

The Lost Stone Circles of North Somerset

By

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In this paper the stone circles of North Somerset are considered. The main portion will be devoted to those now lost. Of these circles most were free standing, that is without a surrounding bank and ditch. The stone circles form only one manifestation of the so-called Megalithic religion or cult. The relationship of the circles to other megalithic structures such as chambered long barrows, chambered round barrows, stone circles in barrows, dolmens and standing stones will only be touched upon. There is a tendency for stone circles, especially free standing ones, to have a distribution mainly within the highland zone of Britain as defined by Fox (1947). This is only a very broad generalization. The interconnections of stone circle sites in Britain and on the Continent require much study for their elucidation. It is not the purpose of this article to do this.

At present only one circle site in North Somerset, that of Stanton Drew, has ever been considered in any detail (Dymond, 1896). It is remarkable that this set of three circles and associated stones has received so little attention and no substantial excavation has ever been made at the site. The most northerly of the circles is a small one, which now has eight stones. Immediately adjacent to it on the south is the great circle still with twenty-seven stones visible out of an original minimum of thirty. South again after a considerable gap is the third circle with, probably, originally twelve stones. It lies on slightly higher land and to the west of it is the structure known as "The Cove" consisting of three enormous stones, two of which are still upright. The two northern circles each have an avenue. The avenues run out north-east and east, join and end at the bank of an old channel of the river Chew. The site is on very low ground, almost on the bank of the Chew and well within the natural forest zone.*

It will be convenient to start the account of the lost stone circles in the north-east of Somerset. Near Bath, on what is now called Bathampton Down, Scarth (1857) records the presence of a pair of circles of large stones each inside a square enclosure and each having an avenue. It is possible from Scarth's description to locate the site near the north-west entrance to Bathampton Camp (*Fig. 28, No. 19*). The site can only have been on the gently sloping ground of a plateau ending at the escarpment of the hill west-north-west from the north-west entrance to the camp. There are

* See *Fig. 27* for a plan of the Northern and Great circles.

still to be seen banks, presumably Celtic fields, and the enclosures mentioned by Scarth were probably two of these. There are still some stones in the area and some have been moved in recent times. Others lie nearly buried, but whether they ever formed part of a circle or circles is now impossible to say. Extensive quarrying has altered the surface features and the circles themselves cannot be found. Scarth states that the enclosures were ignored

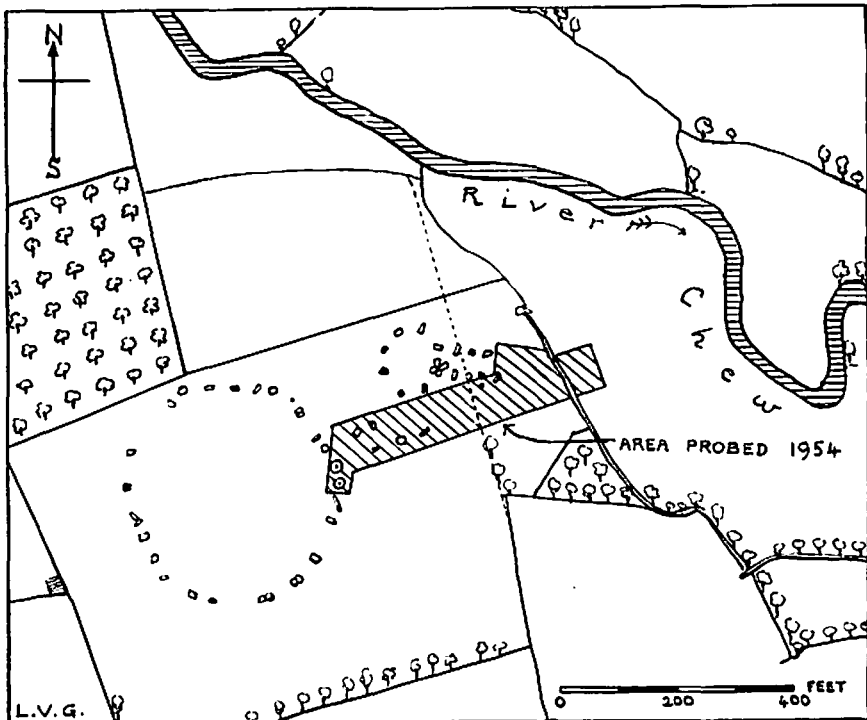


Fig. 27.—Stanton Drew. The Northern and Great Circles.

