

A. D. Passmore and the Stone Circles of North Wiltshire

by Aubrey Burl

Prehistoric stone circles continue to surprise. And multiply. In WАНМ 27 of 1983 A. D. Passmore informed the Society 'of a hitherto unnoticed circle of stones' at Coate near Swindon, and the following year he described it and the remains of a second ring nearby. In two notebooks, unpublished until this year, he provided more details about them and of a possible four more in the same area. Even though he was mistaken with his 'hitherto unnoticed', his fieldwork transformed previous beliefs about the number of megalithic rings in Wiltshire.

It is seldom appreciated how rich northern Wiltshire had been in the distribution, size and architectural complexity of its prehistoric stone circles. Although those near Avebury are well-known others near Swindon are almost forgotten. Hardly realised today because of savage destruction in the last five centuries, the countryside north of Winterbourne Bassett once had as many as seven megalithic rings, several within a few miles of each other, a tight group of stone circles just south of Swindon. Only the vestiges of one remain. (Fig 1)

Until the end of the 19th century just two or three of those rings were known. As well as the questionable ring on Avebury Down there were examples at winterbourne Bassett and Broome, both now destroyed. It was not until 1894 that A. D. Passmore recorded several more in his brief report.¹ That report has now been supplemented, at considerable, by the Society's purchase of Passmore's two Notebooks in which those circles are described more fully. They add details to rings whose existence modifies our understanding of the so-called Avebury complex.

In both Notebooks the writing, mostly in pencil, sometimes in red ink, is confined to the left-hand side of the page. Volume 1 is a soft-backed, lined exercise book, the second a rather smaller, hard-covered book, also lined. Each has about sixty

pages, some left blank. Being a man of catholic interests, Passmore made notes on a miscellany of topics: the hill-forts of Wiltshire; the value of coins he owned; a boar's tusk; round barrows; Dartmoor monuments; Roman jewellery; and a murder in Swindon.

Here, in this report, only his records of stone circles are included. In the transcription the spelling, changes of mind, and contradictions have been left as they appear in the Notebooks.

Before considering Passmore's 'new' sites, the two that were already known must be considered. The more problematical, **Winterbourne Bassett** just a few miles north of Avebury, has gone. William Stukely was the first to mention it. In his *abury* of 1743, he wrote, 'At Winterbourne-basset, a little north of *Abury*, in a field north-west of the church, upon elevated ground, is a double circle of stones concentric, 60 cubits diameter', referring to his imaginary 'Druids Cubit' of 20.8 inches, sixty being the equivalent of 31.7m. 'The two circles are near one another, so that one may walk between. Many of the stones have of late been carry'd away. West of it is a single, broad, flat and high stone, standing by itself. And about as far northward from the circle, in a plough'd field, is a barrow set round with, or rather compos'd of large stones. I take this double circle to have been a family-chapel, as we

¹ Woodland Road, Northfield, Birmingham B31 2HS

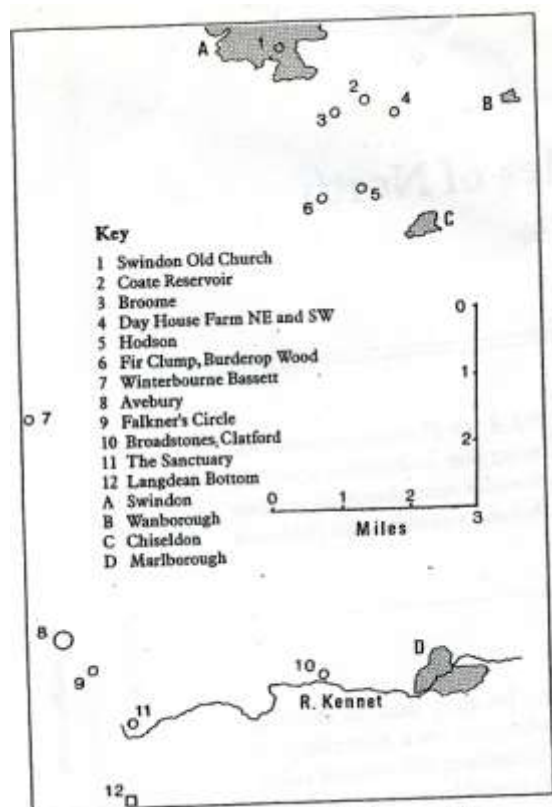


Fig. 1 Map. The North Wiltshire stone circles

may call it, to an archdruid dwelling near thereabouts, whilst *Abury* was his cathedral'.²

Almost a hundred years later Sir Richard Colt Hoare believed he had re-discovered it. 'I was enabled to find the remains of this ring, which is situated in a pasture ground at the angle of a road leading to Broad Hinton and consists at present only of a few inconsiderable stones'. His map showed the scattered stones in the corner of a crossroads at SU 094 755, north of the lane between Winterbourne Bassett and 'Cleeve Pipard' (Clyffe Pypard) and east of another to Broad Hinton.

Having read Hoare, the Rev. Edward Duke in 1846 offered an early version of a ley line laid out by 'our ingenious ancestors'. He imagined a gigantic planetarium composed of seven landscaped concentric rings, the outermost 32 miles in diameter. At their heads, lying exactly north-south, were the prehistoric 'planets'. At the centre was the sun of Silbury Hill. At the south was Saturn, Stonehenge. Failing to find any suitable heavenly bodies at the north of rings 5, 6 and 7 Duke chose Winterbourne Bassett on ring 4, 'a fair temple of stone', as Venus. That unvisited and long-vanished

shrine of the goddess of love rouses no enthusiasm in ley-liners today.

Hoare had mistaken the site but his confident description misled all his successors. In 1881 the Rev A. C. Smith probed the field for missing stones 'by means of the crowbar and spade' and in the following year a plan was made by the Rev. W. C. Lukis showing the remains of a concentric circle whose diameters were 73.2m and 50.3m. Seventy years later Alexander and Archie Thorn surveyed the same stones. Their plan showed an off-centre stone, and a plain ring 47.6m across. (Fig. 2)³

Everyone had accepted Hoare's irrelevant stones but a geophysical survey of the field in 1998 rejected them. 'No convincing evidence was found'. In the Bodleian Library, Oxford the same investigators examined Stukeley's sketch of Winterbourne Bassett. It was entitled 'a double circle of Stones 100 f. diam at Winterburn basset 20 May 1724' and consisted of an outer ring about 30.5m across, the largest stone on its south-west arc, and an interrupted inner circle.

