

## ***Wirral's stone circles – or were they?***

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William Williams Mortimer said of Upton, Wirral, Cheshire, in his 1847 account of the history of the Hundred of Wirral<sup>1</sup> that “.. it was *the* metropolis of Wirral”. There had certainly been a manor house, Upton Hall, there since the 1600s and in the mid 1800s it was rented by William Inman, a shipping magnate, whilst he oversaw the building of his new home, Harefield House, close by. This house was later to become Upton Manor and it had a ‘viewing tower’ from which he was able to look out over the Mersey Estuary to see when one of his ships was returning to the port of Liverpool. This highlights the fact that buildings on this elevated site in north Wirral commanded a clear view out to the Irish Sea.

Just across present day Moreton Road from Upton Manor is the site of one of Cheshire's oldest churches, that of Overchurch, and these buildings share the promontory that is shown on the earliest maps of the Ordnance Survey as Overchurch Hill. The name Overchurch, according to W Fergusson Irvine,<sup>2</sup> means the *church on the shore* from the Anglo-Saxon *ofer* meaning a shore and *cirice*, a church, which implies that at one time either the sea flooded over the marshy ground between what is today's Leasowe Castle and Great Meols and possibly some way up the river Fender, or that a lagoon or salt marsh existed there.

That the church on Overchurch Hill was of Anglo-Saxon origin is well documented, in particular by Edward W Cox's article on Overchurch and its Runic Stone.<sup>3</sup> This stone was discovered when the ‘old’ church was being dismantled in 1887 and rebuilt on a site elsewhere in Upton. This unique artefact was dedicated to one Æthelmund and dated sometime between 700 and 900 AD. This find suggested that the early 1813 church was built on the site of a much earlier place of worship which was confirmed by D O'Hanlon and K Pealin in their survey of the site of Overchurch, Upton, Wirral.<sup>4</sup> They refer particularly to the circular form of the enclosure around the old graveyard at Overchurch as having possible links with a time prior to the early Christian period. They further refer to the ‘enclosure’ also having a ‘depression’ which could possibly have been an internal ditch, a feature that would correspond to the usual structure of a henge.

This very thorough 1986 survey refers briefly to the plotting and recording of ridge and furrow, standing stones and pits and ponds by triangulation and makes brief reference to the 1898 OS map which shows a path leading to the churchyard from Upton Village.

What the report does not mention is that there were a number of other

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<sup>1</sup> William Williams Mortimer, *The history of the Hundred of Wirral*, London: Whitaker, 1847.

<sup>2</sup> W Fergusson Irvine, ‘Place names in the Hundred of Wirral’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 43 & 44 (1893), 279-304.

<sup>3</sup> Edward W Cox, ‘Overchurch and its Runic Stone’, *Transactions of the Historical society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 43 (1891), 305-320.

<sup>4</sup> D O'Hanlon & K Pealin ‘The site of Overchurch, Upton, Wirral: A Survey’, *Journal of the Merseyside Archaeological Society*, 9 (1995), 71-78.

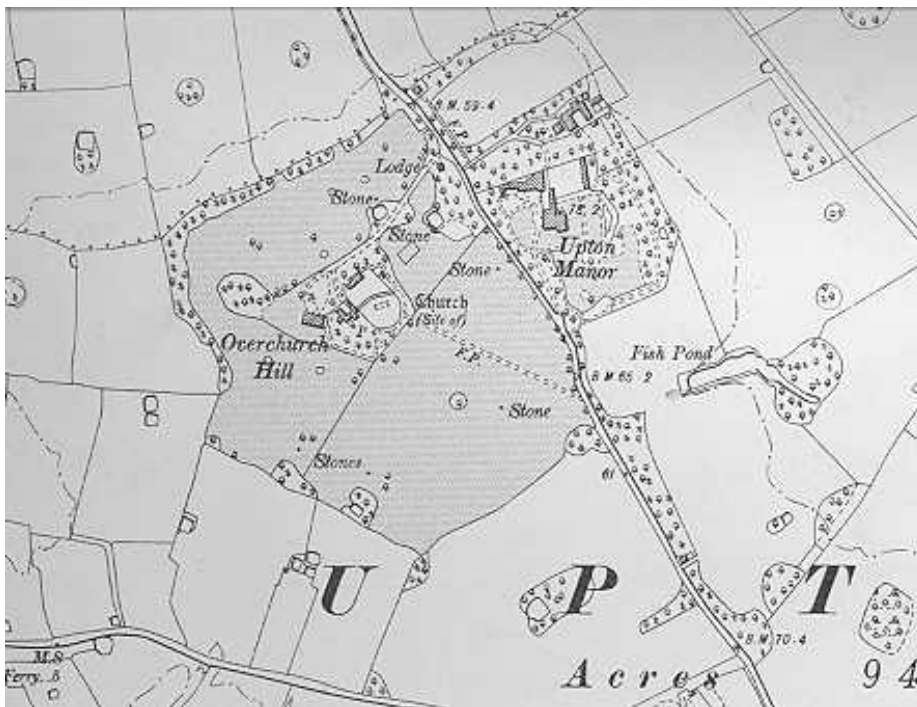
'stones' indicated on that OS map that described a circle with a diameter of approximately 350 yards. Only one of these stones remains today but sadly it is no longer standing upright (*figure 1*).