by Phelps in his *History of Somerset* and that “in two of these enclosures are the remains of stone circles similar in appearance to those of Stanton Drew. Unhappily the larger stones have been removed within the memory of some of the present generation. . . the smaller stones now only remain.” About thirty of the larger stones had been removed. Scarth then adds “these enclosures are approached by avenues of stones leading out of the camp”. The approximate National Grid Reference is ST 772652 at about 600 ft. above sea level. Scarth admits that the circles had suffered greatly from depredations by stone seekers and that the details were difficult to make out, though the reference here is to a preconceived notional arrangement of all stone circles and avenues. All the same there seems no reason

to doubt Scarth's explicit statement that the circles and avenues were there. Scarth describes several long mounds that he thinks may be long barrows. These mounds have in part disappeared, but those that remain do not seem to be long barrows. There are four round barrows on the hill. Scarth considers the circles, the long mounds, the round barrows, the camp, the enclosures and Wansdyke as all being the work of the Belgae, so that the statement that the avenues "led out of the camp" is unimportant save to give the direction of the avenues as being about south-east.

The site (8) is high up above the river Avon and some distance from it, and it commands extensive views, especially westwards towards Stanton Drew, though this may have no significance. The location of the circles is such that they could form a connecting link with the stone circles at Cornwell and Rollright, Oxfordshire (Crawford, 1925), and perhaps with Avebury and Stonehenge.

To the next site there is also but a single reference, in a footnote in Dymond's *Stanton Drew* (1896, p. 18). Dymond is discussing the lithology of the stones there and refers to the views of Professor Lloyd Morgan and then quotes from a letter dated October 22nd, 1895. "He (Professor Lloyd Morgan) has found remains of a small circle 20 paces in diameter on Leigh Down." The O.S. maps record Leigh Down Farm on Somerset sheet 12 N.W. of the 6-in. to 1-mile series, and the hill just to the north is known locally as Leigh Down, which is also on the fringe of Broadfield Down to which Dymond and Morgan frequently refer in their discussion of the site from which the stones of Stanton Drew were obtained. An old green road just to the north of the site is known as Great Stone Lane. No stones are now present in an upright position but it is possible that one or two lying prone may be present in the mass of brambles and bracken that now, February, 1958, cover the site. Lloyd Morgan was a first-class geologist and an acute observer and there can be no doubt that the circle was there in 1895. The size he gives must be right, for the site (N.G.R., ST 542639) could scarcely hold a larger circle. Old parish maps mark it as Heath Hill.*

For the third site there is not even a single reference that I have been able to find in any literature or from parish records. It was discovered by Mr. P. A. Rahtz, who noted in Chew Stoke a group of stones in a hedge on the north side of the road a few yards west of the Methodist Chapel (N.G.R., ST 560616). The stones finally disappeared when the new police house was built, but there were twelve of them, all much of the same size. The parts above ground measured about 3-4 ft. high and 3 ft. wide and about 9 in. thick, perhaps a little more. There was a considerable variation

* Letter dated December 5th, 1956 from the Rev. A. J. Hobbs, Winford Rectory. Parish map of 1828 gives this name and all field names. Five fields in the area are known as Greenway.

in the weathering of the surfaces of the stones and, assuming that there was in the past as now, a prevailing direction of the wind, it was possible to deduce that the stones had once formed part at least of a circle. How big that circle was it is not possible to say, but it is unlikely to have been large, for only with a circle of comparatively small diameter and of relatively small stones would it be likely for the stones to have been grouped together when they were removed from their original setting. Of course there may have been more stones. The author has failed to obtain any folklore about the stones but the very fact that they were preserved at all points to there being, at the time of their removal, some legend attached to them. The site is again on very low ground close to the right bank of the river Chew and well within the zone of natural forest (9).

