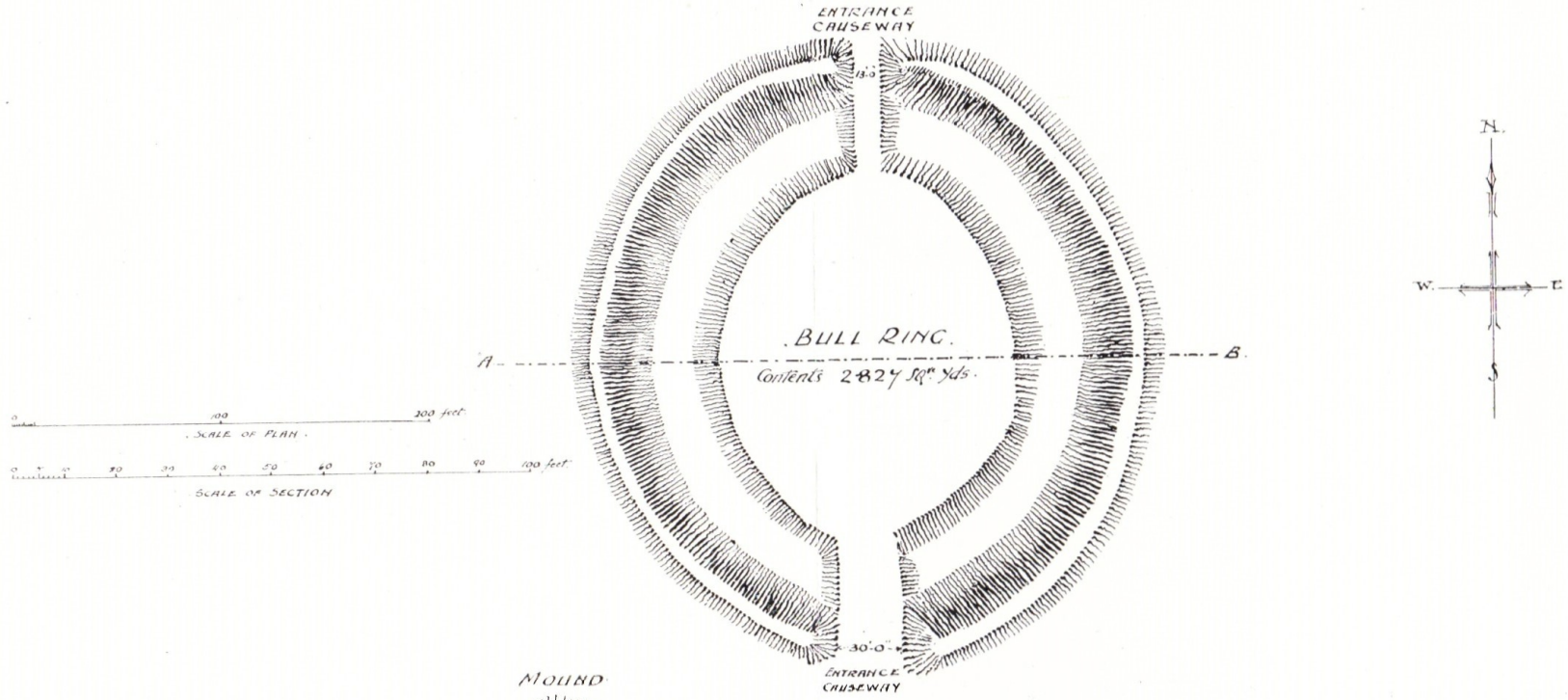
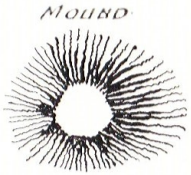
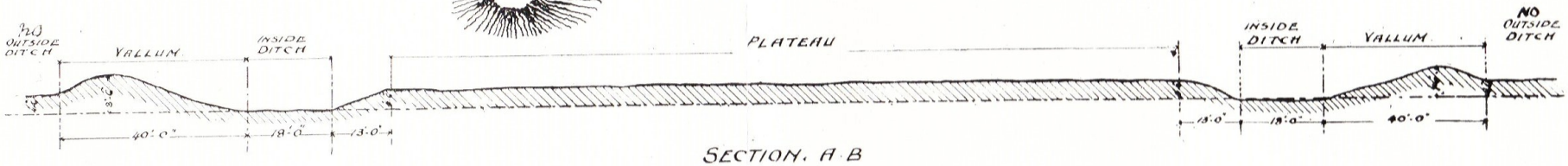
BULL RING STONE CIRCLE. DOVE HOLES NEAR BUXTON







