

“Fairy Rings.”

WHAT THEY ARE.

By T. SHAKSPEARE.

TOWARDS the close of the eighteenth century a considerable advance on the commonly received theory as to the origin of green rings in the grass, as suggested by the poet Wm. Shakespeare in his *Tempest*, act v, scene 1, where he says :

. . . . “ You demy-puppets that
By moonshine do the green-sour ringlets make,
Whereof the ewe not bites ; and you whose pastime
Is to make midnight mushrooms ”

was made by a learned doctor and I presume it still holds the field, for I read Dr. Withering’s admirable substitution for the poet’s theory in Chamber’s *Encyclopædia*, 1890. In an article on “Fairy Rings” Dr. Withering’s theory is advanced almost a hundred years after its original publication, and with an air of finality that must have set all enquiry at rest. The writer in the *Encyclopædia* says, “Dr. Withering appears to have been the first, in 1796, to ascribe them to the growth of fungi ; and they are now known to be due to the outwardly spreading growth of the perennial subterranean species of *Agaricus*, even the common mushroom (*Agaricus Campestris*) showing a tendency to grow in the same manner.” The article proceeds : “The spot where the agaric has already grown is unfitted for its continued nourishment, and the mycelium (spawn) extends outwards to new soil, the fungus exhausting the soil to which it extends for the immediate nourishment of grass, but

enriching it afterwards by the highly stimulating products of its own decay." Then follows a delightful sentence. "Fairy rings of large size sometimes occupy the same situation for many years." The idea that it might have walked off in a night is as fantastic, nay, more fantastic than the fairy origin. Finally, in the last sentence, we are afforded all unknowingly by the writer a clue to the real nature of the rings. "The circle is almost always imperfect, some accidental obstacle having broken the completeness of the expanding ring of mycelium." Dr. Withering's theory was but half the truth. Further examination would have enabled the doctor to discover a mycelium that could walk straight, not as here in a ring, and as a matter of ease could turn at right angles after six or seven feet of straight line, nine or ten inches in width, make another line of the same length, then turn again and, in fact to finish, make a perfect square, except for that place where "an accidental obstacle" interrupted its mathematical progress.

I began my investigations with a new theory, and found it confirmed in the first field I ventured into. I had imagined on these circles a beehive structure, in other words, an ancient British dwelling, and the "obstacle" which prevented the intelligent mycelium performing the circle was not accidental but intentional, for it was the doorway into the building. In other words it was ground which had not been dug to insert the woody foundation of the dwelling, as the green ring part had.

Let us exercise our imagination a little further. We can imagine that our remote ancestors tore down the branches of trees, dug a round or, as we see, a square trench, excepting space for doorway, stuck rows of the thick ends of the branches in the trench and filled up with daub. As the daub spread upward the branches would bend in on all sides and so assume the beehive shape. The beehive shape was not intended to begin

with: the building was found to assume that shape by the weight of the daub upon its yielding lighter parts. As a matter of fact, mushrooms must have a vegetable foundation, and here lies the origin of the mushroom or fairy rings. The mushroom springs out of the decaying vegetable matter that is all that is left—the site— of the ancient human habitation. I am going to assume that most, probably all, of my discoveries, now to be described, relate to more substantial, *i.e.*, to pile dwellings, which mark a later stage of civilization, yet may be thousands of years old.

During my visit to Ilkeston in August, 1919, I made many inquiries after mushroom rings and visited fields in the following order and with the results described:—

Field said to be on Swansea farm, west of the railway bridge on Bramcote Road, at Trowell, Notts., bordered by the Erewash: In this field I found (1) a faint oval, 17 feet by 11 feet; (2) nearly a square, 10 feet by 6 feet (faint); (3) a round, 8 feet 6 inches in diameter (south, faint); (4) a square, west, 5 feet by 8 feet; (5) round, to the south, 13 feet across, faint; (6) another of a D shape. The river bank exhibits a great scoop where the clay and loam, suitably kneaded by the aid of the contingent water, was removed to aid in the building of the afore-found six structures whose sites only remain.

Field on the way to Dale from Derby Road, Ilkeston, just before getting to the second bridge, over the Nutbrook. On the pathway a few yards before the bridge there is a ring 11 feet in diameter. After crossing the bridge, and proceeding about a hundred yards on the footpath, there is a ring 10½ feet in diameter (faint).

In the next field towards Dale there is another ring in the footpath faintly marked with dark green grass and a line of dark green grass running through the middle of it, as though it had been two-chambered. The footpath goes through one half and has nearly obliterated it. It is

about 10 feet across. There were several parts of circles, one 12 feet in length, bending west.

