

## Some Notes on Arbor Low.

BY REV. J. CHARLES COX.

[Read to the Society at Arbor Low, on August 4th, 1883.]



ARBOR LOW was first described with any degree of detail, almost a century ago, by that eminent Derbyshire antiquary, Dr. Pegge, in a paper read before the Society of Antiquaries on May 29th, 1783, which was entitled "A Disquisition on the Lows or Barrows in the Peak of Derbyshire, particularly that capital British Monument called Arbelows."\* The article is illustrated by a plan, sections, and perspective view of the circle. The following are the actual details of the writer's description of what he terms "the temple" as distinguished from the adjoining lows or barrows:—

"It is surrounded with a great circular rampire, measuring by an inward slope seven yards high, and by the outward five. The fosse, which is within, and not on the outside of the rampire, is five yards over in the bottom. The inclosed area is a circular flat of fifty-eight yards diameter, and has been encompassed by thirty-two very large stones, or more, of limestone, or grey marble, placed circularly. The stones formerly stood on end, two and two together, which is very particular, and different from any other stone circle now known; however, they all lie flat now, and are

\* *Archæologia*, Vol. viii., pp. 131—148.

some of them so much broken by their fall that it requires some attention in observing and numbering them; for the fragments are not only some bigger than others, as would necessarily happen, but sometimes lie at a small distance from the principal or larger piles to which they respectively belonged. However, that they stood in pairs at first is very obvious, and it is probable that they were brought, as there is no quarry nearer, from Fairdale, or Ricklow Dale, which is very near; for they are apparently the same sort of stone, but blanced by the weather. The two entrances into the temple, nine yards each, are nearly south and north, but inclining to the south-west and north-east, and, as was observed, the slight rampire from the other low comes up to the southern entrance. The entrances are level, being banks of earth across the fosse (the earth in these places having never been dug away), and they both of them had, on each hand, one of the stone pillars above-mentioned, between which you entered into the grand area. I call them pillars now, though they are flat stones, because, as has been already noted, they stood on end, and were so lofty. In the area lies one very large stone, four yards one foot long, two yards two feet wide, perhaps not less than three or four ton weight. There is another to the north of it, and a third on the east side, which appears to have been much broken. If ever there was a fourth on the west side it is now gone." I make no apology for thus quoting at length from Dr. Pegge's description, as it is interesting for us to note, now we are on the spot, what degree of deterioration and change this monument has suffered in a century.

Dr. Pegge then proceeds to argue as to what nation this great structure belonged. British, Roman, Saxon, or Danish? And he rightly decides that it is British. In arguing, in the second place, as to the object of such a structure, he returns at some length to his contention of the original uprightness of these stones. His conjectures on this point are highly probable, though they have since been combatted, and he adduces one piece of evidence—namely, that one William Normanshaw, then about sixty years old, testified that some of the stones were standing in his memory,

that is about a hundred and fifty years from the present time. On the question of the object of the structure, he concludes that it was either a sepulchre or a temple, with a decided preference for the latter theory.

Mr. Thomas Bateman, the well-known antiquary of Lomerdale House, published an account of Arbor Low circle in 1848,\* and treated further and with more detail of the exploration of its adjacent tumuli in a later work published in 1861.† The following is the most important part of the description of this structure as given by Mr. Bateman, and it is right that you should have here placed before you the theories of that careful mound-digger, although I shall directly combat his conclusions:—"The area encompassed by the ditch is about fifty yards in diameter and of a circular form; though, from a little declination of the ground towards the north, it appears somewhat elliptical when viewed from particular points. The stones which compose the circle are rough, unhewn masses of limestone, apparently thirty in number; but this cannot be determined with certainty, as several of them are broken; most of them are from six to eight feet in length, and three or four broad in the widest part; their thickness is more variable, and their respective shapes are different and indescribable. They all lie upon the ground, many in an oblique position, but the opinion that has prevailed, of the narrowest end of each being pointed towards the centre, in order to represent the rays of the sun, and prove that luminary to have been the object of worship, must have arisen from inaccurate observation, for they almost as frequently point towards the ditch as otherwise; whether they ever stood upright, as most of the stones of Druidical circles do, is an inquiry not easy to determine, though Mr. Pilkington was informed that a very old man, living in Middleton, remembered, when a boy, to have seen them standing obliquely on one end. This secondary kind of evidence does not seem entitled to much credit, as the soil at the basis of the stones does

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\* *Vestiges of the Antiquities of Derbyshire*, pp. 109—111.