Drawn from the ring's northern side it showed Silbury Hill and Avebury's church in the distance with Tan Hill beyond them, places that cannot be seen from the traditional site because of rising ground. A more likely situation for the destroyed

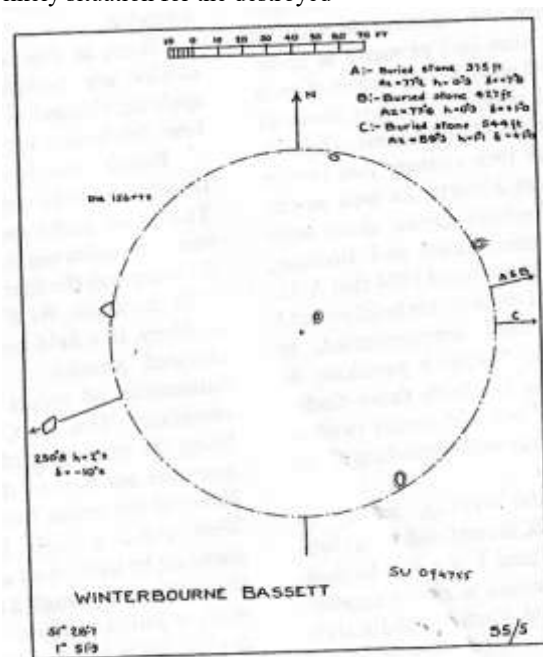


Fig. 2 Plan of the supposed Winterbourne Bassett stone circle. Thom, Thom & Burl, 1980, 132, SS/5.

ring is probably a little south of the lane around SU 093 753 with the barrow about a third of a mile away in Hoare's field.

The second known ring was at **Broome**, SU 167 825, 6½ miles NW of Winterbourne Bassett. In the late 17th century John Aubrey wrote:

at Brome near Swindon in Wiltshire in the middle of a pasture ground called Long-stone is a great stone 10 foot high (or better) standing upright, which I take to be the Remainder of these kind of Temples. In the ground below are many thus oooooooooooooo in a right line. The ground is ye Inheritance of the right Honable Lord Seymour.

Seymour was Aubrey's friend of long-standing, with whom he often stayed at Marlborough. Sixty years later Stukeley copied Aubrey's description without acknowledgement. 'Long Stone, at Broome, near Swindon, Wilts, is a great high stone, and a little way off many lesser in a line'. At some time the sarsen was dragged away but in 1894 Passmore himself noted that its hole was still visible in Longstone Field between Coate Road and Broome Lane.⁵

The other boulders were destroyed in the mid-19th century when the executors of a benefactor's will 'purchased the remains of the Druidical temple at Broome, and after having them broken up they were conveyed to Cricklade' eight miles to the north-west 'and they now formed parts of the roads and footways of the town'.

Nineteenth century indifference to ancient relics in the neighbourhood was no different in France. An antiquarian there came upon a magnificently capstoned portal-dolmen and made enthusiastic arrangements for members of his Society to inspect it. To his consternation, when they arrived, there was nothing to be seen. In disbelief he asked the proprietor whether they were at the wrong place. 'Oh, you mean those big stones? Oh, when you said there was a large company coming, and I thought you would have more room to circulate, so I had them broken up and hauled away to mend the road.' Incredible or not the report is 'absolument vraie quoique invraisemblable!'. *Courrier de l'Europe*, Septembre 27, 1884.⁶

And not only in England and France. In August, 1987, during intensive fieldwork in southwest Ireland, the writer was advised to go the attractively-ditched recumbent stone circle of Glantane NE near Millstreet. Behind the drab house was a green wilderness, garden overgrown, long grass, weeds, a shadow of trees green with moss;

Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.

Andrew Marvell, *Thoughts in a Garden*, stanza 6

Like that green thought the stone circle had also been annihilated, its ditch filled, its pudgy recumbent, two tall portals, eight chunky circle-stones, a pair of outliers all dragged from the ground and carted away to add no more than a square metre or two to the cultivated fields.⁷ The fate of Broome was not unique.

Even today destruction continues, often through ignorance, sometimes through necessity, occasionally because of deliberate vandalism, and it is fortunate that fieldworkers like Arthur Passmore recorded monuments that otherwise would have vanished leaving no word of their existence.

He was a man of considerable prejudices, finding fools insufferable. The writer owns his copy of Alfred Watkins' *Early British Trackways, Moats, Camps, and Sites* of 1922. Passmore thought little of it. On the title-page he pencilled 'ROT' and stuck in a typed comment, 'How any man at any time can have made such a collection of damned nonsense I cannot imagine'. Inside the front cover is a further scornful criticism, 'Useful for illustrations only'

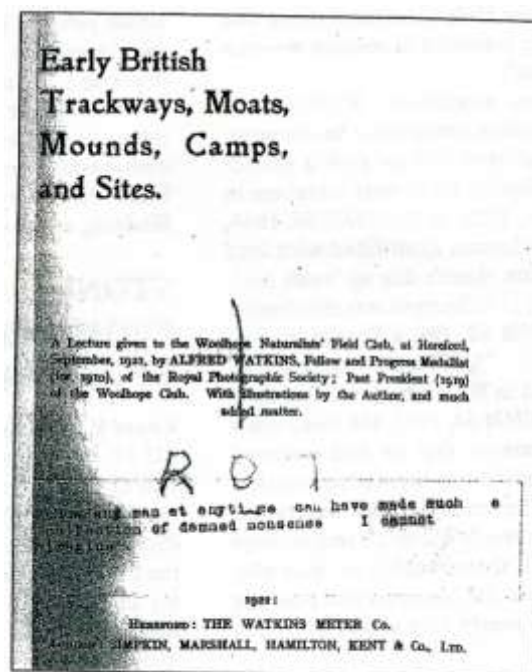


Fig. 3 Title-page of Passmore's copy of Alfred Watkins' *Early British Trackways...*

and, conclusively, opposite, 'Pure idiocy' (Fig. 3) Yet the same intolerant man discovered a forgotten stone circle.

The writer also possesses Passmore's copy of the first editions of Stukeley's *Stonehenge*, 1740, and *Abury*, 1743, bound together. In that dual volume Passmore's bookplate displays a mini-gallery of urns, a Southern beaker, china, porcelain plates, and a hand-axe. The majority of the pieces were presented to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (see paper by Phillips in this volume).

From 1883 onwards Passmore contributed to this magazine on a pot-pourri of topics. As early as 1898, *WANHM* 30, 91, 303, he was proudly displaying his treasured objects to members: local antiquities, stone implements, Samian ware, painted Roman plaster, Saxon urns and a spearhead, a blue glass necklace, amber beads, pack-horse bells, a man-trap and a Belgic urn.

