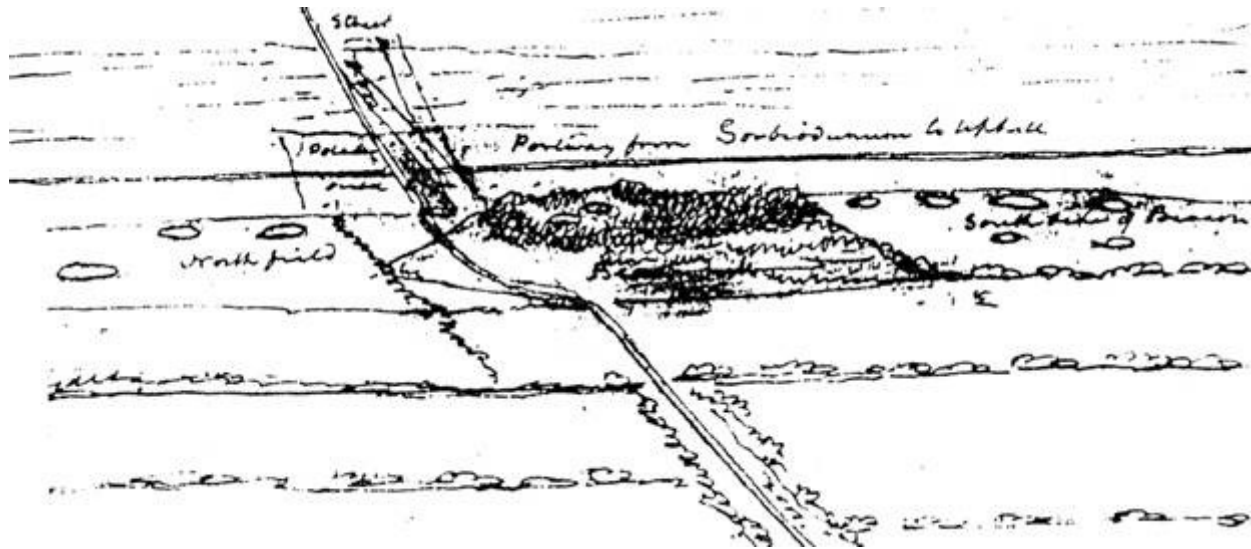


# BEACON HILL WOOD

## Beacon Hill Society Newsletter

### May 2006



[www.beaconhillsocietymendip.org.uk](http://www.beaconhillsocietymendip.org.uk)

#### Dates for your Diary:

The Beacon Hill Society will next meet in the Wood on Monday 5<sup>th</sup> June 2006, starting at the main gate at 7.00pm.

All members are invited to come and meet the committee as we take a stroll around the wood and discuss our vision for its future. We will be looking at the results of past activities and projects, and assessing what might usefully be done to ensure the continued well-being of the wood and our enjoyment of it.

One incidental outcome of the recent archaeological work in the wood was the rediscovery of a missing boundary stone – a rectangular monolith of Doultling limestone lying on its back and buried by leaf litter near the bottom of the main hollow-way. Inscribed with the letter B and the initials WMFM, this is almost identical to the two surviving boundary stones nearby which were erected by William Melliar Foster Melliar, who acquired part of the wood in 1838.

The location of this now recumbent stone appears almost identical to its position as depicted on the OS 1:2500 map, 1903 edition, and it may be appropriate to re-erect it at a future date.

**Précis Minutes of the AGM held 8.00pm on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2006  
at the Kings Arms, Leg Square, Shepton Mallet.**

1. The Chairman, Alan Stone, opened the meeting at 8.10pm and welcomed those present.

**2. Officers reports:**

**Chairman:** Alan Stone reported a successful year for the Society. The LHI grant project had now been completed with the publication of the Education Pack. A further grant from the Somerset Aggregates Levy Fund had resulted in a new website and further archaeological investigations.

A.S. acknowledged the support given to the Society by his fellow committee members and those who had led walks and talks over the past year.

**Secretary:** Peter Banks reported that the Society had held 6 committee meetings over the year, with 4 guided walks and 3 newsletters. He confirmed that all members are welcome to attend committee meetings, everyone being kept up to date by including a précis of the minutes in a newsletter. P.B. invited further newsletter articles and feedback from members.

**Treasurer:** Tony Britton reported reserves had fallen over the past year from £1182 to £1016. The shortfall was occasioned on the hiring of a mechanical excavator to assist with the archaeological investigations carried out earlier this year.