SECTION. A.B

The Stone Circle, known as the "Bull Ring," at Dove Holes, and the Mound adjoining.[1]

By Edward Tristram, F.S.A.

THE memorials which still remain with us of the prehistoric inhabitants of our island form a fascinating subject of study, and, fortunately, Derbyshire is rich in such memorials.

The subject of this paper is the ancient earthwork at Dove Holes, about two and a half miles north of Buxton, known as the "Bull Ring." It consists of a circular vallum, with a ditch on the inner side, enclosing a plateau, which formed the site of a stone circle. How or when the earthwork received the name of the Bull Ring is unrecorded. We can only surmise that in former days it may have been used for bull baiting, and consequently became known as the Bull Ring, or possibly it may very naturally have been called the Ring, and received the prefix owing to it having been used as a bull field. The name Bull Field is not uncommon.

It is somewhat surprising that no plan of this interesting earthwork has hitherto appeared in the *Journal* of our Society, nor, so far as the writer can ascertain, elsewhere; and archæologists are indebted to Mr. Ernest Hill, Surveyor, Manchester, for the carefully prepared plan and section which illustrate this paper. The measurements given in the plan were taken with great care by Mr. Hill and the writer.

[1] This paper, in a somewhat curtailed form, was read at the Annual Meeting of the Society, at Buxton, in 1912.

A few yards away from the earthwork to the south-east is an immense excavation made by the local lime works, which, a few years ago, threatened the total demolition of the Bull Ring. Happily this catastrophe was averted for the time being owing to the exertions of some Buxton archæologists, but if in the future the worst should happen, it will be some little satisfaction to know that a correct plan has been secured.

Local tradition asserts that the large stones which formed the circle were removed upwards of a century ago, to be used either for building material or for the making of the road which runs a short distance away. Probably they consisted of rough, unhewn slabs of mountain limestone, similar to those at Arbor Low, but, unfortunately, no evidence as to their size, number, or character appears to have survived.

The vallum and ditch are both of considerable dimensions, the former rising to an average height of nearly five feet above the ground without, and eight feet above the present bottom of the ditch within. The base of the vallum on the west is forty feet in breadth and the ditch eighteen feet wide.

The enclosed plateau measures one hundred and fifty feet in diameter from east to west, and one hundred and ninety feet from north to south.

There are two entrances, the larger one, thirty feet wide, on the south, and a smaller one, thirteen feet wide, on the north.

It will be seen from a comparison of the accompanying plan with the plan of Arbor Low, which will be found in our Society's *Journal* for 1904, that the Bull Ring is almost identical with Arbor Low. The entrances are in the same position relatively to each other, and are practically of the same width. The plateau at Arbor Low is of the average diameter of one hundred and sixty feet, which corresponds very closely with the plateau at the Bull Ring.

The remarkable similarity in the plan and dimensions of the earthworks of these two stone circles justifies the conclusion

that they both belong to the same period and were intended for similar purposes.

There seems to be no published record of any systematic or scientific excavations having been made at the Bull Ring. Mr. W. J. Andrew, F.S.A., however, informs me Mr. John Ward some years ago cut a tentative trench through the ditch and discovered a fragment of early earthenware. There are also some holes in the north-eastern side of the plateau which bear witness to the fact that extensive digging has taken place at some prior period, but these are probably the remains of excavations for obtaining lime or stone for agricultural purposes.

