

Trevethy Stone / by C.W. Dymond.

Contributors

Dymond, Charles William.
Bate, C. Spence 1818-1889
Royal College of Surgeons of England

Publication/Creation

[Place of publication not identified] : [publisher not identified], [1879?]

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/vccgq9jg>

Provider

Royal College of Surgeons

License and attribution

This material has been provided by This material has been provided by The Royal College of Surgeons of England. The original may be consulted at The Royal College of Surgeons of England. where the originals may be consulted. This work has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights and is being made available under the Creative Commons, Public Domain Mark.

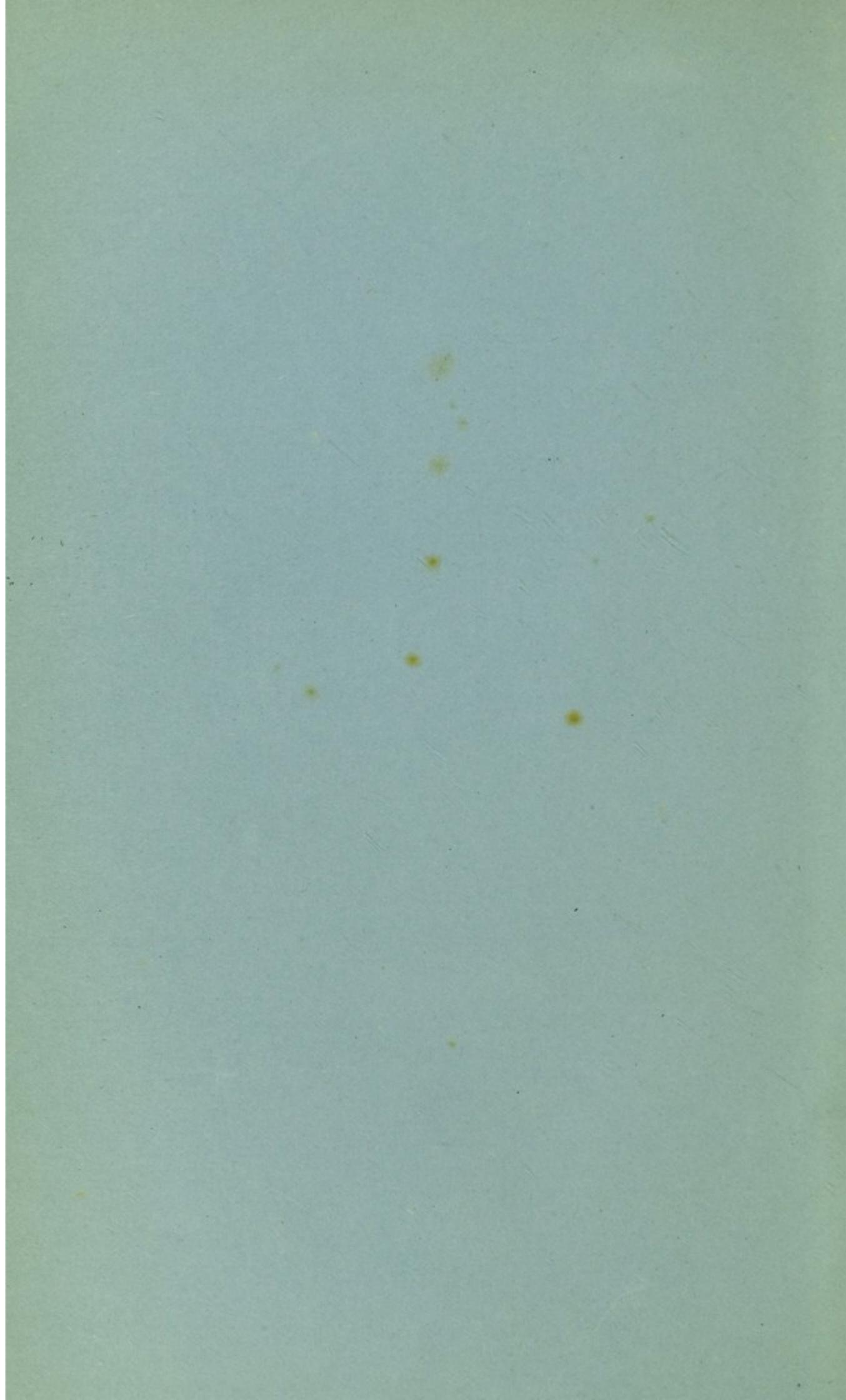
You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, without asking permission.

