

NOTES ON DARTMOOR KISTVAENS.

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“KISTVAEN,” from the Cornu-Celtic *Cist-veyn* or *Cist-vÿin*, Cymric *Cist-faen*, signifies a stone box.

These stone boxes are of an oblong square shape, and are formed of four slabs of stone for sides and ends, with a fifth as a cover. This was covered by a barrow, and surrounded with a circle of vertically set stones. In cases of inhumation the body was placed in the kist in a contracted position; or if cremated, the ashes were deposited in an urn.

The whole of the kistvaens examined thus far lie longitudinally north and south, or with variations east and west of these points, the object evidently being that the remains should face the sun.

All that are known have been opened, and their contents have disappeared, almost without a vestige of a record to assist the antiquary. The popular notion that they contained articles of value still survives in some of the names by which they are at present known to the moormen, such, for instance, as *money pits*, *money boxes*, and *crocks of gold*. Others again know them as *caves*, *Roman graves*, *stone graves*, and *sheep wells*. The idea that they contained articles of value is a very old one; for we find as early as 1324 a grant was made by Edward II. for searching certain barrows in Devonshire.¹

Many of the Dartmoor kistvaens were probably opened with the same object centuries since. There are, however, indications that some yet remain unopened, for in May last a labourer came across one near Hexworthy, which he destroyed in the process of road-making. It was reported to be empty.

¹ *Trans. Devon Assoc.* xviii. 106.

It will be useful and interesting to briefly notice the meagre accounts we possess of previous examinations of Dartmoor kistvaens.

On September 11th, 1832, Mr. Bray searched amongst the remains of one situated two or three minutes' walk north-east of Beardown House. It consisted of three stones, showing about six inches out of the ground, forming three sides of an oblong square, which was about four feet long. On removing the turf and rushes a rough pavement was found surrounding the kist. In the peat earth filling the grave a small fragment of coarse earthenware was discovered. It was smooth on one side and extremely rough on the other, with reddish-coloured surfaces, whilst the centre was of a deep brown.²

Mrs. Bray also mentions that her tenant's uncle, previously to 1832, had found a few silver coins in some of the cairns on the Moor; and her tenant also described a cave or kieve, which he had destroyed, as consisting of a large oblong stone, supported as a cover by others set on edge at the head and foot and on either side, and that amongst the stones and earth within he found some human hair clotted together, but no bones or other vestige of the body.³

In the latter case the presence of the hair indicates inhumation; whilst the former, unless the earthenware found was a portion of a food vase, points to a cinerary interment.

Mrs. Bray also states that silver coins and human hair had been found on Whiten Tor (above Powder Mills), and that on Stannon Hill a "pot of money" had been discovered by a man named Narrich in a barrow from which he was extracting stones. Whether these coins, if found at all, were primary or secondary deposits is of course unknown.

Mr. Shortt mentions the opening of a large cairn near Moreton, nine land yards around, in which a rude kistvaen formed of six stones was found, with a spearhead of copper, the two pegs or screws which fastened it to its staff, a glass British bead, and a small amulet of soft stone, calcined bones, ashes, &c.⁴

The researches of the late Mr. Spence Bate into Dartmoor tumuli are recorded in vols. v. and vi. of the *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*. The principal finds were on Hameldon, consisting in one case of a portion of a bronze dagger, an amber pommel, which formed a part of a dagger or sword handle, and some comminuted bone, and in the other

² *Borders of Tamar and Tavy*, i. 343, 344.

³ *Ibid.* i. 99.

⁴ SHORTT'S *Collectanea Dunmonia*, p. 29.

of a flint implement, associated also with small fragments of bone. The fact that flint was found in one barrow, and bronze of early type in the other, led Mr. Bate to the conclusion that the period of these interments was that of the Early Bronze Age.

