

BEACON HILL WOOD

Beacon Hill Society Newsletter

September 2004

Dates for your diary:

Saturday 25th September 2004. 11.00am

Litter Picking in Beacon Hill Wood.

Please contact the Secretary for more information

Sunday 26th September 2004. From 12.00 noon

Shepton Mallet Home Guard on Manoeuvres.

Display open to the public.

The Home Guard exercises to keep the country safe and working in WWII.

Meanwhile a secret army prepares to go underground if we are invaded.

A guided walk starts at 2.00pm.

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.

Sunday 31st October 2004. 1.00pm

Pond Clearing in Beacon Hill Wood

Come and help with the next stage of clearing this interesting feature.

The Chairman has promised some Hallowe'en festivities and refreshments.

All members and friends welcome; but let the Secretary know in advance.

Sunday 23rd January 2005. 10.00am

Brash Clearing in the Bluebell Glade

Your assistance is again invited to help keep the bluebells looking their best and with generally tidying up before spring.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Well here we are, once more looking down the cold steel barrel of winter. It's as if the weather has turned round and thought 'Oh! Yes! That lot!' and decided to notice us once again. Still we've had more sun than we get in many years sandwiched in between the monsoons and I for one am firmly reminding myself of that fact. Odd seasons always confuse the Mother Nature and various plants are getting in a minor second flush of blossom. Equally, the fungi have been thinking that it might be their season for a while now, so there's a strange mix to be seen.

All that rain has been a good test of the Road-Up Gang's efforts to improve the track for the various categories of riders. (I hesitate to call that section Fosse Way these days, what with the persistent uncertainty about how and where it climbs the slope in the wood). By removing the top layer of leaf mould they exposed a layer of gritty sand that is still moved down by the rain but settles as a fairly stable surface. This is pleasing as some opinions were that Alan Connock and his gang's limited intrusion technique of just grading and rolling would not be enough, but the path created looks as if it will last in a passable state for a while. It has collected some runnels and gullies in the recent downpours but is still comfortably traversed on foot. And it doesn't look 'new' any more.

We've had some trouble with 4 wheel drive twerps in the wood. It's only a few incidences at present and could have been a lot worse (although I wasn't impressed by the bright spark that drove through the bluebells at the height of their flowering) but there's a feeling that it needs to be nipped in the bud. If you do see anyone ripping up the wood in this way please get a registration number for the police. Most of you will have seen how we open the 5 bar gate by the main top entrance and use that section of the wood to park when we have an event; well, to date we have never given anyone permission to drive elsewhere in the wood apart from the forestry contractors (who should be finished by now anyway). The problem has been helped by some rogue stealing the fence at the eastern end of the wood. For a long time I thought it was the contractor improving their access, but I'm assured not. I can't help admiring the nerve of someone who could just calmly dismantle somebody else's fence next to a busy road! Hopefully this will be sorted in the near future.

We have a couple of working parties planned, both continuing works commenced last year. We're carrying out further development of the pond and, in the spring, clearing more of the trimmings from the bluebells. The pond received some consideration at our recent committee meeting; it needs to be deeper and larger but there's that rare moss to consider, as well as concern that it might have some history/archaeology to be investigated. So we decided to finish removing the scrubby willow trees that had colonised it and also to try and dig or dredge it a bit larger by hand, the thinking being that machinery might damage something badly before anyone realised. We did the first bit on Remembrance Sunday last year (we observed the 2 minute silence in the wood) which we felt was quite appropriate. These are sociable, jolly occasions and enormously satisfying when everyone stands back and thinks 'we did that.' Rarely does a pint in the Waggon and Horses feel so justified.....Come and help. We'll be having some food and a drink afterwards, to celebrate Hallowe'en, so please let us know if you are coming so that we can cater. A little bit of Hallowe'en silliness. Should be fun.

Those of you who got to the tours of the archaeological site on the Fosse Lane in Shepton probably had a bit of the original Roman road pointed out to you, complete with a topping of 2 inches of crushed Beacon Hill conglomerate. Imagine how much stone it would take to surface the Fosse Way from Beacon Wood to Shepton at that thickness, an unknown distance beyond AND presumably the same distance back to the North. You begin to understand quite why the escarpment in the wood has been cut into to the degree it has. I look at this part of Beacon Hill quite differently these days.

See you in the wood.

David Gardiner

Beacon Hill Wood – Hub of wartime activity?

On Sunday September 26th 12 – 4pm there will be a ‘Home Guard Manoeuvres’ display in Beacon Wood together with a walk at 2 o’clock led by Tim Wray to look at some of the parts of the wood with possible wartime associations. This note attempts to put this display into context and show that Beacon Hill Wood did in fact play an interesting and varied role during the war.