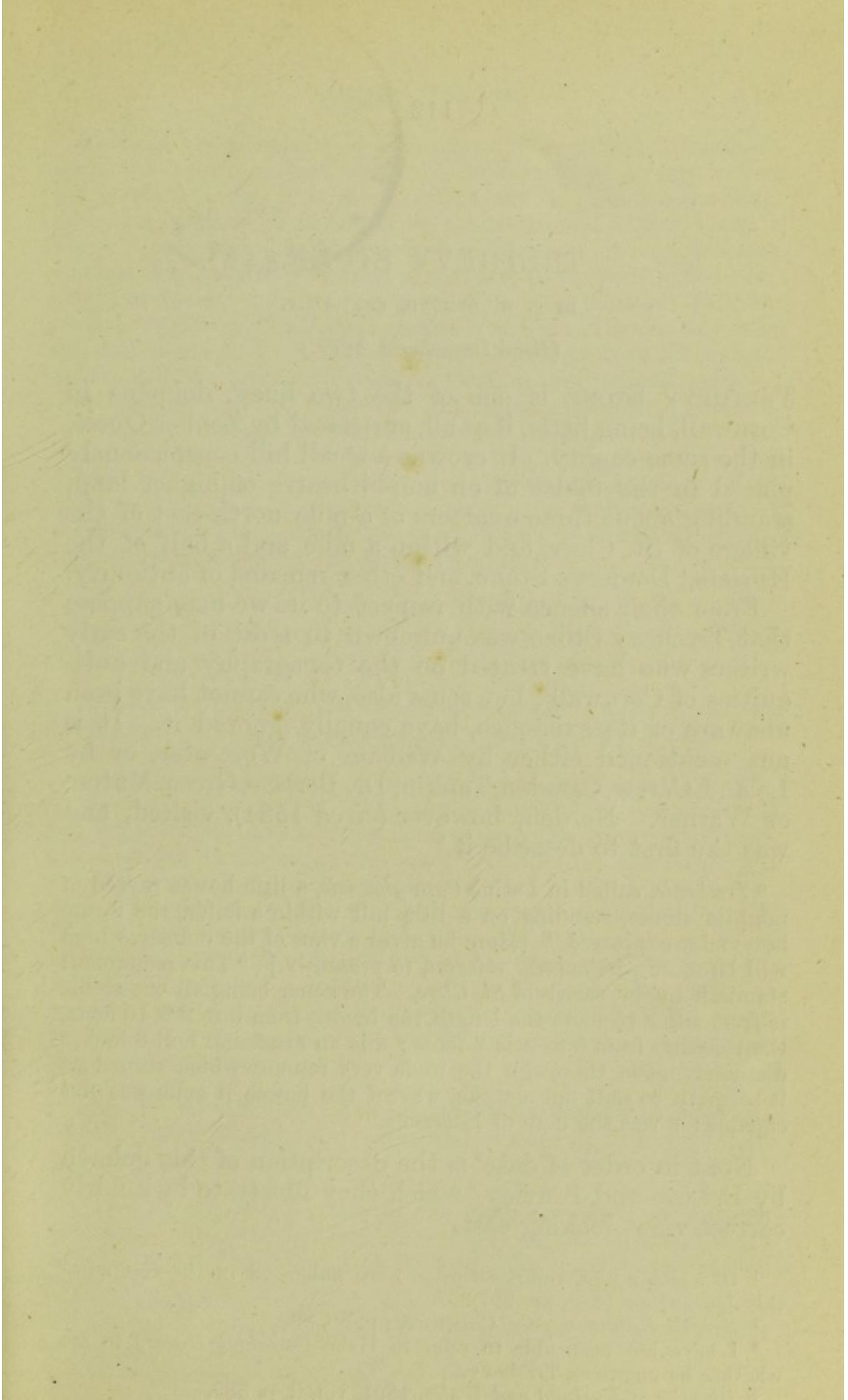
**wellcome
collection**

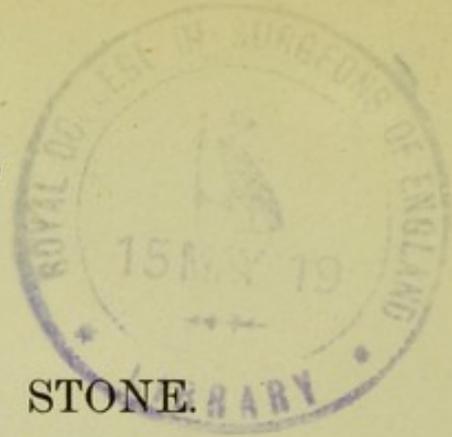
Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

le. Spence Bate Esq. F.R.
with the Author's kind ref

3







TRETHEVY STONE.

BY C. W. DYMOND, ESQ., F.S.A.

(Read December 3, 1879.)

TRETHEVY STONE is one of the two finest dolmêns in Cornwall, being little, if at all, surpassed by Zennor Quoit, in the same county. It crowns a small hill conspicuously placed in the midst of an amphitheatre of higher land, standing about three quarters of a mile north-east of the village of St. Cleer, and within a mile and a half of the Hurlers,¹ Doniert's Stone, and other remains of antiquity.

From their silence with respect to it, we may suppose that Trethevy Stone was unknown to most of the early writers who have treated on the topography and antiquities of Cornwall: but some also, who cannot have been unaware of its existence, have equally ignored it. It is not mentioned either by William of Worcester, or by Leland, Carew, Camden, Tonkin, Dr. Borlase, Grose, Maton, or Warner. Norden, however (*circa* 1584), visited, and was the first to describe it.²

“*Trethevie*, called in Latine *Casa gigantis*, a litle howse raysed of mightie stones, standing on a litle hill within a feilde, the forme herevnder expressed.” [Here he gives a view of the dolmên which will be more particularly referred to presently.] “This monument standeth in the parish of *St. Clere*. The couer being all one stone, is from A to B 16 foote the length, the bredth from C to D is 10 foote, the thicknes from G to H is 2 foote; E is an artefiціаль holl 8 inches diameter, made thorowgh the roofe very rounde, which serued as it seemeth to putt out a staffe, wherof the howse it selfe was not capable: F was the dore or Entrance.”