*Figure 1 (below). The remaining stone at Overchurch Hill*

*Figure 2 (right). 'Stone' at SJ 264 888 on Overchurch Hill*



One can only assume that all the others have fallen victim to urban development over the last two centuries. Seeing this stone marked on the modern OS mapping (*figure 2*) on the Cheshire County Council's tithe map website<sup>5</sup> is what started me on this particular study.

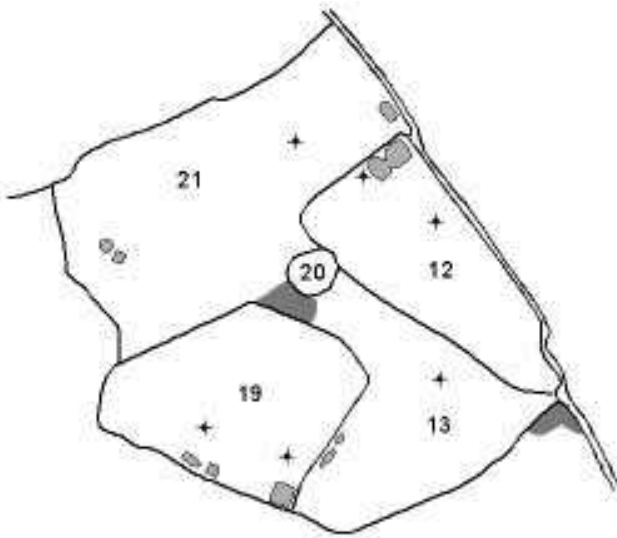


An extract of the 1899 OS six-inch map is shown in *figure 3 (left)*. Five of the six stones shown form a circle centred on the wooded hollow just east of 'Overchurch'.

An observation that may add further credence to there having been a 'chamber' on the site at Overchurch Hill is the name of the field to the immediate south-west of the old church. Field number 19 was

called Great Pit Hey according to the 1837 tithe map shown in *figure 4*. The one remaining stone is the one to the south-west of the '19' in this field.