Retracing my steps to the Nutbrook, I noticed several places where clay and loam had been scooped from the bank as building material for the dwellings whose sites I had found. By a subsequent discovery two fields away (north) on Thacker Barn pasture I came to the conclusion that these sites on the road to Dale had been outpost dwellings to a village set about two hundred yards back from the road. As to the road, I adjudged it to be an ancient British road which existed ages before the district was enclosed into what we improperly call fields, and which should be called "closes." A field is properly the exact opposite of a close—a large open space.

A close on Thacker Barn farm, nearer Derby Road: On crossing the private bridge over the brook to Thacker Barn farm, I first noticed a large scoop in the brook side and obviously the land had been broken down for some distance in order to carry away material for building the village. Quite recently the farmer had brought a horse and cart down, and one of the green rings in the field had been cut up by the cart wheels, and the soil underneath was black, as if carbonized. My description will begin with the eastern part of this pasture, which is divided partly by a hedge. To the east or north-east of the hedge (which runs east to west) I saw three or four rings and a triangle, but all faint, showing great age. The size of one of the largest rings was 14 feet in diameter. The triangle had a doorway to the west, the sides $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length.

On the south-west side of the dividing hedge I found a site shaped like a heart, measuring 6 feet in the centre, and with a dark patch of grass near by where refuse may have been thrown or a fire burned.


Close by was a round site 8 feet in diameter. Up and down the pasture I detected four or five others, but the

largest was the one the cart wheels had cut up, for this was 18 feet in diameter.

I consider this was a village, very ancient, and the sites are very faint.

A day or two later I transferred my attention to fields in the neighbourhood of Sourbrook farm, Kirk Hallam parish (a mile or more south of Thacker Barn site). The road to the farm is a well-marked road, but before reaching the farm itself I turned to the right, where there is an ancient footpath to Dale. In a close to the north-east of this path, two or three closes from the cart-road, I found the sites of ten dwellings. I entered the field at the south end and believe my notes begin there, where there were five in a row. (1) 9 feet in diameter, wall about a foot thick, extra thick growth of grass in the middle of the ring, faint; (2) 5 feet in diameter; (3) $9\frac{1}{2}$ feet in diameter; (4) 6 feet in diameter; (5) 8 feet 4 inches from north to south, where the door was, and 9 feet from west to east. Door in south, the look-out being straight to the belt of trees around the pool of water.

No. 5 was this shape ; (6) this was shaped

like a horse shoe ; (7) 9 feet across; (8) was the

site of a long wall built from east to west and would lean over to the north, keeping out south-west wind and rain. It was 11 feet long and had flanges at each end, thus

shaped ; (9) another similar, like the last, about

18 or 20 feet from the ditch at the bottom of the close; (10) very faint, to the left of the gate, about $8\frac{1}{2}$ feet across; (11) higher up the field, about 100 yards from the gate to the north, a green triangle, with a shortening of two sides for the doorway, the longest side 9 feet, the shorter sides $8\frac{1}{2}$ feet; (12) most distinct of all is a round site

18 feet 4 inches in diameter. It had a doorway in the south four feet wide. The outlook south is exceedingly pleasant to-day.

To the west of the above is a semi-circle in the grass 12 feet long, perhaps a shelter. A little to the north the grass grows rich in half of an ellipse which looked 18 feet long. The hedge forming the close to the south is stuck as it were in a double ditch, perhaps an ancient protection to this hamlet.

Crossing the close to the south I passed through a gate leading to the Dale tip. Here in an ungrazed, rough grass I noticed a circle 13 feet in diameter distinguishable only because it is full of a long-eared herb. The signs of the wall have perished, but the herb may indicate bedding material which has seeded and grown on the floor of the vanished dwelling.

The rain caused my return to Ilkeston.