† *Ten Years' Digging in Celtic and Saxon Grave Hills*, pp. 17—20.

not appear to have ever been removed to a depth sufficient to ensure the possibility of the stones being placed in an erect position. Within the circle are some smaller stones scattered irregularly, and near the centre are three larger ones, by some supposed to have formed a cromlech or altar, but there are no perceptible grounds for such an opinion. The width of the ditch which immediately surrounds the area on which the stones are placed is about six yards; the height of the bank or vallum on the inside (though much reduced by the impairing hand of time) is still from six to eight yards; but this varies throughout the whole circumference, which, on the top, is about two hundred and seventy yards. The vallum is chiefly formed of the earth thrown out of the ditch, besides which a little has been added from the ground which immediately surrounds the exterior of the vallum, thus adding to its height and to the imposing appearance it presents to anyone approaching from a distance. To the enclosed area are two entrances, each of the width of ten or twelve yards, and opening towards the north and south. On the east side of the southern entrance is a large barrow, standing in the same line of circumference as the vallum, but wholly detached, except at the base. This barrow has been several times unsuccessfully examined, and remained an antiquarian problem until the summer of the year 1845, when the original interment was discovered, of a nature to prove beyond doubt the extreme antiquity of the tumulus, and consequently of the temple. About a quarter of a mile from Arbor Low, in a westerly direction, is a large conical tumulus, known as Gib Hill, which is connected with the vallum of the temple by a rampire of earth, running in a serpentine direction, not dissimilar to the avenue through the celebrated temple of Abury. To any believer in the serpent worship of the Celtic tribes this fact will be of interest."

In 1861, that careful writer, Sir Gardner Wilkinson, published a paper on Arbor Low, with an excellent plan and accurate measurements.\*

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\* *Journal of the Archaeological Association*, Vol. xvi.

Mr. James Ferguson, the well-known architectural writer, published, in 1872, his great work on "Rude Stone Monuments," which has revolutionised the careless theories into which so many antiquaries had heedlessly drifted, and an important section of the book is devoted to Arbor Low and remains of a like character in Derbyshire.\*

Mr. Ferguson's arguments as to the historic character and comparatively late date of such monuments have remained up to the present time unanswered, and no serious attempt has been made to refute them. True, a long series of papers in supposed reply, from the pen of Mr. Goss, on the old Druidical sites, were printed in the *Reliquary*, † but no one worthy of the name of antiquary, or possessed of any power of weighing evidence, could regard these papers as any serious contribution to the question. They were entitled "Arbor Low," but not one-hundredth part of their contents had any connection with this erection.

At the meeting of the British Association at Sheffield, in 1879, Sir John Lubbock, the great author of "Prehistoric Man" and other kindred works, was appropriately chosen to read a paper on Arbor Low upon the spot itself. A copy of this paper has been recently kindly forwarded to me by the author.‡ His paper was characterised by that modesty which is not uncommon in really able men, and has a value of its own, notwithstanding the vagueness of its conclusions. From it I take the following extracts:—

"There can be no doubt that Gib Hill and the tumulus here were places of burial, but the original purpose of the circle is not so obvious. Mr. Bateman called it a temple, but the temple is the house of the Deity, and even when perfect this can scarcely have been regarded as a house. Still, just as the tomb was the house of the dead, sometimes a copy of the dwelling, nay, in some cases, the very dwelling itself of the deceased, so by an obvious chain of ideas the tomb developed into the temple. Now, we

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\* *Rude Stone Monuments in all Countries; Their Age and Uses* (John Murray, 1873).

† *The Reliquary*, Vols. xvii., xviii., and xix.

