

WHAT IS GRIMSPOUND ?

BY G. WAREING ORMEROD, M.A., F.G.S.

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VARIOUS opinions exist as to the purpose for which Grimspound was built. Polwhele, in his *History of Devon*, published in 1797 (vol. i. page 140), writes thus: "That Grimspound was the seat of judicature for the Cantred of Durius is no improbable supposition." Page 151: "Within that curious amphitheatre in the parish of Manaton, called Grimspound, are no less than 20 circles, not one of which exceeds a land yard (five yards and a half) in diameter. They all seem to have been formed by stones erect; but in each case where the pillars are fallen, or have disappeared, the circumference is distinctly marked by heaps of small stones. Some of the pillars which lie on the ground plainly point out their original station, and might easily be replaced. At present there are only two perfect circles, one of which consists of 35 pillars, the other of 27; in both cases the pillars are placed at equal distances, and there are six circles (each about twelve feet in diameter) in contact with each other. The wall that encloses these 20 circles is 96 land yards (528 yards) round. It was build with rough moor-stone without cement. In several places where it is entire it is about six feet in height, and of the same thickness; but it is in general in ruins, and a mere heap of stones. From the east part of this circular mound to the west are 22 land yards (121 yards), and from the north to the south 28 (154 yards). There is an entrance on the east side of this amphitheatre, and another on the west side of it, and at each entrance there is an appearance of a flat pavement. The north side of this wall, which is washed by the Grimslake, is the boundary between North Bovey and Manaton. As to the uses of the circle, there is no doubt but these monuments in general are of religious institution, and designed originally for the site of worship. The circles within the stone enclosure of Grimspound are the most remarkable

in Devonshire. It is probable that this spot was one of the principal temples of the Druids."

Rowe, in his *Perambulation of Dartmoor* (edit. 1856, page 55), under the head, "Pounds or Circumvallations," writes thus: "Grimspound is by far the finest and most extraordinary of all the relics of their class. The wall, or mound, is formed of moorstone blocks rudely piled up, but not so large as not to be easily displaced. The base of this rampart covers in some places a surface of 20 feet in breadth; but the average height of a section, taken at any point, would not exceed six feet. With the exception of an opening on the east and west sides the enclosure is perfect, surrounding an area of about four acres. The original entrance is supposed to have been on the south. The vestiges of ancient habitations within this primitive entrenchment are numerous. A spring rising on the easterly side, and skilfully conducted for some distance below the wall, supplied the inhabitants with pure water; and the whole presents a more complete specimen of an ancient British settlement, provided with means of protracted defence, than will perhaps be found in any other part of the island." Writing of Grimspound in another part of the same work, he adds (page 156): "A large stone on the eastern side of the circle marks the spot where the spring rises, and from whence beneath the foundations of the wall it flows, under the name of Grimslake, to join the Webburn. After a dry spring, and a whole month of continuous hot weather immediately preceding, I have found at Midsummer a clear and copious stream issuing immediately from the source." After noticing that Grimspound was totally unprovided with any kind of ditch or additional outwork, Mr. Rowe adds (page 157): "The rampart is doubtless much lower than it was originally built; but unlike many of the *valla* of our hill-forts and earthworks, it has not been tampered with, or the original design altered by successive occupants."

Sir Gardner Wilkinson, in a paper "On the British Remains on Dartmoor," in the 18th vol. of the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 1862, notices Grimspound. He writes: "Its position is well chosen to command the passage over the hills, and to intercept the communications through this part of the country. The site has not been chosen without due consideration of its merits in a military point of view; for though we should now consider it to be commanded by the hills on either side, this was no objection in olden times for the position of a fortified town."

In 1829 the late Rev. Mr. Mason, of Widdicombe-in-the-

Moor, had a plan of Grimspound taken by Mr. A. C. Shillibeer. The contents of the pound, exclusive of the boundary wall, are four acres statute measure; the boundary wall, one rood thirty-six perches; in all, four acres, one rood, thirty-six perches.

In a paper "On the Hut Circles of the Eastern side of Dartmoor" by myself, read before The Teign Naturalists' Field Club in August, 1861, and afterwards printed in a more extended form in the *Journal of the British Archæological Association* for 1864, I endeavoured to show that the circular huts on Dartmoor formed groups or villages, and in each of these one hut was of a character much superior to the remainder. The remains at Bovey Combe Head, near Grimspound, are eminently of this character. They are situate on a spur of the hill on the easterly side of the summit of Shapley Common, so far below the brow of the hill as to be in some degree screened from the winds and storms of Dartmoor; but at the same time in one of the most commanding situations of the district. This place, I think, was probably the dwelling of the person who presided over Grimspound, and the numerous hut dwellings in the vicinity of Vitifer;—probably those of the men who streamed the tin in the Webber, and made the open cuttings—"The Old Men's Works"—between Headland and Vitifer.

It will have been noticed that the description of the wall of Grimspound as given by Rowe differs from that of Polwhele. The latter states that the wall was built of rough stone, and that in *several places where it is entire it is about six feet in height, and of the same thickness*. Rowe speaks of the enclosure as a wall, or mound, of blocks rudely piled up; that it is doubtless much lower than it was originally built; and that it has not been tampered with, or the original design altered by successive occupants. It is evident that Rowe considered, erroneously, the enclosure to have been originally a mound; Polwhele, however, is correct, for in a few places slight portions may still be seen. These are not, however, now six feet high. At the most perfect place on the south side several courses can be seen, both on outside and inside, and the diameter of the wall is there nearly ten feet. To me it would seem that the outer and inner parts of the wall were built in courses of rough masonry, the interior part being filled with irregular stones, mixed probably with earth. The supposed south-eastern entrance can still be seen.