Next in order of date³ is the description of this dolmên by Britton and Brayley,⁴ which they illustrate by a fairly correct view, looking east.

¹ Of which a plan and description were published in the volume of this *Journal* for 1879, pp. 297-307.

² *Speculi Britannia pars*, Cornwall, pp. 88, 89.

³ I have not been able to refer to Hals' *Parochial History* to see whether he mentions Trethevy.

⁴ *Beauties of England and Wales*, 1801, vol. ii, p. 389.

“To the above objects of curiosity may be added a Cromlech, which we believe has not hitherto been mentioned by any writer, but Norden, though it is more curious, and of greater magnitude, than that of Mona, or any other we are acquainted with. It stands about a mile and a half north-east of St. Cleer, on an eminence commanding an extensive tract of country, particularly to the east, south, and south-west, and is provincially denominated *Trevethy Stone*.¹ On the north the high ground of the moors exalts its swelling outline above it. It is all of granite, and consists of six upright stones, and one large slab, covering them in an inclined position, with another reclining under it. The impost measures 16 feet in length, and 10 broad, and is at a medium about 14 inches thick. It rests on five of the uprights only,¹ and at its upper end is perforated with a small circular hole. No tradition exists as to the time of its erection; but its name at once designates its being a work of the Britons, and sepulchral. The term *Trevedi* (*Trevethi*) signifying, in the British language, the place of graves.”

Bond, the author of *Topographical and Historical Sketches of the Boroughs of East and West Looe*, visited Trethevy in 1802, and thus records his observations:²

“About a mile from St. Cleer church...stands a most magnificent cromlech on a barrow in a field, near the high road, on the tenement called *Trethevy*. A friend who was with me took a rough measurement of the upper, or covering, stone, and calculated it to be about five tons weight. The stones which form this cromlech are supposed to have been brought some miles from where they stand, as there are none of the same kind near it. That this is a work of art, there cannot be a doubt. We can hardly, however, suppose it possible that such immense stones could have been brought from a distance and erected in the manner they are. What machinery was used baffles all conjecture. The upper, or covering, stone has a hole in it;—for what purpose I have no idea, unless to support a flag-pole. One of the party remarked it might have been meant for a chain to drag it by; but I rather thought it too near the edge for that purpose.”

Mr. W. C. Borlase gives a tolerably complete account of Trethevy Stone, the principal points in which I will here quote.³

“The largest, though, perhaps, the least known of the Cornish cromlechs is that of *Trethevy*, *Trevethy*, or, as the common people call it, *Tredavy*, in the parish of St. Clere. The earliest account of it

¹ Incorrect.

² Quoted in Davies Gilbert's *Parochial History of Cornwall*, 1838, vol. i, pp. 193, 194.

³ *Nænia Cornubiæ*, pp. 45-51.

is given by Norden....Two more recent notices of it appear respectively in the *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, and the *Report of the Penzance Natural History Society* for the year 1850; in the former the author being S. R. Pattison, Esq., F.G.S., and in the latter, E. H. Pedler, Esq....The monument consists of six upright stones, upon the upper edges of three of which an oblong covering stone is at present diagonally resting. An eighth stone, probably at one time the supporter at the western extremity, has fallen lengthways along the cist, leaving that end open, and throwing the whole burden of supporting the horizontal stone upon two side stones. These latter have consequently been forced out of the line at their base, and bowed inwards at their top, giving a circular or triangular form to that end of the cist."...Mr. Pattison thinks "the fall of this western pillar caused the superincumbent stone in its descent to break off the upper portions of the side stones."

After giving some dimensions, Mr. Borlase continues: "But the most remarkable feature in this cromlech...is the fine *mênhir* which forms the principal and eastern supporter. In the choice of this stone, as well as in its erection, the greatest care and labour were evidently displayed. On the outer face it presents a smooth surface of finely grained granite, while the squareness of the upper end, and the well coyned angles, give it almost the appearance of a wrought stone....To render it more secure, another and ruder pillar, of nearly equal height, is projected like a buttress against one side of it....The fallen stone once closing up the western end, seems to have been considerably longer than the side stones, so that it is not improbable that this monument was originally a *trilithon*....The pit in the centre" of the cist "shews that the stones rest not on the mound, but on the natural surface of the ground....Two...features in this monument...have given rise to a considerable amount of speculation. The first is an aperture in the lower end of the eastern stone so much resembling an artificially constructed means of access to the chamber that Norden does not hesitate to call it 'the dore or entrance'. The height of the door is 2 feet, and its breadth 1 foot 9 inches. Mr. Pattison considers that it 'exhibits marks of art', but on an examination of the stone in December 1871, the author came to the conclusion that the fracture, if not the natural configuration of the stone, *might* have been accidentally caused either at the time of its transportation from the quarry, or during its erection. The second feature to be noticed is a hole, from 6 to 8 inches in diameter, in the north-east corner of the covering stone. It is more oblong than round, and is placed immediately above the 'entrance' just described. The circumstance of a hole being so frequently found in the dolmens of eastern Europe and India has induced some antiquaries to form a comparison between them and the Trethevy Stone; but in the former cases the hole is always in one of the side stones, and communicates with the interior of the chamber, while in the latter it is pierced through an overlapping portion of the roof. Norden speaks of it as 'an arteficial holl

...which served as it seemeth to putt out a staffe, wherof the howse it selfe was not capable.' Mr. Pattison confirms this opinion by mentioning that the 'sides are smooth as if worn by a staff'; and", Mr. Borlase concludes, "such is without doubt the true account of it."

