, Vol. xxxviii, an account of a very remarkable custom where the churchyard wall at Norton was a measure of taxation.

If it could be shown that the arable lands in Hathersage were measured by a perch of $13\frac{1}{2}$ feet, and that the churchyard wall was repaired as it was at Threlkeld, we should be sure that " Little John's Grave " was the village perch.

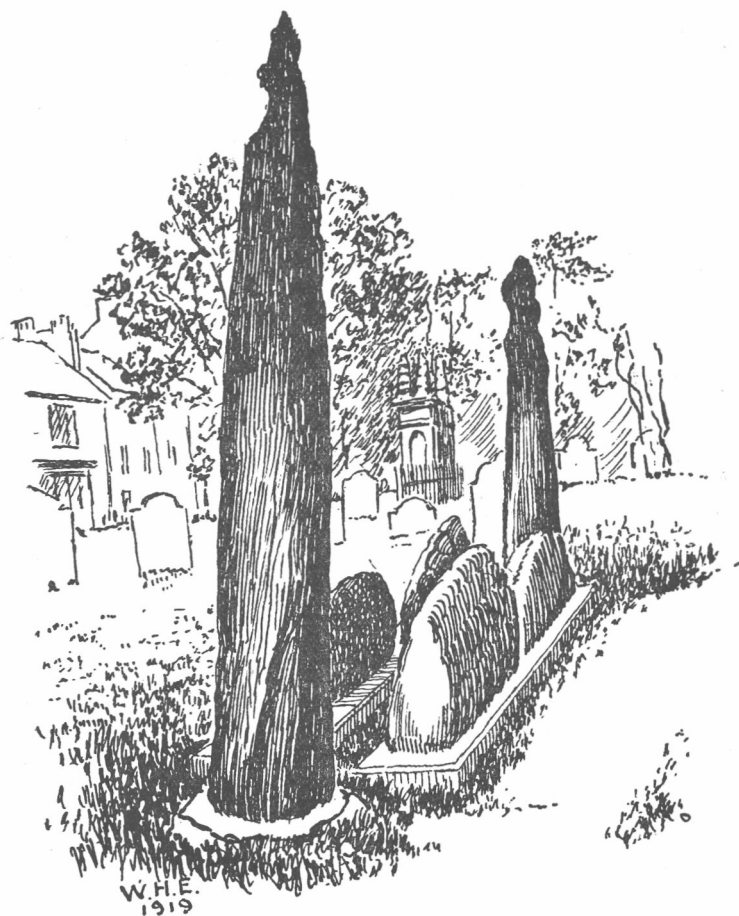
There is another reason for thinking that the distance between the stones was a village perch of $13\frac{1}{2}$ feet; there is a hole in the top of each stone as if to ensure more accurate measurement by drawing a line from the centres of the stones. Mr. Elgar says:—

" The two ancient stones stand about three inches above ground level, and are each five inches wide, that is from East to West; in the opposite direction they measure $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches and seven inches respectively. The East or foot stone has a small round hole about an inch deep and three-eighths of an inch in diameter in its top surface, and $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches from its East face. It is fairly regular in shape, two of its angles being rather unequally splayed off. Its inner, or Western, face seemed to be vertical, as far as could be ascertained without excavating. The West stone is more irregularly shaped, especially on the top, a rather pronounced lump being on its North border. In a similar position, viz. $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches from its West face is a depression, not circular, but square, and placed diamondwise with respect to the outline of the stone. The sides of the square depression are about an inch wide, and in the centre the depth is nearly half an inch. This West, or head, stone shows the splay clearly on one angle, but the other is too much defaced for one to be certain about it."