**Membership:** On behalf of Mary Newman, T.B. reported membership was holding steady at just over 30 and that members joining in the last quarter of the Society year were considered to be paid up through the following year.

**3. The Future Direction of the Society:**

This was discussed and several suggestions made to promote a continuing interest in the Wood. Guided walks were considered most important, but new leaders were required to avoid placing an unfair obligation on present volunteers. Organised visits to other related sites might be of interest to members. An annual year-book with in-depth articles was considered attractive, with the newsletter continuing to keep members informed of activities. The Website was felt to be a promising new medium, we should seek to ensure there are links to and from other relevant sites, including; local council, heritage and community groups. A.S. informed the meeting that a new project, sponsored by the local quarries, was being set up locally to provide environmental education to youngsters; our new Education Pack should be a useful contribution and provide an introduction into Beacon Hill Wood for them. P.B. reported on a local councillor's proposal to promote Martin's Lane as a nature trail, he felt this might usefully be extended to include the green lane as far as Beacon Hill Wood. The recent SALSF grant had proven most useful and further funding, to support continued information gathering and dissemination, was considered to be a most desirable activity for the Society; there had already been enquiries into possible Society involvement in a survey of some of the Bronze Age Barrows damaged by Forestry Commission plantation in the 1950's.

**4. Election of Officers:**

The existing committee agreed to continue and was re-elected unopposed. The need for a Newsletter Editor was agreed; Caroline Gentinetta volunteered and was accepted to fill the post.

**5. Presentations:**

Peter Leach gave an illustrated talk on the recent archaeological excavations carried out in Beacon Hill Wood; as supported by the Somerset Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund. Evidence had been found of the base of the Roman Fosse Way but with its original surface badly eroded. A second site, thought to be a working platform for the preparation of quern stones, was also investigated. Further investigations are being planned to help tell us more about the history of Beacon Hill.

Richard Dixon gave the meeting an introduction to the new [beaconhillsocietymendip.org](http://beaconhillsocietymendip.org) website which had recently appeared on the World Wide Web. The site was a valuable resource where a copy of all the information on Beacon Hill Wood

could be found. Past activities of the Beacon Hill Society are also recorded and illustrated with photographs. There were also contact details for people to get in touch with the Society, or to find out what future events were being planned.

**6. Date of Next Meeting:**

It was agreed to meet next on Monday 5<sup>th</sup> June 2006 at 7.00pm at Beacon Hill Wood. There would be a walk round the wood with Sally Glass of the Woodland Trust and everybody would have a chance to comment on their favourite aspect of the wood; refreshments afterwards in a local hostelry.

## Archaeological Excavations, Spring 2006

At the end of March we completed the second phase of archaeological investigations within the wood, as part of the research programme funded through the Somerset Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund. Despite spells of sometimes wet and windy weather in the last week of March we were grateful for the enthusiastic support of members of the Charterhouse Environs Research Team (CHERT), the Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society, the Frome Society for local study, and archaeology students from Strode College, Street.

Following on from our first phase of excavations of a stone quarrying site (*Trench 1*) in October 2005 (see *Beacon Hill Newsletter*, December 2005), the primary objective in March was to identify and characterise any surviving remains of the Fosse Way, and to examine another area where ancient quarrying and stone working may have taken place. *Trench 2*, 16m long by 2m wide, was opened with the help of a mechanical excavator to cut a section across the line of a low bank alongside and in parallel alignment to the modern Fosse Way track in the lower western part of the wood (see plan). This approach gave more time for the examination by hand of archaeological features and deposits within a larger area, and was a considerable saving in manpower for both the removal of overburden deposits and backfilling of the trench at the end!

Mechanical removal of topsoil and vegetation, followed by hand cleaning, revealed an uneven surface of worn cobbles with smaller mixed rubble and sand (*layer 2003*) over the eastern half of the trench – the remains of road metalling and makeup. A one metre wide section excavated by hand through this road material (*F200*) revealed a maximum surviving depth of 400mm and a composition of well compacted sand and predominantly local Andesite rock fragments. At its base the stones were smaller and more angular, resting upon much larger angular but irregularly tumbled Andesite rock and sand deposits (*layer 2004*). The latter is interpreted as naturally weathered rock and debris derived from the solid Andesite lava outcrop unseen below.

