

A Guide to the  
**STONE CIRCLES**  
of Britain, Ireland and Brittany

REVISED EDITION



**AUBREY BURL**

Rollright Stones is a Midlands counterpart of stone circles in the Lake District such as Swinside, and one of its functions may have been to act as a depot from which Cumbrian stone axes were exchanged.

There is indirect confirmation of its early date. About nineteen miles to the ssw the once-great circle-henge of the Devil's Quoits, SP 411 048, has been robbed, wrecked and vandalised. Assays from the ditch of  $2060 \pm 120$  bc (HAR-1887) and  $1640 \pm 70$  bc (HAR-1888) suggest occupation from late in the Neolithic to well into Early Bronze Age times, perhaps from as early as 3000 BC to as late as 1800 BC. Discovery of Late Neolithic grooved ware in a posthole fits well with this time-span.

Many legends are attached to the Rollright Stones. A king and his army were turned to stone after a witch had tricked them. The Whispering Knights, traitors, were similarly petrified. Witches also prevented anyone from counting the stones.

Nothing has been discovered inside the circle. John Aubrey wrote that 'Ralph Sheldon, of Beoley Esq, my honoured Friend, told me, he was at some charge to digge within this Circle, to try if he could find any Bones: but he was sure that no body was buried there: but had he digged without the circle, and neer to it; it is not unlikely he mought have found bones there.' Sheldon seems not to have done so.

Long Compton, down the hill, was a stronghold of witches. When a miller from the village dragged a stone from the circle to dam a stream for his waterwheel, every night the water drained away. Although it had taken three horses to drag the stone down the hill it took only one to return it. The resentful and fearful miller believed that malicious witches in the village had cast a spell on it.

T.H. Ravenhill, *The Rollright Stones and the Men who Erected Them*, Birmingham, 1932; G. Lambrick, *The Rollright Stones*, London, 1988, *Plan*

## SHROPSHIRE

*Two open rings near Corndon.  
Probably Early Bronze Age*

**71 HOARSTONES**, Shelve (3) [D2/2. Black Marsh] Lat: 52°.6 SO 324 999  
*7 miles N of Bishop's Castle, 1 mile NW of Shelve. Walk. 250 yds (230m) w of lane from Black Marsh. Easy. Map 3*  
Overlooked to the east by the long quartzite ridge of the Stiperstones with its grotesquely weathered crags, the highest known as the Chair in which the Devil sits for shelter during storms and blizzards, the ring, also known variously as Black Marsh, Hemford and Marsh Pool lies in flat and sometimes wet ground.

Somewhat elliptical it measures 76ft 6ins N-S by 69ft 2ins ( $23.3 \times 21.1$ m), but, despite its above average size, its stones are small. They are local dolerites probably from Stapeley Hill nearby. Just south of the ring's centre is a stone about 3ft (1m) high, but its prehistoric ancestry is questionable. A gap at the east may be a original entrance.

Thin, tubular holes can be found in some of the stones. They are the results of wedding celebrations when miners would drill into the boulders and fill them with gunpowder. The explosions caused accidents but, by report, no fatalities.

*TSANHS 10, 1926, 247-53; TTB, 26, Plan*

**72 MITCHELL'S FOLD**, Corndon (3, 4) [D2/1] Lat: 52°.6 SO 305 983  
*6 miles N of Bishop's Castle, 1 mile N of Corndon Hill. Where lane to Priestweston turns sharply N then w at SO 302 977 drive N up track for 500 yds (450m). Walk. N for 300 yds (270m). Easy. Map 3*  
At a height of 1083ft (330m) O.D. this ring stands in dry heathland at the south-west end of Stapeley Hill within a few miles of the Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age picrite stone axe factory of Cwm-Mawr. It is only 1½ miles south-west of Hoarstones stone circle (71). The name may derive from 'micel' or

'mycel', O.E. for 'big', referring to the size of this large circle.

Its doleritic stones came from Stapeley Hill. Many of them are now missing and others are fallen. In the beginning there may have been some thirty pillars. The survivors that stand range in height from 10ins to 6ft 3ins (0.3–1.9m), and stand in an ellipse 89ft NW-SE by 82ft (27.1 × 25m). The tallest is at the south-east end of the major axis, standing, perhaps by coincidence, close to the line of the major southern moonrise. This pillar and a companion have been taken to flank an entrance about 6ft (1.8m) wide. About 77 yards (70m) to the south-east is a weathered cubical block on a small cairn.

There was a claim for a central stone and a very dubious eighteenth-century report that 'there was a stone across your two Portals, like those at Stonehenge, and that the stone at eighty yards distance was the altar.' The probability of a trilithon, otherwise unique to Stonehenge, at Mitchell's Fold, like an identical claim for Kerzerho in Brittany, should be regarded as rumour rather than reality.