In *WANHM* 42 he wrote about Wansdyke and the controversial 'stone circle' - which it is not - at Langdean Bottom. In *WANHM* 51, 432, he discussed a pterodactyl bone; in *WANHM* 53 long barrows, round barrows and Roman buildings. There were idiosyncrasies. In *WANHM* 44, 1927, 76 the editor noted that in the *Wilts Gazette* of October 7, 1926 Passmore argued that at Stonehenge the Aubrey Holes, the stone circle and trilithons 'were really intended to contain wooden posts to support a roof.

The contributions continued: *WANHM* 46 about Luckington, Roman coins, and a Saxon mint. *WANHM* 47, 493 reported that he took a plaster model to Wayland's Smithy for Society members to see at a visit in August, 1936. In *WANHM* 50, 1944, 292, he wrote about a human skull filled with lead in Stratton St. Margaret church dug up 'years ago'. In *WANHM* 51, 1947, 118, the topic was the slitting of cows' ears; *WANHM* 52, 394, a Roman discus; and, finally in *WANHM* 53, 1950, 259, the spurious relics of witches found in Wiltshire. It was his final contribution. In *WANHM* 54, 1952, 464 there was a rather terse announcement that he had resigned from the Society. The chairman 'wanted to mention the severing of Mr. Passmore's long association with the Society. How much Wiltshire archaeology owed to his labours only those could appreciate who turned to the volumes of the *Magazine* and read his communications over nearly fifty years'. Six years later he died.⁸

By a megalithic coincidence, of all these notes and articles his very first contribution had been the note in *WANHM* 27, 1893, about the 'hitherto

undescribed stone circle' at Coate. In the short paper that followed in *WANHM* 27, 1894, 171-4, he reported the discovery of the tumbled ring at Day House Farm NE and included a plan of eight half-buried stones forming two-thirds of a circle that had been disturbed and damaged by the erection of a rick- and cow-yards to its west.

Some quarter of a mile to the south-west near Coate Reservoir were three more large tumbled sarsens, the southern arc of a second ring, Day House Farm SW. Alongside the road passing Day House Farm was a line of five widely separated Stones that Passmore suggested could have been an 'avenue' approaching the first circle. He ended by mentioning the erstwhile circle at Broome and a possible megalithic ring at Hodson just over a mile SSW of Day House Farm. It also had a 'stone row' near it.

It was a scanty report but until today that was almost all that was known about these forgotten sites. It is a considerable benefit to prehistoric studies not only in Wiltshire but to stone circle research generally that the purchase of Passmore's Notebooks allows those data to be considerably augmented.

NOTE. In the quoted passages from those Notebooks that follow numbers in square brackets [] either refer to his pages, e.g. [p. 14] or Passmore's own insertions in the books. Any remark in round brackets () is an explanatory interpolation by the writer. To make the descriptions of the various sites easier to follow they have been arranged in alphabetical order: Coate Reservoir; Day House Farm NE; Day House Farm SW; Fir Clump; Hodson; and Swindon Old Church.

STONE CIRCLE EXTRACTS FROM THE NOTEBOOKS OF A. D. PASSMORE

Coate Reservoir

SU 17. 82. Passmore, Notebook 1, [p.29b]. At the end of Coate Reservoir there are [what to] a lot of sarsens of large size and from their positions I think they are the remains of a double circle, one within the other like the one at Winterbourne [They seem to] There is also a double line leading up to them about 400 yards long. All these stones are in the [p.30] bed of the reservoir under high water mark and when the Reservoir [was dug] they were [rolled from their proper] [positions but] probably moved a bit out of their original position.

(Note. This is followed by descriptions of the Day House circles in Coate hamlet between the escarpment of the downs and the isolated Swindon hill. The village lies by a little stream 2.5 miles south-east of Swindon town centre. The wreckage of Day House Lane NE ring can still be seen. It was first noticed by Richard Jefferies who was born at Coate Farm in 1848. A quarter of a century after Jefferies, Passmore described the circle and its partner in considerable detail).

Day House Farm NW and SE.

[p.20] 'Discovery of stone circles at Coate', by A. D. Passmore. These circles which are situated at Day House Farm about $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile from the village of Coate are of sarsen stone and not one [is] now standing all having tumbled down and (scarcely noticeable to any but) gradually worked their way underground until only the tops are visible, at first they appear very small but on closer investigation I found them to range in size from 6 ft to 12 ft (1.8m, 3.7m) long and about the same width. I first noticed these stones in last January (1893) and since then I have made many fresh discoveries namely another circle to the S.W of the Day House circle [see Day House SW][and also] the [p.21a] remains of a [a not] double circle and/at the end of the reservoir about $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile [distant] west [see Coate Reservoir]

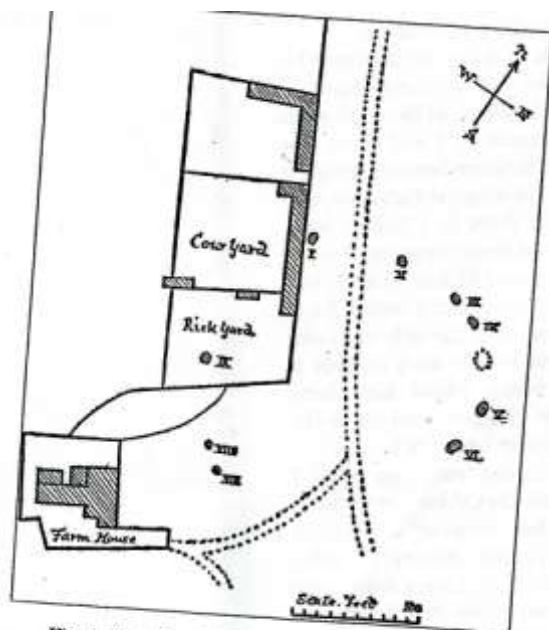


Fig. 4 Plan. Day House Lane circle NE. Passmore, WANHM 27, 1894, 171.

and a line of three stones [pointing straight] almost $\frac{1}{4}$ mile of 2nd circle. These stone(s) point straight at Hodson about $1\frac{1}{2}$ away and on going to [?] place where I expected them to my surprise and gratification I found the remains of another circle and on going to the other side of it I [found] saw a line of stones going away from it and this time pointing straight to Coate. Owing to want of time I must leave Hodson circle till the next number of the magazine [where I hope to have] (see Hodson circle).

Notebook 1 [p.8] About 6 months ago whilst walking home from Chiseldon to Swindon through Day House Farm I was struck by the remarkable position of certain [stones] sarsen stones which were lying in the field in front of the farm. [I continued my walk] [mentally resolving to again visit] [this circle].