If these sites are considered as a group their distribution and association with other structures are remarkable. The high land to the north of the head of the river Yeo (*Fig. 28*) is known as Broadfield Down and the eastern extension to the north is Dundry Hill. In this limited area are not less than five long barrows and two more doubtful ones (5 and 6). Of the five, three are certainly chambered and two probably not. The chambered ones are Fairy Toot (7), Felton Common (4) and the Water Stone Dolmen (3) which is certainly a ruined chambered long barrow. On Dundry Hill there is an unchambered long barrow (11) and another at Redhill (2), though it is possible that this may have small chambers. On the west end of Dundry there is a record of a cistvaen or dolmen (12), known as The Soldiers' Grave (*see p. 124*). There are also quite a number of round barrows, most of which may be presumed to be of Bronze Age date, and unless very early in that period, later in date than the stone circles. These are presumptions that will have to be tested by excavation.

In the valley floor of the river Chew are the circles at Chew Stoke and Stanton Drew. Around them by analogy with other sites, there should be a considerable series of barrows. Perhaps these have disappeared under cultivation for Rahtz has shown that both Secondary Neolithic and Beaker period sites occur in the valley bottom (16, 17) (Chew Valley Lake) and could be contemporary with the circles. The presence of circles and other sites implies at least some forest clearance by the end of the Neolithic and the beginning of the Bronze Ages. Beaker period graves occur at Corston without barrows ((15) Taylor, 1933, and Crook, 1944). Farther east is the chambered oval barrow, almost down on the banks of the local stream, at Wallmead in Camerton parish (18). This yielded an early Bronze Age dagger, gilded and other objects. Nearby was another barrow with cysts (Scarsh, 1859) and not far away are other round barrows also in the parish of Camerton. Farther east still is the famous long barrow of Stoney Littleton (14). Then come the circles and four round barrows on Bathampton Down.

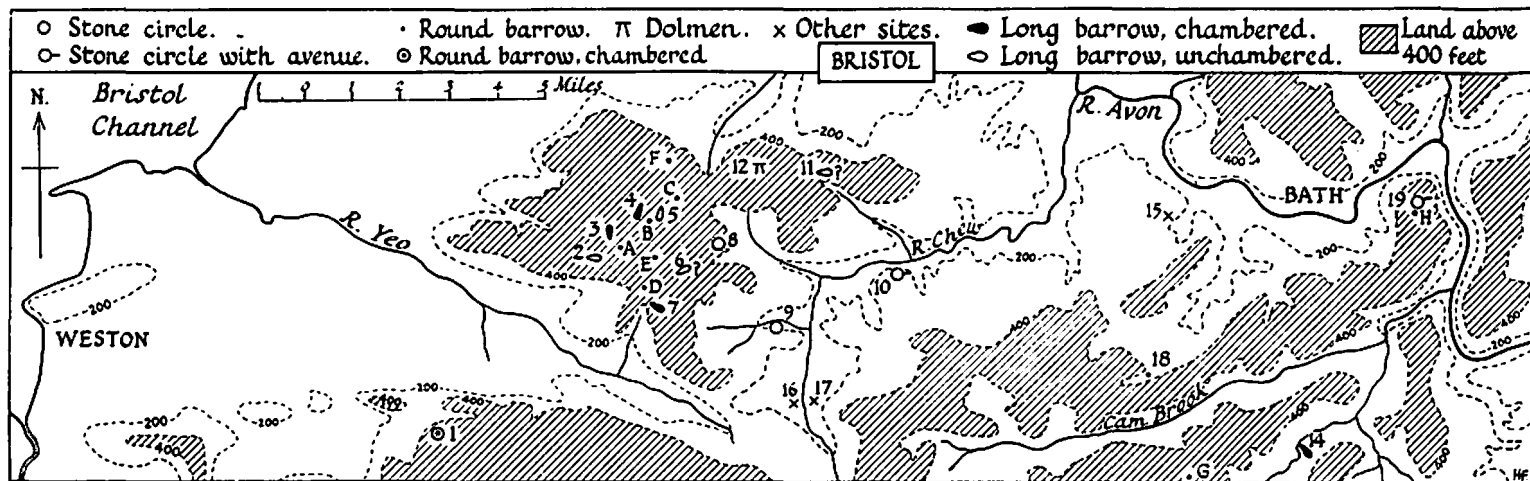


Fig. 28.

