

ON THE
 CIRCULAR HUTS
 SOMETIMES CALLED *CYTTIAU 'R GWYDDELOD*,
 AND THEIR INHABITANTS.

BY THE REV. ELIAS OWEN, M.A.

No. II.¹

THE earliest remains of human abodes in Wales are the *cyttiau* or hut habitations. They are circular, occasionally ovoidal in shape; their dimensions vary, but are generally small. The foundation-stones of these huts have reached our days, and are found in many places, particularly in the uncultivated or partially cultivated parts of Wales. Where they stand they are in no one's way, and it is to this fact that we are indebted for their preservation. To my knowledge many of them have disappeared from the upland farms in the present century.

Here and there the remains of a single hut are to be met with on the commons or uncultivated land, with its large foundation-stones set on end, and the *débris* of fallen walls on each side of them. But generally several small huts are found in a group, nestling in thick walls, and surrounded by an encircling wall; and often a deeply worn trackway, with erect stones on either side, leads from one group of remains to another, showing that a community with common interests lived in these huts. The dimensions of these habitations are so limited, and the simplicity of their arrangement such, that their inhabitants had evidently but few wants, and

¹ See *Y Cymmrodor*, vol. ix, pp. 120-140.

were entirely ignorant of many conveniences of life that in our days are within the reach even of a farm servant. Still, we observe traces of a mode of living which indicates a certain amount of civilisation.

In the immediate neighbourhood of these primitive abodes is generally a camp, situated on an elevated spot of ground, into which, in cases of emergency, the inhabitants of the circular huts could retreat; and the flint arrow-heads which are found in these huts indicate that war, against either men or wild animals, was an occupation of the ancient inhabitants of the country. In close proximity to these ruined abodes are to be seen patches of ploughed land, having very narrow furrows or butts. The ploughed land is often protected by the remains of walls, originally erected to keep out animals that fed on grain; but this is not invariably the case, for here and there one meets with ploughed fields having no surrounding walls. This would lead us to the conclusion that originally these small fields were protected by stockades or hedges, which in the lapse of ages have disappeared. The quantity of grain sown in those days was small, and must have been quite inadequate to the wants of the people, so that we must suppose they lived chiefly by the chase, or, when not distant from the sea, on shell- or other fish.

Whorls have been discovered in these huts, their presence showing that the inhabitants were acquainted with a rough kind of weaving; and possibly some of the small fields were devoted to the cultivation of a kind of hemp or flax which was converted into cloth. That corn was used and made into bread is an undoubted fact, for corn-crushers or querns are found in these primitive habitations.

There is another feature connected with these ancient abodes which cannot be passed over, and that is the evident care taken of the dead by their inhabitants. Here and there

on the hill-sides, but not close to the huts, are to be seen *cistfeini*, which have been pillaged, it is true, but which still retain features pointing to a religious faith held by those ancient people; and when by mere accident one of these burial-places has been for the first time opened, small cups and bone pins have been discovered in it. The cups would lead us to suppose that they were placed there for the use of the dead in the spirit-world. The *cistfaen* as now seen consists of stones placed on edge in rectangular form. Into the *cist* the body of the dead was put, and then it was covered with a capstone, and a heap of stones was piled upon the grave. Around the interment a circle of stones was placed. But the *cistfaen* which has reached our days has in most cases been deprived of its superincumbent stones, and in other ways mutilated.

Judging from the character of the masonry and the formation of the hill-huts found in the large camps or fortifications on Conway town hill, Penmaenmawr, and Tre'r Ceiri, I have but little hesitation in saying that all these remains belong to the tribe or race of people that built and inhabited the huts that dot the Carnarvonshire hills; nor do I doubt that the circles of stones on Penmaenmawr and the Aber hill belong also to no other people than those whose homesteads I am describing.

We have, therefore, as I believe, glimpses of the history of a remote past in these remains. All that is required is the key that will enable us to read aright the silent document. These ancient remains have not been carefully explored. Perhaps it is just as well that they have not all been desecrated by curious collectors of antiquities. We shall understand better how to investigate such monuments, as our knowledge and proper appreciation of the past increases. For the present, I will content myself with describing these remains as they were twenty-five years ago; but, before I

have finished this series of papers, I shall have something to say on the civilisation of their inhabitants.

