

THE NAME "ARBOR LOW".

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FOUR and three-quarter miles south-west of Bakewell and nine miles from Buxton, between the villages of Youlgreave and Hartington, lies the prehistoric stone circle known as Arbor Low. Scheduled and protected as an ancient monument by the Ministry of Works, it occupies a dominant position on the northern face of a hill near the summit of the watershed separating the Bradford and Lathkill rivers, 1,230 ft. above sea-level, from where it commands a magnificent view of the surrounding countryside.

Attention was first drawn to the existence of the monument in 1783 by the Rev. Samuel Pegge, Rector of Whittington, in a paper entitled, "A disquisition on the lows or barrows in the Peak of Derbyshire, particularly that capital British monument called Arbelows".¹ Prior to this, the monument had been visited by Pegge and one John Mander, of Bakewell, who recorded the fact in his diary in the following manner: "Arburlows viewed by Mr. Pegge and myself, 10 June 1761 . . . round which are thirty two very large limestone slabs formerly erect, now flat."² In June, 1782, Mander recorded another entry in his diary, this time referring to the monument as Arber low.³ Pegge restricted his use of the name Arbelows to the tumuli associated with the monument and spoke of the circle as "the temple". He wrote: "They (the barrows) stand on the brow of a hill so as to be conspicuous afar off and therefore may be imagined to belong to persons of great account and as 'arar' in British means a hero, it seems probable that this constitutes the first part of this name and then the sense of the whole will be, 'the barrows of the heroes or great captains', answering to Knightlow in Sir William Dugdale."⁴ Not content with

¹ Read at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries on 29th May, 1783, and printed in *Archæologia*, VII (1783), pp. 131-48.

² *Journal of the Derbyshire Archæological and Natural History Society*, Vol. XXX, p. 170.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁴ Samuel Pegge, *Barrows in Derbyshire*, p. 10.

this explanation, Pegge also suggested that Arber may be a corruption of Arvir, probably the same person as the Briton Arviragus mentioned by Juvenal in his fourth satire (v. 127), or even Arbila, the British Prince mentioned in the old Scholiast on Juvenal.

The Rev. E. P. Davies, writing in 1811, spoke of Arbelows or Arbor Low, a circle of stone within which the ancient British Bards were accustomed to hold their assemblies."⁵ John Leyland, eighty years later, wrote of "the stone circle known as Arbor Low, Arbe Low or Arbelows", and pointed out that the British word "arrhber" means a place of fortification.⁶ During the eighteenth century the place was also called by the local inhabitants, Arbour lows Rink.⁷

Sir John Lubbock (Lord Avebury), who visited the monument in 1879, later read a paper on the subject before a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in which he said: "Arbor or Arbe as it is variously pronounced is evidently the same word as Abury, the great sanctuary of our country, the greatest megalithic monument indeed in the world."⁸ Another explanation was contained in a letter to the editor of the *Antiquary* in 1899. The writer said: "Arbor is here evidently an apocoped form of Arbury, a common local name signifying earthworks, Arbury itself being a synco-pated dialectel form of Anglo-Saxon 'eorthburh'." For pronunciation compare Anglo-Saxon "heorth" (modern English "hearth"). The apocope in Arbor is due to the weakening influence exercised by the following word "Lowe" (Anglo-Saxon "hloew").⁹

The subject has been a happy hunting-ground for students of philology, many of whom have hoped to find in the meaning of the name some clue to the origin and purpose of the monument. There have been those, for instance, who adopted the hypothesis of James Ferguson,¹⁰ who believed that the monuments at Avebury,

⁵ *View of Derbyshire*, 1811, quoted by J. C. Heathcote in *Arbor Low*, p. 11.

⁶ *The Peak of Derbyshire*, 1891, p. 187.

⁷ *Journal of the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, Vol. XXX, p. 171.

⁸ *The Reliquary*, Vol. XX, p. 81.

⁹ *Antiquary*, Vol. XXXV, p. 352.

¹⁰ *Rude Stone Monuments* (London, 1872).