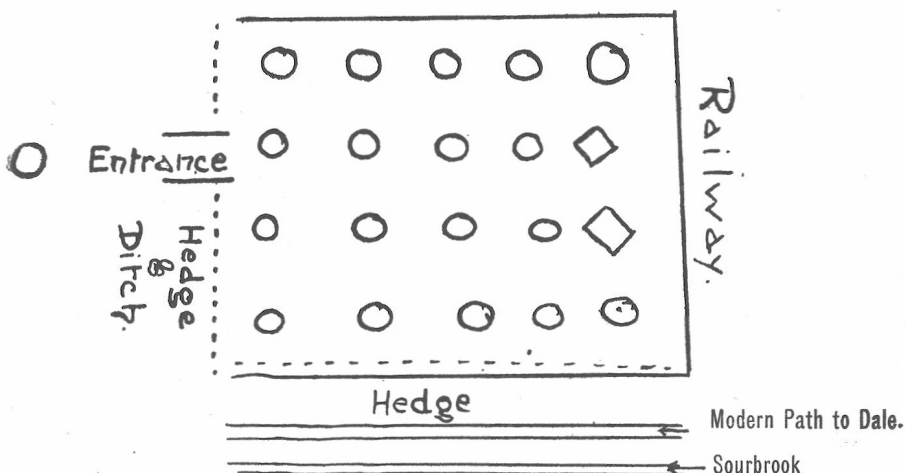
A day or two later I made my greatest discovery. On this occasion, having my son and two friends with me, we passed Sourbrook farm, and going through the gate into the road to Stanton, we turned off the road by the first gate to the right, and then looking to the left, we beheld a stile. Climbing over this we passed diagonally to the south-west corner of the close, where we entered another close, at the end of which and outside it, the Dale-Stanton railway runs. In this close we counted, I think, as many as twenty-two sites and one we found, as we returned, in the close next to it, making twenty-three sites. It is a close of ridge land, and the ridges pressed nearly flat by the population that once inhabited the vanished dwellings whose sites we were recognising for what they were after perhaps a thousand years. The sites varied from 20 feet to 5 feet in diameter, but the majority were from 14 feet to 7 feet in diameter. One was of straight lines and the sides were respectively, 8 feet, 14 feet, $12\frac{1}{2}$ feet, and 6 feet in length. This was

on the second ridge, to the west, counting the ridges from the north. Another "line" site was four feet by five feet in diameter. Near the entrance to the close were two "ring" sites of which the shape was imperfect, probably built by an amateur architect. One site was shaped something like a horse shoe with extensions at

end, thus



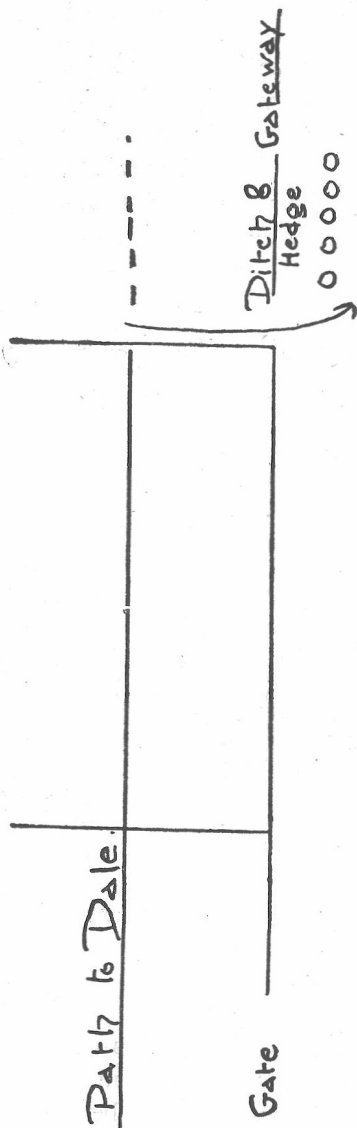
The plan of the village was apparently uniform, as —



See Plan (from memory) of sites in close north-east of Sourbrook farm on page 88.

NOTE.

The discovery of the site of a wood-village near the south-west border of the parish of Kirk Hallam, or perhaps in the parish of Stanton, may come to be regarded as having a bearing on the name of the parish of Stanton (stone town), *i.e.*; Stanton may have been so named to distinguish it from the village which was made of wood, and which existed about the distance of a mile



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Cart Road From Kirk Hallam

away. In another part of the county, near Bakewell, there is a name which indicates the use of both stone and wood buildings, viz., Stanton Woodhouse.

NOTE BY EDITOR.—I know of a Park in Surrey where there are two very large 'Fairy Rings,' and where soil from inside a ring and some from outside it were thoroughly analysed, and found to be exactly identical.

NOTE BY AUTHOR.—This should be so in most cases, but supposing a pile dwelling burnt down *in toto*, the thick thatch of the roof itself would account for the black soil in the ring, or ordinary ruin and decay would produce it.

The writer concludes that these "rings" and other markings are evidences of the earliest occupation of the Saxons. There was a forest from Derby to the Erewash, hence timber dwellings would be first made hereabouts.