The foundation-stones of the detached circular abodes may still be seen along the Carnarvonshire hills, and they are all that has reached our days of these most ancient homesteads. It should be stated that there are two sets of foundation-stones to these old walls, an inner and an outer, the intervening space being filled with stones. The diameter of these detached huts varies, some being but eighteen feet, or even less, across, whilst others are larger. They have but one entrance, about three feet broad, and on each side of this doorway is still to be seen in many instances the stone doorpost, three or four feet above the ground. There are no holes in these stones into which hinges could have been inserted, and therefore we can only conjecture how the entrance was secured from wind and weather and unwelcome visitors. It might have been secured by a huge stone from the inside, or by a wickerwork door. In whatever way the privacy of the hut was obtained, the contrivance must have been simple, and corresponded in character with the primitive abode itself. There are no traces of windows of any kind. Light and heat reached the interior through the doorway, and the entrances, most likely, were usually open in the daytime. Hearthstones they had, and quantities of wood ashes have been found, either on or close to the hearthstone. Ancient stone corn-crushers have also been found in the huts, and even iron, if the testimony of my informants may be believed. I see no reason why it should be doubted, for they knew nothing of antiquarian disputations respecting the stone age, bronze age, and iron age, and merely stated what they had observed.

It is very seldom that a perfect example of these detached abodes is found in Wales, but an old man supplied me with the following particulars of one that he had accidentally

discovered. He was engaged in clearing a rough, uncultivated piece of ground for potato-planting; as he struck the pickaxe into the ground it came into contact with a stone, and he thought he heard a reverberating sound, as if the ground underneath the spot was hollow. Repeated trial-blows of his pickaxe confirmed him in this opinion, and, as it turned out, he had discovered a beehive-shaped primitive abode.

This hut stood in a plot of ground called Buarthau, on Gerlan farm, which is on the mountain-side, about a mile from the modern town of Bethesda. Before the spot was touched it had the appearance of a mound of earth, and a colony of ants had made a lodgment on it. Upon clearing away the soil slabs of stone came in view; and upon removing these an underground circular chamber was exposed. The walls were of stone, the roof was formed of stones overlapping each other, and the whole building resembled a large beehive. The entrance was four feet high and three feet broad. The stones about the doorway were cemented with cockleshell mortar. The floor was of tempered earth, such as is met with at present in mountain cottages. The fireplace was opposite the door, and possessed an iron grate, the bars of which were very close to each other. This grate was thrown away by the discoverer, being too much corroded to be of any use. A hole above the fireplace served as an escape for the smoke. About a wheelbarrowful of wood ashes was on the hearthstone. Around the fireplace several large stones were arranged, as if for seats. My informant told me that he and another man rifled and destroyed this singular hut in the vain expectation of discovering hidden treasures.

There are several important items in the above description worthy of special notice. The wood ashes found prove that the fuel used when it was occupied was wood, and not peat,

which was and is still consumed in the neighbourhood of the hills. At present there is not a single tree near these remains; indeed, I may repeat what I said in my first paper, that the Carnarvonshire hills are naked, and have been in their present state for a length of time. This hut evidently was occupied at a time when the country was well wooded, as probably was the case from very ancient times to within two hundred years of our day. The existence of iron in this hut may be considered a difficulty; but as I shall have to refer to this matter more fully, I will only say here that it is not improbable that some of these *cyttiau* were inhabited up to a comparatively late period, and slightly improved by their later and somewhat more refined occupants. This will account for the presence in this hut of what would in the most remote ages be considered superfluous appendages, such as an iron grate and a mortared entrance.