[About two months after made] [I thoroughly examined it and] of which I give a scale plan 32 feet to the sq inch the stones [a] in the circle are 9 in number and in [the] line leading up it there are [p.9] 5 stones. (Sixty years later Alexander Thorn planned the stones more accurately but when redrawing his field-notes misplaced north at the east. Figs. 4, 5). The circle or rather oval appears to have originally consisted of 30 stones which was the number of days in the lunar month and a favourite cycle with the Druids; the diameters are 220 ft from to and 170 ft (67m, 51.8m) from to . The stones are themselves are of small size ranging from 5 ft long to 10 ft long (1.5m, 3.1m). None of them now remain upright. One part of the oval is unfortunately encroached upon by a rick yd and cow sheds and I hope to find another stone when

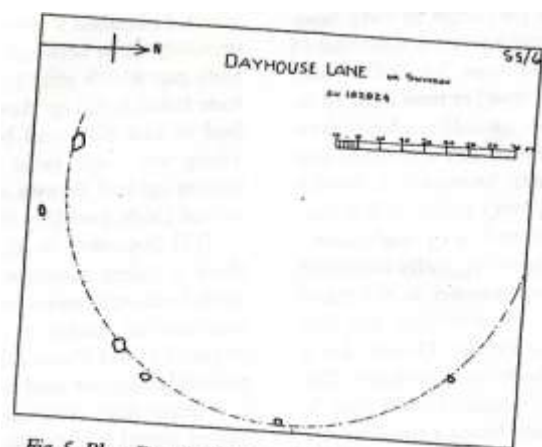


Fig. 5 Plan. Day House Lane circle NE. Thom, Thom & Burl, 1980, 134, 55/6.

the ricks are removed, in the walls of the shed [there] and scattered about the field there are large pieces of sarsen which would account for the few stones that [p.10] [the stones were] some of the stones were broken up, I have proved by digging into the hollow between stones marked 8 and 9 and there discovering a[nd] quantity of ashes probably straw and some chips of burnt sarsen.

The line of stones which leads up to the circle consists of 5 stones none now standing upright. They are about the same size as the others i.e. about 5 or 7 feet long (1.8m, 2.1m). I cannot find traces of any stones within 400 ft (122m) of the circle but the wall of the cowsheds covers most of this distance and would probably account [for them] their absence at the above distance [there] from the circle there is a stone and at the distance of 6? 5? ft. (65 feet, 20m) there is another and at a like distance 1 more, [p.11] [at a distance] 191ft (58m) from this there is a stone which would [be] leave room for two stones in between and about the same distances that is 65 ft (20m) [which] and [280] ft (20m, 85m) from this [last] stone there is one more. This being the last stone that I can trace, it will be noticed in the plan that the road makes a bend between these two end stones of which I shall say more farther on.

Some archaeologists (repeated on pages 24, 25) whom I have taken over the ground deny that the line of stones has any connection with the circle and that they were drawn out of the way when the road was made but I ask why should the stones be equal distances from each other and why should they cross the road [between] the last stones where it curves [an] on its way to Coate while the stones [continue] [p.12a] are in a straight line. I think also that these stones are two (*sic*) large to have been moved for the purpose by modern workmen most of the[m] stones weighing between 3-4 and 5 tons. This would have taken [almost] at least 20 men to lift [which] and all this labour would not have taken place in recent times. These stones also could not have been [put? like] natural because in a district where stones are comparatively scarce it is a rare thing to find more than one and in a straight line.

The circle appears to have originally consisted of 30 stones [p.22] the same number as the inner circles at Avebury. This number [of] was the number of years counted by the Druids for a generation and was a favourite cycle of theirs. The lunar month also anciently consisted of 30 days. It is not quite a circle [be] there being a considerable difference between the diameters from E to W and N to S. The oval [in] on the W side is unfortunately

encroached upon by [a] cowshed and a rick yard and in this large space there is only one stone left that being mutilated. The others were probably buried or smashed up to build the walls around. Scattered about the sheds are a [good] few pieces of sarsen which [p.23] would account for [so] such a small number remaining. That some of the stones were broken up I have proved by digging into the hollow between the 9th and 10th stone and I there found some black ashes and a piece of burnt sarsen.

By the side of the road which passes through the circle there are five stones which from their present position I think may have formed part of an avenue leading up to the circle from the north none of these now remain upright. They are about the same size as those in the circle i.e. about 5 to seven feet (1.5m, 2.1m) long.

On turning round the road to Day House Farm in the left hand side [there] between the third and fourth [stone] there is a stone [no. 4] 5 ft long [at] a distance of 400 feet (122m) there is another 6 ft (1.8m) long in the side of a ditch. 191 ft (58m) from this is a stone and 65 ft (20m) further on there is one and at a like distance there is another. This one [number 5 on plan] is the last I can [trace] find near the circle*. It will be observed from the plan that the line if continued would pass over stone 14 or just to the E of stone 1 in the second circle.

The [stone] first stone of the circle number [6] is within 3 yards of the shed wall and has fortunately not been noticed by the builders, of the [sto] walls [acro] The next three stones 7, 8 and 9 are not broken [p.26a] [and] the distance between stones 8 and 9 I take to have been the original distance apart, between stones 9 and 10 there is a hollow from which I obtained a piece of burnt sarsen and ashes probably show between stones 11 and 12 there is a wide gap which after hours of search with a bar I have failed to fill up. Stone 14 is the only one I can find in this rick yard but in the ditch outside it There are some large pieces which have been broken up and thrown in. We now pass on to the second circle, (see Day House Lane SW).

[15] (repeated in different words on p.28) I think it rather remarkable that these circles have never been mentioned before. Stukeley and Britton mention the stones at Broome Manor ½ miles distant but not Coate [Sir R. C. Hoare must have passed] [along the road also] Hoare doesn't mention it, neither does Richard Jefferies who must have passed [seen] it every day. [30b] [Near the] [It is] Richard Jefferies also seems to have overlooked the circles [as] he lived [within] _____ very close and

was married from Day House Farm before which the circle stands.

Passmore was unaware that Jefferies had already described the circle in one of a series of articles for the *Wiltshire Herald* in 1867-8. Jefferies wrote:

‘The road from Coate makes a wide semi-circle round to Chisledon. Day-house Lane cuts off the angle, and was formerly much used, until the road was widened and macadamised. There may be seen on the left side of Day-house Lane, exactly opposite the entrance to a pen on Day-house Farm, five Sarsden stones, much sunk in the ground, but forming a semi-circle of which the lane is the baseline or tangent. There was a sixth upon the edge of the lane, but it was blown up and removed, in order to make the road more serviceable, a few years ago. Whether this was or was not one of those circles known as Druidical, cannot now be determined, but it wears that appearance. It would seem that the modern lane had cut right through the circle, destroying all vestige of one half of it. In the next field, known as the Plain, lies, near the footpath across the fields to Chisledon, another Sarsden of enormous size, with two smaller satellites of the same stone close by. If the semi-circle just spoken of, was a work of the Druids, or of the description known as Druidical, which some think a very different thing, it may be just possible that these detached stones in the Plain had some connection with it.’