There is also a so-called Giant's Grave in Penrith churchyard, but the giant is not Little John. " In the churchyard," says Lewis, " are two stone monuments called the Giant's Grave, or more commonly the Giant's Legs; they are about twelve feet high, and fifteen feet distant from each other." (*Topographical Dict. of England and Wales*, 1833). The volume of *Archæologia*

for 1773 says that the two pillars are about five yards apart. In Gough's *Camden*, 1806, iii, p. 44, we have this description:—

“ On the North side of the churchyard are two square obelisks of a single stone each, 11 or 12 feet high, about 12 inches diameter, and



“ THE GIANT'S GRAVE,” PENRITH.

twelve by eight at the sides, the highest about 18 inches diameter with something like a transverse piece to each, and mortised into a round base. They are 14 feet asunder, and between them is a

grave enclosed between four semicircular stones of the unequal lengths of five, six and four and an half and two feet high, having on the outsides rude carving and the tops notched. This is called the *Giant's Grave*, and ascribed to Ewan Cæsarius, who is said to have been as tall as one of the columns, and capable of stretching his arms from one to the other Mr. Sandford says the place was opened in his time, and the great long hand-bones of a man, and a broad-sword, were found."¹

In Whetton's *History and Topography of the Counties of Cumberland and Westmorland*, 1860, p. 603, it is said that the two pillars are fifteen feet apart, and we are told that "the churchyard was unfenced and open to the public till the year 1820, when it was enclosed."

Mr. W. G. Collingwood (V.C.H. Cumberland, 1, 265), says that the four semicircular stones, "as Gough calls them, which bound the 'grave' on its two long sides are hogbacks or recumbent tombs," and like so many elsewhere, are "houses of the dead, with roofs carved to look like tiles." He was thinking about the early carved stones on which he is so great an authority. But he gives no measurements, not even the distance between the two pillars which mark the ends of "the grave." An accurate plan of this monument is much needed. If made, it would be seen how nearly it would resemble the modern plan of the Hathersage "grave," the yew-tree at each end corresponding to the two pillars at Penrith.²

The parallel between the two stones at Hathersage and

¹ Gough's Camden misquotes Edmund Sandford, who said (c. 1675; in the edition by Chancellor Ferguson from the MS. p. 37). "There is 2 crosses distant the length of a man one at head, and other at feet, And was opened when I was a Scoller there (probably c. 1616), by William Turner and there found the great shank-bones and other bones of a man and a broad-sword besides fonde there by the church wardens." Ed.

² As the stones have been rearranged—probably more than once—since the beginning of the eighteenth century, a plan of the stones as they now stand would be of little or no value in helping us to determine whether they had ever been set as a measurement of the customary perch of the locality. Dugdale, at his visitation of Westmorland, drew them and stated the distance between them to be 15 ft. For a careful description of this grave the reader is referred to Mr. W. G. Collingwood's article, C. & W. A. & A. Soc. *Trans.* N.S. xxiii, 115. Ed.

the two pillars at Penrith is significant. Both are in a churchyard, where, or in the church itself, standard measures ought to be kept, and both are said to be the grave of a mythical giant. In both some bones of a giant are said to have been found. The distances between the stones are $13\frac{1}{2}$ and 15 feet respectively, these being well-known perches in English land-measures. All this may be an accidental coincidence, but if so, is a very remarkable coincidence. "Did any one," said Dr. Samuel Pegge, "ever see a grave-stone in a churchyard 200 years old in 1774?"—*Anonymiana*, ed. 1818, p. 222. He was writing in 1774.

I turn to a most interesting piece of evidence. In 1898, the following passage appeared in *Notes and Queries* (9th S. i, 306), which shows how the rood or perch was obtained in a German churchyard:

"In a German book on surveying, published in Germany, by Jakob Koebel, about 340 years ago, the author gives the following instruction, accompanied by a woodcut, as to how the length of a foot is to be found: 'To find the length of a rood in the right and lawful way, and according to scientific usage, you shall do as follows: Stand at the door of a church on a Sunday and bid sixteen men to stop, tall ones and small ones as they happen to pass out when the service is finished; then make them put their feet one behind the other, and the length thus obtained shall be a right and lawful rood to measure and survey the land with, and the sixteenth part of it shall be a right and lawful foot.'

