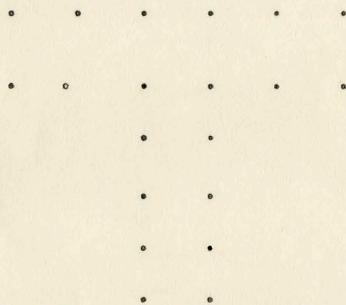


WRETHAM LAKE DWELLINGS

Lecture to Norfolk & Norwich Archaeological Society (?) Unpublished.
c 1864-1868

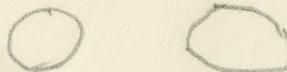
By the Rev. John Gunn

In a late number of the Edinburgh Review mention was made of ancient vestiges of man in the form of Lake habitations in some meres in Wretham Park. In consequence of this, I applied Mr. Jacob Thomas Birch, and received from him the following obliging communication (May 25). 'In draining and taking an enormous quantity of mud out of a pool (Micklemere - R. R. C.) of about 50 acres, 10 or 12 years ago (c. 1856), my Father laid bare oak posts about 12 to 14 feet below the constant surface of the water. I could trace piles or posts in the following form,



and occasional piles in other directions. I have not made any map of their primary position, and, as the work was going on for 4 or 5 years, it would have been next to impossible to have done so. I, however, saw enough to convince me that there had been an artificial island for some purpose. On the north and east sides to a distance of 80 to 110 yards the mud, elsewhere free from stones, was full of good

slinging stones, such as



which might have

been used for warlike purposes. There were no animal remains in the immediate vicinity, but 150 or 200 yards to the south and west cart loads of bones and horns of Deer, Ox, and a few swine bones were found. Many of the deer horns were sawn off, some specimens of which are kept at Wretham Hall. The majority of them crumbled very rapidly after exposure to the air. A part of a Kelt, or Celt, was also found,

which appears to me to have been cast in a similar description of mould to those in the Dublin Museum. A sword also of about the time of Charles I, pommel hilted and highly finished, in contact with human bones, was found in another part of the pool, but, of course, it had no connection with the Crannog.

In an interview, which I subsequently had the honour to have with Mr. T. C. Birch, I learnt that a hard floor, resembling a barn floor, was discovered in draining an adjoining lake (West Mere - R.R.C.), and also some masonry, the uses of which he could not ascertain, but these remains attested the fact that the relative levels of land and water were changed since the bed of peat-moss was formed, which as well as those relics, is now considerably beneath the present surface of the water.

This peat-moss formation was described by Bunbury in the Transactions of the Geological Society of 1858, and mention made of the piles, but the discovery had not then been made of lacustrine habitations, which has since thrown light upon the subject.

In consequence of these communications, I was tempted to go to Wretham to inspect the Meres, and see the collection of Deer horns at the Hall.

The horns of the red deer were sawn off, as described by Mr. Birch, and one especially attracted my notice (a very interesting variety of Cervus Elaphus). To this a label was attached stating that "a human skeleton of small stature was found near it". A skull of the Bos Primigenius was perforated as if it had been killed by a blow precisely as the ox is slain by recent butchers. A very beautiful horn of the Roe-deer was in the collection, taken, not from the lake, but some marsh-land adjoining.

I have since received a most obliging communication from Mr. W. Birch expressing his regret at his absence and offering to show me his collection on his return home in the Autumn. He says that no flint implements have been obtained but that he has several particulars to communicate respecting the discoveries at the Lakes.

I applied for information respecting the human skeleton to Mr. Birch's Steward, Mr. Fergusson, and received the following interesting communication from him (Aug. 1st 1864)

Wretham Thetford

Augt. 1st 1864

Sir,

I have ascertained from the man I wished you to see when you called here the other day that a human skeleton perfect and entire was found about 12 feet deep in mud when the mere (? Mickle Mere - R.R.C.) was cleaned out here a few years ago. It appears from what he tells me it remained on the surface for several days until Mr. Birch gave orders to have it thrown into the water again. The man, whose name is Edward Nunn, tells me that the skull was perfect and the brains as white and clean as if the man had not been dead many days. He tells me he took a tooth out of the jaw and thinks he has it now. I expect I was from home at the time it was found as I cannot recollect seeing any part of it, tho' I have some recollection of hearing something about it. I am sorry you were pressed for time when here as you might have seen the man and heard all about it from himself.

I am, Sir,

faithfully yours.

John Fergusson.

On my way to Wretham Hall, I was taken by Mr. Roper to see the Devil's Punch Bowl, which may be considered a key to the formation of all the other lakes. It is a circular depression in the Chalk, about 600 feet in diameter and 50 in depth, at the present time dry, but occasionally more than half filled, and (singular to say) on one side is a well about 20 feet from the bottom, which constantly retains water, even when, as at present, the bowl itself is empty. This circular depression in the Chalk may be supposed to be formed by the chemical and mechanical action of rain-water in the same

manner as sand galls in the chalk. The rain is carried into the Bowl and drained through it by subterranean currents, which carry away the solid materials and from time to time deepen and enlarge the area of it.

Where the materials of the soil offer equal resistance on every side, a circular form would be the result ; but where sand, or any lighter material offers a slighter resistance in one part than in another, the water makes its way there, and a lake would be formed in that direction.

The "mickle mere" in Wretham Park suggests this solution for its formation in an oblong and curved form. The piles (consisting of oak saplings) appear to have been driven in in a cruciform figure from the South Side, about halfway into the lake ; the other mere (West Mere - R. R. C.) which was drained, was of a circular form.

There are several similar meres and lakes in the neighbourhood which promise well for Crannogs, and the discovery of one at Wretham renders the existence of others in the locality highly probable, and will, I hope, be a stimulus to future researches.

Devil's Punch Bowl (Ordnance Map) the retention of water in the well, due to substratum of clay,