An intriguing fact does exist however. Aerial photographs have revealed mediaeval ridge-and-furrow ploughmarks not only running up to the ring but also through it as though this 'prehistoric' megalithic ring might postdate the Middle Ages! It does not.

A third stone circle, the Whetstones, was less than half a mile to the east, SO 305 976, but nearly all its stones were blown up in the 1860s. Now there is only a collapse of stones. When the last stone was uprooted around 1870 charcoal and bones were seen in its hole.

Huddling as they do around the axe-factory it is likely that all three rings were connected with the distribution of Early Bronze Age perforated shaft-hole axes, many of which have been discovered in Wessex. They may have been exchanged for flint, which is not indigenous to Shropshire, but which is prevalent in Wiltshire.

Legend says that the circle was used by a giant whose cow gave unceasing milk until tricked by a witch who used a sieve to drain the animal dry. The cow fled to Warwickshire where it became the Dun Cow. The witch,

*Mitchell's Fold, Shropshire (72), from the south-east showing a vandalised stone in the foreground, toppled in June 1994.*



deservedly, was turned to stone. What became of the milkless giant is not known.

The nineteenth-century Middleton-in-Chirbury church a mile to the west of the ring has a carving of the cow legend on the capital of a column on the north side of the nave. The font, benches and choir-stalls also are carved with flowers, dragons, animals, bonneted women, grim men, laughing men and men in medieval caps. They are the work of a former parson, Waldegrave Brewster.

Grimes, 1963, 125-7; TTB, 24, *Plan*

## SOMERSET

*A strange mixture in age and plan. An enigmatic site, two ruinous rings, probably Early Bronze Age, and a Late Neolithic triumph*

### 73 ALMSWORTHY, Almsworthy

Common, Exmoor (5)

Lat: 51°.2 SS 844 417

*4¼ miles SW of Porlock, 2¼ miles NNW of Exford. Walk. From the unfenced road at SS 848 417 less than ½ mile W. Easy. Map 3*

Speculatively named 'Stone Circle' on the Ordnance Survey map. When the conglomeration of poky stones on the common was discovered in 1931 after heather-burning it was interpreted as three damaged ovals, one inside the other, measuring 129ft by 94ft (39.3 × 28.7m). This was probably mistaken. There is little conformity to an ellipse in the disposition of the fourteen blotchy-red sandstones and the site, lying near an elaborate field-system, has been re-identified as the wreckage of six stone rows.

An eye of faith is needed to see either a ring or a set of rows. One observable fact is that the tallest stone, a sharp-cornered, flat-topped cube, no more than 1ft 10ins (56cm) high, stands at right-angles like a blocking-stone at the ESE lower end of the longest 'line'. But others on this quiet slope twist in a confusion of directions unlike most other rows. The eccentric disposition, however, may be the result of soil

slipping down the slope and moving the little, slight stones.

PSNHAS 77, 1931, 78-82, *Plan*; Burl, 1993, 118, 121, 241

### 74 PORLOCK, Exmoor (3)

Lat: 51°.2 SS 844 447

*2¾ miles SW of Porlock. 1 mile S of the A39 immediately to the W (Rt) of the lane going S to Exford. Easy. Map 3*  
This once-fine circle, 80ft (24.4m) in diameter, has been persistently despoiled since the beginning of this century. In 1928 ten of its twenty-one stones were erect, the survivors of a possible forty to forty-five uprights. Today there are fourteen, five of them standing. Expectedly for Exmoor, except for a prostrate block at the SSE, 6ft 3ins by 2ft 2ins (1.9 × 0.7m), all the stones are small, no more than 2ft 7ins to 3ft 3ins (0.8-1m) in height. 83ft (25.3m) to the north-east is a low circular mound. A little stone used to stand at its north-west edge.

PSNHAS 74, 1928-9, 71-7, *Plan*

### 75 STANTON DREW, Chew Magna (3)

[S3/1] Lat: 51°.4 ST 601 631

*6 miles S of Bristol. Circles. Open to the public. Honesty box at the entrance. Signpost in village. By church. Easy. Cove is S of the Druid's Inn. Easy. No charge. Map 3*  
This is one of the wonders, and perplexities, of megalithic Britain, a marvel of landscaping that included a gigantic central ring with two large rings to north-east and SSW of it, two avenues, a Cove and an outlier.

The stone circles, on a singularly bent NE-SSW axis, stand by the River Chew. Their unworked stones are mostly pustular breccia but some are of oolitic limestone perhaps from Dundry Hill four miles to the north-west. The two outer rings have been called ellipses but Dymond's surveys of 1872 and 1894 showed them to be true circles. They are not evenly spaced. The north-east ring and Great Circle are 145ft (44.2m) apart but 450ft (137.2m) separates the SSW from the Great Circle.

A. *The north-east ring, 97ft (29.6m)*