No date is given, but Jakob Koebel published a tract on surveying at Frankfort-on-Main in 1556. It is called *Geometrei*, and there are one or two later editions. The translation just quoted was made from one of these later editions, and I have used it because the passage in the earlier edition has been improved and corrected by the author in the later. There is nothing, for instance, about Sunday, or about the foot, in the edition of 1556. I have had the remarkable woodcut which illustrates this edition reproduced from a copy in the British Museum,

where it appears on signature A. 4 of the book. It shows more clearly than words could do how the village perch was made in the churchyard, and we may be sure that, when the measurement had been taken, a standard was preserved either in the churchyard or upon the church. The object in the background of the woodcut may be a



How the Village Perch was obtained.

grave with a cover over it, not an uncommon arrangement on the Continent.

I do not know of any instance where a standard perch was marked on a church wall, but according to the old Icelandic Laws called "Grágás" (Gray Goose) twenty yard-wands were marked on the church wall at Thingwall, where the Parliament was held (Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v. "stika.") But in Nottinghamshire, or at least in Sherwood Forest, land was measured by a foot of eighteen

inches in length, called the forest foot, and in two cases was marked on the church wall. This is proved by the following extract from the Register of Newstead Abbey in Spelman's *Glossarium*, 1687, p. 458:—

Notandum est quod Pes Forestae usitatus tempore Ric. Oysell in arrentatione vastorum, factus est, signatus, et sculptus in pariete cancellae ecclesiae de Edwinstowe, et in ecclesia beatae Mariae de Nottingham.

Et dictus pes continet longitudine octodecim pollices. Et in arrentatione quorundam vastorum pertica 20, 21, et 24 pedum usa fuit.

It must be noted that the forest foot used in the time of Richard Oysell in the renting of wastes, was made, marked and graven on the chancel wall of Edwinstowe, and in St. Mary's Church, Nottingham.

And the said foot contains eighteen thumbs (inches) in length. And in the renting of certain wastes, a perch of, 20 21 and 24 feet was used.

Richard Oysell is said to have lived in the time of Edward I. In a pamphlet of *Notes on Edwinstowe*, published in 1915, the Rev. E. V. Bond, vicar of that place, says: "The stone which has claimed the most consideration in the whole church is a small one about eighteen inches long, protruding slightly from the wall on the left-hand side of the Rigley Memorial An examination of the stone seems to show that originally it was a part of a string course, though no such course, or part of such course, exists in the present church. It is of Mansfield stone, and was removed to its present position from outside, near the Priest's doorway, in 1911, as water was beginning to wear it away Robert White, 40 years ago alluded to it as if a part of the measure was lost. This seems to be borne out by the stone, one end of which is broken off short."

In Lincolnshire the perch had a length of 21 feet, and the foot was the length of Henry de Lacy's foot. He was Earl of Lincoln, and his date appears to have been about 1250-1311. It is said that he made the perch of that

dominium from his own feet (*de pedibus suis propriis*). The authority is given in *Notes and Queries*, 9th S. x, 134. Here then the size of the acre depended on the length of his lordship's foot. St. Patrick is said to have measured out his churches of 60 feet in length by his own feet (Stokes, *Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*, i, pp. xc, xciv; ii, p. 307). Petrie said that this is the length even of the larger Irish churches. If so, the foot of the tenth century could not have differed from that of the nineteenth, or the difference must have been trivial.

A pillar or cross could also be a measure of land. There was such a cross at Irtlingborough in Northamptonshire. "In the middle of the village is a stone cross upon a graduated base. The shaft of the cross is 13 feet in height, and is the standard for adjusting the provincial pole by which the doles or portions in the adjacent meadows are adjusted." (Moule's *English Counties*, ii, 226). The great stone pillar in Rudstone churchyard near Bridlington, is 25 feet in height, and we have seen that there were perches of 24 feet. Rudstone, Rodestan in Domesday, may stand for "rood-stone," the stone by which the customary rood or pole was adjusted. The Oxford English Dictionary gives *rud* and *rude* as forms of "rood," and we have such terms as Rudmas Day, the Feast of the Holy Rood. It has been suggested that the first element of the word is the man's name Hroda or Rudda.