The mortar made of cockleshells, with which the stones were cemented in this beehive abode, should not lightly be passed over. Mortar made of cockleshells is often to be met with in the oldest houses in the parishes of Llanllechid and Llandegai. The old farm-house of Plas uchaf, in the parish of Llanllechid, now converted into a barn or stable, has cockleshell mortar in its walls, and so has an old building by Pont Tŵr, near Bethesda. Mr. Elias Williams, an intelligent farmer, now dead, who lived at Bronydd, in the parish of Llanllechid, described to the writer the manner of converting cockleshells into lime. He stated that a hole was dug in the ground and filled with wood and layers of cockleshells. The whole was ignited and kept alight until the shells crumbled to lime. This use of cockleshells suggests that formerly shell-fish formed an article of consumption of the people. The writer has seen heaps of shells exposed by cutting into the ground in more than one place in Carnarvonshire. That cockles were eaten by the Roman soldiers in

Anglesey is evident from the remains found in Roman camps in that island.

The late Rev. W. Wynn Williams, in an interesting letter published in the *Archæologia Cambrensis* for 1856, when describing the Roman remains at Rhyddgaer, Anglesey, says: "And quantities of cockleshells were found at the same time and place" (3rd Ser., vol. ii, p. 326).

Miss Angharad Llwyd, in her *History of Anglesey*, pp. 69-70, states that the inhabitants of Anglesey, in consequence of the ravages of the Danes, were reduced to such straits that they were obliged to resort to shell-fish to assuage their hunger. Her words are:

"In consequence of famine, which was caused by this 'Cenedl Ddu', the Grim Tribe of Marauders, the islanders were constrained (for the *first* time) to eat shell-fish."

"Naw cant a phedwar ugain a deg, y diffethwyd Môn, gan y Genedl Ddu. Bu am yr un amser ryfelu, a lladdgarwch mawr rhwng pendefigion Gwynedd a Phowys; ac bu rhyvel rhwng Mredydd ab Owain, ac Ithel ab Morgan, Brenin Morgangwg, achos anrhaith gwyr Mredydd yn eu newyn. Gan drudaniaeth. a'r amser hwnnw y dechrewyd bwytta cregyn y môr."

A footnote informs us that this extract is taken from *Llyrr Ieuan Brechva*. The following is a translation: "In the year 990 Anglesey was devastated by the Black Race (Danes). There was at the same time war and much slaughter between the chiefs of Gwynedd and Powys; and there was war between Maredudd ap Owain and Ithel ap Morgan, King of Glamorgan, on account of the pillaging of Maredudd's men in their famine. Owing to the scarcity at that time began the habit of eating shell-fish." All that this quotation means is, that the only available support of the famished islanders in the year 990 was shell-fish. People had undoubtedly long before the year 990 commenced eating cockles,

as is shown by Mr. W. Wynn Williams's statement. It is very likely, judging from the heaps of shells in Carnarvonshire, and the conversion of them into lime, that from remote ages people resorted to the sea for food.

The roof of the hut above described was conical, and composed of overlapping stones, but it would be unsafe to infer therefrom that all these huts were formed in the same way. The diameter of some of them is almost too great to suppose that the roof was of stone, and very probably they were often covered over with wood, arranged so as to form a dome, and it is not unlikely that the whole roof was protected by a coating of sods, which would cause the hut at a distance to resemble a mound of earth. It is difficult to ascertain the height of the walls of the huts, but, drawing a conclusion from the varying breadth of the foundations, they must have differed in this respect; probably the outer wall would not be much above four feet. The hut, being conical in form, would be of considerable height in the centre.

From what has been said of these abodes, it will be seen how simple they were in construction, and how very primitive the habits of the people who dwelt in them must have been.

The grouped abodes are generally found in the neighbourhood of the detached circular huts. They resemble the latter in construction, but differ from them in being protected by a thick surrounding wall.

