

# THE MOORSTONE AGE.

ABSTRACT OF LECTURE BY  
MR. R. HANSFORD WORTH.

(Read March 29th, 1928.)

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THE handicrafts are of necessity influenced, largely determined, by the nature of the raw materials available. This is as true to-day as at any former time ; but with present interchange and trade the available choice is no longer severely localized.

Here, in the West, granite has always been a convenient substance of many applications. It was certainly in use in the early Bronze Age ; thereafter its increasing importance probably culminated in the early years of the seventeenth century, to dwindle to what is, even now, no negligible quantity.

A part of its adaptability has arisen from the variety of shape to which it is reduced by the failure of cohesion on the planes of its joints, under the influence of weather. The loose surface blocks which result are widespread over the moors. These blocks, and not quarry stone, have been the usual source of material until comparatively recent times. From its place of origin the rock took the name of "moorstone" ; the term "granite" came later when the science of geology was taking form.

The decline in the use of moorstone, coupled with the durability of the material, has resulted in a certain confusion in the minds of some would-be antiquaries. Objects remain the use of which is not a matter of common knowledge, and where knowledge ceases guesswork begins. Fortunately it is not as yet too late to describe and classify such objects, for the prevention of future error ; but within the limits of this abstract it is not possible to give more than a few examples.

### WOOD-AND-STONE GATES.

In Devon and Cornwall it is by no means unusual to find gates hung from moorstone posts in which holes have been sunk. Such holes occur near the end of the stone, and are usually about four

inches in diameter. In Devonshire such holes are about five inches in depth ; there are examples with holes of somewhat greater diameter and depth ; the hole does not pierce the stone. In Cornwall the holes are of similar diameter, but more usually pass completely through the stone.

The Rev. W. C. Lukis and Mr. W. C. Borlase figure several of these holed stones as prehistoric monuments. (*Prehistoric Stone Monuments of the British Isles, Cornwall*, Plate XXXIII.) We have it on the authority of the Rev. S. Baring-Gould that Mr. Lukis also intended figuring a Dartmoor example, but the true use was explained to him. (*A Book of Dartmoor*, page 133.) The illustration which Mr. Baring-Gould gives is like no Dartmoor example of which I have knowledge, and would be rather impracticable, but it serves to indicate the true use of these stones.

The holed stone, usually six feet or more in length, was laid on top of the hedge with the holed part projecting, the hole being downward, at a gateway. The back style of the gate extended upward ; it was rounded at the top, and it entered the hole in the stone. A smaller stone, also with a hole in it, was set in the ground, and the foot of the back style of the gate extended down, was rounded, and entered the socket so provided. Thus, top and bottom, the gate was held, but free to turn ; and the moorstone sockets played the part of hinges. More usually, on Dartmoor, the bottom of the back style was provided with an iron pin, which entered a small hole in the stone set in the ground. This was a superior arrangement, the iron turning in stone being a much better lasting device than wood in stone, where the wood must of necessity often be wet and thereby softened.

Here, too, comes the superiority of your Dartmoor man. The top stone which he provided, with the hole only sunk in it and not piercing it, protected the wood, and kept the rain from entering the end grain. The Cornishman was less alert ; he cut the hole right through the stone, and the top hinge must often have been wet. The line of holed stones at Tregaseal, which Lukis figures, is merely a collection of lower hinge stones, not quite finished, worked on the open moor, and never used. As to which see later. Plate II, Fig. 1, shows a holed upper stone now used as a gatepost on Ringmoor Down, and Plate II, Fig. 2, shows one of the very few wood-and-stone gates still in use ; it is near Lustleigh. It should be noted that "Wood-and-stone" is not infrequently distorted to "wooden-stone," to the further bemusement of artless enquirers.