Arbor Low stone circle, as will be remembered, was excavated in 1901 and 1902 under the superintendence of Mr. St. George Gray. His account of the work appears in *Archæologia*, vol. 58, and an extensive abstract of it is printed in our Society's *Journal* for 1904.

No metals were found at Arbor Low nor any trace of fictile ware that could be assigned to the date of its construction. The finds chiefly consisted of flint implements, and in discussing the age of that earthwork Mr. St. George Gray placed particular emphasis on the finding of a barbed arrow-head of flint on the original surface of the ditch. After a full and careful review of the result of the excavations, Mr. St. George Gray concludes as follows: "That the date of the construction of Arbor Low stone circle should be located, in accordance with the evidence derived from the excavations within the period covered by the late neolithic and early bronze periods, in other words, the period of transition from stone to bronze."

Professor Gowland, F.S.A., from the evidence derived from his excavations at Stonehenge in 1901, deduces a similar date for its construction. According to these authorities, therefore, Stonehenge, Arbor Low stone circle, and, as a consequence, the Bull Ring, may be assigned to the same period. There appear to be reasons for believing that the circle at Avebury, Wiltshire, which far surpassed Stonehenge in grandeur of

design, is considerably older than the other circles above mentioned, although it may belong to the same period.

During the last few years, since Professor Gowland wrote on Stonehenge and Mr. St. George Gray on Arbor Low, the opinion has gained ground that barbed flint arrow-heads are attributable to the bronze age, and that the people who introduced the use of bronze into Britain were a distinct race from the neolithic inhabitants and possessed different customs, particularly with regard to the burial of the dead. If this theory is correct, the stone circles of Arbor Low and the Bull Ring could scarcely be correctly designated transitional, but would be the work either of the neolithic people or their bronze-using successors. Probably we shall be more correct in regarding them as attributable to the early bronze age.

The date suggested by Sir John Evans for the introduction of bronze into Britain lies between 2000 and 1800 B.C., and in the *Bronze Age Guide Book*, published by the Authorities of the British Museum, about 1800 B.C. is accepted as a probable date. No doubt the people who introduced the use of bronze into Britain arrived first into the south or east of England, and some little time would necessarily elapse before they penetrated into the midlands and the north.

The purposes for which stone circles such as Arbor Low and the Bull Ring (our largest and principal local examples) were originally constructed, have been frequently discussed, and the subject is one of the deepest interest. The suggestion made in our Society's *Journal* for 1911 that Arbor Low stone circle was intended "as a sheepfold or cattlefold in which flocks or herds were protected at night, and in which they were milked," cannot be accepted. All the arguments put forward in support of that theory would equally apply to the circles of Avebury and Stonehenge and the gigantic stones of which they are composed.

Mr. A. Hadrian Allcroft, in his comprehensive *Earthwork of England*,[1] when treating of stone circles, remarks "that the peculiar position of the fosse makes it unlikely that they were

[1] Page 559.

intended for defensive purposes or for the herding of flocks, and the entire absence, in such as have been examined, of any remains of habitations within, or of subsidiary defences without, seems to point to the same conclusion. In the case of Avebury, once a stupendous monument, as much surpassing Stonehenge as a cathedral doth a parish church, few now doubt that the work was of a religious character, and the similar but smaller works are usually supposed to be of the same class." Subsequently when referring to Arbor Low[1] and the Bull Ring he speaks of them as of a religious pattern.

Mr. W. J. Andrew has made a special study of the Derbyshire stone circles, and the writer had the privilege of visiting a large number of them in his company, and assisted at the excavation of two of them. Mr. Andrew considers that the larger circles such as Arbor Low and the Bull Ring had a religious origin.