<sup>5</sup> <http://maps.cheshire.gov.uk/tithemaps/TwinMaps.aspx>

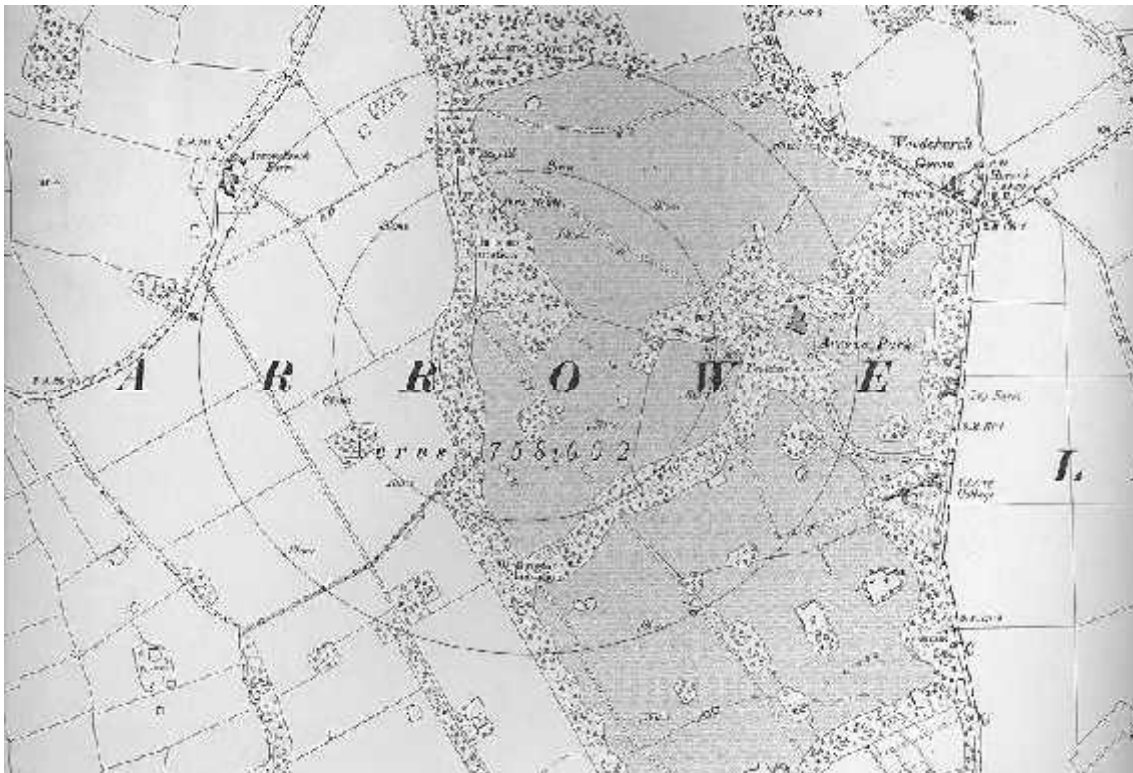


*Figure 4. Redrawn section of the 1837 tithe map of Overchurch Hill*

The old church yard, 20, is close to the centre of the circle of stones shown as + in figure 4. Field 21 was Far Church Hey, 12 was Near Church Hey and 13 was Little Church Hey. The significance of field 19 being called Great Pit Hey is that the actual centre of the circle of stones in figure 4 is near the north-east boundary of the field near to the small plantation of trees shown here in grey.

If this had been a pit or a deep depression at the time these fields were named then the name may indeed have been derived from a henge containing some sort of burial chamber.

So, was the 'stone circle' on Overchurch Hill in existence at the time the first Christian church was built there in the seventh or eighth century AD and did the 'Great Pit' that gave its name to the field in which this church was constructed once contain an early burial chamber?



I guess we will never know, but the legacy left to us by those early surveyors of the Ordnance Survey is a very real one, even if today the stones that they included in their survey have all

disappeared, except for one. Sadly, the field books in which the early surveyors kept all their notes have been destroyed.

To add further credence to this suggestion, I have studied all the large-scale Ordnance Survey maps of Wirral for the period between 1875 to 1899 to see if other 'stones' had been included in their cartography. I can report that there were a total of 57 stones identified, including the six at Overchurch. This also included



three rows of 'stones' located in a field to the east of Fenderlane Farm and south of Fender Lane which contained a total of 37. These are a curiosity of a different nature worthy of further research, but twelve of the remaining stones were located not much more than a mile away from Overchurch Hill, as the crow flies, in the area of Arrowe Park. The curious thing about this collection of twelve 'stones' is that they fall closely into two concentric circles as shown in figure 5 (page 49). Two of these stones are still to be found in Arrowe Park and are shown below.

From their appearance, these stones are undoubtedly of considerable age and they have most certainly seen use or misuse over many years. But there is no mistaking the fact that, at least at the end of the nineteenth century, they were part of a collection of similar artefacts that can be shown to have been part of two rather larger than normal, circles of stone. They are not part of any eighteenth or nineteenth century enclosure system either. One can easily draw a circle through two or three stones and imagine that they were part of some early Neolithic design, but when a series of two concentric circles can be drawn through a complex array of twelve stones, I would suggest that they represent something more significant than just serendipity.

Recent excavations and thinking around the various circles at Stonehenge now suggests that this monument was dedicated to the dead of the 'society' that lived there, and that a much bigger henge, 'Wood Henge', about a mile away and closer to the River Avon, would likely have been the henge where the community lived, especially with fresh water on hand. The same theory could also be applied to the Arrowe Park and Overchurch 'circles of stone', with fresh water being available from Arrowe Brook which flows through the middle of the Arrowe Park circles. What do you think?



*Standing stones at Arrowe Park*

*All photographs by Malcolm C McIvor*