The Barrow Literature of Dartmoor has been dealt with by the Committee appointed by this Association for the purpose of annually reporting on Devonshire tumuli; but it is a matter of regret that funds are not provided for the purpose of examining, under efficient supervision, some of the unopened or partially opened places of early interment known to exist within the confines of the Forest.

The latest record of the examination of undisturbed kistvaens appears to be contained in a paper by Mr. Pengelly, in vol. xii. of the *Transactions* of this Association. In 1878 Mr. S. H. Slade found an unopened cairn at Thornworthy thirty feet in diameter, and four to five feet high in the centre. On exploring this, two kistvaens were found which yielded four flint implements, and some fragments of pottery. Unfortunately the last discovered was exposed, and left without examination in order that Mr. Pengelly might make a personal investigation of it.

During the interval, however, some person removed the cover-stone, and threw out the contents. The opportunity of a scientific investigation of an unopened kist was therefore lost.

In the following description of Dartmoor kistvaens it should be borne in mind that probably nearly every one of them was capable of receiving a body in a contracted position; for there is undoubted evidence of a kistvaen having been opened at Trethil, in the parish of Sheviock, Cornwall, which contained an adult skeleton in a space two and a half feet long, two feet wide, and two and a half feet deep.⁵

We cannot of course say that they did contain inhumed bodies, since both cremation and inhumation were practised at the same period; for kists have been found containing respectively a burnt and an unburnt body, which from their construction showed that they had been made at the same time, and with equal care.⁶ Out of three hundred and seventy-nine burials examined by Canon Greenwell on the Yorkshire Wolds, seventy-eight were after cremation, whilst three hundred and one were by inhumation.

⁵ *Transactions of the Plymouth Institution*, vol. viii.

⁶ GREENWELL'S *British Barrows*, 20.

Referring to these Yorkshire barrows, the same authority remarks that there is a greater probability of post-dating than ante-dating them, and that we need not fear that we are attributing too high an antiquity if we say that they belong to a period which centres more or less in B.C. 500.⁷ The meagre information we possess of the contents of the Dartmoor kistvaens certainly points to a pre-historic period, and this is confirmed by the many instances of the results of the examinations of similar undisturbed places of interment in other parts of the country.

For convenience of reference and methodical arrangement, the sheets and sections of the six-inch maps of the last Ordnance Survey have been followed. All the kistvaens known to the author on each section will be found described. The measurements are all internal. The longitudinal directions ascertained by compass.

Sheet 107 N.W.

On the left bank of the Blackabrook, and lying south of Round Hill, just eighteen feet from the river bank and high enough to be out of reach of floods, is a fine example, four feet long, two feet two inches wide, and three feet six inches deep. The south end stone has been displaced for convenience in rifling; the other slabs are in position. The cover-stone, five feet by four, has been removed, and is resting on the west side of kist. There are scanty remains of a barrow and circle. This kistvaen projects considerably above the level of the soil. North and south.

Twelve feet north is another, with two side stones in position, but end stones broken and imperfect. This kist is almost wholly buried in the soil. No trace of cover-stone, circle, or barrow. From the length of the side stone the grave appears to have been three and a half feet long by two and a half feet wide. North and south.

About six yards east of the last described is a very imperfect remnant of another, and about twelve feet further in the same direction, is a more perfect specimen, with the vertical slabs standing, three feet long, two and a half feet wide, and two feet deep. The cover-stone has disappeared. North and south. There are remains of hut circles on Round Hill.

The fifth example in this section lies on the south-west slope of Bellaford Tor. It is a large specimen, being four feet three inches long, three feet wide, and is now one and

⁷ *British Barrows*, 131.

a half feet deep. One end stone gone, and one side slab caved in. The cover-stone, six feet by five feet, is partially removed from its original position. The surrounding circle is standing in fair preservation, with remains of the barrow, which has evidently been thrown back to obtain access to the kist. North and south.