For what purpose was this enclosure made? Polwhele considers that it was a Druidical Temple; Rowe and Sir

Gardener Wilkinson, that it was a fortified town; the late Dr. Croker, in his *Guide to the Eastern Escarpment of Dartmoor* (page 15), writes: "It could hardly have been an encampment, on account of its situation in a valley."

Firstly, as to Polwhele's opinion. Had he examined many of the huts on Dartmoor, he would have seen that they are generally formed internally of an upright circle of granite slabs, and that against these stones and earth are placed, sometimes in courses, but oftener rudely piled together, and that occasionally, but rarely, a third or outer circle has been built. The outer wall in the generality of circles often falls away, and the inner row of slabs remains; these are the stones which Polwhele considered to be a series of pillars. Without entering into the vexed point whether certain series of remains are ascribed correctly to the Druids or not, it will be sufficient to remark that those remains, as at Merrivale and Teigncombe, are accompanied by stone avenues, stone pillars, kistvaen, and cromlech; these are at Grimspound completely absent. There does not appear to be a particle of evidence that Grimspound was ever a place for worship, and I am not aware of any subsequent author agreeing with Polwhele's opinion.

Secondly, was it a fortified town? Grimspound is 154 yards from north to south, and 121 from east to west, and contains within the wall four acres; it is placed in a narrow side valley on the northerly slope of Hamildon Down, which rises rapidly from the pound. It is overlooked on every side; from the north and east it would be at the mercy of the archer, and from the south the archer would also have command over it, and a few strong men, armed with the missile found on the spot, stones of granite, certainly with a sling, and in a great measure by the hand, would soon compel this so-called fortress to surrender. With respect to the stream mentioned by Rowe, as being conducted through the pound, this is not mentioned by Polwhele. The course exists, but I have never, though often visiting Grimspound in the course of the last fifteen years, seen any water in it; it was a diversion of part of the Grimslake, to which it seems now to have returned.

Thirdly, was it a village, or association of huts? With the south-western part of Dartmoor I am not well acquainted; but I believe that I have thoroughly examined most parts of the remainder of the moor; and the huts, circles, and other remains from Cawson to Rippon Tor I have carefully mapped. In the districts with which I am acquainted the villages consist of

detached huts, which for the most part have had fields adjoining them, and the traces of the enclosure walls can now be seen. In connection with these villages sometimes circular enclosures occur, varying in size and character, of which that of Grimspound is the largest that exists on Dartmoor. The next in size is Dennabridge Pound, near Dartmeet. This is nearly circular; it measures from north to south 110 paces, and from east to west 117 paces; the height of the wall is about five feet and a half; the thickness at the base three feet, and at the top two feet and a half, and has a double facing. Mr. Bray, in *The Tamar and the Tavy* (vol. i. page 135), says: "Though far beyond the memory of man, this superstructure is unquestionably modern when compared with the base or foundation, which is ruder, and of larger stones." Mr. Bray thought that he could distinguish the vestige of a small circle near the centre. Mr. Spence Bate, in a "Report on the Archæology of Dartmoor," in the *Transactions of the Devon Association* for 1871 (page 497), mentions enclosures at Shell Top, near the head of the Yealm, which, he says, are of very similar character to Grimspound. These he considers to be villages. The remains at Shell Top I have not seen. Those at Yealm Head consist of two adjoining enclosures, containing a few huts, and several hut circles are situated externally, and at some of these the traces of enclosure walls can be seen. Of the two enclosures the lowest is nearly circular, and is about 96 paces from north to south, and has five huts near the west, north, and easterly sides, of which the foundations are clear; the rest of the area is apparently open. The adjoining enclosure is of an irregular, semi-circular shape, being probably an addition to, and is larger than the last-mentioned, and contains the foundations of five huts, and scattered stones, which probably are the ruins of a few more. These are mostly near the enclosure wall; one near the centre is of a higher style of hut, having an outer wall. As at Grimspound, there are no dividing walls inside either of these enclosures. The walls of the hut circles are similar to those generally met with, but the inner row of upright slabs does not always occur, but one example is shown in Mr. Bate's sketch. The enclosure walls were probably not more than three feet wide at the base, and not larger than the moor walls in that district. On Shuffle Down, to the west of the Teigncombe village, there are old pounds, small in size; and at Vitifer and Headland they also occur; but these last are of comparatively recent state. Some of what are popularly known as sacred circles, as, for example,

those at Scor Hill, the Grey Wethers, and perhaps Fernworthy Circle, may possibly have been used for the purpose for which I think Grimspound was built. Similar erections, with the space intervening between the upright stones, filled up with turf and furze in other parts of the world, as in Canada, and near the Cape, are, I am informed, used for that purpose; but those I have named are claimed as "sacred," and I will not notice them further. What, then, is the purpose for which Grimspound was built? I do not for a moment suppose that it was built either as a place for worship, or as a place of defence; had it been intended as a place of residence, there is no reason why a strong perpendicular wall should be required round twenty huts of small size in a sheltered spot, when so many huts of a superior character in more exposed stations had no protection at all. But in the days when Grimspound was built there were doubtless wolves on Dartmoor, and, if legends are true, there were bands of robbers, to whom cattle would be also a great temptation. For the protection of cattle from these, and in the severe winters of Dartmoor, I think that Grimspound, Dennabridge, now used as the pound for the cattle straying on the forest and other smaller pounds, were erected, and that the huts were for the dwellings of the owners or herdsmen.