The road was at least 9m wide, although its eastern edge merged into more compact cobbles fringing the western edge of the modern 'Fosse Way' track at this end of the trench, which were not removed. Its western margin was more clearly defined. Here, a steep-sided and flat-bottomed ditch (*F202*), approximately 1m wide and over 0.5m deep, was cut into the top of the weathered Andesite rubble layer *2004*, and through a 500mm thick layer of finer pink sand and gravel (*layer 2005*), which continued westwards above *2004* to that end of the trench and beyond. This sand is probably naturally deposited hillwash material spreading downhill from weathering of the sandstone on the top of Beacon Hill. A spread of small stone rubble in the bottom of the ditch was derived from erosion of adjacent road makeup material to the east, finer sandy deposits filling its upper levels representing silt washed in from wear of the road when in use. Less than 0.5m east of the ditch and parallel with it, a broad shallow cut into the road makeup (*F201*), over 2m wide and up to 0.5m deep contained a deposit of fine silty sand. This was probably a hollow or gully worn into the road surface by a combination of use and water erosion at a late stage of its life. All these deposits and features were eventually sealed by up to 400mm of pink sandy silts and gravel (*layer 2001*), representing a later episode of eroded hillwash deposition that post-dates the abandonment of the road.

No datable material was recovered from these deposits but their arrangement suggests the following sequence and interpretation of events.

1. Creation of a heavily weathered and mixed deposit of rock rubble derived from erosion of the underlying natural Andesite lava rock outcrop (*layer 2004*), probably in the early post-glacial period.
2. Deposition of finer sands and gravels as hillwash (*2005*), derived from water erosion of the natural Devonian redsandstones capping Beacon Hill in prehistoric times.
3. Excavation of a modest north-south aligned ditch (*F202*) representing a marking out and western boundary ditch for the Roman Fosse Way road in the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century AD. No eastern ditch found - buried or destroyed by the modern track?

4. Clearance to top of weathered stone rubble 2004 as a suitable base for road makeup and surface metalling deposits (*layer 2003*) at least 9m wide – the Roman Fosse Way.
5. Disturbance and heavy weathering of road material and surface over several centuries use, culminating in a deep wear gully (*F201*) along its eastern edge.
6. Original road course abandoned and subsequently buried by post-Roman hillwash (*layer 2001*); a new course established immediately alongside to the east and continuing as the modern track.

*Trench 3* was excavated and backfilled entirely by hand, and was located less than 100m to the north west of the Fosse Way trench at the foot of the steep scarp slope marking the Devonian sandstone outcrop in this part of the wood (see plan). Its focus was a small rectangular platform and ramp, identified during the archaeology survey of the wood by Mark Corney in 2002 (*site nos. 2 & 22*), suspected as the remains of another ancient stone working and/or quarrying site.

Clearance of vegetation and topsoil from an irregular rectangular area 9m by 4m wide (max.) revealed the platform to be covered by a spread of large sandstone rubble blocks, smaller stone rubble and sand (*layer 3001*). No prepared surface could be detected and subsequent sampling excavation by means of a 1m wide trench revealed this to be the upper fill of a small quarry (*F300*) cut along the base of the steep slope above, where sandstone bedrock was exposed at the surface in places. The quarry cut was 2.5m wide, but of unknown length and was not bottomed. The partial exposures of bedrock revealed a sequence of coarse conglomeritic sandstone above finer sandstone with some pebbles, which succeeded a much finer sandy mudstone as the lowest strata exposed. This geological sequence mirrors that found in *Trench 1* (October 2005), where a quarry of similar size appeared to be extracting stone from the two upper stone beds.

The platform was bounded to the south by a roughly built revetment of very large sandstone blocks (*3002*) set upon a levelled surface of the softer mudstone bedrock, though heavily disturbed by tree boles and roots. A very limited investigation of the adjacent ramp to the south indicated a construction of dumped sandstone rubble and sandy soil. This extends downslope to the southwest for a considerable distance, possibly as an access to and from the platform and quarry site. Once again, no evidence was recovered to date any of these deposits and activities, nor of any artefacts or secondary working of the quarried stone at this site.

This completes the first stage of a programme of archaeological research into the remains preserved within Beacon Wood, as identified most recently by Mark Corney's surveys and supported by SALSF. Identification of remains of the Fosse Way has been the most prominent result, although further questions relating to its course and character remain. A start has been made towards exploring the remains of ancient quarrying, but there are still big questions concerning its date, products or secondary working sites. Another topic is the condition and potential of the non-scheduled prehistoric burial mounds within the wood, most of which were damaged by mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Forestry Commission planting. These objectives and a full publication of the data from such investigations will be the subject of future requests for funding support and an opportunity for continued local participation and support.

Peter Leach  
May 2006