In the enclosure known as Black Newtake, and lying between the south-west wall of Bellafood Newtake and the Cherrybrook, are three more kistvaens, associated with what appear to be the scanty remains of two small cairns.

The first, nearest the above wall, wants cover-stone, but is otherwise a very perfect kist, four feet ten inches long, two feet two inches wide, and three feet deep. The tops of the slabs are almost level with the surface soil. They are perfectly jointed, and appear to have been shaped. There is an imperfect circle, and a very slight trace of the barrow. North and south.

A little further, in a S.S.W. direction, is an imperfect kist, composed of one end and one side stone. From measurements of these it appears to have been about four feet nine inches long, and two feet nine inches wide. North and south.

Still further south is the imperfect ruin of another.

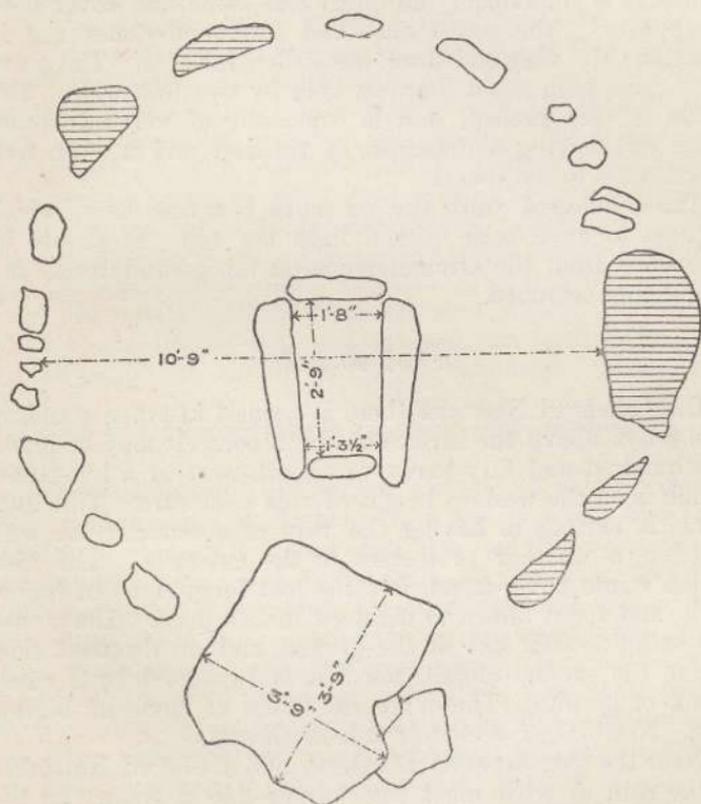
Sheet 107 N.E.

An imperfect specimen lies between Yar and Corndon Tors, close to the road leading to Sherril. One end and one side stone are standing, with cover-stone close by. It appears to have been about three feet long and two feet wide. The surrounding circle, twelve feet in diameter, is in a fair state of preservation. This section requires further exploration. North and south.

Sheet 107 S.W.

Close to the trackway leading from Tor Royal to Swincombe is the kistvaen known as the "Crock of Gold." It is one of the smallest of any of the Dartmoor examples known to the author. Two feet ten inches long, eighteen inches wide, and at present two feet deep. The cover-stone, just four feet square, is lying against the kist. The circle, ten feet in diameter, is fairly well preserved. There are distinct remains of the barrow. It would be an exceedingly tight fit to pack an adult human body within such narrow limits. This might therefore have been a case of cinerary interment. North-west to south-east.

One mile south-east of the "Crock of Gold" are the remains of three kistvaens and a cairn. They are situated on the slope of Royal Hill, overlooking Fox Tor Mire and the Swincombe Valley. The most northerly grave is surrounded by a fairly perfect circle of close-set stones, nine and a half feet in diameter. The south side-stone of kist,



KIST VAEN, "CROCK OF GOLD," TOR ROYAL NEWTAKE.
Earthfast stones of circle shaded.

three feet long, is in place; the north side-stone, three feet two inches long, is out of position. The end stones have disappeared, but the cover is near the kist, lying against the stones composing the southern side of the circle. North-west to south-east.