In the Notebook he continued his account, [p. 15] In conclusion (repeated on page 13) I wish to express my best thanks to Mr. Handy [the] upon whose farm the stones are and for the kind manner in which he gave me permission to go over his land and do what excavation I thought necessary. If any one who reads may have any doubt of the accuracy of the above statements [I] and think I may have drawn from my [p.16] Imagination I shall be pleased to take them over the ground and convince them of the truth of what I have said.

Near this circle on the bank of the Reservoir I have picked up flint implements of a shape very often found in the Swiss lacustrine dwellings there [are also] nearly 2 ft (60cm) under surface [unseen] among fossils which would assign them to a very early palaeolithic age and also other implements of a later period near the same spot.

[p.17b] The 2 stones behind the shed [Coate] have evidently been moved to their present position [level with the shed wall lately] when the shed was

built and this shed being exactly between the two circles I think that they are the remains of an avenue between (pages 18, 19, blank)

[p.22] Near this circle I found a piece of red pottery of very rude make [being], the clay mixed with small flints and I [should] is [put it] early British. I have also found implements near here one being [the same] of a type very often found in the Swiss Lakes.

The word Coate is a Celtic Word derived from [the] a form of old Welsh *coed*, wood, or the Cornish ‘Coit’.

October 1st A. Passmore

The line of stones leading from the Coate circle if continued would lead to water this is the case at Avebury in the Beckhampton which I firmly believe in. At Stanton Drew two of the circles have short avenues which go from them towards the river which flows close by. At Mount Murray in the I. of Man there is a small circle [which] with a small [p.33] curved, avenue. (There is no stone circle at Mount Murray. The site at SC 32S 766 3.5 miles west of Douglas is the Glendarragh ‘circle’ at Braaid, Kirk Marown, a mixture of a round ‘Celtic’ house and, just to the north, the ‘avenue’, the remains of a Norse ‘boat-shaped house of about 1000AD’ .A.B.)

Mr. A. L. Lewis in reading a paper before the Anthropological Institute says that all [sto] nearly all stone circles have a reference to the NE either a hill top, [or] a large outlying stone or another circle.¹⁰ Out of 21 circles visited by him he says 18 had a special reference to the N.E. the next most distinguished marker is the S. E. [nine cases] the circle at Coate [Coate at Co] adds another as it has a circle at the S. E.

In a Saxon Charter the ten stones are mentioned as a boundary of the parish of Chiseldon. (page 34 blank).

[p.35] In the N. W. sky of the evening there are the following stars which by a singular coincidence are nearly in the same positions as the stones at Coate [plan] and to the S. E. of these there are three more which are exactly like the 3 stones in the [scn] circle at Coate the only difference being that [the apex of] star number 1 is the wrong side of the other two.

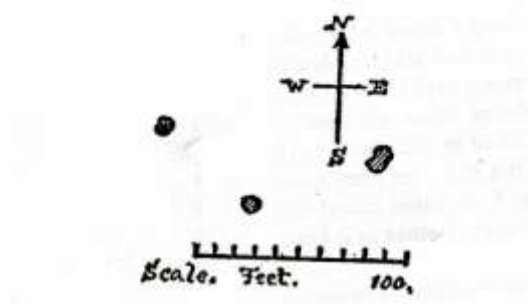
Passmore, Notebook 2. [p.30]. July 29, 1895. The dry weather [of] in June of this year scorched up the grass in several places around the stone circle at Coate leaving brown patches thinking that stones might be underneath I examined the ground with a bar and was rewarded by finding 5 new stones

[some of larger] one of larger size than any I had previously examined the first stone no X belongs to the avenue or line of stones is 170 ft (52m) distant from stone no 2 and 20 ft (6.1m) from the road. No 11 which is 8 ft long is 110 ft (2.4m, 33.5m) from the [circle] stone no 2 and 60 ft from stone 10 [it will be noticed from the plan that the probable original distance between the stones in the line was 65 ft] (19.8m).

Day House Lane SE

c.SU 182 823. [p.26a] In the next field about a quarter of a mile from the above I found the remains of another. (Fig. 6) [p.14a] The line of stones which leads up to the first circle (Day House NE) which seems to be lost [and] stone number 1 may have curved here and gone towards Swindon and I have traced it [at] with great trouble [to the] some stones being 100 yards (90m) from others till it gets as far as the second park field.

this is only a suggestion very probably correct to E of Swindon where it seems to end is a row of 16 large sarsens about 2 feet (60cm) apart and a ¼ of a mile to the N of this [line] row of stones [I ha] behind Swindon church (new) discovered the remains of another circle or two of stones of which I give a plan (see: Swindon Old Church).



Notebook 1. [p.12b]. A smaller one (Day House Farm SW) with only three stones remaining (of which I give a plan) the stone marked 1 is of greater size and I think I am right in stating that its the largest [within 3 miles] in the district. The stone marked 2 is of small size [have been] bearing marks of having been mutilated. The stone number 1 (no. 3?) has also been knocked about. They are equal distances [p.13] apart [i. e.] 59 feet (18m). Between the two circles (Day House Lane NE and SW) [there is] in a straight line there is a stable and by

the side of this there are 3 large stones which have evidently been placed against the wall [at some] within the century [?] and the inside of the stable is paved mostly with sarsen I think that these circles may once have been connected by a line of stones. To the west of the second circle (SW) there are 3 stones in a straight line pointing straight for Burderop 1 ¼ miles distant where on top of ladder hill there are to (sic but?) stones of large size standing upright about 20 yards (18m) apart and in a straight line with the stones at Coate.

[p.26b] between the two circles there [are] is a place 12 feet square (3.7m) paved with sarsens. This may have been part of the [sheds] cow sheds which are within 6 feet At the back [p.27] of this shed there are 2 stones which have evidently been moved to their present position lately and were drawn from out of this shed when it was built and placed against the wall, as this building is in a straight line between the two circles. I think that these are the remains of a connecting line. The first stone in the second circle is of very large size. The other two have been mutilated and that they were of very large size is proved by the large hole which remains. There are equal distances apart 59 ft (18m) and this circle must have been [and... have been] [much smaller circle] than the first, to the west of this second circle there are three stones pointing straight from Hodson of which I have already spoken. It is rather a remarkable fact that these circles have escaped observation on the part of Archaeologists. Neither Stukeley, Aubrey Hoare or Britton mention it although the [1st] former and Sir R. Hoare must have passed very close to it. Stukeley mentions the stones which were at Broome, now unfortunately in Cricklade streets and in a note book of his there is the following entry "Longstones* at Broome, near Swindon, Wilts is a great high stone, and a little way of many lesser ones in a row [* The field in which they stood still retains the name Longstones Meadow.]