‡ I find that this paper has been reprinted in the *Reliquary*, Vol. xx., pp 81-85.

may regard a perfect megalithic interment as having consisted of a stone chamber, communicating with the outside by a passage, covered with a mound of earth, surrounded and supported at the circumference by a circle of stones, and in some cases surmounted by a stone pillar or 'menhir.' Sometimes, however, we find the central chamber standing alone, as at Kits Coty House, near Maidstone, which may or may not have been covered by a mound; sometimes, especially of course where stones were scarce, we find the earth and the mound alone, sometimes only the menhir. The celebrated stone avenues of Carnac, in Brittany, and the stone rows of Abury, may, I think, have been highly developed specimens of the entrance passage; in Stonehenge and many other instances we have the stone circle. In fact, these different parts of the perfect monument are found in every combination, and in every degree of development, from the slight elevation scarcely perceptible to the eye—excepting perhaps when it is thrown into relief by the slanting rays of the setting sun—to the gigantic hill of Silbury; from the small stone circle to the stupendous monuments of Stonehenge or Abury. . . . Now, the natural question will arise, when was this monument erected, and I can but give the simple answer, I do not know. Only last week I was opening a barrow in Wiltshire with one of our best archæologists, Mr. Cunnington; he was asked the same question. 'I do not know,' he said; 'nobody does know, and nobody ever will know.' I should not like to go so far as that, why should we despair? When Bruce asked his negro guide what became of the sun at night, the man said that it was no use troubling ourselves about questions which were beyond the range of human intellect. More recently, Caunt laid it down as an axiom that we could ascertain nothing about the heavenly bodies excepting their mass and movement, yet he was scarcely dead before we had analysed the very stars. I fully hope, then, that one day this question also may be answered. But if we cannot reply in terms of years, still, some answer, I think, may be given."

In a book published in 1880 by Mr. Kains Jackson on ancient

monuments, there is some account of Arbor Low, but nothing original or much worth quoting.\*

Arbor Low is happily scheduled in the Ancient Monument Act of last session, and the nation is now responsible for its due preservation. A great debt of gratitude is due from all antiquaries to the quiet perseverance of Sir John Lubbock with this measure, a persistence that at last overcame the crass prejudice of the selfish and wanton.

As I am about, as briefly and concisely as I can, to set my own views before you about this stone circle, and its probable intention and age, and that in more positive terms than have been used by men so much more able than myself, as Sir John Lubbock, I wish first to state that I am doing so at the unsought request of our Society, and in supposed default of any one here to-day of better qualifications. Ecclesiology has for some time been my chief hobby, but in speaking to you of Arbor Low I am returning to an old love. In past years I have given a good deal of close attention and time to the consideration of our Rude Stone Monuments, not only in England, but also those famous ones at Carnac and Lockmariaker, as well as many less known ones in Brittany and in the south of France. When the British Association were at Sheffield, in 1879, I was invited to choose the Derbyshire excursion on which to address them, and originally selected Arbor Low, but on hearing that the services of Sir John Lubbock might be secured, I was the first to suggest that it would be right to invite him. The views, therefore, that I put forth are the same that I should have had the temerity to lay before that august Association. And I do so chiefly as a disciple of Mr. Ferguson's, whose suggestions have never yet been seriously contradicted.

Here, then, we are standing in a circle of some thirty or forty stones, originally, in all probability, standing upright and perhaps in pairs. The comparatively imposing position that it presents from a distance is owing to this circle being placed on an

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\**Our Ancient Monuments and the Land around them*, pp. 14—16.

artificially raised platform, formed by digging out a circular fosse. Measurements that I took here in 1869 gave 18 feet as the average width of the fosse, 21 feet as the average height of the vallum on the inside, and 173 feet as the diameter of the central platform. The longest of the prostrate stones that I could then measure was 8 feet 3 inches. To this enclosed area there are two wide entrances, opening north and south. On the east side of the south entrance is a barrow or tumulus, attached in an irregular way to the outer vallum. This was first explored about 1770, again by Major Rooke, in 1782; thirdly, by Mr. William Bateman, in 1824; and fourthly, with success, in 1845, by Mr. Thomas Bateman. It was found to contain a cist of irregular shape, consisting of thirteen limestone blocks. The principal objects found therein, in addition to calcined human bones, were two rude food vases or jars, a bone pin, a piece of flint, and a piece of iron pyrites.