Penrith and other places were trophies of the battles of King Arthur. In support of this theory it was claimed that a great battle between the Britons and the Romans was fought out on Hartington Moor, near to the circle at Arbor Low. The local inhabitants, it was said, did at times pronounce the name of the place "Artor (or Artur) Low".¹¹ Others have spoken of Arbor as being derived from the Celtic word "Arbhar" meaning "a locality or institution adapted for an assemblage of people, either for civil, military or religious purposes."¹²

C. P. Kains-Jackson, in 1880, pointed out that the British word "Arrhber" means a fort, and gave as an example "Cold Harbour" which is derived, he claimed, from "Col" (a hill) and "Arrhber" (a fort).¹³ Titus Wheatcroft, an eighteenth-century schoolmaster in the village of Ashover, did, in fact, refer to Cold Harbour, a local place-name, as Cold Arbour.¹⁴ On this interpretation, Arbor Low simply means the "fort barrows". Certainly Harbour Farm, in Hertfordshire, is described as "the site of a Roman settlement or camp", whilst at Arbury Banks in the same county there is a circular vallum. At Arbory, in Lanarkshire, there is a circular wall, "now entirely cast down, enclosing a space of about 135 ft. in diameter."¹⁵ In 1563, the townships of Ryton and Chapwell, near Durham, are said to have been bounded in one place by a "greate round hill like a wynde-mylne-hill, a pece of grounde caste about with a greate olde ditche, by some called the Arbour."¹⁶ This explanation is an attractive one, particularly if "harbour" is thought of, not only as a fort, but as a place of refuge or shelter from the cold, as explained by Sir James Murray in the Oxford English Dictionary.

As for the word "low" — this is associated with over two hundred place-names in the County of Derby alone.¹⁷

¹¹ *The Peak of Derbyshire, op. cit.*, p. 188.

¹² *Sheffield Telegraph*, 18th March, 1920.

¹³ *Our Ancient Monuments and the Land Around Them* (1880), p. 15.

¹⁴ This was in 1722. See *Journal of the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, Vol. XIX, p. 40.

¹⁵ *The Harbour and Barrows at Arbour-lows*, by S. O. Addy, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* See also Surtees, *History of the County of Durham*, Vol. II, p. 281.

¹⁷ *The Names of the Derbyshire and Staffordshire Barrows*, S. O. Addy. Dr. Plott in his *Natural History of Staffordshire* refers to Arbour-low-close, near Okeover, where there is a low, p. 404.

They are often high places on which tumuli have been found. In the case of many of the Derbyshire lows the word prefixed is a personal name or that of the nearby village. The prefixed names are not prehistoric, and are often either Old English or Old Norse, the names rarely being those of women.

"Low" is most probably derived from the Old English 'hlæw' or 'hlāw' (Gothic hlaiv — a grave), which meant a mound, particularly a burial mound. When the word is found in old English charters it is invariably associated with the name of a person, no doubt the one buried there. We are told that by the thirteenth century, "hlaw" had become "law" (or "lawe" in the dative), as in Tidislawe, near Tideswell, mentioned in 1251. In the fourteenth century it became "low", as in Fowelowe, mentioned in 1308. "The change was in accordance with the well-known rule that Old English ā becomes in Southern English ō, thus stān becomes stone. In the Derbyshire dialect, however, the sound of a is still retained in the place-names, for people say Basla', Foola', Huckla', instead of Baslow, Foolow and Hucklow."¹⁸

This, however, is not the only explanation that has been advanced of the word "low". As the Rev. Samuel Pegge, in the eighteenth century, explained, "Some have deduced the word from the British 'llehau, locare, collocare': others from the Saxon word 'lex, liz, lize', or according to the pronunciation of the Danes 'loze', signifying flame." "As, therefore," wrote Pegge, "Bastum denotes the place where a man was burnt and buried, so did our ancestors, in imitation of the Romans call the place of burial 'lowe', whether the bodies were burned or not."¹⁹ In support of this interpretation, it is claimed that in Scotland and the Northern parts of England the flame of any fire is called "low" to this day.

Whatever the correct explanation, the original investigators of the monument were probably correct in restricting the use of the term Arbour Lows to their description of the tumuli. To-day it is the fashion to refer to the entire monument by this name.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2 (Addy).

¹⁹ S. Pegge, *op. cit.*, p. 2.