[p.29a] These stones [being] may have been connected with [a line of] [stones] a circle which was [smashed] broken up before Stukeley's time and being so close to Coate I think this confirms my opinion about the line at [Coate] Day House Farm being connected with the circle.

Fir Clump, Burderop Wood

SU 161 814. Notebook. [p.17a]. Local tradition says that there [is] [a] was a stone circle of large size near the railway bridge outside Swindon Old Town station and the old Marlboro road leading to

Ladder Hill (SU 161 804) but of the size and number of stones I cannot gain any information as they were broken up about 30 years ago. There are a lot of small pieces of sarsen on the spot where it is said to have been.

(Passmore failed to find the actual location of the ring where there was to be a megalithic tragedy. In 1965, a mile south of Broome, Richard Reiss noticed a much disturbed concentric ring of coarse sarsens, the inner, flattened at the north, 86.5 x 73.7m, the fragmentary but enormous outer about 107m across. About 125m to the west was a single line of stones, 102m long, lying NNW-SSE. In 1969 the stones were casually removed during the construction of the M4 motorway.¹¹⁾

Hodson

c.SU 17. 80. [p.21b] This circle must wait till the next number of the / Magazine [when I hope to have] [p.38] This circle is situated in the village of Hodson about 3 miles from Swindon and 1 mile from Chiseldon station.

It is like the Coate circles encroached upon by barns and other buildings, the road also passes through it. the stones are about the same size as those at Coate none are now standing. 8 stones are in position and inside these there are traces of a second circle of which I can only find 3 stones and these being out of position I think they [are the remains of] came there by accident or probably for some agricultural purpose leading up to this circle there are 4 distinct lines of stones which [go in] leave the circles in the [p-39] direction of Coate and I think that this line if stones was continued on to Coate and joined the line of stones there [the three y second circle].

This circle is about the same size as the one at Coate being 250 ft (76m) in diameter but is unfortunately right in the midst of sheds hedges and lanes which make it very difficult to find.

Swindon Old Church

15. 84.[p.14b] behind Swindon Church [new] I have discovered the remains of another circle of two stones of which I give a plan (Fig. 7) [p.54].

The Old Church, Holy Rood, Swindon, was a by 1852, the chancel being refurbished as a chapel in 1964. The new church, Christ Church, Cricklade Street, was designed by Sir George rt Scott in 1851).¹²⁾

.55] Notes on Swindon Circle. In the big field d the Church there are a lot of sarsen stones form a half circle [I am going over the

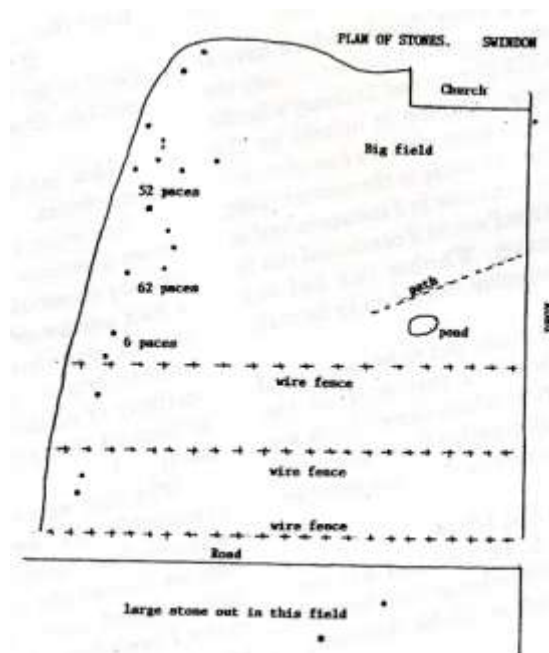


Fig. 7 Plan. Swindon stone circle and rotn. Passmore, Notebook 1, 54.

ground with a bar] on Jan 18 mr Leslie went out in the field below the big field and discovered several more stones extending in all about ½ a mile [nearly] they are sarsen stones, some big about 5 to 6 feet (1.5m, 1.8m) average size, some nearly buried [this stone lin] this stone line may have been a sacred road leading to some worship place.

(In the Notebook all the following six lines have been crossed out), probably the circle in big field the northern end of this [circle] line points in the direction of Stratton where near [Hodn] Notts boundary in a field on right hand side of road there are [p-56] large stones. Keeping the same N+S direction, this line also points straight for Avebury. Mr Haliday says that these stones were broken up to form part of the wall and that they were in the form of a circle 18 years ago. (Pages 57 - 70 blank).

The Purpose of Stone Circles

[p.36] The question will probably be asked what where these stone circles & their uses? An answer to this question is very difficult to give as the archaeologists are divided in their opinions respecting them but the most widely accept theory is that they were connected with the worship of the Sun & Moon [is] this is almost certain as most circles have an [reference?] outlying stone or some other distinguishing object on the Eastern side the

famous "Friar's Heel" at Stonehenge may be taken as an example.

There are several other theories which have at different times been accepted as correct namely the Water Worship [p.37] Theory and Stukeley's Snake Worship. The former's opinion is upheld by the following facts. That in some circles a line of stones is found leading from the circle to the nearest river, at Stanton Drew this is the case in 2 instances and at Coate the line by the road would if continued run to water in at [?] direction. Whether this had any connection with the worship carried on in the main temple is doubtful.

In conclusion there is one fact to be mentioned against the temple theory & that is if all the inhabitants of the districts where these circles are why should they not be all together instead of being scattered about in circles very close to one another.

Letter to C. H. Goddard Esq 1/1/14,
[p.40] (In 1914 the Rev. E. H. Goddard was the Editor of the *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*. He lived at Clyffe Vicarage, Swindon).

Dear Sir,

I write to tell you of a remarkable coincidence in connection with the stone circle at Coate, You will remember that the stones 1 to 6 in the [large] first circle are of large size and the other three are very small and one could almost [be] say that they were not really a part of the circle, if these six stones are left and the three small ones struck out, and these being put on paper together with the 3 stones of the second circle and also the three stones which are in a line to the west of the second circle. Having placed these in their proper positions on the first clear night go out and look in the Northern sky and just under the north star [p-41] you will observe half a circle of 6 stones exactly like those on your plan to the right of these [that is to the west] there are three stones exactly like the second circle the only difference being [in] that they are on a rather large scale and that the middle star is on the wrong side of the other two. On the right of these again judging the distance by your plan you will see three stars in a line exactly like the three in the line mentioned above after you have seen these stars you will be [struck by the] surprised at the coincidence. I don't wish to say that this is anything more than a very remarkable coincidence but if as some authorities on stone circles say that they are connected with the Worship of the Sun, Moon, & [p-42] Stars one would be justified in saying that this is something

more than a mere accident [al].