Some 350 yards to the west of Arbor Low is a large conical tumulus, called Gib Hill, which used to be undoubtedly connected with the circle by a rampart of earth, now in most places worn level. It was explored in 1848 by Mr. T. Bateman. The interment was found close to the summit. The cist, consisting of five blocks of limestone, was removed, re-erected in the gardens of Lomerdale House, where I have seen it, and where I believe it yet remains. A small vase and calcined bones were found within the cist. In other parts of the tumulus were found "a battered celt of basaltic stone, a dart or javelin point of flint, and a small iron fibula, which had been enriched with precious stones."

The occupation of this island by man is usually divided by archæologists into five great periods:—

I. Palæolithic or First Stone Age, when the climate was very severe, and when man was coeval with the mammoth and woolly-haired rhinoceros, the hippopotamus, reindeer, white bear, and Irish elk. Stone implements were then used, but only rudely chipped.

II. Neolithic or Second Stone Age, when the climate had grown more temperate, causing the disappearance of the now



extinct animals, and when man had learnt to grind and polish his stone implements, and also to make rude pottery.

III. Bronze Age, when man's implements were of a combination of copper and tin.

IV. Iron Age, when that metal superseded the use of bronze.

V. Historic Age, from the advent of the Romans to the present day.

These conclusions have been arrived at from the careful study of the contents of grave-mounds, or barrows. Denmark abounds in these ancient interments, and the theory of the successive ages of stone, bronze, and iron, was propounded by antiquaries of that country. To Sir John Lubbock we are indebted for the useful division of the Stone Age into Palæolithic and Neolithic. According to the hard lines of the Danish system, when a barrow or tumulus contained bronze, it was assigned to a period beginning one or two thousand years before the Christian era; if iron, from the Christian era to about A.D. 1000; if no metal, but stone or bone implements, then its date was at least 1000 B.C., probably 2000 B.C., and possibly 10,000 or 20,000 B.C. But, true as is the order of succession of these ages, more accurate observation certainly establishes the fact that all these ages very considerably overlap each other. The mingled and various contents of English barrows, and in none is this mingling and variation so remarkable as in the Derbyshire barrows opened by Messrs. Bateman, prove conclusively the absurdity of drawing absolute conclusions from the presence of weapons that originated at a special era. Take four Derbyshire barrows as samples. At Cross Flats there were found with the skeleton, an iron knife and a flint spear head; at Gatley Lowe, a gold necklace set with garnets, a coin of Honorius, a flint arrow head, and a piece of iron stone; at Rolley Lowe, a brass coin of Constantine, a brass pin, some ornamented pottery, and several flint weapons; and in a barrow on Ashford Moor, iron and flint arrow heads side by side. Roman coins and Anglo-Saxon ornaments have been found in various other barrows in this immediate neighbourhood in conjunction with iron and stone implements. All the customs and habits of our daily life show

how foolish it would be to attempt to give dates on the authority of single articles. The Derbyshire oatcake, once so universally used, has had its day, but it is still to be found in the Peak, side by side with the wheaten loaf. Croquet still lingers and dies hard, notwithstanding all the counter attractions of lawn tennis; and if weapons were now buried with us, the mallet and the racquet might be found side by side. Or to take a graver instance, archery was practically used in warfare by English bowmen, several centuries after the almost general use of gunpowder, both in cannons and muskets. Therefore, the remains of a bow in an English interment would not prove that it was of fourteenth or thirteenth century date, for it might be sixteenth or even seventeenth.

The contents, then, of barrows that may be connected with Megalithic remains are really no positive guide to their date. Those who desire to consider them pre-historic can of course point, if they will, to flint chips or bronze weapons; but those, on the contrary, who consider them historic are equally entitled to point to iron helmets, Christian ornaments, or Roman coins. To argue, as is often done, that all instruments or traces of later ages have been added in subsequent interments, or that Roman coins have been dropped and stamped in by the tourists or picnic parties of those days, seems to me almost unworthy of serious discussion.