None of the other authors who mention Trethevy (so far as my researches have extended) appear to have seen it, but they draw their descriptions from some of those I have quoted.

The plan and views of Trethevy Stone, which illustrate this paper, will be found to be much more accurate and detailed than any which have hitherto been published. The former has been constructed from elaborate measurements, and the "orientation" fixed by reference to careful observations of magnetic bearings, an allowance having been made for a local deviation of $19\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ west, which, according to the best information I have been able to obtain, must be very near to the truth. The view of the south side is copied from a photograph; the others from drawings taken on the spot.¹

There is no evidence to shew that this dolmên has suffered the least change since the time of Norden, whose view of its northern side—very good for the time when it was executed, allowing for evident artist's and engraver's errors—represents it just as it stands at the present day. The principal discrepancies in his picture are, that it represents the hole in the impost as perforating its edge horizontally; and the "dore" as in a stone distinct from the eastern supporter, and standing out flush with the edge of the north-eastern side-stone. Doubtless, this is but an artist's device for combining in one view the features of two.

Trethevy Stone consists of eight principal members forming one large covered cist, with an *annexe*, crowning a low mound. For convenience of reference most of the stones are numbered on the plan. Six of these, Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7, remain standing; one, No. 6, has fallen; and the eighth is an inclined "table-stone" or "impost",

¹ The "orientation" of other Cornish dolmêns is given in my "Notes on Chywoon Quoit" (see the volume of this *Journal* for 1877, p. 178). The bearing of Trethevy Stone there recorded, which was only roughly approximate, is correctly given in the plan with this paper.

firmly resting on three supporters, Nos. 1, 3 and 5. The mound, composed of earth and fragments of stone, is generally about 3 feet high; but, within the area of the cist and the *annexe*, the surface is about a foot lower, or 2 feet above the level of the field. It is probable, as Mr. Borlase says, that the standing stones are founded on the natural surface. The slabs (granite) of which this dolmên is built, though not produced on the spot, could have been obtained from an adjoining hill at a short distance, over which the difficulties of transport would not be great. It must be evident to those who look at the large gaps over stones 2, 5 and 4, that it would have been exceedingly difficult, if not impracticable, to close these so as to exclude the soil from the interior of the dolmên, if it were originally entirely buried in a mound; to say nothing of the impossibility of keeping the *annexe* clear. And this is only one of many instances which support the theory that "free-standing dolmêns" were recognized forms of ancient sepulchral architecture.

When stone No. 6 was erect, the cist must have been about 6 feet square. The *annexe* is $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet long transversely, and about 3 feet wide. The length of the table-stone between A and B is $15\frac{1}{2}$ feet, and its width between C and D 10 feet. Its thickness varies considerably, but may average 14 inches. The eastern supporter, No. 3, stands 10 feet above the floor of the cist, and is about $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide, and from 10 to 11 inches thick. No. 7 stone stands about 9 feet above the floor of the cist, and leans toward No. 3; but is not, as Mr. Borlase says, "projected like a buttress against one side of it", there being an interval of nearly 3 inches between them at the top; and they are kept apart by a small stone, about 18 inches by 8 inches, (visible in the plan and in the view of the northern side), which is inserted at the level of, and is partly supported by, the upper edge of No. 4. Nevertheless, No. 7 was probably intended to serve, in part at least, the purpose of a buttress. The highest point of the table-stone (the north-east corner) is 12 feet 8 inches above the mound, or about 15 feet 6 inches above the level of the field: the lowest point (the south-west corner) is 4 feet 9 inches above the mound, or about 6 feet 3 inches above the level of the field. The soffit of the table-stone