Seventy yards south of the above is the second in this group. The kist is irregularly shaped, the north end-stone

being two feet ten inches long; whilst the south end-stone is two feet five inches long. The side-stones are respectively two feet ten inches and two feet six inches in length. The cover-stone has disappeared. The circle, which is in fair preservation, is fourteen feet in diameter. North-west to south-east.

Two hundred and seventy yards further south is the third. The kist is imperfect; the north side-stone and cover have disappeared; the south side and east end-stones are in position; the west end-stone has fallen inwards. The grave must have been about four feet long by two feet wide. The circle is very perfect, and is composed of vertical stones close set, having a diameter of thirteen and a half feet. North-west to south-east.

Three hundred yards further south is a fine cairn, which appears to have been opened from the top. It should be re-opened from the circumference on the ground level, and thoroughly searched.

Sheet 99 S.E.

On Lakehead Newtake there is a small kistvaen standing like a box above the surface of the Moor. It may be found one hundred and fifty yards west-south-west of a hut-circle, which is on the western height of this enclosure. This hut-circle is curious in having the ruin of a semicircular wall forming a weather protection to the entrance. The kist, which wants cover-stone, is three feet long, eighteen inches wide, and about fifteen to eighteen inches deep. The stones are standing well out of the ground, and on the west side, where the ground slopes, the kist is supported by a small block of granite. There are no traces of circle or barrow left. North-north-west to south-south-east.

Near the gate between Lakehead and Bellaford Newtakes is the ruin of what must have been a fine kistvaen; for the side-stones are quite five feet long.

On the Bellaford side of this gate is the ruin of what appears to be another, connected by a single row of stones—a few only erect—with a large irregularly-shaped enclosure containing a hut-circle.

In Soussons Warren, near Ephraim's Pinch, is a sepulchral circle, thirty feet in diameter. The stones composing it are twenty-four in number, and nearly all are still upright. There is a depression in the centre, but there are no remains of kist visible.

Sheet 99 S.W.

In the tennis-ground at Archerton is a kistvaen, three feet one and a half inches long and two feet ten inches and a half wide. It is thus nearly square. The interior was examined some little time since, and it was found that the bottom was a concave cavity lined with small stones. It had of course been previously opened. North and south.

On Chittaford Down, between eight and nine hundred yards south-west of Archerton House, are the remains of a barrow containing a fine kistvaen, and what appears to be the portion of another. The more perfect kist is three feet long, two feet wide, and two and a half feet deep. The cover-stone has been removed from its original position, and the barrow appears to have been opened on the south and west side, as the western longitudinal slab of the kist has been thrown down. The circle, twenty feet in diameter, is in great perfection, and is uncommon, for it is built of two rows of vertical stones close set, one within the other. Much of the barrow still remains, and has been utilized in the formation of an old hedge or boundary. North and south.

About one hundred yards south are the remains of two cairns.

Between four and five hundred yards north of the Powder Mills, on the slope of Higher White Tor, is a very fine kistvaen, three feet eight inches long, two feet two inches wide, and two feet deep. The cover-stone, six feet long, four feet wide, and nine inches thick, has been removed, and is now lying close to the kist. The usual circle surrounds the grave, but it is imperfect. Lying prostrate in the circumference of the circle is a stone seven and a half feet long, with planes sixteen inches by ten inches. It is similar to a small *mênhir*, and when erect probably appeared above the barrow, which has now disappeared. North-east to south-west.

This list, together with well-known kistvaens, such as Grimsgrave, Childes Tomb, &c., and those examined and described by Mr. R. Hansford Worth, brings the total up to about fifty known examples on Dartmoor, of which considerably less than half are figured in the new survey.