FIG. 1. STONE GATE-HANGER, RINGMOOR DOWN

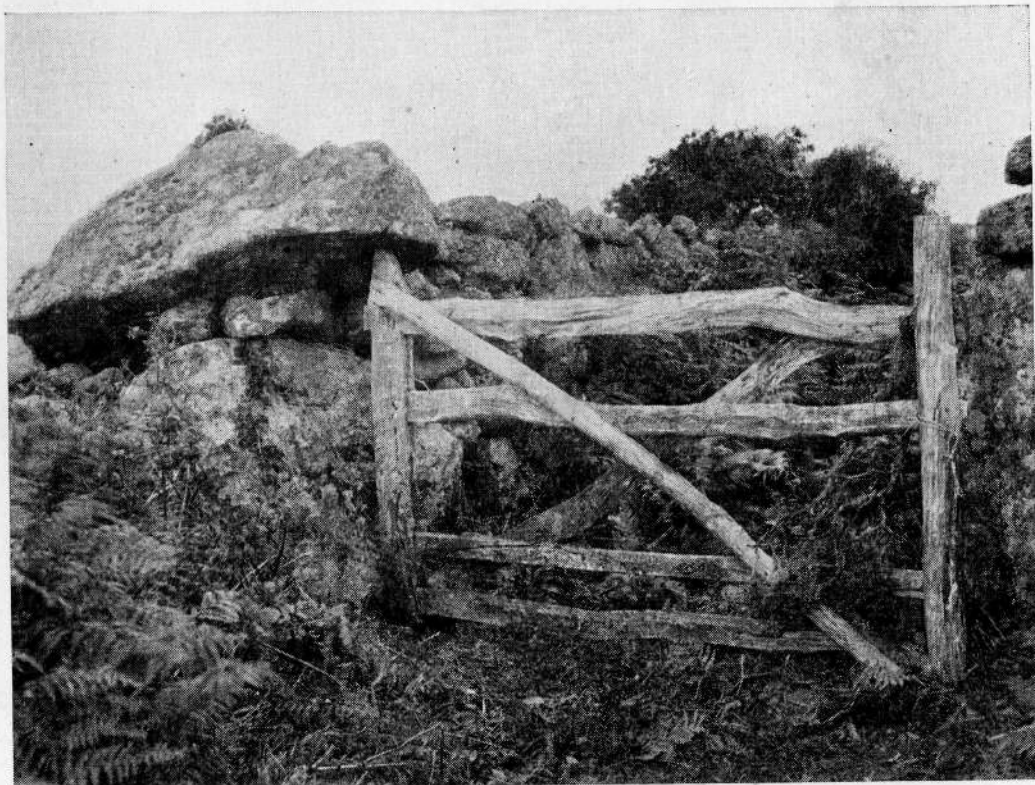


FIG. 2. WOOD-AND-STONE GATE, NORTH HARTON, LUSTLEIGH



FIG. 1. CHEESE PRESS, GRATTON, MEAVY

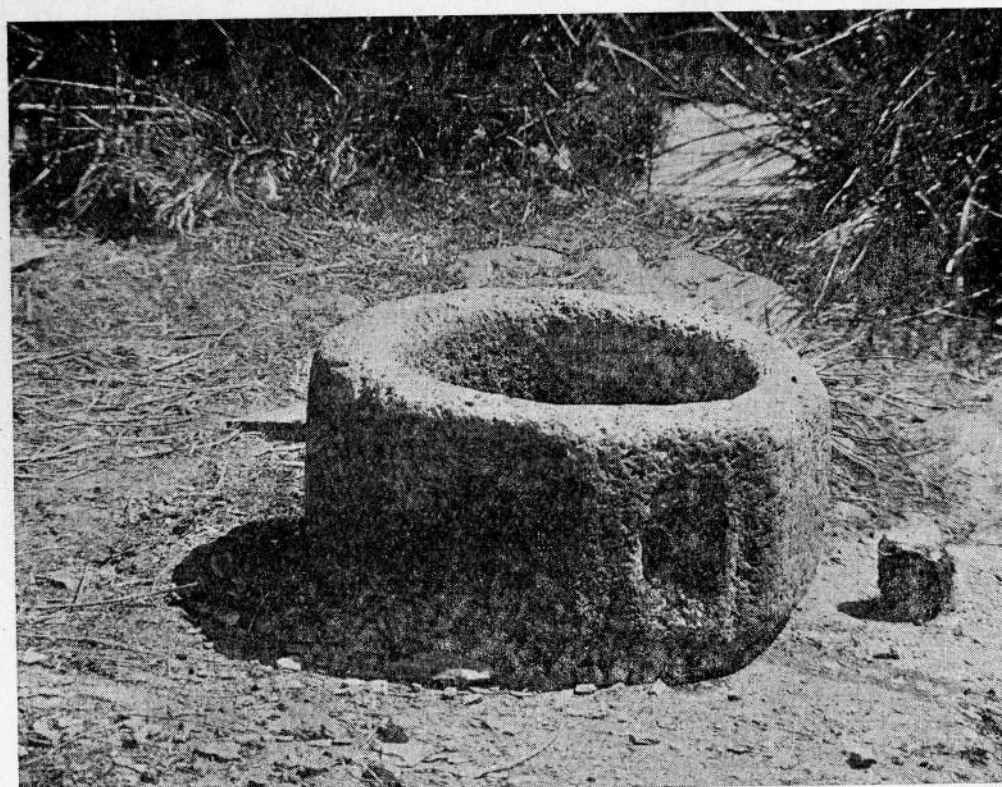


FIG. 2. CHEESE PRESS, DITSWORTHY, SHEEPSTOR

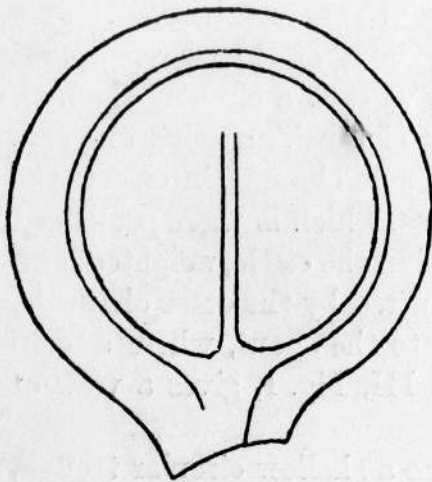




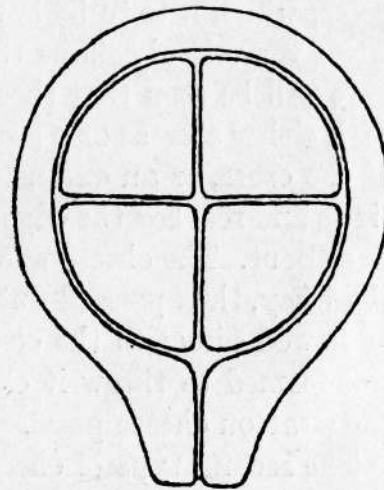