If you cannot find out these stars please write to me and I will point them to you myself if possible.
(Pages 43 to 55 blank)

This marked the end of Passmore's notes on stone circles.

The stone circles described by Passmore create more questions than answers. Six of them form a clumsy rhomboid about a mile wide and a mile and a half northwards from Fir Clump up the south-eastern outskirts of Swindon. Had they been contemporaries each would have had a little territory of no more than 160 acres (65ha). This is so limited that a chronological sequence is more likely.

Why they were erected in such a limited area is predictable. As always, prehistoric people used whatever local material there was and around Coate sarsens littered the ground. 'Broome Manor must have boasted many 1000s... At Coate there are many. Here a Bronze Age circle is found of them... Ladder Hill... can show many examples'. These were the ancient Lower Greensand sarsens unlike the later Bagshot blocks around Avebury.¹³ That stone circles should be put up in such a megalithic abundance is understandable. And that there should be concentric rings amongst them is not unexpected.

Two were already known at Winterbourne Bassett and the Sanctuary. Both of them were far above average size for stone circles in Britain. The surprise is that Fir Clump, a mere three miles north of Winterbourne Bassett, was enormous, over seven times the area of the Sanctuary and nearly twelve times as big as Winterbourne Bassett. It was almost as big as the southern circle inside Avebury and must have been an important meeting-place like a 'tribal' lodge for an extensive region.

It is a criticism of our times that this irreplaceable relic of antiquity, perhaps the ritual centre of prehistoric generations, could be destroyed with the indifference of ignorance to make room for that modern passage of convenience, a motorway from London to Bristol.

Its associated concentrics may also have been large. The dimensions of Coate Reservoir are unknown but the Hodson ring was spacious if Passmore's recorded diameter of 76m is correct. Capable of accommodating a congregation of hundreds, Fir Clump even more, surely these monsters could only have been contemporaries if used for ceremonies at seasonal times of the year as

the cromlechs at Carnac in Brittany were.¹⁴

Despite this modern concentration in north Wiltshire concentric circles were uncommon in Britain and Ireland, only about thirty previously being known, widely spread from Cnoc Fillibhir on Lewis in the Outer Hebrides down to the outer sarsen ring and inner bluestone circle at Stonehenge five hundred miles to the south. There are two distinct regions, a concentration around the coasts of the Irish Sea and a scatter in Wessex.

Around the North Channel the ovals are unimpressive, their outer ring enclosing a much smaller containing a central cairn, a feature which may reveal their sepulchral nature. The Wessex concentrics are different. Their paired rings are closely-set and arguably they were open-air facsimiles of a roofed, wooden prototype. In such an interpretation the concentrics represented the outer wall-posts and inner uprights of a covered building that had been a place of assembly or maybe a mortuary house as the Sanctuary may have been.¹⁵

That Passmore was able to claim several concentrics in northern Wiltshire is helpful but not perplexing. They were part of an established tradition. So was his long double line at Coate Reservoir. Such avenues in Wessex have been known for centuries: at Stonehenge; at Stanton Drew in Somerset; at Avebury and the Sanctuary. Probably added to an existing ring they are comfortably explained as processional approaches to the circle.

To the contrary, in Wiltshire single lines were almost unknown. Because John Aubrey's *Monumenta Britannica* remained unpublished until 1980 there was no early record of such solitary rows. Yet in south-west England they were abundant, some in Cornwall and on Exmoor, plentiful on Dartmoor, non-existent in Wessex.¹⁶

According to Passmore they did exist, sometimes leading in the direction of another ring: Day House Farm NE 'from the circle there is a line... and at 65 ft. there is another and a like distance more...'; at Day House Farm SW, 'a line of these stones...'; at Fir Clump, 'to the west was a line of stones'; at Hodson, '4 distinct lines of stones'; and at Swindon Old Church 'several more stones extending in all about ½ a mile'. There was another at Broome as John Aubrey wrote. 'In the id below (the Longstone) are many thus 0000000000 in a right line'.¹⁷

Such a sudden emergence of single lines makes it probable that these were the result of influences, immigrations, from the south-west perhaps

quite late in the history of stone circles, rows of standing stones added to existing rings just as avenues had been. There is possible confirmation in the misinterpreted setting at Langdean Bottom three miles south of Avebury. It is a confusion of sarsen.

Passmore described it: 'An unrecorded stone circle' and 'a curious collection of stones quite unlike anything in the county... an irregular north and south line of stones, the first three of which [to the north] are upright and in their original position'. 'A short distance east of this line stands a stone circle' with two big stones forming an entrance slightly north of west. The ring 'stands on slightly raised ground'.¹⁸

Despite his interpretation of the site as a stone circle there has been a conflict of opinions including the negative one that Langdean, like Coate and others, was unrewarding to visit because 'few traces of these remain'. Happily, those 'remains' do survive. Other suggestions were more positive but contradictory. Langdean was either a stone circle or a round barrow or a dwelling.

Nikolaus Pevsner, uninhibited by any understanding of prehistory, wrote of 'a small circle of undressed sarsen 33 ft (10m) in diameter'. To Stuart Piggott the site 'appears to be the retaining sarsen kerb of a round barrow 30 ft. across'. Terence Meaden thought that the stones might be 'a foundation ring for supporting the floor of a hut'. Neil Mortimer who re-examined the area inclined to the view that Langdean Bottom might be an unusual type of stone circle.

The conclusions were inconclusive. The surveyors of the National Monuments Record shrugged. To them the site 'hardly conforms to a prehistoric hut or a stone circle, but proof one way or another is unfortunately lacking'.¹⁹

They were over-pessimistic and seemingly did not consider that a nearby feature provided a possible solution to the mystery. Pevsner mentioned it: 'E of the circle is a short avenue of standing stones'. So did that doyen of fieldwork studies, Leslie Grinsell. Very close to the 'stone circle' he recorded '2 parallel rows of upright sarsens 10-13 yds. apart (9-12m) and 45 yds. long (41m), running roughly W-E., with indications of about 3 transverse rows'. Of the 'stone circle' he thought that 'the valley situation perhaps favours the view that it might be a circular house site'.²⁰

It supports the idea of Langdean Bottom as a form of Dartmoor hut-circle because the suggestion is strengthened by its adjacent double row so

typical of Dartmoor. Many such rows lie isolated on the moor except for nearby hut-circles. On Dartmoor and Exmoor, hardly a hundred miles from the Marlborough Downs, there are over fifty of these independent settings.²¹

There is a paradox. People on the sarsen-covered Marlborough Downs did not use stone for the foundation-walls of their dwellings and there are no recorded hut-circles which may be because they are deeply buried under today's towns and villages. On the uninhabited uplands of Dartmoor there are many more than a thousand.