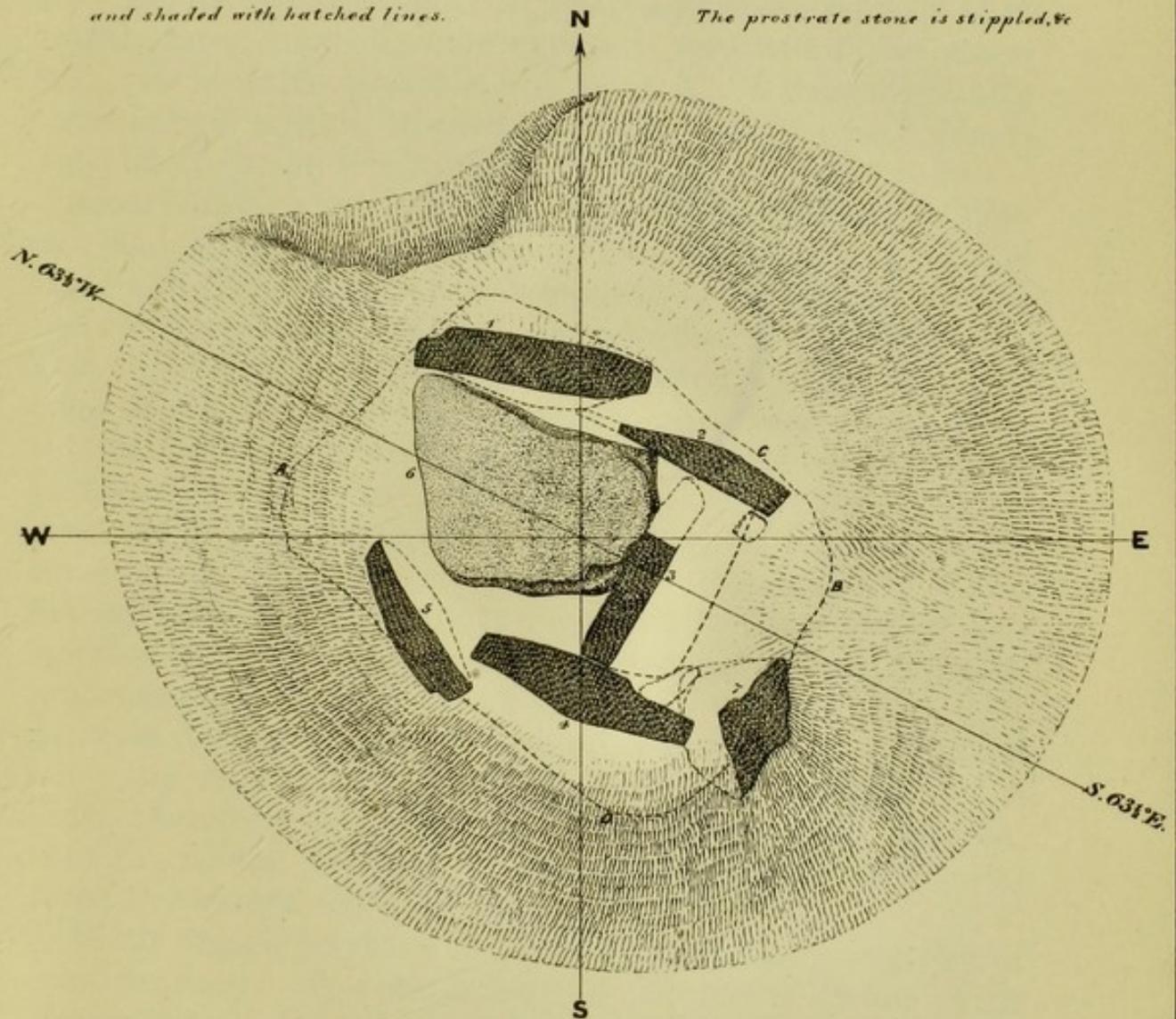
TRETHEVY STONE:

A DOLMEN NEAR ST CLEER, CORNWALL.

Assumed deviation of the Magnetic Needle, 19½° W.

*Sectional plan of erect stones
taken at the level of the ground
and shaded with hatched lines.*

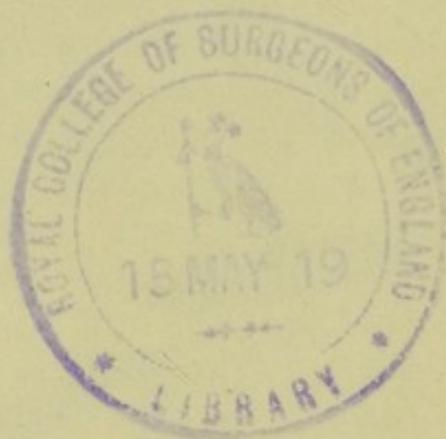
*Overhangs, and Table-stone with
hole, are drawn in dotted outlines.
The prostrate stone is stippled, &c*



SCALE OF FEET.



Measured by C. W. Dymond, C.E., 12th Sept. 1877.



over the western edge of the fallen stone, No. 6, is 5 feet 4 inches from the floor ; the exposed length of this stone being 6 feet 11 inches. That it was originally erect, and that it touched, if it did not support, the cap-stone, is probable from the analogy of similar structures, particularly the "quoit" at Zennor, whose western stone (now fallen inward) is shewn in Dr. Borlase's view as standing, and, apparently, supporting the cap-stone which became displaced, and slid to the ground on one side, when that support was removed. But the discrepancy between the visible length of No. 6, and the height of the space above it, does not prove that the stone, when standing, was too lofty for its position, as it is clear that some part of that length must have become exposed only when the stone fell. It is quite possible, too, that No. 6 may originally have leaned a little inward, the more easily to accommodate itself to the headway.

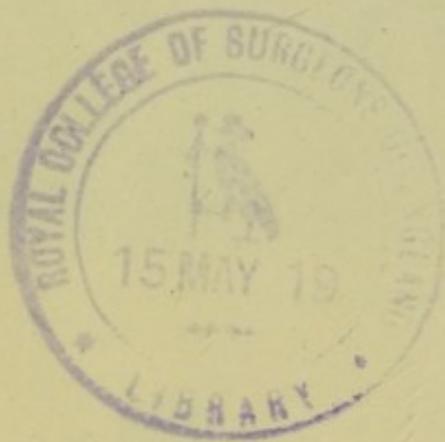
After careful examination, I am convinced that Mr. Borlase and Mr. Pattison were mistaken in thinking that the table-stone has slipped, and has not only dislocated, and bowed inward, Nos. 1 and 5, but also fractured their tops. The table-stone rests for about 3 feet along the inner edge of No. 3, which has evidently been hammered away to a rough line to receive it. It also rests on two small surfaces of No. 1, 18 inches apart, which appear to have been artificially bedded, and on the apex of No. 5. Indeed, considering the rudeness of the structure, so skilful is the fitting, that it is not easy to regard it as the result of dislocation, especially as it is most improbable that the present supporters, Nos. 1 and 5, have given way, founded, as they doubtless are, on the solid ground, and kept in place by the embanked filling within and without. I have, therefore, no doubt that the plan of this dolmên, though rather unsymmetrical, has remained unaltered since the stones were set up.