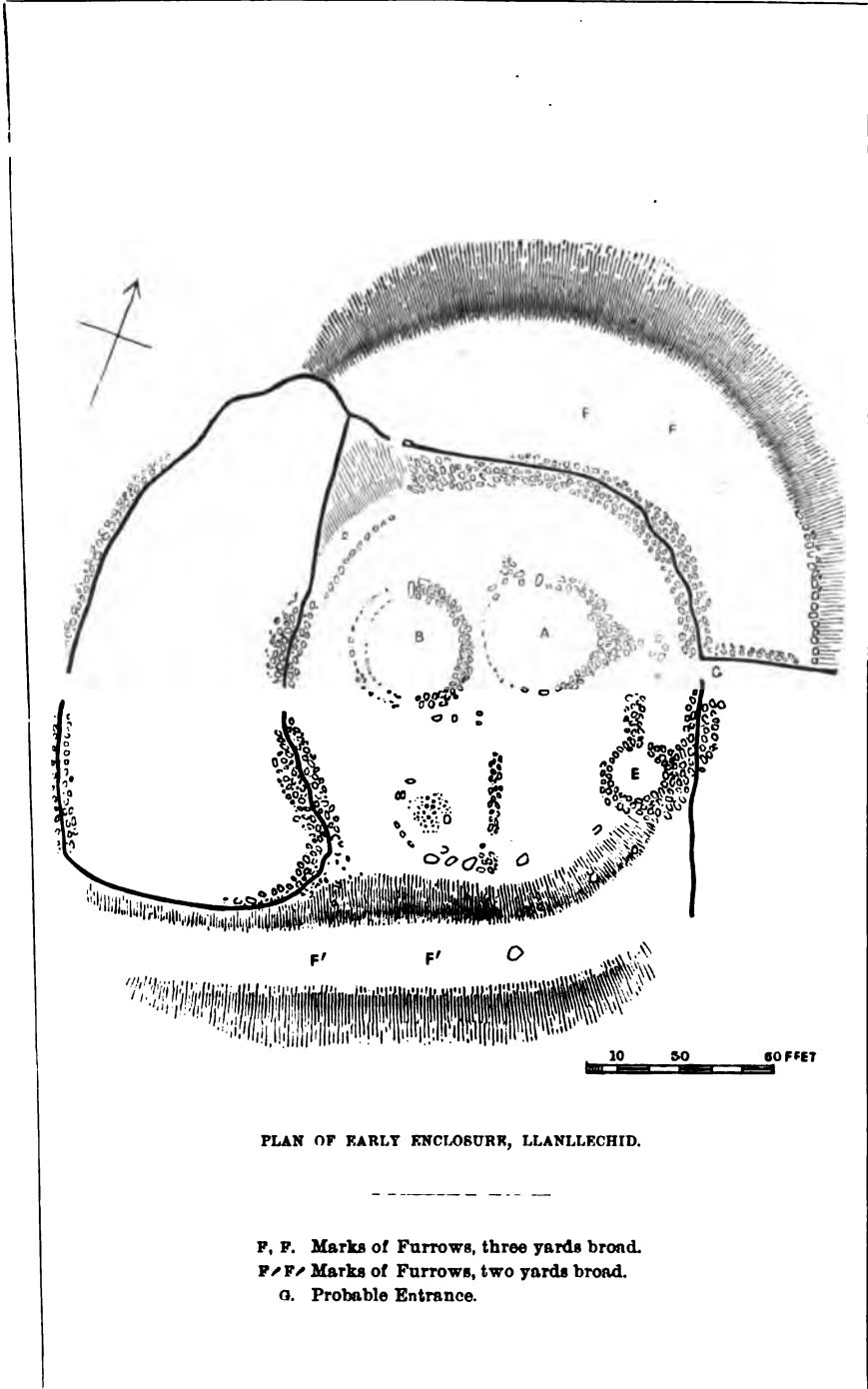
The accompanying plans, for the use of which I am indebted to the courtesy of the editors of the *Archæologia Cambrensis*, will show the kind of structures I am now about to describe.

The first plan is that of an enclosure near Tan y Bwlch farm, in the parish of Llanllechid. It stood in a field between the house and the mountain. Since I took the plan, a quarry has been opened on the farm, and I am unable to

state the condition of these remains at present ; this is, however, of little moment, as the group was carefully inspected before the quarry was commenced.