For a start there were long established rifle ranges at the foot of the hill over the fields running parallel with the course of the Fosse way. These would appear to originally date from Victorian times but there is no doubt that both the army and the home guard were using them during WWII. Many ex home guard members have memories of coming for practices and weapon displays at the range and it was the scene of a very nasty accident when a shell exploded leaving four soldiers dead. An overgrown area still marks the position of the ‘butts’ and the remains of a shed suggest that this was once a munitions store. As the war went on Yoxter on the top of the Mendips increasingly became the main practice range for the area as it remains to this day.

As preparations for D Day were made the whole of the area on the top of the Mendips around Beacon Wood was shut off and the road along the top became a huge store for tanks and other weapons run by the Americans who were based at Maesbury. After D Day the area rapidly emptied as these were all transhipped to France.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect to Beacon Wood during the war is the presence of the ‘Secret Army’ Auxiliary units. Tim Wray has made a study of this subject for which little information has ever made it into the public domain. Small groups of men organised from Southfield House in Cranmore became top secret units along a secondary defence line which ran along the southern edge of the Mendips. If a German invasion had occurred they were to go underground and act as saboteurs, making life as difficult as possible for the advancing troops.

These units constructed secret hideaways in the woods on the hills. Secret that is except to prying school boys! Tim has identified two possible locations for the hideaway of the unit that we know operated in Beacon Hill Wood.

There is an article by Tim on his researches the ‘Secret Army’ in ‘A Town Alive’ Shepton Mallet and District 1939 – 1945’. This 200 page book, published in August, covers a huge number of aspects of the War in the area and how it affected people’s lives. It is available from Otakers Bookshop in Wells and the Tourist Information & Heritage Centre in High Street Shepton Mallet. There will also be copies available at the Home Guard Demonstration.

Alan Stone



Autumn on Beacon Hill

Autumn is a time of change, both in human society and in nature. We have our harvest festivals – feeling very smug about a good harvest and our suntan. In nature everything is at it's fullest. The frantic business of breeding, raising a family and holding territories is generally over. The hedgerows and trees are full of fruit and nuts (unless the grey squirrels have been there first!), and, at least until the first frost, living is easy. Soon though the trees will start to show their autumn colours, as the green chlorophyll and other useful minerals are drawn back into the tree for winter storage.

In Beacon Hill wood the beeches will take on a glorious copper colour, and the woodland floor will be carpeted with leaves. The smell of autumn will remind us that winter is just a few weeks away. Nature's recyclers are hard at work. Under our feet billions of microbes, insects and other soil invertebrates, and fungi are at work. Breaking down all the fallen leaves and wood into minerals for next years plants to use.

Fungi are a mysterious kingdom (they aren't plants, because they can't capture the sun's energy through photosynthesis, but rely on others to do that for them).

Their names describe their appearance or how they could be used:-

Penny Bun, Wax Caps, Ink Caps, Beefsteak, Razor strop, Blewits, Wood woolly-foot, Fairy-ring, Horse Mushroom, Oyster, Death Cap and Avenging Angel (the last two, as their names imply are deadly poisonous).

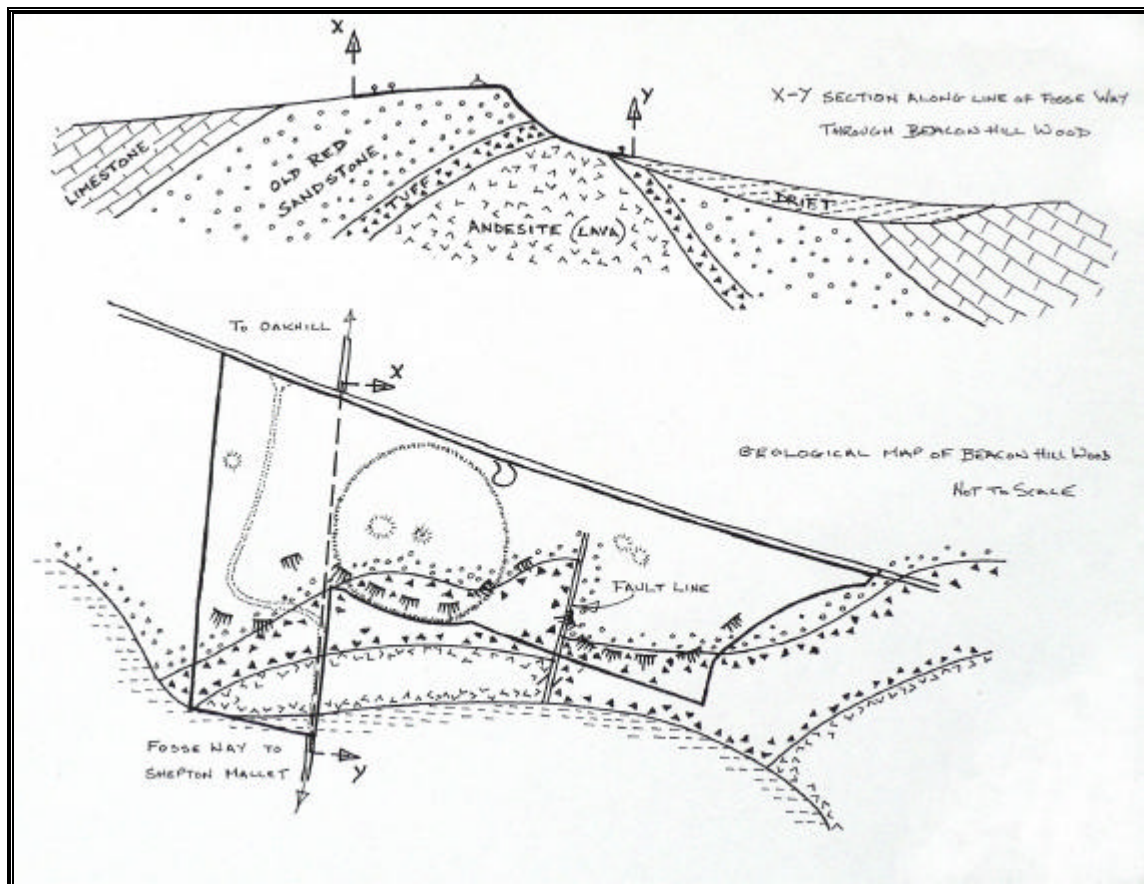
Generally the ones that can do you serious harm are rare. Since moving to Somerset I must have eaten at least 30 species of wild fungi. But if you are thinking of trying the delights of Chantarelles or Giant Puffballs you need to get them identified properly by an expert. There are some excellent books with extremely good photos today, but it is still easy to make a mistake.

