

THE EARTH CIRCLES ON ST. MARTHA'S HILL, NEAR GUILDFORD

BY

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This paper deals with the folklore and customs of St. Martha's Hill, near Guildford, and neighbouring places, describes the excavation of an earth circle on the hill, discusses the type, and lists the other archaeological sites and finds of the vicinity.

ST. MARTHA'S HILL is the conspicuous eminence, 573 feet O.D., just north of Chilworth in the Tillingbourne Valley, 2 miles south-east of Guildford (grid reference 51/028483). The so-called Pilgrims Way runs up and down it, east and west, and the hill is crowned by the old church of St. Martha. Near the top of the hill, below the church, on the south side, are four circles, consisting of banks with external ditches, and a fifth is not far away to the south-east. (Fig. 1.)

THE HISTORY OF THE SITE

These circles have been the subject of casual references and intermittent interest for some hundred years, and it may now be useful to set out the known facts about them. The references will be made in chronological order, and the considerations arising from them discussed later.

It is curious, but not necessarily significant, that none of the older histories of Surrey (Aubrey, compiled 1673 onward, published 1719; Salmon, 1736; Camden, 16th century, revised by Gough, 1789; Manning and Bray, 1809; Allen, 1829) mention the circles at all; nor do the earlier works of local topography (Russell, 1801; *Excursions Through Surrey*, c. 1820; Smith, 1828); nor do the usually voracious *Gentleman's Magazine* and its peers. The first notice is that by Brayley in 1850:¹

On the southern side of St. Martha's Hill, are two distinct but small circles; each formed by a single bank and ditch: one of them is about 30 yards in diameter; the other, 28 yards. Whether these circles were ever connected with Druidical rites, or not, must remain questionable. They have not hitherto been noticed in any published work; and the same may be stated with respect to a large Barrow,² enveloped in foliage, and obscured by large trees growing upon it, which is situated about three-quarters of a mile from the hill, in the approach from Guildford.

¹ Brayley, E. W., *Topographical History of Surrey*, Vol. V, 1850, p. 133.

² This barrow is the platform mound at Tyting.

Thistleton Dyer, in 1876,¹ records a folk-custom whose significance will appear shortly:

A custom, the origin of which is lost in the obscurity of time, prevails in the neighbourhood of Guildford of making a pilgrimage to St. Martha's (or Martyr's) Hill on Good Friday. Thither from all the countryside youths and maidens, old folks and children, betake themselves, and gathered together on one of the most beautiful spots in Surrey, in full sight of an old Norman church which crowns the green summit of the hill, beguile the time with music and dancing. Whatever the origin of this pilgrimage to St. Martha's, it is apparently one that commends itself to the taste of the present generation, and is not likely to die out with the lapse of years, but to increase in popular estimation as long as the green hill lasts to attract the worshippers of natural beauty, or to furnish the mere votaries of pleasure with the excuse and the opportunity for a pleasant holiday.

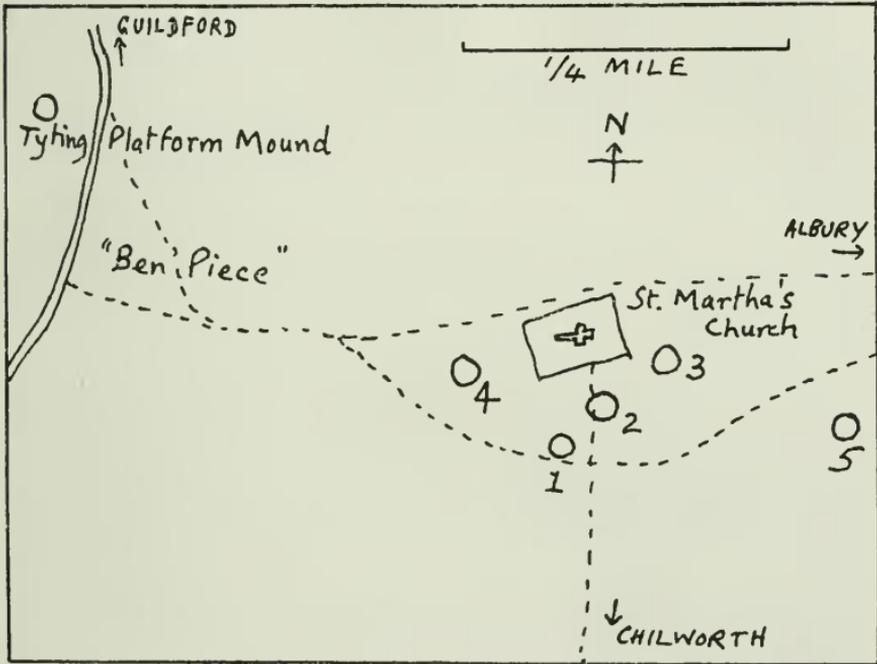


FIG. 1.—ST. MARTHA'S, THE EARTH CIRCLES AND TYTING.

Clinch and Kershaw, in 1895,² repeat this, but add: "It [the custom] clearly has no reference to the solemn event celebrated upon Good Friday by Christians."

Lasham, in the same year,³ may be referring to these descriptions in his note on the circles, but goes a little farther in his interpretation:

¹ Thistleton Dyer, T. F., *British Popular Customs*, 1876, p. 156, quoting *The Times* of April 18, 1870.

² Clinch, G., and Kershaw, S. W., *Bygone Surrey*, 1895, p. 112.

³ Lasham, T., "Camps, Earthworks, Tumuli, etc., in West Surrey," *Sy.A.C.*, Vol. XII, 1895, p. 151.