Upon reference to the plan, it will be observed that the enclosure appears to have been protected by two walls, an outer and an inner. The inner, at the time the plan was taken, was much thicker than the outer wall, but originally this might not have been the case. A modern wall, shown by a black line, has been built upon the outer wall, and indicates its direction, although at present there are no remains of it. A late tenant of the farm, who removed this outer wall, informed me that it was continued all along the border of the ridge represented in the plan. It was not equidistant throughout its length from the inner wall. The space between the two walls has been cultivated, and the narrow furrow-ridges have reached our days. There are also marks of the plough on the narrow strip of ground marked F¹, F¹ on the plan. It will be observed that these are small plots of ground to be subjected to the plough, but, in other like cases, similarly small patches are to be met with, as, for instance, on the uplands above Aber village, Carnarvonshire. There are no traces of a wall about the ploughed ground to the south of the group, which was probably protected from intrusion by a wooden fence. These patches of ploughed ground show that the inhabitants were acquainted with the cultivation of grain.

The circular inner enclosure measures from north to south 164 ft., from east to west 140 ft. It was protected by a thick wall, the *débris* of which in places are 26 ft. wide. This wall, therefore, must have been, when in its perfect state, of considerable thickness and height. Within the area are four ovoidal buildings, marked on the plan, A, B, C, D. The two larger, A and B, measure respectively 31 ft. by 30 ft., and 23 ft. by 20 ft. The entrances to these buildings have their





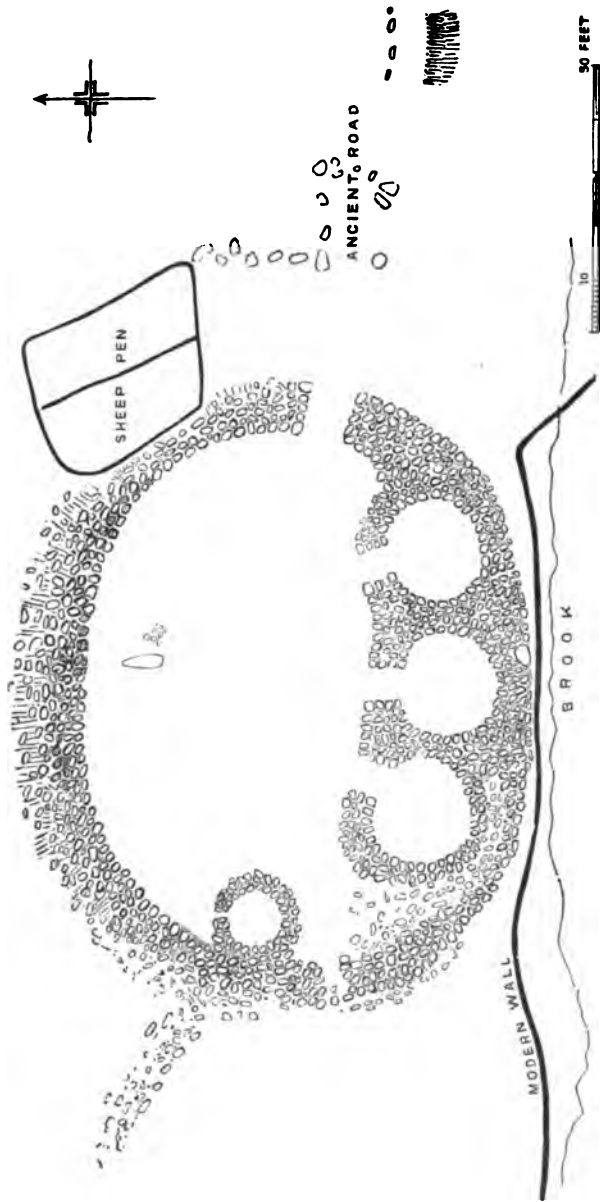
stone doorposts still standing in their original position ; and from them we find that the entrances were respectively 6 ft. and 5 ft. wide. From the large dimensions of these two enclosures one would suppose that they were appropriated to the housing of the live stock. The enclosures c and d are in a dilapidated state. They were less in diameter than the larger ones, and were probably family residences. Several of the foundation-stones of these circular buildings have not been disturbed, and show that the walls were about 6 ft. thick. The area in which these remains stand was at one time level, but at present it is disfigured by heaps of stones, and parts are overgrown with hawthorns and brambles.

