

# SCIENCE

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## A VISIT TO A "PICT'S HOUSE."

BY DAVID MAC RITCHIE.

As I have to-day visited an admirable specimen of the underground structures so frequently found in Scotland, where they are popularly known as "Picts' Houses," some description of it will, I think, prove interesting to the readers of *Science*, although the place itself has long been known to antiquaries. There are very many examples of these structures in the British Isles, notably in Scotland and Ireland, but unfortunately the information regarding them (almost invariably most exact and detailed) is for the most part buried in the various volumes of "Transactions" of antiquarian societies, and is thereby practically useless. If the descriptions already published regarding these buildings, together with reproductions of the diagrams illustrating them, could be focussed into one volume, the result would be of the highest interest to those who have paid attention to the subject, and would be a positive revelation to those who have not yet done so.<sup>1</sup> And one great advantage to be derived from a comparison of the various delineations would be that the student would realize that, although such structures are referred to under many names (such as underground caves, souterrains, weems, cloghauns, Picts' Houses, and — popularly — fairy halls), they all belong to one great class.

The specimen visited by me to-day is situated at Pitcur, in Forfarshire, about two miles to the south-east of the small town of Coupar-Angus, and is locally known as "the Picts' house." It is entirely beneath the surface of the ground, and the portion of it which is still covered over stretches for about twenty feet beneath a ploughed field. That is to say, its roof is covered by a foot or two of soil, through which the plough passes without ever striking the flat, stone roof below. In other cases, indeed, the ploughshare has often been the first discoverer of these subterranean galleries.

The ground-plan of the Pict's House at Pitcur may be roughly described as of a horseshoe shape, with a shorter gallery parallel to the exterior curve of one side. The horseshoe itself is about 130 feet in length from end to end, with an average depth of 6 or 7 feet, and an average breadth of about 6 feet. The shorter gallery is about 55 feet long, and its dimensions otherwise resemble those of the horseshoe, except that it broadens out into a bulbshape at the inner end — a common feature in such structures. The line of length, in each case, is taken along the middle of the gallery, there being, of course, a great difference between the length of the inner and outer curves.

Be it understood that both of these galleries are, as it were, great symmetrical ditches or drains, quite underground, and entered by several burrow-like doorways. Their sides have

been carefully-built walls of large, unhewn, unmortared stones, and these are still to a great extent unimpaired. The roof was formed by bringing the upper tiers of the wall slightly together, and then placing huge slabs of stone across from side to side. Two of the largest of these roof-slabs measure as follows: One (the largest of all) is about 74 inches in length, by 58 inches in breadth, and from 11 to 13 inches in thickness, its shape being an irregular oblong. The other is about 60 inches long, by 48 inches broad, and 12 inches thick. These are certainly very large specimens, but one is always struck by the great size of the flag-stones used in roofing these underground retreats. I have described as unhewn all the stones employed in this building, but (as in similar cases) one is led to conjecture that some rough process of shaping must have been adopted, although the outlines are perfectly rude, and no trace whatever is visible of any tool. The selection of these great stones, whether from a quarry or a hillside, their carriage to the scene of action (often from a very great distance), and the method used in placing them in position, are all problems which have greatly puzzled antiquaries.

In the Pitcur "house" most of the roof-slabs have disappeared, having obviously shared the fate of so many monuments of antiquity, at the hands of proprietors and farmers in need of building materials and quite devoid of all interest in archæology. But (perhaps because it goes underneath arable land) the northern portion of the great horseshoe gallery still retains its roof; and this part of the building is, therefore, in all probability, in its original condition. It appears to have been of itself a "house," apart from the main gallery of which it forms a portion, for it has a carefully-built doorway leading into the main gallery; and, moreover, an extra ascent to the upper earth leads from the side of the wall just at the outside of this doorway. On going through the doorway of this inner portion, one finds, on the right hand, a small recess in the wall, about 33 inches high, 23 inches broad at the floor, and going into the thickness of the wall about 21 inches. Although this cavity is 23 inches broad at the base, the two slabs which form the supports of its little doorway are made to slant towards the top, where the breadth narrows to 14 inches. Within this recess it is possible for a man of 5 feet 10, and of proportionate breadth, to sit in a squatting posture; but it is a very "tight fit." I am particular in giving the dimensions of this recess, because the late Captain Thomas, a naval officer who devoted much time and study to these subterranean structures, and who found this little recess on the right hand of many of their doorways, regarded them as probably identical with the "guard-cells" of the Pictish "brochs." Captain Thomas quite realized that if these were really "guard-cells" they were useless for any but men of distinctly small stature — an attribute of the Picts, according to tradition.

It is difficult to convey a true idea of such buildings by written description alone, but perhaps these notes will give the readers of *Science* some impression of an example of a very interesting class of structures.

Easter Logie, Perthshire, Scotland, July 1.

<sup>1</sup> I may mention that, as a small beginning in this direction, I am about to issue a pamphlet (published by David Douglas, Edinburgh) containing several written descriptions and sketches of such structures; extracted from the "Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland."