

The Megalithic Remains at Stanton Drew

BY THE REV. H. T. PERFECT, M. A.

(Read at Stanton Drew, May 28th, 1884.)

STANTON DREW, as well as Stonehenge and Avebury, is situated in the district which is known to have been occupied by the Belgae. There is a hamlet in this parish variously written as Belgetown, Belluton, or Belton, which evidently took its name from the Belgae of this district. The final syllable "ton," which is Saxon, would seem to point to the transitional period when Belgae and Saxons were contending together for the possession of the soil, at the time when this town or homestead was still an important settlement. The very name of Belge-town, the close proximity of the stone circles and the fortified camp of the Maes Knoll, seem to bespeak this immediate locality as one of the greatest importance in early Celtic days, and offer a pleasing temptation to group these three points together as collective evidence that the locality of Stanton Drew was one of the leading centres of Celtic life in England amongst the Belgae, or even centuries earlier amongst their predecessors.

However this may be, the so-called druidical remains in this parish consist of one large circle adjoining a smaller one, with apparently the remains of an avenue connecting the two together. Several of the stones, both in the large circle as well as in the avenue, are missing, having been broken up in olden days when these monuments were not so carefully preserved as they now are. Others are some little distance underground. The plan of them which I have had the honour of presenting to your president is one which was drawn out by the Rev. S. Seyer in 1822. I have myself personally made a round of the stones on two or three occasions in company with others, and by means of probing the surface to a considerable depth with an iron bar, I am able to verify the existence of all those which are marked on the plan, with the exception of four. These I am able to say with equal confidence do not now exist. There is one very important stone missing in the large circle which in all probability stood at the head of the avenue. The stones in the smaller circle are of much larger proportions than the rest, and one of them deserves special attention. It looks like the

remains either of one huge stone broken by its fall, or of a pile of stones which had been constructed for some specific purpose and had fallen abroad again. If these circles contain any important interments it is here that they will most likely be met with. Besides these two principal circles, there is also another in an adjoining field, but the stones there are of much inferior size. Near the church again there is a remarkable group of one prostrate and two erect stones, supposed by some to be the remains of a dolmen.

The stones are not all the same. They are of three or four different kinds, the most striking of them being conglomerate or pudding stone, which is the fundamental rock of Compton Martin, about 7 miles away. It is often a matter of wonder to visitors how such huge blocks could ever have been transported from so distant a point, and it certainly shows that they who superintended their removal must either have been very remarkable for animal strength, which would be an evidence of the greatest antiquity, or else of mechanical knowledge and civilisation the remains of which do not exist. If we look at the illustrations in Layard's *Nineveh*, and see how the huge bulls were moved, we can easily imagine how these stones could have been dragged along by means of many hands and many ropes and rollers. But then we must remember that *Nineveh* and *Egypt* were nations of the highest civilisation, possessed of the most perfect scientific culture ; whereas the primitive people who erected these monuments have left us no remains whatever of civilisation or of scientific knowledge.

The Druidical remains in this parish are usually classed with those at Stonehenge and Avebury. The stones here do not bear the mark of any tools, and are altogether ruder and smaller than those at Stonehenge. Those at Stonehenge not only show the mark of the tool, but are trilithons consisting of two uprights with a slab on the top. The stones at Stanton Drew are supposed by many, (although their opinion is rejected by some of the most, learned antiquaries), to have been raised by the Druids for religious as well as political purposes: and some have connected them with a very intricate system of astronomical observations or of serpent worship—but of all this we simply know nothing.

The question of their age, again, has been a matter of much dispute. Upon this point there are two great theories. One that they were erected before the occupation, of the country by the Romans; the other that they were erected after that period. If we admit the latter of these theories, we have a very clever hypothesis submitted to us for

our acceptance by Mr Fergusson. He places the erection of the circles in this parish in the Arthurian age, about A.D. 550, during the period when, after the Romans had forsaken the land, the Britons had to contend with the Saxons for the mastery of the soil. Professor Pearson the historian, would fall in with this view and connect them with a new revival of Druidism which the Romans had done all in their power to destroy. An argument is often brought forward in favour of this post-Roman theory, namely, that no mention is made of these circles by the great Roman historians, although Roman roads were constructed for military purposes in their immediate vicinity. The absence of these accounts is assumed as an evidence that the circles did not exist at that time. One Roman author, however, Hecataeus, does allude to a magnificent circular temple in the Island of the Hyperboreans over against Celtica, which many archaeologists assume refers to Stonehenge; but this is altogether doubtful. It certainly is strange that the Romans should not have taken more notice of the circles if they really did exist in their days and were the temples of the Druids, for the Druids were a priestly caste of great power in Britain during the Roman occupation, and are known to have used all their influence in exciting the Britons against the Romans. In addition to the testimony of Hecataeus, another argument against the post-Roman theory, is the fact that when a barrow was opened about 300 yards from Stonehenge, under the superintendence of Sir Richard Hoare, some time ago, there were found chippings not only of the stones forming the outer circle, but of the stones which are of Syenic character. Now barrows belong to a period before the Romans, and contain no Roman remains; but they do contain these chippings, which seem to require a belief that the circles existed before the Roman occupation. If, on the other hand, we believe these circles to belong to an earlier period than this, we are driven into a choice of two alternatives, viz., that they were the work of one of the many branches of the Aryan and Celtic families, or of the still earlier settlers in the land who were of Turanian origin, such as the Basques in Spain, and others elsewhere in the present day, and others again whose existence has ceased to have any historical status in their westward course. In any case we can easily imagine that these circles were used as places of deliberation in social and political matters as well as for religious purposes, and we may also easily conceive that the Druids, if they did not actually erect them themselves, might have been glad to take advantage of them to

encourage their own religion by the older traditional reverence of earlier tribes. In accepting this latter theory, the pre-Roman one, which I myself prefer, we might trace back the date of their erection by many centuries from the Roman period to the time, at least, of the Patriarchs of Judea. There is an indication in the Pentateuch of a desire to connect holy events in family and national life with the erection of stones in the history of the Abrahamic family. In Egypt we know, this inclination had assumed at this time a form of the most stupendous grandeur. I can easily imagine that tribes which had broken away from the centre of Eastern civilisation many centuries before this, and had separated themselves from the influence of scientific knowledge, may have landed on these shores with only the rudest elements of devotion connected with temples of stone and graves, and dependent only upon manual and muscular power for the expression of their devotional feelings. The absence of all scientific knowledge in the history of such people would naturally encourage us, when endeavouring to account for the removal of such huge blocks of stone from their native soil — I say the absence of all scientific knowledge on the part of these people would naturally encourage us to date back the erection of their stone monuments to the very earliest days, when civilisation and scientific skill did not exist, and man's animal power was such as now we cannot understand. This would lead one to believe that these stone monuments belong rather to the earliest Turanian dispersion from the Far East than to the after emigration of the Aryan tribes, which would include the various families of the Celts.