

BEACON HILL WOOD

Beacon Hill Society Newsletter

June 2004

Dates for your diary:

Monday 19th July 2004. 8.00pm

Committee Meeting in the Kings Arms, Shepton Mallet.

Agendas will be sent out to all members the week before.

Let the Chairman or Secretary know if you wish to raise a topic.

Sunday 25th July 2004. 2.30pm

Archaeology walk led by Peter Leach.

Coincides with Somerset Archaeology Fortnight.

Open to the public. Meet at the main gate.

Sunday 3rd October 2004. 2.00pm

Wildlife walk led by Les Cloutman.

Somerset Wildlife Trust and Beacon Hill Society members only.

Meet at the main gate.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Well, the sun has arrived and Beacon Wood has been at its best, with a canopy of new leaves over a carpet of bluebells. It was great to see that the bluebells in the dell seemed to have been boosted by our efforts to tidy deadwood out of their way (not so great to see them marred by idiots in a four wheel drive car though), but did you notice how the rest of the wood, particularly the downhill western end was spectacular this year? I think that the thinning of the trees, now that the brushwood is rotting down, might be beginning to pay dividends in bluebells!

The pond, site of so much effort last year, holds water but looks unprepossessing; if you have looked at this and wondered why it isn't deeper/ prettier/ grander it's because restoration has to consider the rare moss growing there, so we are avoiding drastic change. We'll be having another look at this next winter when any amphibians, invertebrates etc are hibernating.

Alan Connock and his road gang recently brought their vintage machinery back to the wood to continue creating a sympathetic through-route for the riders of horses, motorbikes and bicycles; you may remember that last time they tried this their efforts were comprehensively rained off. This time they were able to grade and level the track as we asked them. It will be interesting to see how it holds up to traffic over the coming months. If it does cut up quickly it is difficult to know what to do without getting over-intrusive, so I'm very keen that it lasts! It's also nice to be able to get this job done in such a picturesque way and I'm very grateful to Alan and his team for their willingness to help.

There is a movement to of having an area of the wood coppiced. Those in favour say it would create a habitat for a new range of wildlife and increase variety in the wood; I can certainly see that, chosen carefully, new, attractive vistas could be created. There is also discussion over encouraging a couple of areas that are currently intermittently under water to become full time ponds. You probably knew that we have an archaeological survey of the wood; well we could instigate a 'dig' if there was interest. And always there is the tussle between wanting to enhance the wood and remembering that it is, fundamentally, a wild place, not a municipal garden! Come along to the next committee meeting and take part in the discussions about this sort of thing if you want; you'll be most welcome. As ever, if you have any ideas for suitable events in the wood do let us know.

Finally, if you haven't renewed your subscription it's either because you've forgotten or because the notice got lost in the post. In either case, get on with it; we need you all!

See you at Beacon Hill,

David Gardiner

BEACON HILL AND GLASTONBURY

Illustrations of three pots included here

Decorated pottery from the Glastonbury Lake Village

From the western edge of Beacon Wood, Glastonbury Tor is, on most days, visible as a prominent landmark several miles away to the southwest. From Glastonbury the sun rises over Beacon Hill on May Day, and the two are also linked by the St Michael Ley line which extends across southern England from Cornwall to Glastonbury, and on to Avebury and East Anglia. More tangibly perhaps, there was also a direct link in prehistoric times.

One of the most renowned archaeological sites in Britain is the Glastonbury Lake Village, discovered at the end of the 19th century and excavated during the first decades of the 20th. The waterlogged condition of the site resulted in the preservation of wooden building remains, its pile foundations, and an astonishing range of perishable objects including wooden tools, implements, basketry, boats, etc., as well as evidence for metalworking, glass bead manufacture, crops and domestic animals, and pottery. Information from the finds suggests occupation of the village from the 3rd to the 1st centuries BC – towards the end of the Iron Age.

One of the most distinctive finds from Glastonbury was pottery, some of which was elaborately decorated with ‘Celtic’ style motifs. Analysis of the clays used to make some of this pottery produced some surprising results. Some of it could be traced to Cornwall, while another and probably larger group contains grit that almost certainly came from Beacon Hill. None of this pottery has been found on Beacon Hill itself, but for whatever reason, temper for the clays used to make the Glastonbury village pottery – probably somewhere near the site – came from several distant sources. This link with Beacon Hill is further strengthened by the discovery of quernstone fragments for grinding corn, made of the distinctive pebbly sandstone found there. This stone was evidently much prized in the Iron Age, since Beacon Hill querns have also been identified at the hillfort of Cadbury Castle.

Peter Leach

FAMILY ARTS EVENT



This took place on May 15th and was a great success. It was a glorious late spring day, and the wood was magical with its drifts of bluebells, tender green foliage, and dappled sunlight. About 20 children with attendant parents came along. On arrival at the parking area they were told to find the event by following a trail of red ribbons tied to trees. Nell Pickering, community artist, had selected a place in the wood just south of the barrow with the standing stones, and laid out a large tarpaulin for sitting on, some hand tools and a selection of freshly cut whippy branches for weaving with.

Nell had brought along a beautiful woven nest lined with mud and hair, which she had made the previous day, to show what could be done. She and her two helpers got each family group started on weaving their own nest or basket. The nests turned out to be very varied in size, shape and character. Two of the largest were big enough for children to climb into, which they hugely enjoyed. One nest was strong enough for children to sit inside and be hauled a few feet into the air, suspended from a large beech tree. At the end of the day two big nests were hauled right up into the branches of trees (without children inside!) and left there to surprise the visitors and wildlife over the coming days. The children had plenty of time to both join in the art work and to play in the wood. The families each proudly took home their own creations, some said they planned to plant sweet peas in them. An inspiring and enjoyable time was had by all.

Penny Stokes

p.s. Thank you very much for showing us how to make nests in the woods. We enjoyed it a lot. We loved exploring the woods especially the fairy village. I thought the bluebells looked like purple smoke. We all had a lovely time.

love from Olivia.

LEY LINES

Arnold Watkins, born 1855 in Hereford, was employed by his father as an outrider or brewer's representative. This furnished him with an intimate knowledge of the local countryside, customs and legends. In 1970 John Michell wrote, 'Riding across hills near Bredwardine in his native county, he pulled up his horse to look over the landscape below. At that moment he became aware of a network of lines, standing out like glowing wires all over the surface of the country, intersecting at sites of churches, old stones and spots of traditional sanctity'. Watkins, then aged 65, wrote a totally controversial book, *Early British Trackways*, in 1922 and the classic *The Old Straight Track* which followed in 1925. In Watkins's preface to the latter he confirms 'What really matters in this book is whether it is a humanly designed fact, an accidental coincidence, or a "mare's nest" that mounds, moats, beacons, and mark stones fall into straight lines throughout Britain, with fragmentary evidence of trackways on the alignments.'

The fact that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line can be used to demonstrate the existence of a ley. It is said that the prehistoric trackway network was the substructure, laid down from time immemorial, upon which the Roman road system was, in part, built. A ley could be a portion of a very long distance track passing through tumuli, Bronze/Iron Age forts, long barrows, alongside (rather than through) castles, mounds, tumps (hills), henges and beacons. The line could also be very short – a church, a moat, a cairn on a hillside. Water played a crucial part of the whole not only providing for the traveller and animals but, by moonlight, indicating a crossing or onward marker on a sheet of bright, reflected light. A stand, albeit of only one, of Scotch pine on the skyline or, unexpectedly, in the landscape will indicate a track as will notched hills in silhouette on the horizon. As an example, an interesting line is the Old Sarum Ley. (OS Landranger 184 124423). This travels from Stonehenge, crossing the A303 (the Harroway, see below), to Old Sarum (crossing the London - Silchester - Dorchester Roman road), through Salisbury Cathedral, then crossing the river Avon at East Harnham and, again, the river Ebble at Odstock, ending at Clearbury Ring otherwise named Frankenbury Camp - a distance of 11 miles.

