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WILLIAM STUKELEY, THE KIT'S COTY HOUSES AND HIS COVES: A NOTE

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William Stukeley's *Prospects* of Kit's Coty House and the Lower Kit's Coty House, published posthumously in his *Itinerarium Curiosum* (Centuria II, 1776, Tabs. 31, 32, 33, 34), are rightfully renowned for the details of those monuments, and their condition, during the earlier years of the eighteenth century. When commenting upon Stukeley's *reconstruction* of the Lower Kit's Coty House (the Countless Stones), the present writer recalled (1993, 80) that, when Stukeley made his drawings during 1722, he had already been busy at Avebury since 1718 and that his assessment of our Kentish stone-built long barrows, and his anomalous reconstructions, might owe something to that quarter. It has since emerged that not only did William Stukeley deploy, in Kent, many of the notions and preconceptions that activated him in Wiltshire, but he also considered Kit's Coty House as closely comparable with Avebury's *Cove*, the three huge stones which stood (two still stand today) within the northern circle of that great henge monument (Smith, 1965, 250). It is also manifest that his published reconstructions of the Lower Kit's Coty House were not based upon alleged memories but were versions of the *coves*, which had a great fascination for him, and of which he prepared a comparative diagram (Fig. 1).

The term *cove* first appeared in Stukeley's *Abury, a Temple of the British Druids* (London, 1743, 23). He wrote '... that immense work (Avebury's Northern Inner Circle) in the center, which the old Britons call a cove: consisting of three stones plac'd with an obtuse angle toward each other, and as it were, upon an ark of a circle, like the great half-round at the east end of some old cathedrals: or like the upper end of the cell (the horseshoe of sarsen trilithons) at Stonehenge: being of the same use and intent . . .'. This Avebury cove was drawn by Stukeley on 16 August, 1721 (Piggott, 1985, 165) and is Tab. XV of *Abury* (1743). It has recently emerged that it may have had a cover stone (Ucko *et al.*, 1991, 27). Because it is a concise term, *cove* has been retained by present-day prehistorians. Coves are features of

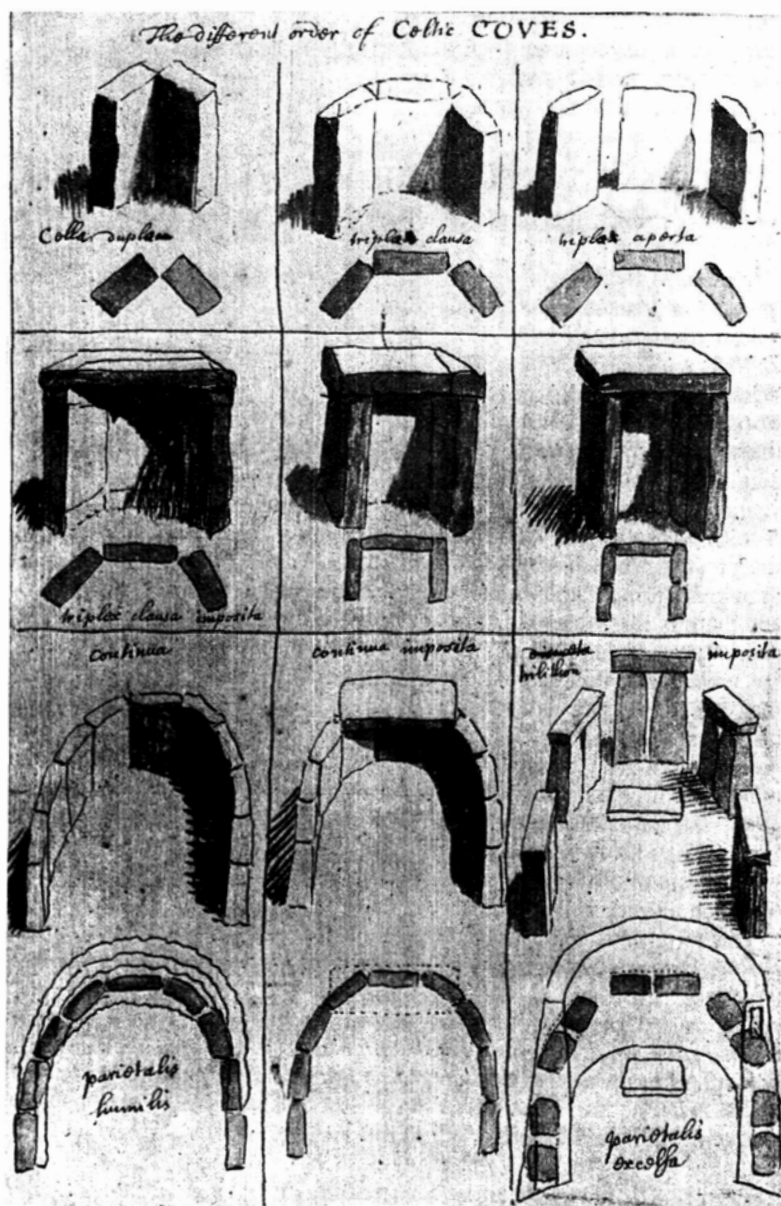


Fig. 1. William Stukeley's comparative typology of coves (Bodleian Library MS. Top. Gen. b. 53. 8v).