Langdean Bottom, far too small to be a stone circle and quite unlike any stone-surrounded round barrow in Wessex, may be such a hut-circle with tall, wide slabs for its walls, a conspicuous entrance and, tellingly for a Dartmoor connection, 3 double row typical of that region close to it. Both the style of house and the lines of stones are untypical of Wiltshire but almost identical to the settings and hut-circles on Dartmoor. It is revealing. Like the un-Wessex-like single rows in the neighbourhood of Swindon the sarsen settings at Langdean Bottom may be one more instance of intrusive fashions reaching Wessex, perhaps in the Middle Bronze Age when a deteriorating climate was already causing people to abandon the inhospitable uplands.²²

It must be conjectural but the alternatives are unconvincing. The 'stone circle' is not only claustrophobic but it is on a low mound unlike any other Wiltshire ring. The setting differs entirely from other round barrows in the county. Of necessity, queries remain. Grinsell wavered about the rows of sarsens, 'Query whether the site (was) a row of 2 or 3 prehistoric houses'. Mortimer was less doubtful. 'The enclosure is definitely a rectangle with an additional row of sarsens running parallel to its northern side'.²³

Such assessments take no account of later interference such as the medieval labour-saving expedient of integrating rows of standing stones into the walls of cattle- or sheep-pens. Such vandalism was commonplace. The Rollright Stones circle in Oxfordshire became a Roman cock-fighting arena. Castilly henge in Cornwall was transformed into a play-house in the Middle Ages. The high banks of the Maumbury Rings henge at Dorchester were adapted for a Civil War gun-battery. So was the Castilly erstwhile theatre.²⁴ There are many similar sacrileges.

At Langdean Bottom the individual similarities of a sarsen ring and stone rows to monuments on

Dartmoor could be coincidental. What makes the distant origin a likelihood is the closeness of the ring and the rows, oddities a few steps from each other in a countryside of established local forms. That, in turn, offers the probability that the double and single rows a few miles to the north also were related to Dartmoor customs.

If ideas, even human immigration, from that bleak upland to the more sheltered countryside of northern Wiltshire did occur then it is from the detailed notes of A. D. Passmore that the first clues have emerged, providing a glimmer of light on prehistory like the flickering of a birthday cake candle in the darkness of the past.

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Notes

¹ Passmore, A. D. 1893-4, *WANHM* 27, 104, 171-4.

² Stukeley, 1743, 45.

³ Hoare, 1819, 94-5; Duke, 1846, 6, 80-2; Lukis, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, (III), 1883, 347; Smith, A. C., 1885, 76-8; Thorn, Thorn & Burl, 1980, S5/5, 132-3.

⁴ Andrew David et al, 202. Stukeley sketch of Winterbourne Bassett: Bodleian Library, Oxford, Gough Maps 231, fol. 216.

⁵ Broome circle: Aubrey, 1980, 106-107, Passmore and the Long Stone: *WANHM*. 44, 1929, 84-5.

⁶ Destruction of the Broome circle and Cricklade: *WANHM* 23, 1887, 115-16. French portal-dolmen: *ibid*, 156-7.

⁷ Glantane recumbent stone circle: O'Nuallain, 1984, 12, no. 3, plan, 52; Burl, 1995, 220.

⁸ Passmore's death: There were obituaries in *WANHM* 57, 1959, 255-6, and, reputedly, in the *Wiltshire Gazette & Herald* of March 13, 1958, although there is no report in that or adjacent issues.

⁹ Richard Jefferies and Coate: *North Wiltshire Herald* articles, October, 1867 to June, 1868; G. Toplis, (ed) *Jefferies' Land. A History of Swindon and its Environs*, Simpkin, Marshall, London, 1896, 134-5.

¹⁰ A. L. Lewis, 1912.

¹¹ Fir Clump stone circle: R. H. Reiss, in *lift.*, 23 January 1996; National Monuments Record, Swindon, in *litt.*, 13 February, 1996; *WANHM* 96, 2003, 222.

¹² Swindon old and new churches: Pevsner, 323.

¹³ J. B. Jones, 'Wiltshire's oldest sarsens', *WANHM* 53, 1950, 131-3.

¹⁴ Seasonal gatherings in Brittany: T Cato Worsfold,

The French Stonehenge, Bemrose, London, 1898, 7, 20, 21-2; Burl, 2000, 341.

¹⁵ Concentric stone circles in Britain and Ireland: Burl, 2000, 316.

¹⁶ Long single rows of stones in south-west England: Burl, 1993, 91-116; Dartmoor, 236-7, Cornwall, Z36, Exmoor, 237,

¹⁷ Single row at Broome: Aubrey, f 9SO, 107.

¹⁸ Langdean Bottom: Passmore, 'Langdean stone circle', *WANHM* 42, 1924, 364-6. Plan.

¹⁹ Interpretations of Langdean Bottom: almost destroyed: A. Service & J. Bradbury, *The Standing Stones of Europe*, J. M. Dent, 1993, 224; stone circle: Pevsner, 231; round barrow: Piggott, 1973, 332; stone circle?: Mortimer, 1997, 24-6; National Monuments Record, Mortimer, *ibid*, 26.

²⁰ Double row of stones: Pevsner, 231; L. Grinsell, 1957, 67. Hut-circle: Burl, *Prehistoric Avebury*, Yale U.P., 2002, 268.

²¹ Dartmoor double rows: R. H. Worth, *Worth's Dartmoor*, eds. G. M. Spooner & E. M. Russell, David & Charles, Newton Abbot, 1967, 99-132; Burl, 1993, 75, 78-88, 233-5.

²² Langdean Bottom and an exodus from Dartmoor: Burl, 2000, 125; Burl, *Prehistoric Avebury*, Yale U. E., 2002, 268.

²³ Row of houses: Grinsell, 1957, 67. A definite rectangle: Mortimer, 25-6.

²⁴ Rollright Stones: G. Lambrick, *The Rollright Stones*, Oxford, 1983, 46-7; Castilly henge: Charles Thomas, *Cornish Archaeology* 3, 1964, 10-12; Maumbury Rings, H. St. George Gray, 'Fourth interim report on the excavations at Maumbury Rings, Dorchester, 1912', *Proc. Dorset Nat. Hist & Ant. Field Club* 34, 15-16; 'Fifth interim report', *Ibid* 35, 1914, 4, 13, Plate 2.

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