A particularly long ley named the Great Ley or St Michael's Line, in recognition of the many churches so dedicated, follows the midsummer sunrise which tracks over the longest unbroken stretch of land in southern England. This runs from the Logan (rocking) stone (OS 203 398219 lying 1 mile east of a ruined chapel believed to be the hermitage (with a well) of St Selevan, a 6th century Cornish saint. The ley then passes through some notable landmarks: locally, Cadbury Camp (St M's), Lyng church, by Athelney Island, Burrow Mump (St M's), Othery (St M's) Glastonbury (St M's), Stoke St Michael and Trowbridge; onward to Avebury (lying between Silbury Hill to the south and Windmill Hill (Neolithic camp) to the north and thence to Bury St Edmunds on its way to landfall at Hopton between Gt Yarmouth and Lowestoft on the east coast.

With all this mind while on a guided walk in Beacon Wood the thought occurred – could the tumulus sit on the Great Ley? I thought no more of it until later when plotting the recognised features of the Great Ley onto an OS map. Taking Glastonbury and Trowbridge as the two known points of local reference, I drew in the line and there it was - running straight through Beacon Wood! A pencil line on a map usually represents about 100 yards either way so one could not be sure that the tumulus comes into the picture; furthermore local knowledge has it that the ley runs along the S S/E edge of the wood. It would seem that the Great Ley has a more sacred feel to it by virtue of the type of monument involved. The following two examples are perhaps more prosaic or secular being of economic or trade route status.

continues....

There are two very early long distance tracks or highways in southern England – the Ridgeway and the Harroway. In both cases the Romans have occasionally used the infrastructure but in the main the tracks run through clear country. In June 1990 The Times carried an article by Christopher Somerville describing the Harroway which he was researching. ‘This was the main artery used by Bronze Age man and for 5000 years linked Devon to Surrey.’ It runs, for the most part, under the A303 which, in its turn, has many Roman temples, villas and settlements in close proximity. ‘The way lies forgotten, a series of dislocated paths which, surely, must invite exploration’.

Bibliography.	Arnold Watkins, The Old Straight Track	ISBN 0 349 13707 2
	Roger Crisp, Ley lines of Wessex	ISBN 0 9529619 3 8
	Goodwin and Anderson The Oldest Road	ISBN 0 905483 52 9

Caroline Gentinetta

DAMSELS IN DISTRESS

I am very fortunate in having a garden pond which is home to a wide variety of wildlife. One of the greatest delights I have is seeing dragonflies and their smaller cousins, damselflies, visiting the pond. Since the pond was created twelve years ago, no fewer than seven species of dragons and two of damsels have visited, and all but two of the dragons have bred here.

In the second half of May, the damselflies will start to emerge, the earliest being the Large Reds followed a week or so later by the Azure Blues. Blue damselflies can be quite difficult to identify, as they are all fairly similar, and each species can be slightly variable. The only certain way of knowing which ones are present is to look for particular markings on the different body-segments, and as they seem to take great delight in staying just out of close visual range, or flying off at the crucial moment, this can be a very frustrating process.

Given that there are no less than nine species in the U.K. of which five are found in this area, you can see the problem. However, with patience and a good reference book or field guide, it can be done. You also need to have some time on your hands!

Dragonflies are powerful fliers, especially the group known as Hawkers, which you can see flying over water catching other flying insects in their jaws without any apparent effort. Damselflies on the other hand are much less direct in their flight, and appear to flutter along rather than whiz about like the dragons. One consequence of this weaker flight is that damselflies often find themselves unable to take off again if they land in the water. This is particularly the case when they are newly emerged from their larval stage (called nymphs) and first take off from the stems of water plants. I had occasion last year to rescue two Reds from a watery end; some people say that one shouldn't interfere with nature in this way, but I am too soft-hearted to let any creature suffer unnecessarily.

My only hope is that these two rescued flies had enough sense not to fall in again, as the knight in shining armour might not be around next time!

Paul Newman