With regard to stone No. 7, another point is worthy of consideration. A comparison of Trethevy Stone with Zennor Quoit (of which it is, in the main features, an almost complete duplicate) strongly suggests the query whether No. 7 was designed to do duty only as a buttress. Its analogue in the Zennor dolmên is a wing-stone in the form of a thin, flat slab, nearly 11 feet long, and 7 feet

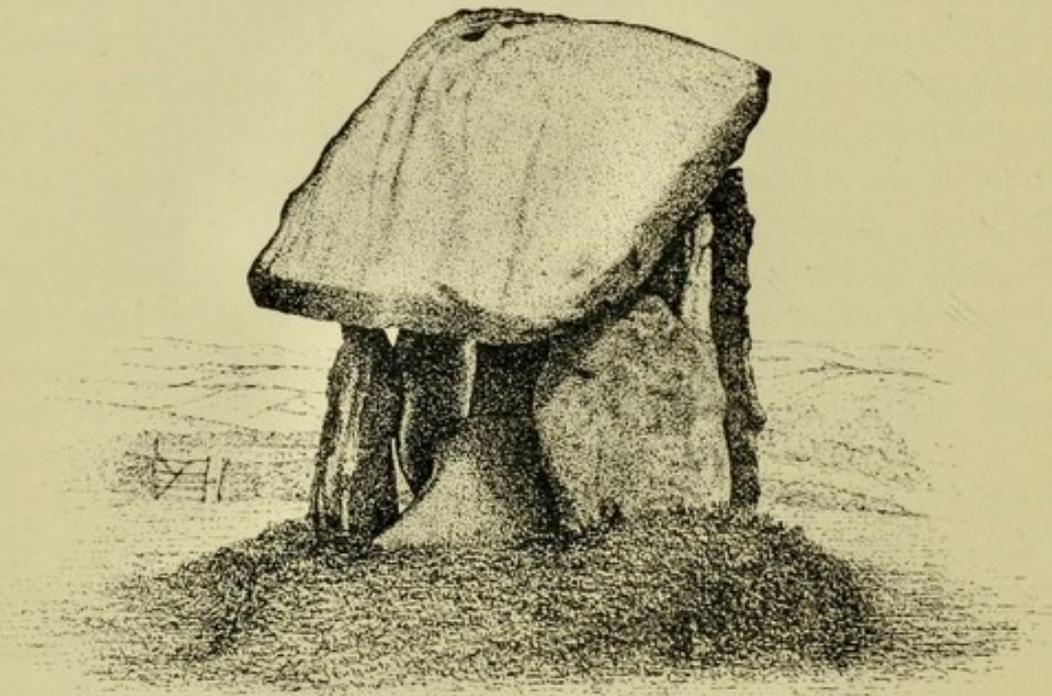
high, standing edgewise across the eastern end of the south-eastern side-stone which, as well as the corresponding north-eastern side-stone, projects considerably behind the main eastern transverse supporter. Another and similar, though smaller, wing-stone stands across the end of the north-eastern side-stone. An interval, 2 feet 2 inches wide, is left between the two wing-stones giving access to the secondary cist, or *annexe*, which is about $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet long transversely, and $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide. Now it is possible that No. 7, though not very shapely for that purpose, may have been regarded as a wing-stone; and a *vis à vis* may have been planted at the north-eastern corner, and afterward removed; or may have been destined for the place, but never set up. Otherwise, it is difficult to say why seven-eighths of the rectangular *annexe* should have been inclosed, and the remaining small part of its fencing omitted.

And this leads us farther to speculate as to which end (if either) of such a structure as this was regarded as the front, and which as the back. Was the fallen western stone the door? Or was the eastern *annexe* a very rude effort to produce a species of portico *in antis*?