Sir Norman Lockyer's scientific investigations at Stonehenge from an astronomical point of view, may be considered as fairly conclusive that the builders of that circle were observers of the sun and stars, and that the plan of the circle bears a definite relation to the rising of the sun at a certain season of the year. It is still the custom for a band of enthusiasts to visit Stonehenge before daybreak on the 21st of June, and from the centre of the circle to witness the sun rise directly over the index stone known as the "Friar's Heel," situate outside the circle. It is interesting to notice in passing that the word "Heel" is supposed to be derived from the Greek word "Helios," the sun.

Nature was the only revelation which the inhabitants of Britain possessed in these remote centuries, and there is little doubt that the stone circles are silent but eloquent witnesses to their searchings after God. Whether the sun, moon and stars were the direct objects of worship, or whether they were regarded as the visible manifestations of a higher Deity, we

[1] Page 576.

have no evidence to show. If the ancient Welsh Triads can be regarded as embodying traditions which relate back to the stone circle period, then it would appear that the heavenly bodies were not directly worshipped. Perhaps one might be pardoned for suggesting that originally they were regarded as deities, and that subsequently, as knowledge increased, more enlightened views became gradually incorporated into the ancient beliefs. That the religion to which the stone circles were devoted was a widely extended one, and prevailed over many centuries, is testified by the fact that stone circles are found in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

While the evidence obtained from excavations tends to show that the larger stone circles were not originally intended for burial purposes, yet, according to such evidence, many of the smaller stone circles, of which numerous examples still exist in Derbyshire, were undoubtedly constructed for burials. There is naturally a close affinity between the places intended for worship and burial, and no definite line can be drawn between those designed for each purpose. No doubt the persons honoured with a stone circle, or mound, burial, and many of the smaller circles were originally covered by a mound, were the chiefs and others of great importance. The obsequies of the ordinary tribesman would not be commemorated with such a substantial memorial. We have to-day our cathedrals, parish churches of various sizes, and mausoleums, in all of which the dead lie buried, and three thousand years hence, in the absence of written evidence, it would be very difficult to distinguish between the ruins of each class.

Each of the larger stone circles in Derbyshire almost invariably has a mound associated with it. The mound is sometimes situated close to the circle and in other cases some distance away. At Arbor Low we have Gibb Hill, which is one thousand and forty-three feet from the centre of the circle in a westerly direction, and at the Bull Ring, as shown in the plan, the mound is about two hundred and forty feet from the centre of the circle to the south-west. This mound has been

much disturbed and the upper portion thrown down in times past, no doubt by treasure seekers or other unscientific diggers. There appears to be no record of any excavation of this mound, and it seems to have escaped the attention of Mr. Thomas Bateman, as it is not mentioned in *Ten Years' Diggings*.

One mile south-south-west of Avebury is situated the celebrated Silbury Hill, an enormous mound, probably only partially artificial, rising to a height of one hundred and seventy feet, measuring upwards of five hundred and fifty yards in circumference at the base, and covering an area of five acres. The association of a mound with each of the larger Derbyshire stone circles leads to the suggestion that Silbury Hill was similarly associated with Avebury, and it must be conceded that such a gigantic mound would form a fitting companion to such an impressive stone circle. It will be noticed that the mound in the case of Arbor Low, the Bull Ring, and Avebury is situated to the west, south-west, and south-south-west of the circle. It would be interesting to ascertain the compass bearings of mounds in the neighbourhood of, and relatively to, other stone circles, although the diverse position of the mounds in the three instances just mentioned does not hold out much promise of any conclusions being derived from the relative position of the circle and the mound.

No mention has been made of any mound in connection with Stonehenge because, although there are a number of burial mounds in the neighbourhood, yet the only hill or mound existing to-day of sufficient importance to be associated with Stonehenge, as Silbury Hill may be with Avebury, would appear to be the natural hill known as Vespasian's Camp, which is about a mile from Stonehenge. This is merely referred to in order to show that Stonehenge may not be singular in not having a hill or mound associated with it. Vespasian's Camp appears to have been regarded as a sacred hill or mound in the early Celtic traditions.