DIRECTING POST, BETWEEN TAVISTOCK AND  
ASHBURTON, NEAR YELLOWMEAD,  
WALKHAMPTON

## CHEESE PRESSES.

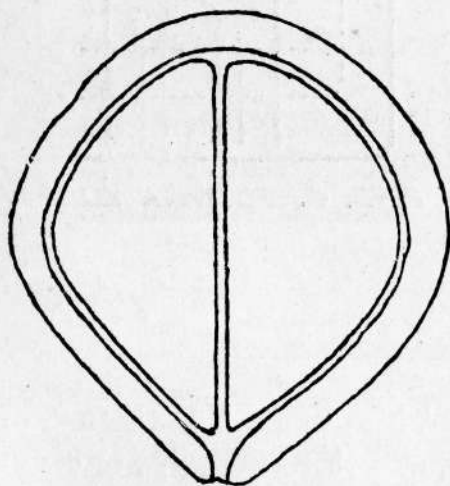
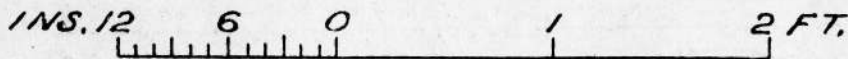
These are of two types, of the first of which the block here inserted shows four examples.

*CHEESE PRESSES.*

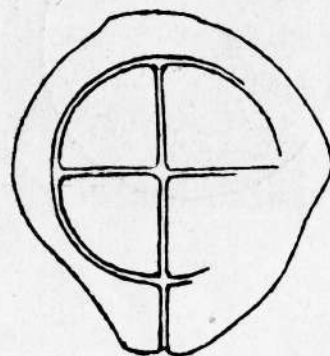
LONGSTONE.