The density of sites on the western, seaward end of Broadfield Down is in contradistinction to the western end of the Mendip Hills to the south with no sites as yet certainly identified for long barrows or circles. The distribution does suggest arrivals by sea and penetration inland from the Bristol Channel perhaps by routes either up the river Yeo or perhaps through such valleys as Goblin Combe with the series of long and round barrows clustered round its head. There is an apparent anomaly in this distribution and that is the absence of megalithic structures, unless the principal Wall Mead barrow is considered to be a long barrow, along the stretch of high land commencing south of Stanton Drew (10) and running east and then north to Bathampton Down. Perhaps a detailed search might lead to the discovery of sites though the absence could easily be due to the small size of the population. There is also the unexplained absence of long barrows and megaliths on the western end of the Mendips.

The final site is on Mendip. There is a persistent tradition that there was once a stone circle on Mendip. Knight (1902) records that the Rev. Stivard Jenkins, *c.* 1850, removed the stones, by bullock cart, from a circle on Mendip and set them up in the garden of Locking Manor. An alternative source of the stones is given as the moors near Glastonbury, a most unlikely site for a number of reasons. The stones are still in the garden of Locking Manor and number 21, with one more in the pond, and perhaps another broken up. None of them are very large, but there is one pillar-shaped one approximately 8 ft. \times 2 ft. 6 in. \times 1 ft. 9 in. The height of the stones as re-erected varies from 3 ft. 5 in. to 8 ft. : their width from 2 ft. to 3 ft. 9 in. and their thickness from 1 ft. 6 in. to 2 ft. 6 in. A number of the stones seem to have had their surfaces tooled in the same manner as the stones at Stonehenge. Their lithology is varied. Nine are yellow Trias Limestone, 8 are Dolomitic Conglomerate, and 4 are Carboniferous Limestone.*

The great question is from where on Mendip did they come? If they came from a free standing circle or circles then the original location will only be determined by chance. There are indirect clues provided by Knight, but too much reliance should not be placed upon them. The report is that they came from the top of Mendip. This could be taken to mean the general plateau rather than one of the summits. The lithology of the stones suggests an area Priddy-Harptree Hill top for a location, though other areas might possibly fit. The number of stones and their size suggest a fairly large structure. Blackdown and its immediate neighbourhood can be ruled out by the lithology unless the stones were moved a considerable distance in prehistoric times. There is a single disc barrow amongst those at the Beacon Batch, Blackdown, but the barrow is too small and the largish stones now

* Preliminary study by Dr. D. T. Donovan, Department of Geology.

in it are Old Red Sandstone. Gorsey Bigbury (Jones, 1938) between the north and west arms of Longwood, Charterhouse, is ruled out as there are several accounts of the site written prior to 1850 and none of them mention stones, and no stone holes were found when the site was excavated.

The large disc barrow or perhaps degraded bell, T 239, east of the Hunter's Lodge Inn is a possibility, and there is one fairly large stone now lying prone on the northern edge of the barrow, but if the Locking stones did come from there they would have had to be set very close together. The Henge monument (*see* p. 124) south of the road south of T 239 is again a possibility, but by analogy with Gorsey Bigbury is unlikely to have been the site. A disc barrow on North Hill, Priddy, is too small unless the stones were set very close together in concentric circles. A large disc barrow on Beacon Hill, north-east of Shepton Mallet, is too far east and there are drawings and accounts of it made prior to 1850 which show and describe the barrow without any stones. (Skinner, 1820 and 1818.)*

The most likely site of all seems to be the Priddy Circles themselves. There are in circles 1 and 2 (Taylor and Tratman, 1957) some fairly large stones within the perimeter. Secondly, two stone holes have now been found, but in each case the stones had been removed in prehistoric times. There are probably other stone holes not yet found. Thirdly, a large stone had been set up in the bank of circle 1 after the bank was at least partly in ruins. The lithology would fit well with the area and also with the stones used in the bank core. Therefore as a working hypothesis, and nothing more, it may be assumed that the Priddy Circles are the sites from which the Rev. Jenkins took his stones.

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* I am indebted to Mr. A. T. Wicks of Wells for these references.

