

# Introductory Article.



## DARTMOOR PRESERVATION.

BY ROBERT BURNARD.

**T**HE English people have but little knowledge of the unique, wild, and mysterious region known as Dartmoor, but this ignorance, thanks to the publication of books, tracts, and articles, bearing on the subject, is gradually being dispelled, and it is now no new experience to find that strangers to the fair County of Devon are frequently recording their favourable impressions of the land of rugged tors, of deep gorges, and brawling streams.

The railways, which now encircle the moor on every side, are, however, bringing each year larger numbers of roving holiday makers intent on sport, the picturesque, or the curious. Whether this increasing popular appreciation is an unmingled blessing, as far as the romantic seclusion and solitude of this primeval region is concerned, may be questioned, but on the other hand, it must be granted, that the more persons there are who take an intelligent interest in the matter, the more likely it is, that this vast playground will be preserved for popular use and enjoyment. Devonshire men above all others, should be the first in their efforts in this direction, for they have in their midst this beautiful land of rock and river on which many of them have valuable rights conferred, or acquired, so long since, that their origin is veiled in the mists of antiquity.

That there is the utmost need of increasing vigilance on the part of the many as against the few is patent, for the lords for generations past have taken every opportunity of extinguishing public rights, and by wholesale encroachments have robbed men who were either too ignorant or weak to protect themselves.

This pilfering spirit has been so persistently intense, and has had such wide reaching effect, that they, who above all others, should have been virtuous, have displayed the greatest vice, and the evil example thus given has led to petty spoliation by the poor peasant, who has sought in the cultivation of the strips of moor nearest at hand, a means of eking out his hard-earned and oftentimes meagre wage.

The forces of nature are slow, though potent, on the elevated heights of Dartmoor, but with the exception of the raging flood which sweeps away the ancient and the modern bridge with furious impartiality—they appear to be as nothing compared with the destruction wrought by the hand of man.

Where in broad England can be seen such an extent of land, undisturbed by cultivation, and carrying on its surface so many hoary monuments of prehistoric human beings? The cromlech menhir, barrow, cairn, stone avenue and kistvaen—the whole of these archæological curiosities, with the exception of the first named, exist in numbers, whilst on many of the heights of the borderland, are still to be seen the ditch and rampart, remnants of the hill forts which guarded the passes leading from the rugged moor down to the champaign country below.

On the slopes of the moor itself, we can contemplate the remains of enclosures, with walls rudely built up with "clitter" boulders, and speculate as to whether they are tribal forts, night refuges for a pastoral people, in a land where bears and wolves were once by no means uncommon, or secure places in which the bronze age miner stored his hoard of block tin won by diligent washing from the alluvial ground in the valley below.

Studded about, but more in the southern half of Dartmoor than in the northern, are many hundreds of the foundations of the circular huts of the former primitive inhabitants of this region—the hunters, the shepherds, and the tanners, or perhaps a race who combined all these employments, and who traded with merchants from over the sea long before Julius Cæsar set foot upon our shores.

That Dartmoor was not a sealed district, even in very early times, is clearly shewn by the fact that the remains of a roughly paved broad and continuous pre-Roman road crosses its breadth from east to west and was connected with the main artery which ancient writers affirm, served as a means of communication from one end of our island to the other.

Coming down to later times we have examples of crosses, some perfect, but the greater number in various stages of mutilation, ancient smelting or blowing-houses, and interesting bridges spanning the streams with huge slabs of granite resting on rudely formed piers of dry laid blocks of stone. The larger proportion of these examples of the ancient handiwork of man have been exposed for centuries to the destructive influence of his more modern descendants.

All the known barrows, cairns, and kistvaens have been rifled in search of treasure, and the pottery, weapons, and ornaments, which many of them contained, have been abstracted without record, or regard, for the information which these objects convey of the epoch, and habits of a people who lived before the historic period commenced. The few undisturbed interments which have been intelligently examined have yielded objects which connect the occupants of these primitive tombs with the bronze age in Britain, and we also find evidence of the cremation of the dead, as well as inhumation of the body in a contracted position, in kistvaens, which always run longitudinally north and south—or nearly so—and never east and west—thus pointing to a pre-Christian period when the veneration of the Sun, fire worship, and the peculiar cult which demanded from its votaries the sacrifice of children in the fiery lap of the hideous Moloch, was universal among such comparatively civilized people as the Carthaginians and their "forbears" of Tyre and Sidon.

An object of undoubted Baal worship has been discovered on the borderland of Dartmoor,\* and this points either, to the extension of this cult to early Britain or intercourse with a people who practised the abominations of the Canaanites.

What a flood of light would be thrown on the period of the stone avenues, if only the cairns and kistvaens, which are always associated with them, were now intact, and could be opened under proper supervision, and their contents examined, with the information and knowledge of our own times.

The careful and critical examination of the remains of the dead can be woven into an account of the living, for of such apparently slender material the story of the dwellers of the Yorkshire Wolds is charmingly told by Canon Greenwill, in his valuable and highly interesting work on *British Barrows*.

\* Kingsteignton—see *Devonshire Association Transactions*, Vol. 9, p. 170.