An enclosure similar to the one I have just described was cleared away in the same neighbourhood some years ago, and a quern was discovered among the ruins. That hand-mills should be picked up in such places is to be expected, since the inhabitants grew wheat. A large find of crushers and querns was made by the tenant of Bodfeirig Farm, in the parish of Llandegai, when clearing away a group of these circular huts. I visited him, and saw several of these querns and crushers; some of them were small and rude in form, but all had done good service in their day. Iron scorix were found at the same time, in the same place, by the same man. I have no doubt these corn crushers and querns are still in existence, and most likely are kept where they were when I visited the place, viz., by the front door. The front door is seldom used by Welsh farmers as a means of ingress to their houses, and the relics would be less liable to removal or interference there than elsewhere. I was told that arrow-heads were found when this clearance was made; these I did not see, but my informant said they were flint arrow-heads.

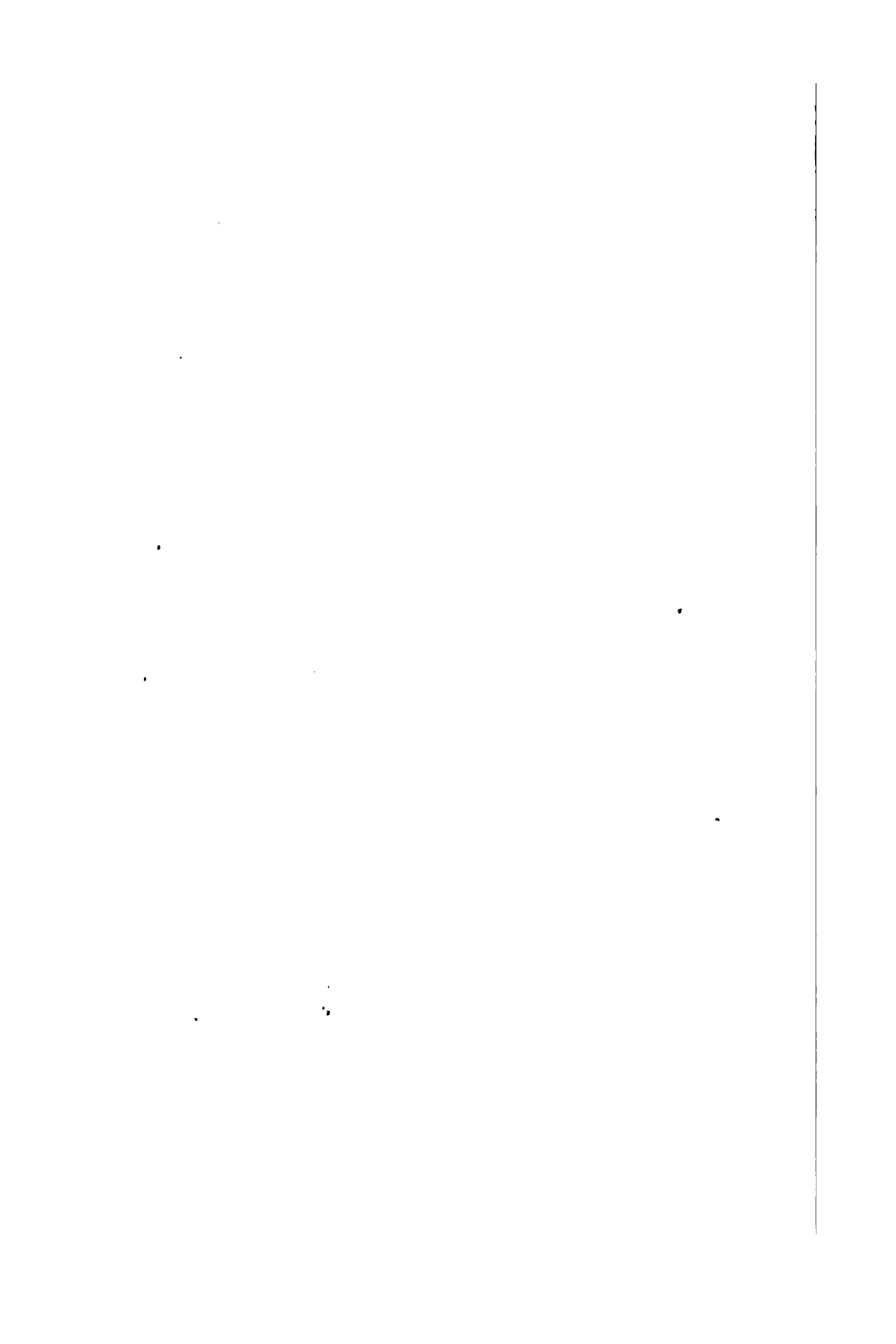
Another ancient homestead, which differs in several particulars from that just mentioned, stands on Ffridd Corbri, in the parish of Llanllechid; its situation is about three