Hope to see you on the walk at Beacon Hill on Sunday 3rd Oct 2.0pm.

Les Cloutman

Geological Notes on the Beacon Hill inlier, Shepton Mallet

Beacon Hill lies on the eastern edge of four upstanding domes forming the ancient core of Mendip. These so-called periclinal ridges now give rise to prominent and distinctive high ground above the general surface of Mendip's limestone plateau. Their summits are around 300 metres above sea level. The periclinal ridges comprise of the oldest rocks in Somerset, deposited over 400 million years ago (mya) during a time known to geologists as the Primary Era (or Palaeozoic). Although completely buried by younger rocks during the ensuing Secondary Era (or Mesozoic), they were re-exposed later by erosion and severe weathering towards the end of Tertiary and Quaternary times (or Cenozoic) in particular. Mendip experienced arctic-like conditions for lengthy phases during the so-called Ice Ages over the past 1 million years. The present landscape was thus shaped as the sea lowered to its present day level.



Geological Map © Peter Banks

The Beacon Hill Wood Reserve contains much useful evidence of the above 'geological story', especially along the former Roman Fosse Way which climbs over Mendip from Shepton Mallet towards Bath. This trackway winds up the steep south facing escarpment to the top of the ridge within the heart of the wood. The well-trodden route at the foot of the scarp face traverses weathered volcanic rocks. These formed on the slopes of a nearby island arc volcano that was active 420 mya during Silurian times. Nowadays, the rubble underfoot reveals stones of lava (called Andesite) with fragments of explosive debris and ash thrown further from the erupting

crater (called tuff). The former rock is extensively quarried for roadstone at nearby Moon's Hill Quarry, Stoke St. Michael.

The prominent west-east ridge along the length of the wood adjacent to the Old Frome Road (also a former Roman Road), comprises of resistant Old Red Sandstone deposited some 350 mya during Devonian times. Thick beds of these consolidated desert-derived quartz sands are exposed in small bluffs, cliffs and old quarries along the south facing crest of the scarp. The rusty red colour of these rocks results from oxidation of iron minerals under arid conditions, as in today's sub-tropical desert regions. The most resistant beds of sandstone forming the prominent crest of the scarp exhibit many rounded pebbles of polished white quartz typical of flash flood events. These are known as conglomerates.

Deep burial, compaction and subsequent earth movements have caused cracks to open up in the Old Red Sandstone, called bedding and joint planes. The former show that these beds were tilted northwards locally (some 28 degrees from the horizontal) when the Mendip Hills were uplifted about 280 mya. Many vertical joints are also evident in the ORS outcrops along the cliffs. Surface water penetrating them has eventually created weaknesses for erosion to occur, especially during rainstorms and severe frosts. Angular fragments of ORS fallen from the cliffs over many years have produced scree slopes at the foot of the escarpment. Embayments in the eroded scarp face east of the Fosse Way also indicate the existence of local fault lines cutting through the compressed core of the Beacon Hill pericline. These faults give rise to small springs along the southern boundary of the reserve. In general, however, the ORS is relatively impermeable and the thick soils developed throughout the woodland are acid, peaty and gleyed (where saturated).

Jim Hanwell