several British stone circles (Piggott, 1947, 113; Burl, 1988) and have been likened to the non-functional entrances to West Kennet and various Cotswold-Severn stone-built long barrows (Piggott, 1962, 65; Darvill, 1982).

Stukeley's remarkable fieldwork at Avebury may have been motivated by, and, to some extent, modelled upon John Aubrey's earlier, seventeenth-century, investigations, an account of which was in his unpublished *Monumenta Britannica* (Piggott, 1985, 46; Ucko *et al.*, 1991, 42–8). Thus in his 1722 unpublished *History of the Temples of the Antient Celts* (Bodleian Library, MS Eng.Misc.c.323) he wrote regarding Kit's Coty House (pp. 35, 39) that '*This conjecture of mine I find much confirm'd, by Mr Aubrey's account of it who probably saw it in a more perfect state*'. This statement is surprising as the details of Kit's Coty House in the *Monumenta Britannica*, a drawing and the transcript of a letter (Fowles and Legg, 1980–82, 814–15), are scant. Despite this, Aubrey probably knew Kit's Coty House, and its fellows, well, as he frequently passed them *en route* to Hothfield Place, the seat of his friend and patron Nicholas Tufton, 3rd Earl of Thanet (Tylden-Wright, 1991, 170). Stukeley's access to some now missing observations is a possibility.

Although Stukeley's appreciation of the denuded long barrow attached to Kit's Coty House (1776, Tabs. 31, 33, 34) was graphic, accurate and comparable with his appraisals of not dissimilar stone-built long barrows in Avebury's vicinity (Stukeley, 1743, Tabs. XXX, XXXI), he, nonetheless, because of its three standing sarsen stone slabs, supporting the capstone, entertained specific notions regarding its nature and apparent significance. Indeed, his drawing of the stones with *The Generals tomb* close by (Stukeley, 1776, Tab. 32, Kit's Coty house 15. Oct. 1722 *The N.E. Prospect*), which has the well-known reconstruction of the Lower Kit's Coty House beneath it, may reflect his preoccupations. Of Kit's Coty House, he wrote, when comparing it with the Avebury Cove, '*... three stones stood ... as some at Abury on the top of which lay another, & probably before them lay one on the Ground as an altar stone*' (Stukeley, 1722, 39, 41). Stukeley's detailed consideration of the Avebury Cove, in his *Celtic Temples* is missing, although his speculations have survived (Ucko *et al.*, 1991, 229) so one has to turn to his *Abury* (1743, 23) which gives an insight into the '*... Cove in the center (of Avebury's northern interior circle), compos'd of three stones of a stupendous bulk, set in a nich-like figure*'. His studies of stone-built long barrows, as well as of Stonehenge and of Avebury, made it clear to him that the principles inherent in his *coves* could be expressed in various forms. To this end he prepared a comparative typology (Fig. 1) and, in this, Kit's Coty House takes a prominent place. With its capstone, it is patently his

triplex clausa imposita. Of further, and even greater, consequence, is his next stage, *continua* and *continua imposita*, clearly his sources for the reconstruction of the Lower Kit's Coty House.

For some time now the Medway Valley's stone-built long barrows have been mustered into two groups, A, the longer, and B, the shorter (Evans, 1950). The shorter ones comprised a category based upon the nature of Coldrum's kerb (Philp and Dutton, 1985, Fig. 2) and Stukeley's reconstruction of the Lower Kit's Coty House (1776, Tabs. 31, 32, lower), supposedly based upon recollection. Following upon the excavation of the Chestnuts, where the readily detectable remnant of the sandy barrow was only about 50 ft. in length, this division appeared as confirmed (Alexander, 1961, 13) and has since passed into currency (Whittle, 1977, 61). Recently the present writer (Ashbee, 1993, 60) has, particularly in view of the lack of precise knowledge of Coldrum and the Lower Kit's Coty House, expressed a measure of doubt regarding this claim for duality. Now, with the publication of Stukeley's scheme for the *Coves* (Ucko, *et al.*, 1991, 230), it is clear that his Lower Kit's Coty House reconstructions, regarded as a garbled representation of a short, boulder-bounded, long barrow (Evans, 1950, 67–8), is no longer valid as an element of the classification. Indeed, it is demonstrable that the Lower Kit's Coty House is a massive toppled chamber, comparable with the Chestnuts and that traces of a considerable razed long barrow, severed by the modern road, may exist to the west of it (Ashbee, 1993, 60, 82). Stukeley's alleged reconstructions can be seen as no more than examples of his *coves*, developed at Avebury, set down upon Blue Bell Hill.