That rude stone monuments such as this of Arbor Low were Druidical temples, is an assertion much easier to make than in any way to prove. There is not a solitary sentence in any of the classical or ancient authors, upon whom our whole knowledge of the Druids rests, that directly or indirectly in any way connects the Druids with the stone temples or stones of any kind. Had such temples existed in the days of Cæsar or Tacitus they could hardly have failed to be mentioned. Before 1700, no one ever dreamt of such monuments as Stonehenge and Avebury being pre-historic. Dr. Stukeley's silly fictions about Druids and serpent worship, and the serpent-like dispositions of stones extending over miles of hill and dale, are wholly due to his own

lively imagination, and it is astounding that they gained the credence which for so long a time pertained to them. Those who have argued that Stonehenge and other circles such as Arbelow were astronomical observatories or orreries of the British Druids or earlier races, have hitherto failed to produce a single rational account of the way in which these stones could be used for such a purpose. As Mr. Ferguson says, "They have not as yet pointed out one single observation that could be made by these circles that could not be made as well or better without them." If we were here at the right times we could doubtless see the sun rise over some of these stones of Arbelow, and set behind others, but our observations would be equally interesting and valuable if the stones were altogether sunk below the sward.

The views, then, with respect to rude stone monuments, that I wish very briefly to put before you, are these—and again let me refer all interested in this subject to the scholarly, interesting, and unanswered work of Mr. Ferguson on this subject—

I. That they are generally sepulchral, or connected directly with the rites of the dead. About three fourths of our English stone circles, for example, have yielded sepulchral deposits to the explorer, and the remainder are practically unexplored.

II. That they are not temples in any usual or proper sense of the term. The assertions that they are temples are merely built on unsupported surmises, and their size, position, open character, lack of ornament, and a score of other reasons, all militate against such conclusions.

III. That they were generally erected by partially civilised races after contact with the Romans.

In October, 1873, I was specially visiting and minutely examining that greatest and most famous of Megalithic monuments, Carnac, in Brittany. By great good fortune at the time of my visit, the authorities of the department were moving back one of the finest stones, that measured nearly 12 feet from the ground, in order to widen the public roadway. The base was buried some 6 or 7 feet in the ground. I was the first to descend into the hole from whence it was taken. In the closely pressed ground

below its base was wedged a Roman tile! Mr. Ferguson, in an admirable chain of reasoning, contends that Carnac was a national monument to commemorate the battle wherein the Romans were overthrown, *circa* s.c. 400. Is not this tile irrefutable evidence that the Carnac stones are historic?

The great stone circles are a class of Megalithic remains peculiar to England, and are apparently the product of one people about the same time. The probability is great that they are military trophies of victory in connection with the burial of prominent leaders, and easily erected when large bodies of troops were present in the very sparsely inhabited districts where they are usually found. The probability is also great that their date is *circa* A.D. 500, and that they commemorate a series of battles fought by the Britons against the Saxons, and which are attributed by Irennius to King Arthur.

At any rate, so far as Arbor Low is concerned—and I have only been able to give a very few of the arguments in the most meagre skeleton form—I have been myself convinced, after the closest and most unprejudiced study, that its date is subsequent to the Roman occupation of Britain, and that it was erected as a trophy of victory on a spot where a commander fell, or where the crisis of a battle was decided.

As to the Etymology of Arbor Low, the *lowe* is of course a barrow. Dr. Pegge connects the first half of the word with either *arar*, a hero, or with *Arbila*, a British chief, mentioned in Scholiast, or Juvenal's Fourth Satire. Either of these support our theory, but the most probably correct of all the proffered derivations is also in favour of its military character, viz., *arrhber*, which is Celtic for a fort. This gives it the same origin as Cold Harbour—*col*, hill, and *arrhber*, fort, that is the hill fort.

Those who have not hitherto made any study of our rude stone monuments, and may be disappointed at the size of Arbor Low, will not quarrel with Dr. Pegge's description of it as "a capital British monument," when I mention that there are only five circles that are larger.