GRATTON



MILTON COMBE



SHEEPSTOR

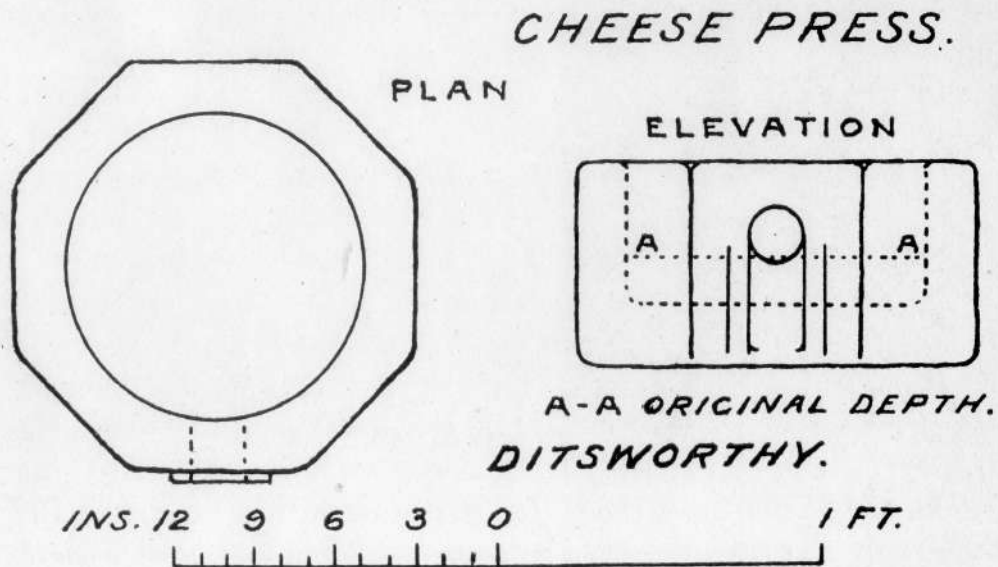
Here we are evidently fairly free from prehistoric suggestion. None the less, if error is possible someone will fall into it. Thus these stones have been alleged to be the heads of wheel crosses.

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Their upper surfaces were always dressed flat, and accordingly, when they fell from their domestic use, they often became part of the paving of the farm-yards. There is one such press in the paving of Gratton farm-yard, near Meavy; and we find Crossing stating that formerly there were in the yard the remains of a wheel cross. It was probably some similar idea that induced the transport to the churchyard at Sheepstor of another cheese press, which it is to be hoped will long be there preserved. This latter very clearly shows the lip for draining off the whey.

It will be seen that these stones have each a circular channel, with either a cross or a single straight channel, and that one arm of the cross, or an extension of the single channel, intersects the circle and reaches the edge of the stone, which is there prolonged to a spout. The cheese was placed within the circle, weighted, and the whey, thus pressed out, was conducted by the cross channels, or flowed direct to the circle, thence to the spout, where a drip was formed to throw it clear. Plate III, Fig. 1, gives a view of the Gratton cheese press.

The second type of cheese press was a shallow circular trough,



usually octagonal in outer form. There was a hole through one side to take the flow of the whey, and there were lips to confine the flow to one place on the outer circumference. Such a stone, with the trough subsequently deepened, may be seen at Ditsworthy Warren. A drawing is here inserted, and Fig. 2, Plate III, is from a photograph.

These presses have been supposed to have ecclesiastical uses as



fonts or stoups. So too have the rather elaborate stone mortars which formed part of the household goods of any well-furnished yeoman's house. The smaller of these have even been considered to have functioned as alms dishes ; there is a collection of them in Dittisham Church.

Cider presses were formed on the lines of the cheese presses, but to a much larger scale. Both types are to be found ; the trough type is, however, of circular and not of octagonal outside form. The channels, in the other form, in place of being little more than grooves, are usually some three to four inches in width, by an inch or more in depth. A cider press of the slab type has been used as the base of a cross, in what must be a relatively modern reconstruction, at Boskenna, St. Buryan. A. G. Langdon tells us that this cross was re-erected in 1869. (*Old Cornish Crosses*, page 127, where it is illustrated.) This was probably a mere use of convenient material, without any error as to the nature of the press.