Stukeley's (1776, Tab. 31) *A Prospect of Kits Coty-house Kent Oct 15, 1722* depicts *The lower Coty house*, correctly sited, as an angular horseshoe of standing slabs, open to the north and with a capstone at the southern, inner, end. Scrutiny of Stukeley's classification of coves (Fig. 1) shows that the structure (Fig. 2) is an isometric sketch, from the rear, of his third cove category, the *continua imposita*. This *Prospect*, a panorama from a point about a mile north-east of Aylesford church, was based upon an original drawing, which has survived (Bodleian Library, MS Top. Gen. b, 53f, 19v), executed upon 15 October, 1722. It does not even show the Lower Kit's Coty House, indeed, the field, in which it is sited in the published engraving, is empty. It is inescapable, therefore, that the perspective of a cove, labelled *The lower Coty house* (Fig. 2) was a later addition, perhaps even by Elisha Kirkall, the engraver with whom he had, as was usual during the eighteenth century, a friendly rapport (Godfrey, 1978, 40; Piggott, 1985, 43). In contrast the *Prospect of the Country from Kits Coty House 15 Oct 1722* (Stukeley, 1776, Tab. 33) depicts the distant *lower Coty house* as a rectilinear slab-capped structure, one large with

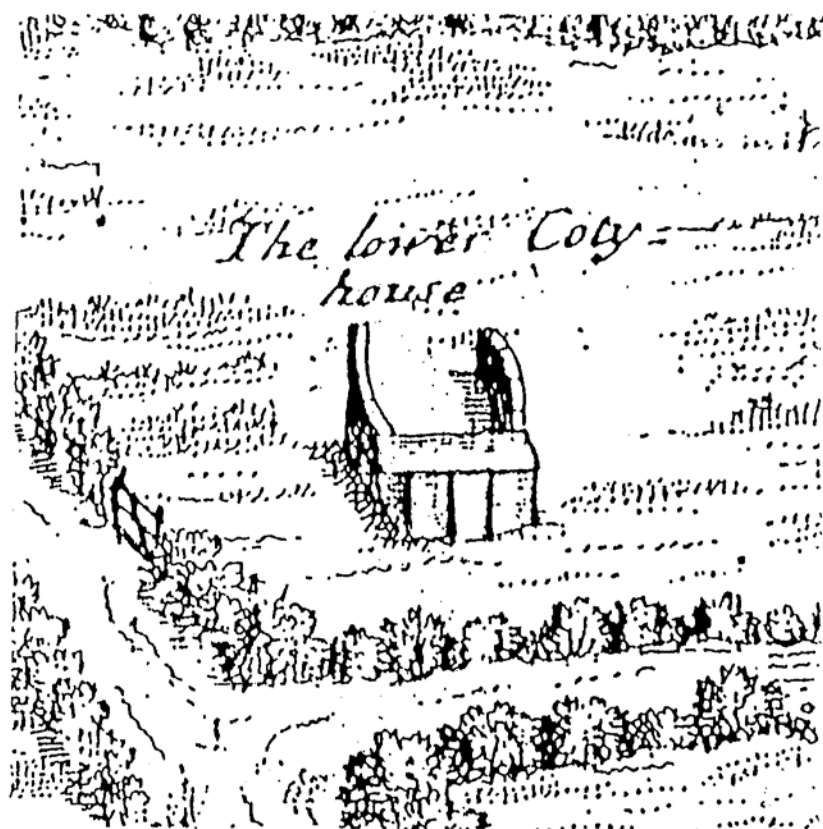


Fig. 2. The Lower Kit's Coty House as depicted in *Itinerarium Curiosum* II (1776), Tab. 31.

three smaller slabs, which resembles neither the imported cove nor its more detailed *reconstruction* (Fig. 3).