hundred yards north-west of a curious natural rent in the hill, called locally Bwlch y Nylchi; but it is also named Ffos y Rhufeiniaid. The whole of this district abounds in ancient vestiges. There are in it several circular enclosures, erect stones, and more than one old zigzag roadway, and above the Ffridd on the hill are, or were, several *cistfeini* and *carneddi*, and a curious huge boulder stone called Carreg y Saethau, once used for sharpening arrows. There are also two small hill-forts, into which the occupants of the many ancient abodes could on an emergency retreat. An old road, traceable on the hill-side, descends to the Ffridd, and is crossed by ancient boundary walls erected after it had ceased to be used. In the Ffridd it is about two yards broad, and has along its sides erect stones; it proceeds from one group of homesteads to another. As it approaches the one I shall now speak of, its breadth is increased to about three yards, and large stones are on either side. From this, the main road, a branch leads to the enclosure, entering it on the south side, while the main road proceeds northward along the west of the enclosure to other remains.

Upon referring to the accompanying plan, it will be seen that this homestead is ovoidal in shape, and apparently had two entrances; but that on the west side is not clearly defined, as is shown in the plan, while that on the east is distinctly marked. The enclosure measures from east to west 120 ft., and from north to south 90 ft. The thickness of the wall at the entrance is 10 ft., and its uniform breadth 8 ft. The apartments are arranged along the south side of the enclosure, and are nestled in the wall. They are circular, having a diameter of 18 ft., and their doorways measure, commencing with the most eastward, 5, 6½, and 6 ft. broad respectively, whilst the passage or thickness of the wall at the entrance is in all cases 7 ft. On the west side of the enclosure, facing the entrance, is a single circular apartment, 10 ft. in dia-



PLAN OF EARLY ENCLOSURE, LLANLLECHID.



meter, with a doorway $1\frac{1}{2}$ ft. broad. The internal area into which all these apartments open is level; there is a solitary flat stone a few feet from the north wall, $8\frac{3}{4}$ ft. long by $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. broad, and by its side flourishes an old hawthorn tree. The height of the surrounding wall, as it now stands, on the south side, is only a few feet above the ground. On the north and west sides there is a fall of about 10 feet in the ground, the enclosure being on a natural platform; and along this bank are strewn stones that once formed a wall on this side. Adjoining the enclosure is a modern sheep-pen, which most probably was built with stones quarried from these remains. It is worthy of notice that the apartments have their backs to the quarter whence storms usually come. There is another road which leads to this enclosure, and proceeds therefrom to other groups of remains in an eastward direction, so that it may be said that this was an important homestead. A very extensive and pleasing view of the surrounding country is obtained from the spot. Penmaenmawr, Anglesey, Dinas Dinorwig, and the peaks of several parts of the Snowdon range are seen at a glance.

There are many remains similar in construction to this group on Ffridd Corbri to be seen in various parts of Wales. One at the foot of Foel Rhiwen, in the parish of Llanddeiniolen, has, in addition to the main features of this homestead, certain peculiarities, which prove that local requirements were not disregarded by the builders of these ancient abodes.