But, if the Western cider presses have misled no antiquaries, their homologues in the East have been more deceptive. There are in Tripoli certain press bases, formerly used in the extraction of oil from the olives. The whole oil extraction plant closely resembles the cider press of Devon and Cornwall, except that stone was used for the frame carrying the levers, in place of wood. The press bases had channels and spouts exactly resembling the cider press. These bases were claimed as altars by H. S. Cowper. (*The Hill of the Graces*, page 149, where illustrations will be found.)

#### DIRECTING POSTS.

In earlier days the tracks across the Moor were marked by stone crosses, set at such intervals as to give sufficiently frequent landmarks to the traveller. One such track may be followed from Dousland to Holne. At Dousland there is the base of a roadside cross. At Lowery there is another cross base. At Cross Gate, near Vinnylake, there stands a cross with octagonal shaft, the shaft restored, the head and base original. A cross east of Classenwell Pool, and another nine hundred yards further east, point toward Nun's Cross. Then there is a cross on a boulder to the south of Fox Tor Mire, followed by Childs Tomb, and that in turn by a cross at the south-east angle of Fox Tor Farm. This is followed by crosses on Ter Hill, two on Down Ridge, and Hornes Cross. Excellent ground for the traveller is thus marked out, the mires avoided, and the best stream crossing places indicated.

After the Reformation the same needs existed, but other means were adopted to meet them ; no new crosses were set up, but in their place directing stones.

In the Receiver's Book, No. 4, of the Plymouth Corporation, 1699-1700, there appears the entry : " Item paid toward defraying the charges of putting vpp Moorestones on Dartmoor in the way leading from Plymouth towards Exon for the guidance of Travellers passing that way the sune of.....2-0-0."

Most probably these stones are those still to be seen above Merrivale Bridge, where they lead from the head of the pre-historic rows to and across the land now enclosed at Yellowmead Farm, over the brow of the hill, and into the Meavy valley, south of Princetown. Their average distance apart has been two hundred yards. On the side toward Tavistock the stones are marked with the letter "T," and on the side toward Ashburton the letter "A" is inscribed. A photograph of one of these forms Plate IV ; the stone stands 466 yards north-west of Yellowmead Farm, and is five feet four inches in height.

#### PARTIALLY WORKED MOORSTONE OBJECTS LYING ON THE MOORS.

It was the habit of the stonemason of old time to take his tools to the moor, select a stone suitable to his purpose, and use the open moorland as his workshop. The object, be it millstone, beestone, trough, cider mill, or other, was completed and then brought to the place at which it was required. The advantage was two-fold : the stone might prove defective and be abandoned, the fashioned object was lighter than the block from which it had been cut, and easier of transport.

If no definite order was at hand the mason partly formed some object for which he might reasonably expect a future sale, using it as a chipping block. It results that many such partly formed or broken objects are scattered over the moor. There is a cross near the summit of Rippon Tor, not yet fully wrought from the boulder. There is a millstone near the stone rows at Merrivale, not completely worked. There is a cider mill between Scurton Tor and Branscombes Loaf, broken in transit. There are beestones at Belstone ; and there are troughs at various places.

The millstone near Merrivale has been alleged to be the capstone of a Cromlech, or dolmen. The old pound, within which it lies, has been called a "religious enclosure," and these in the first volume of our *Transactions*.

The lower holed stones for gates at Tregaseal have been treated as a prehistoric row of holed stones of unknown intent.

At least two partly formed troughs have been cut from stones forming the enclosing wall of prehistoric pounds at Shaugh Lake, and on Western Beacon. Such as these have been assumed to have formed a part of the paraphernalia of prehistoric rites, presumably of a bloody nature—the victim's dying cry had a great attraction for the early antiquary.

The lecture touched also on slip-bar gates, wrought stone stiles, bull's-eyes for the measurement of water, stone weights, mould stones and mortar stones of the tin industry, cider mills and their edge stone runners, and many other of the uses to which moorstone had been adapted. Some of these were dealt with in considerable detail.

The errors to which early workers were led in the field of antiquarianism are offset by the general accuracy of their observation. Too great stress must not be laid on their grotesqueness. It was a time of rather unguarded enthusiasm, which is unfortunately liable to recrudescences, through one of which we are at present passing. The one cure is field work, and that cannot be forceably administered. But even field work will not prevent a certain type of mind discovering that for which it looks, and that alone. For some the pig's trough must be and remain the altar, the domestic mortar, the early font.