The length of the perch varied in different places, and every village had its own lawful standard. For instance in 1304 certain arable lands at Staveley in this county were measured, as we are told in a Norman-French document, by the perch used in the district (*par la perche huse deu pais*). See T. Walter Hall and A. H. Thomas, *Descriptive Catalogue*, Sheffield, 1914, p. 321. Unfortunately the length of the perch is not given. Between 1242 and 1270 the perch in Norton, Beauchief and Alfreton was 24 feet (Pegge's *Beauchief Abbey*, 34). In

Duffield in the twelfth century it was 17 feet; and 20 feet at Yeldersley (Jeayes, *Derbyshire Charters*). At Morton, near Alfreton, each oxgang of land carried with it responsibility for the repair of eighteen feet of the churchyard wall (*Journal*, xxxvii, 51-2) and this must have been the length of the village perch. It was "the ancient forest measure. An acre derived from it, containing 5760 square yards, is often mentioned in charters, and is the customary acre of Western Devon, and also of Cornwall" (James F. Morgan's *England under the Norman Occupation*, 1858, p. 20). In this connexion it is interesting to learn that the word Morton means "the enclosed place on the moor." Here, then, we have a village built on land reclaimed from the waste, or forest. For a forest was a waste, as in Peak Forest.

It need hardly be said that measures of length have usually been derived from various parts of the human body. In Yorkshire the thumb is still regarded as an inch, and a yard is the distance between the nose and the tip of the outstretched hand. The most striking example of this primitive kind of measurement is the foot which, in Western Europe, has long been regarded as the basis of the other measures of length. But as the stature of the body varies so does the foot, and hence a perch of a given number of human feet in one place might be considerably different from a perch of the same number of feet in another place. We have just seen that in an old book on surveying an average was taken from big and little men. It is probable that many of our old churches were laid out in accordance with local measures, and I should like to see, for instance, an accurate measured plan of Hathersage church.

If by any chance it should be found that the nave of Hathersage church is 54 feet in length, as at Puxton, we may be sure that this measurement was composed of four perches of $13\frac{1}{2}$ feet each. At Puxton the length of this

chain of 54 feet "was ascertained by placing one end thereof at the foot of the arch dividing the chancel from the body of the church, and extending through the middle aisle to the arch of the west door under the tower, at each of which places marks were cut in the stones for that purpose." Our difficulty would lie in the fact that we do not know the exact length of the foot. But, as Professor Ridgeway says, "among primitive and unmixed races, where all live under the same conditions, idiosyncracies of stature are rare, and consequently the average sized foot may give a standard sufficiently accurate for all their purposes" (Smith's *Dict. of Greek and Roman Antiq.* s.v. "Mensura"). On one of the Essex manors of St. Paul's during the twelfth century, a barn was measured by the perch of $16\frac{1}{2}$ feet, and found to be four perches and seven feet in length. The measurement was taken from the post in the *culacium*, or appendage, on one side to the post in the *culacium* on the other side (*Domesday of St. Paul's*, Camden Soc. p. 138). But the foot was used in measuring the height of the building.

If we dismiss from our thoughts this tale of Little John, what remains? What other theory but this would bear either statement or examination? Yet however strong the presumption that the "grave" was the measure of a standard perch of $13\frac{1}{2}$ feet, it is liable to be rebutted by the discovery in some old Hathersage writing of a perch of different length.

It may be said perhaps that the alleged discovery of huge human bones at Hathersage and Penrith must be accounted for. These objects, however, have not been preserved, and the reports were written down too long after their asserted exhumation to be of value. "Until the beginning of the 19th century it was universally believed that giants, of a size far exceeding those who are exhibited in our times, formerly existed, either as nations or as individual specimens. This belief was based on the

asserted discovery of colossal human bones, on supposed scriptural evidence, and on the evidence of various ancient and medieval authors."—Chambers's *Encyclop.* 1901, s.v. "Giants." The belief no longer exists.