In Cornwall are to be seen huts identical in form with those on Ffridd Corbri. Two of these groups are described and delineated in Blight's *Churches of West Cornwall*, pp. 134-5, 144. Of that at Chysauster Mr. Blight writes:—

“This [one of the ancient huts at Chysauster] is formed of a thick wall faced externally and internally with stones built together without cement, the intermediate space being

filled with earth. On the north-east side, the highest part of the ground, the wall is about 2 ft. high and 9 ft. thick from the external facing to the small circular chambers. On the opposite side the wall is constructed on a rampart, sloping away from its base, and its height, exclusive of the rampart, is about 9 or 10 ft., the breadth 4 ft. The entrance faces a little east of south, and forms the approach to a passage somewhat more than 20 ft. in length, and contracted in width towards the interior of the dwelling. Passing through this we came into a large open area 32 ft. by 34, *from which openings led into small chambers apparently constructed within the thickness of the wall* on the east and north sides. Three of these chambers are from 15 to 12 ft. in diameter; the fourth, opposite the entrance, being of much greater dimensions. One half of the second cell on the right of the entrance is deeper than the other. All these chambers are regularly walled; in some instances the stones appear to have been slightly overstepped, and thus gradually approaching as they increased in height, and giving the structure somewhat of a beehive form. The stone-work, however, does not appear to have converged sufficiently to have formed a perfect dome, and the apex of the roof was probably constructed of furze and turf laid on branches of trees. The large open area could only have been roofed by the erection of a pole in the centre, with others converging to its summit from the surrounding walls. No traces, however, of such construction exist, neither does it seem probable that this space was ever covered in. The dimensions of this hut [the whole enclosure] are about 80 by 65 ft. Three or four yards north of this is another, somewhat less in size, on nearly the same plan: there are, however, but three cells, and the outer wall follows the shapes of these cells, not being carried around in a continuous curve as in that described above. This second hut has, within the large open area, two walled pits, each 6 by 3 ft., and similar in

character, though much less in size, to those in the camp on Worle Hill in Somerset, and to those found in some of the Cornish hill-castles" (pp. 134-5).

This description agrees in general with the ancient homesteads that are found in Wales, but Mr. Blight calls the whole structure a hut, which term might, with greater propriety, be applied to one of the four chambers built into the wall of the homestead. The small chambers may have been separately occupied by various members of the family, or by different families closely connected. Be this as it may, the striking similarity between the Welsh and Cornish vestiges of these most ancient abodes is remarkable, and but few would have the temerity to say that they all alike owe their origin to the Irish, as Camden supposed was the case with the circular huts in Anglesey. It may be said that like monuments and similar dwellings may have been erected by offshoots of the same race, but not necessarily by any particular branch of that race.

In my next paper I will describe other homesteads of the prehistoric inhabitants of Wales, similar in construction to those that are the subject of this paper, but varying therefrom in a few minor particulars. A few only of these dwellings have been explored and their contents made public. The Hon. William Owen Stanley made some valuable researches among the huts in Holyhead Island,¹ and we are greatly indebted to him for the light which he was instrumental in throwing upon their ancient occupiers. The work, however, of careful investigation of these remains in various parts of Wales has not been systematically taken in hand by competent persons. A few earnest workers have done a little, but much remains to be done. The writer knows of a veritable town of circular huts that has never been described, and perhaps has not had many visitors.

¹ *Arch. Camb.* for 1868, 3rd Ser., vol. xiv, pp. 385 *et seq.*

Tumuli have been desecrated for the urns they contained. Cathedrals, churches, and castles are visited by numerous sight-seekers, and antiquaries wrangle over Roman roads whilst they have neglected the most interesting set of remains that have reached our days—the abodes of the people of prehistoric times. Personally, I am not sorry that they have been neglected, for when I see ancient stone implements in museums, and eagerly ask, or endeavour to ascertain, where they were found, I can obtain only meagre, if any, information about them. The real value of such remains is enhanced a hundredfold when it is known where they were discovered. Private owners of stone relics I meet with, time after time, who are unable to give the history of the treasures they possess. The intrinsic value of their treasures is lost when it is not known whence they came; but when the finds are associated with the place of discovery, real knowledge is increased. Querns I have seen in many places, and could not ascertain the exact circumstances connected with them. If, however, the possessor of any one of them could have said that it was found when a prehistoric detached circular abode was being cleared away, he would have supplied me with valuable information. I am, therefore, with these circumstances before my mind, not displeased that the ancient homes of the ancient people that have bequeathed their history to us in these truth-speaking relics have not been pillaged by mere collectors of curiosities.
