

DEVONSHIRE HEDGES.

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A LITTLE eminence on Whitchurch Down commands an interesting view.

There is the Down, glorious in gold or purple, and, in the distance, the wild Moor breaks into craggy Tors.

But between Down and Moor there is a belt of cultivated land, divided into fields.

What must strike an observer, as he gazes at this belt of enclosed land, is the curious irregularity in the shape of its fields. It has been well likened to a patchwork quilt.

This is remarkable ; but if you cross the Down and enter one of those fields you may discover something still more remarkable, because when you get there and look about you, you find yourself in a kind of fortress. You are hemmed in by no simple hedge which you could creep through, no mere stone wall which you could vault over, nor by a low earthwork ; but you find yourself confronted by a combination of them all.

There is the earthwork, but it is faced and built up with solid masonry : granite blocks of all sizes, some huge, some quite small, and topping this construction is the hedge, which in some cases has grown into big trees.

Now this suggests questions : What does it mean ? Why should the fields in this part of Devon be thus enclosed ? Questions easily put ; and yet, as far as I am aware, never put before. I am simply amazed at the scant notice these constructions have received. I have waded through nearly sixty volumes of your *Transactions* in order to find some explanation, but in vain.

If in my guesses at the origin, date, and purpose of these field divisions I should stimulate some, whose learning is far more complete, to deal with the subject, this paper will not have been read in vain.

I. ORIGIN. Is there in the neighbourhood any construction of an earlier date that resembles these field divisions ?

Undoubtedly there is, and you will find it in the Hut Circles on the Moor.¹

I cannot claim any first-hand acquaintance with those wonderful relics of the habitations of Neolithic Man ; but a committee of your Association has been at work on them for many years, and the result of its labour is to be found in various volumes of your *Transactions*.

This is how the Committee in its Report, read at South Molton in 1894 (Vol. XXVI), describes the handiwork of these Neolithic Men : "The Builders collected slabs of granite and set them up in a rude ring, such slabs being about 3 feet high. The spaces between the slabs were filled in with smaller stones rudely coursed ; and then the whole circle was backed up with vags or turf."

Again allow me to quote this as to the method of construction, from the Third Report of the same Committee : "The outside ring was made up of large blocks, and the wall above these was built up of stones and turf together."

When the Association met at Okehampton in 1895 (Vol. XXVII), the remarkable Hut Circle at Grimspound was reported on. "It is the opinion of some of the Committee after much consideration that Grimspound can never have been erected for military defence, and that it was simply an enclosure for cattle against wolves."

The article on "Early Man" in the *Victoria History of Devonshire*, by Mr. R. Burnard, gives a good deal of attention to Grimspound.

"The enclosing wall of Grimspound presents in several places two faces, the one outer the other inner, comparatively perfect, showing that the wall originally did not consist of a congeries of stones piled together at random, but was composed like the hut walls of stones, some set on edge, and others laid in courses." (p. 350.)

I have spoken of the Hut Circles as Neolithic. Mr. Burnard is of opinion "that probably the great bulk of the hut circle occupations of the Moor was during a period when stone implements and weapons were still in general use, but bronze was known and employed to a limited extent." (p. 350.)

¹ "There are ancient stone-faced hedges on Dartmoor which, when the earth is removed, present 'avenues' precisely identical with those of Merivale." *History of Devonshire*, by R. N. Worth, p. 328.

To come to more recent times, may not our field divisions bear some relationship to the Anglo-Saxon fortification ?

“Their only attempt to improve upon the natural defences of hill or river was to add a fence or hedge, perhaps on an earthen rampart, on the least protected sides. Thus the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that in 547 Bamburgh was enclosed by a hedge.” (See *Military Architecture—Medieval England*, p. 94.)

II. DATE. We come now to a consideration of the probable date of existing specimens. It would be determined by the period when the enclosure was made, and this is not easy to ascertain. As the Hut Circles themselves are enclosures, we may say that enclosures of some sort have been made ever since. The process has gone on for thousands of years, but at various periods it has been accelerated by social conditions. Thus, after the “Black Death” in 1348, sheep-farming, which demanded enclosures, became much more profitable than corn-raising, and the increasing wool trade made a steady demand for that commodity. For this it was necessary to enclose not only the common lands, but the lord’s demesne land.

The process continued with much friction and serious revolts till the seventeenth century, when there appears to have been a lull until the more modern Enclosure Acts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

I suppose no farmer in the present day, nor for the last three or four generations, would dream of enclosing his land with such a rampart. But though probably abandoned for the enclosure of fields, these structures are still used in the neighbourhood for marking out gardens. Houses built near Tavistock but yesterday are engirdled and protected by them.

Until some documentary evidence of the date of the earliest enclosures at present in existence can be produced, this subject must be left to conjecture, and the rest of what I have to say must be devoted to their purpose.

III. PURPOSE. Whatever the original purpose may have been, it is not necessary to suppose that it immediately operated in the erection of existing specimens. It is probable that a custom of construction so deeply rooted would persist long after its original purpose had ceased to operate. What I think we may fairly conclude is that the

original purpose was protection. The wall of the Hut Circle was built up for that purpose, and a similar need at a later date produced a similar result. This need was, I believe, due partly to the violent hostility to enclosures. How this feeling burst out into open rebellion in the reign of Henry VIII is a well-known fact of history. That it smouldered for centuries we can well believe. To check its ebullitions something solid and difficult to remove was required.

A pleasant paper on "Devonshire Lanes," read at Sidmouth in 1873, could not quite ignore these constructions, for the obvious reason that apart from them the Devonshire lane would lose its characteristic feature, and be no different from the lanes of other counties.

We are told that "anxiety for shelter was no doubt the main original cause not only of the small irregularly-shaped enclosures, but also of the high banks and fences which characterize the district."

That the anxiety for shelter as well as protection may have contributed to the persistence of this form of enclosure is probable; but whatever their original purpose, a method of construction which may date its origin from Neolithic Man, which gives to this county its characteristic lanes, and which after thousands of years is still practised, deserves something more than a passing notice.