Stukeley's detailed, proximate, portrayal of *The lower Coty house* (1776, Tab. 32, lower) reconstructed, is in two parts; *The View*, which is the monument allegedly as it once stood on the end of a considerable mound, with a human figure, for a scale, contemplating it, and *The Groundplot*, a plan, which differs in scale. Despite his many and varied notions of ancient religion, its structures and symbolism, he was a competent surveyor, although we know little of his methods, who from his earliest days was conscious of the importance of visual records (Ashbee, 1972, 49-50). Furthermore, it is apparent that he made reconstructions of monuments, and their details, in which he had a

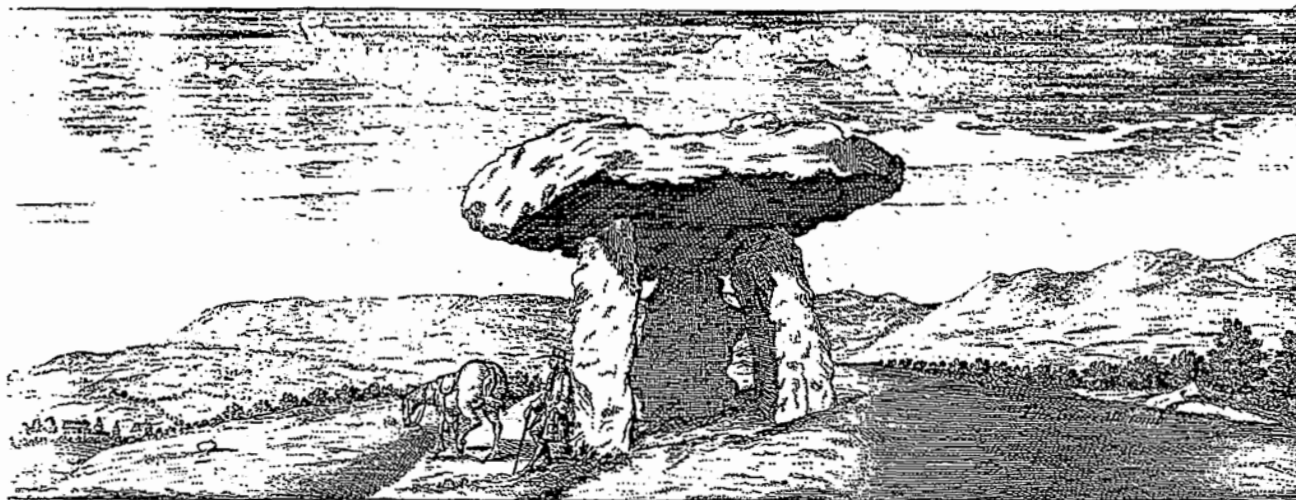
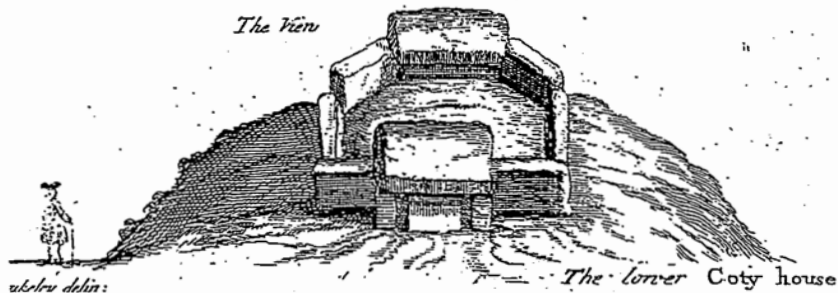
*The View**utroque delin:**The Groundplot**E. Kirkall scul*

Fig. 3. Kit's Coty House and the Lower Kit's Coty House ostensibly as coves (*Itinerarium Curiosum*, II (1776), Tab. 32).

particular interest. Seen in this light *The View* of the Lower Kit's Coty House can be seen as a compound, cove-induced, structure (Fig. 3), reflecting the flexibility of his fertile mind (Piggott, 1985, 152-7). Essentially, it is the *continua imposita* (Bodleian Library MS. Top. Gen. b. 53, 8v; Ucko *et al.*, 1991, Pl. 70) fronted by a modified version of his *triplex clausa imposita*, which is also Kit's Coty House, from the same source, flanked by rectilinear slabs on edge. On *The Groundplot* the capstone of the *continua imposita* element has not been shown and the central stone of the *triplex clausa imposita* is depicted as a recumbent slab. Here, Stukeley may have had the Avebury Cove's altar stone in mind (Ucko *et al.*, 1991, 229). All in all, this illustration from the *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1776, Tab. 32) portraying the stone chamber remnant which is Kit's Coty House with, beneath it, the elevation and plan of an apparently reconstituted Lower Kit's Coty House, emerges from William Stukeley's enthralled pursuit of coves and their principles into Kent and upon Blue Bell Hill.

It is not impossible that further Stukeley sources may come to light and thus this examination of the anomalies surrounding his presentation of Kent's stone-built long barrows may need modification. Nevertheless, an attempt to see these in terms of his ideas, preconceptions and preoccupations, explains much that was hitherto indeterminate.

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