SCHEDULE OF SITES IN Fig. 28

Number or Letter	U.B.S.S. Cat. No.	N.G.R. ST	Description and Principal References
1	T 185	449583	The Rowberrow Barrow. Round. Chamber $4 \times 4 \times 3$ ft. Tratman, E. K., <i>Proc.</i> , Vol. 3 (1), 32, 35.
2	T 31	499635	Redhill Long Barrow. Probably not chambered. Tratman, E. K., <i>Proc.</i> , Vol. 2 (3), 279.
3	T 25 A	500644	The Water Stone Dolmen. Other stones removed about 1900 and some are still, 1958, on garden wall. Mound still visible but edges vague. Lloyd Morgan, 1896, <i>Proc. Clifton Antiquarian Club</i> , Vol. 3 (3).
4	T 26	517548	Felton Hill Long Barrow. Chambered. Tratman, E. K. Reference as in 2.
5	T 30 A	520649	Felton Hill Long Mound, probably long barrow, 54 ft. N.-S. and 30 ft. E.-W. Discovered by L. V. Grinsell.
6	T 40 A	527634	Stones in very low oval mound north of Regilbury Court. Possibly a long barrow cut by road, Benches Lane. Discovered by P. A. Rahtz. Just to south in same field are some other stones, but there is no mound and there are mine workings near.
7	T 41	520618	Fairy Toot Long Barrow. All but totally destroyed. Chambered. <i>Gent. Mag.</i> , 1789. Many other refs. in later literature. It contained a porthole stone. A long excerpt from original account is in Scarth, 1859.
8		542639	Leigh Down Stone Circle, site of. Dymond, 1896, p. 18, footnote.
9		560616	Chew Stoke Stone Circle, site of. Discovered by P. A. Rahtz.
10		601632	Stanton Drew Stone Circles and Cove. Dymond, C. W., 1896.
11	T 367	576664	Long Barrow, E. Dundry. Unchambered. Discovered by P. A. Rahtz (regarded by author as doubtful).
12		553667	Soldiers' Grave, Dundry (<i>see</i> p. 124).
14		735572	Stoney Littleton Long Barrow. Chambered. Hoare, Sir R. Colt-, 1821, <i>Archæologia</i> , Vol. 19, 45.
15		683649	Corston Beaker Burials in Flat Graves. Crook and Crook; Taylor. References, p. 116.
16		556593	Ben Bridge. Secondary Neolithic Occupation and "B" Beaker Burials.
17		571594	Chew Park Farm. Primary Neolithic and perhaps secondary Neolithic.
18	T 383	679597	The Wall Mead Barrows. Skinner <i>teste</i> Scarth, 1859. One oval with chamber $3\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. and passage S.-N. 15 ft. long.
19		771653	Bathampton Stone Circles.

SCHEDULE OF SITES IN *Fig. 28—continued*

Number or Letter	U.B.S.S. Cat. No.	N.G.R. ST	Description and Principal References
A	T 32-T 35 A	508638	Group of round barrows near top of Goblin Combe. T 32 destroyed. T 33 almost ploughed out, 1958. T 35 recognizable only as crop mark. Tratman, E. K., 1926 and 1938, <i>Proc.</i> , Vol. 2 (3), 278, and Vol. 5 (1), 84.
B	T 28 and T 29	519648	Felton Hill Twin Round Barrows. Reference as in 2, p. 278. Re-examined 1953. The more northerly, T 28, has a causeway 9 ft. wide across ditch on north. T 29 has causeway 9 ft. wide on east and perhaps two more, one on each side, at the ends of the confluent portions of the ditches.
C	T 30 B	523654	Round Barrow. Discovered by P. A. Rahtz.
D	T 40	516627	Round Barrow and Windmill (<i>see</i> p. 89).
E	T 36	517637	Round Barrow. Doubtful. Reference as in 2. Close to Butcombe Court. Estate agent states that it is reputedly an ancient burial mound but was used as a grave for a favourite horse about 1905.
F	T 22, T 23	520665	Two Round Barrows at top of Barrow Hill. Ploughed out, 1958. Reference as in 2. Nearby double-looped socketed bronze adze found. Grinsell, L. V., 1953, <i>Ant. J.</i> , Vol. 23, 203.
G		690562	Two Round Barrows near Camerton.
H	T 379-T 382		Four Round Barrows, Bathampton Down.