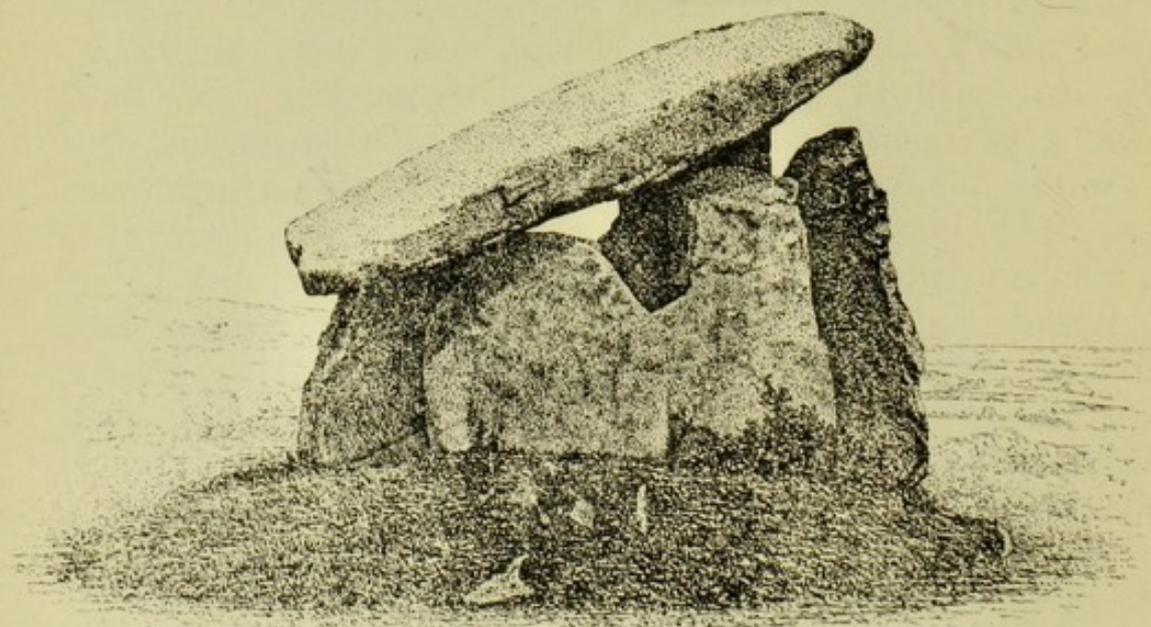
Two other features peculiar to Trethevy Stone remain to be noticed. One of them is the hole through No. 3. Its position and shape are accurately represented in the view of the east end. Its sides are respectively 2 feet 10 inches and 2 feet 1 inch high, and its width 1 foot 9 inches. I agree with Mr. Borlase in thinking that the indications point to its having been produced by a natural fracture rather than by the agency of tools. There is only one mark suggestive of the latter, and that is a slight notch, shewn in the view, which is continued for an inch or two above the left hand top corner, as though it were part of a chisel-draught cut to insure a neat fracture of the stone. But, to set against the theory that the hole is artificial, we have the facts that this granite often naturally breaks into regular rhomboidal masses; that, in accordance with this, the left hand side of the hole is parallel to the left hand, or southern, edge of the stone in which it occurs; and that this southern edge, as well as the jamb and soffit of the opening, are all equally weathered to a comparatively smooth surface which con-



TRETHEVY STONE.



WEST END.



SOUTH SIDE.

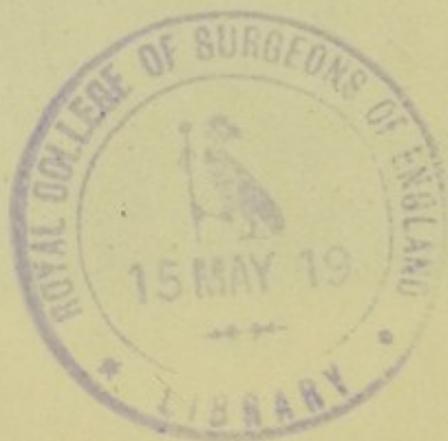
TRETHEVY STONE.



EAST END.



NORTH SIDE.



trasts with the jagged line of the upper edge of the same stone, with the upper edge of No. 1, and with the hole in the cap-stone, and the under surface surrounding it,—all of which clearly shew indications of cutting or chipping. A similar rhomboidal hole is broken out of the great standing-stone in the Cove at Stanton Drew;¹ but, in the discussion on that megalithic group, I have adduced good reasons for concluding that those are not the ruins of a dolmên. Another instance—the only one of which I have seen any notice—of the existence of a hole at the bottom of one of the side-stones of a cist is furnished by the dolmên of Grandmont, in Bas Languedoc, a view of which is given by Dr. Fergusson.² It is, however, represented as having a very ragged outline, probably due to the nature of the stone out of which it has been broken.

The only other feature remaining to be noticed—and it is the one which has been the greatest *crux* to antiquaries—is the hole in the table-stone, the size, shape, and position of which are accurately shewn in the plan. It is rudely rectangular, 8 inches by $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and is cut, not perpendicularly to the face of the stone, but nearly vertically to the ground. It looks toward a point about 1 foot to the east of that to which a plummet from its centre would fall; or, in other words, is about 5° out of the upright. We have seen that two theories as to the use of this hole have been proposed,—the one, that it was intended to pass a chain or rope through to facilitate transport; the other, and the favourite one, that it was cut to receive a mast or flag-pole. To both of these theories there appear to be very serious objections: the first arising from the transverse position of the hole. Had it been destined for either of the suggested uses, it would have been cut longitudinally; in the one case to weaken as little as possible that part of the stone near its corner on which the strain would come; and in the other, to facilitate the erection of the mast. The second objection springs from the fact that every side and angle of the hole is tooled, which would be quite superfluous for haulage purposes, and impossible to have been produced by

¹ For a view of which, see the volume of this *Journal* for 1877, p. 304.