We need not follow the destructive newtake wall builder in his depredations on Dartmoor antiquities, he has been at it for many years, and although quiet just now, is quite ready to commence again, should the opportunity occur. Within the past few months, the Roundy Pounding, under Kestor Rock, was within an ace of destruction, and destroyed it would have been, probably before interference could be effective, if it had not been discovered that the enclosure which was to be partly made with the stones of this unique ruin would not pay for the necessary outlay.

It would be an insult to the readers of the *Western Antiquary* if they were to be asked whether they do not condemn in the strongest way possible the wanton destruction of monuments which can never be replaced, still they may with propriety be reminded that if the tangible remainder of the antiquities of Dartmoor are to be preserved, some practicable steps must be taken to strengthen the hands of those who have striven, and are now striving in this laudable direction.

There are, however, other dangers to Dartmoor, which must appeal to a larger number of the public than the limited section who interest themselves in the study of its archæology. The forces of encroachment have played sad havoc in the past. This is graphically portrayed in map accompanying the report of Mr. Stuart A. Moore, to the Committee of the Dartmoor Preservation Association, and it is at once seen that enclosures have been made from Dartmeet to Princetown which completely cut off the northern from the southern portion of the Forest, and in addition to this there are isolated specimens of considerable extent at Fernworthy and Huntingdon Warren. It is to be feared that this spirit of spoliation, now happily quiescent as far as the Forest is concerned, will soon become active if favourable opportunities occur, and it behoves all who take a shred of interest in the matter, to keep a vigilant watch on what is left to us of the Forest of Dartmoor.

This watchful attitude should be extended so as to include the proceedings of the War Office who appear, so it is said, to be determined to make the camp which is now annually formed in Okehampton Park for artillery practice, during the best of the summer months, a larger and more permanent affair. The military authorities have already extended the area of its operations, for a camp for infantry has been this summer, for the first time, pitched on Watchett Hill, a portion of the Belstone Commons.

This practical absorption of the large extent of moor lying between Cosdon Beacon, and the West Ockment, and for some miles south, must interfere with common and venville rights and although the exigencies of warlike education demands some patriotic sacrifice, care must be taken that reasonable access is given to all concerned in this large tract of grazing and fuel-providing country.

As it is at present, the cottagers complain bitterly of the difficulty they experience in getting in their "vags," and as they depend on this material for their winter firing, it is a serious matter for them, especially if the season be wet or unsettled. If this occupation is to continue, there should be at least a fair portion of the day understood to be set apart for free and safe access, during which time all gun and rifle practice should be discontinued. At present the hoisting of red flags on Yestor, and other heights, is the signal that it is dangerous to approach this portion of the moor, and the time that these flags shall be displayed or hauled down, appears to be quite at the discretion of the military.

It must not be forgotten, that many of the householders in the district bordering on the north quarter, derive considerable profit from the visitors who fill their houses in the summer holidays, and they certainly deserve some consideration at the hands of those who appropriate their commons and moors and employ them for dangerous purposes.

It is no uncommon thing to see unexploded shells lying about in places far remote from the firing base, and recently some visitors to Cranmere Pool, when returning to Belstone, were startled to see a shell burst, not five hundred yards from them, in the surrounding bog.

The Commons of Devonshire extend like a deep fringe around the boundaries of the Forest, and of which they probably once formed part and parcel. Their importance and extent can be best judged by reference to the map previously referred to.

There appears to be some difficulty in determining the exact legal position of these border lands as between the Duchy of Cornwall and the immediate lord or freeholder, but this does not effect the long and consistent witness of many generations as to the Commoners' rights on them.\*\*

Yet these rights are in imminent danger, for it has been proposed to absorb a portion of the Commons at Dean Moor, by wire fencing a district of some half-a-dozen miles in length.

This must be strenuously resisted by all who have any desire to preserve intact these great open spaces of our county. Should this attempt succeed through apathy or want of funds, other lords and freeholders will follow suit and the Commons of Devon will have ceased to exist. This would amount to a national calamity and an eternal disgrace to Devonshire.

As mere units, the public are powerless, but united as an Association for the preservation of public rights, they can, if they see fit, successfully resist all such attempts at deprivation. Fortunately, such an Association exists, and all that is now requisite, is that every man who cares for Dartmoor should become a member, and do all in his power to preserve this grand open space for our use, and for the enjoyment of those who will succeed us.

Let us cultivate the friendliest relations with the Duchy of Cornwall, for we have less to fear from it than the inferior lords, and the time may come, and that quickly, if the public do but interest themselves in the matter, when the Government might be asked to negotiate, and acquire by purchase, all the rights of H.R.H. the Duke of Cornwall over the Forest of Dartmoor, and thus this great and romantic region might be turned into a National Park, for the use and enjoyment of the people of this realm for ever.

There would be no interference with existing rights, and the great advantages to be gained, would justify any reasonable expenditure on the part of the richest, the smallest, and the most densely populated of all the powerful countries of the World.

\*\* See Sir F. Pollock's Introduction to *Dartmoor Preservation Association*, Vol. 1.