The various theories as to the probable purposes of the

mounds in the neighbourhood of the circles may perhaps be tabulated as follows:—

1. Burial mounds placed in the vicinity of the circle as graves are now placed round a church.

2. Mounds for the promulgation of laws, or as the seats of Justice, of which *Tynwald* Hill in the Isle of Man may be a modern survival.

3. Mounds used for some astronomical observations, either in connection with the circle or otherwise.

4. Mounds intended for defensive fortification purposes.

The fourth suggestion may be shortly dismissed, as it is now pretty well established that isolated mounds, that is, mounds unconnected with other defensive works, were not used as fortifications before the Norman period.

No. 1 appears at first sight to be the most probable solution. But it must be conceded that the evidence derived from excavations points rather against than in favour of such a proposition.

Gibb Hill, near Arbor Low, was thoroughly excavated by Mr. Thomas Bateman in 1848, and he gives an account of it in his *Ten Years' Diggings*. A cist containing human bones was found, in a position quite unexpected by Mr. Bateman, close to the summit of the mound, and the covering stone was only eighteen inches below the surface. The cist was removed and set up in Mr. Bateman's garden, a proceeding which would scarcely be countenanced by archæologists to-day. This find, however, is not conclusive that Gibb Hill was originally a burial mound, but rather points to the contrary. The position of the cist at the summit of the mound and other facts disclosed during the excavation led Mr. Bateman to the conclusion "that Gibb Hill was not in the first instance a sepulchral mound." Mr. Bateman's experience as an excavator of burial mounds in Derbyshire was very extensive, and his opinion on this point is certainly entitled to every respect.

The result of the ancient digging at the Bull Ring mound is, as far as I can ascertain, unrecorded and unknown.

Repeated attempts have been made to unearth the secret of Silbury Hill, but without result. No burial has yet been discovered, but the hill is so gigantic that a burial, if it exists, might very easily have been overlooked by the excavators.

There is a stone circle on the high ground behind Ford Hall, near Chapel-en-le-Frith, and also a mound about two hundred and fifty yards away. This mound is somewhat in the form of a long barrow, possibly owing to the upper portion having been thrown down by excavators. A few years ago a trench was cut through this mound and no trace of a burial was discovered, but this investigation was scarcely exhaustive.

On Eyam Moor is a stone circle with a huge mound of stones a few yards away. This mound, now much destroyed and scattered, is referred to in the Appendix[1] of *Ten Years' Diggings*, but there is no mention of a burial having been found in it. The burial urn taken in 1759 from a stone mound known as the "Round Hillock" on Eyam Moor described in such Appendix[2] cannot relate to the mound by the circle, as it is stated that the mound which contained the urn was carted away in June, 1759, for making the road known as Tideswell Turnpike.

With regard to No. 2 it is doubtful whether such a custom dates back to the stone circle period, although the ancient Celtic traditions appear to refer to sacred mounds and mounds used for purposes of justice.

Solution No. 3 has often been suggested, and appears somewhat plausible, but there is no direct evidence in support of it, and the variation in the position of the mound relatively to the circle militates somewhat against it.

It will be seen from the foregoing that at present there is not sufficient evidence to lead to a decision on the question.

We are justified in assuming that the Bull Ring stone circle was regarded as an object of veneration and superstitious awe by the ancient inhabitants of the locality. What rites or

[1] Pages 248 and 249.
[2] Page 247.

ceremonies were here performed, whether human or other sacrifices were offered, we can, in our present state of knowledge, only conjecture, but there seems no reason to doubt that the circle and mound formed the focus round which centred the religious, and probably also the legal, observances of the people inhabiting the district between three and four thousand years ago.