² *Rude Stone Structures*, p. 344.

the friction of a round mast, even if it could be conceived how this could have such play and abrasive power as to wear away the face of the stone. Nor, if the mast were steadied by wedges, would such careful shaping of the hole be at all necessary. But a third objection may, perhaps, arise from a fact which does not appear to have been before noticed, viz., that the outer upper edge of stone No. 3 underlies fully one third of the area of the hole, as may be seen in the plan. Now, though this still leaves room for a pole from 3 to 4 inches in diameter, it seems more probable that, had the orifice been intended for this purpose, it would have been cut so as to be quite clear of the stone below. Indeed, I think it must be evident that neither of the above explanations solves the problem; for masses quite as large as this table-stone were often transported and erected in structures of the same age without any trouble being taken to thread a rope through them; and as to the mast, it is purely conjectural, and needs stronger presumptive evidence than has yet been offered to establish its claim to be advocated.

Casting about, then, for other solutions of the puzzle, two theories suggested themselves to me, the first of which I mention here, only to explain to any who may independently have hit upon the same, why it seems quite untenable. It is, that this hole was cut with the view of suspending from it, out of reach of predatory beasts, a basket of food or other offerings to the departed to whom this tomb was erected. But for this purpose it would be unnecessary that the hole should be either so large or so well wrought as it is: moreover, it is so nearly over the inner corner of the eastern end of No. 2 stone, that there would not be room to suspend such a vessel, save at the height of many feet from the ground; indeed, very nearly as high as the cap-stone, if it were to be secure from molestation by animals. The second theory is one which, alone among those that have been offered, appears to be really free from difficulty. It is, that the hole was the socket for a cross which has since disappeared. We know that in Christian times such crosses were often erected in Brittany on these pagan monuments; and it is quite possible—though we have, I believe, no other known instance in England—that this was done here. The position of

the hole at the highest part of the structure; its transverse direction—the longer sides facing the ends of the dolmên; its rectangular shape—rude though this is; and the careful way in which its faces and some of its corners have been cut, so as to be nearly vertical—the error being only such as would naturally occur in guiding the work by the eye alone;—all are congruous with this hypothetic use; and I suggest that, in the absence of any more plausible theory, this may have been the purpose for which the hole was made. Though it can hardly be regarded as corroborative of this idea, it may be well to mention here that both Doniert's Stone and its companion, The other Half Stone, about a mile and a half distant (monuments of an early Christian age), have each a mortise sunk in the top, evidently for crosses which have been removed and lost. Before passing from this point, I may note that appearances indicate that this hole was cut from the upper surface downward, probably after the dolmên was erected, for a large flake has broken away from the under side; possibly during the operation, unless it were then merely shaken, and afterward detached by frost. If the latter, then the northern and eastern sides of the hole, which are only about 4 inches deep, while the south-western corner is 7 or 8 inches deep, may have presented better cheeks than they would now to steady the cross.

There is no record of any excavation of the ground within the cist: we do not, therefore, know whether the fall of the western stone was caused by such an operation, or whether it resulted from being imperfectly founded.

But structural peculiarities are not the only matters connected with this dolmên that have been themes for discussion. Even its name is regarded not only as of unsettled etymology, but as of uncertain form. For the last three hundred years at least it has been pronounced by the people in the neighbourhood *Trethēvy*; sometimes with a rustic approximation towards *Tredavy*. Norden spells it in his text, *Trethewie*; in the title of his view, *Trethewye*; and in the margin, *Tretheaye*. The first and second are plainly only old methods of spelling *Trethevy*; and the *a* in the third is probably a misprint for *u*. But for nearly a century since Pryce published his *Cornish*

Grammar and Vocabulary, it has been the fashion to think that the local name is a corruption of *Trevethy*,—a word compounded of *tre*, a town, village, or dwelling, and the plural of *beth* (in combination transmuted to *veth*), a grave: hence, town or place of graves. If, indeed, this were the original form of the name, at least one other plausible meaning might be extracted from it; e.g., *trev*, house, *etha*, great: hence, great house. But certain sober philological facts make it very unlikely that the suggested form is the true one. The transposition of *th* and *v* in the alternative words is quite conceivable, and, perhaps, not unexampled. But while the living name is pronounced with a long *e* in the emphatic penultimate syllable,—thus, *Tre-thē'-vy*, on the contrary, *Tre-vēth'-ow*, *Trem-bēth'-ow*, *Tre-vēr'-y*, and similar forms in Cornish, have the *e* always short. Now such change of vowel-quantity as would be implied if *Tre-vēth'-y* became corrupted into *Tre-thē'-vy*, is in the highest degree improbable; and, on this ground, I think it is time the advocacy of this hypothetical name was abandoned. The little group of cottages close by the dolmên is called *Trethevy*; and it is probable that the latter took its title from the tenement on or near which it stands. The fact that there are two other tenements of exactly the same name in the county, and that a family named *Trethevey* lives, or lived, near Egloshayle, tends to establish its correctness. Its etymology has not been satisfactorily settled. Bannister, in his *Glossary of Cornish Names*, records two suggestions: the one, that *Thevy* is a modification of *Dewi*,—hence, David's house; the other, that the complete name means dwelling of the god, hero, or chief (*de, dhe, ga*). It remains but to note that in the Ordnance Map we find the tenement in question named *Trethery*, and the dolmên *Trethery's Stone*. Although there is another *Trethery* in Cornwall, it seems probable, from the total absence of published corroborative evidence in favour of the use of this form here, that it is only one of those engraver's errors from which our national maps are not quite free.
