

BEACON HILL WOOD

Beacon Hill Society Newsletter

January 2008



A Bronze Age Burial Ceremony (detail © Jane Brayne)

www.beaconhillsocietymendip.org.uk

Dates for your diary:

Sunday 10th February 2008 2.00pm

Volunteer work party to clear brambles, pick litter and prepare the wood for the Spring. We will follow this up with refreshments at a local hostelry to discuss Society activities over the coming year. During the afternoon we will also discuss our plans for the reinternment of the remains from the Bronze Age urn and future archaeological research.

Spring 2008

The Tree Quiz (see article for more details).

1st May 2008 Beltane

An ancient Celtic festival when bonfires were lighted on the hills. Weather permitting we will watch for the sunset on Glastonbury Tor identifying the line of the Great Ley. To be accompanied by appropriate libations.

Chairman's Comment

It is 18 January and I have just seen the weather forecast. It is only meant to drizzle this afternoon. Tomorrow it is meant to rain, Sunday is mainly rain, Monday is rain, Tuesday is mainly rain. Combined with this there seem to be quite strong winds.

Perhaps I won't make my first visit of the year to the woods yet – I suspect it will be a bit of a quagmire and my wellingtons leak!

However the rain will stop, spring will come, the bluebells will come out. I am looking forward to the summer. I want to take one of my Shepton Mallet Heritage walks through the woods this summer. A chap called Dave was at a local history group meeting last night and asked if he could join the Society. There is a lot of interest in the wood out there and we must make sure we are providing information to the public to keep that interest alive and build it further.

Alan Stone

Sec's Section

Congratulations are due to Sally Glass on her promotion to S W Area Manager for the Woodland Trust. Sally has been responsible for managing Beacon Hill Wood since its acquisition in the early 1990's and has been a great support to the Beacon Hill Society who, having campaigned to raise the necessary purchase funds, continues to take a keen interest in the well-being of the wood.

A warm welcome to Jonathan Burgess who has now taken charge of Beacon Hill on behalf of the Woodland Trust. He has already suggested several ways and means that we might like to consider with regard to the well-being of the wood and the gathering in of new members. Jonathan's introductory article follows.

Peter Banks

Older IS more beautiful

The Woodland Trust values *all* trees for the fantastic benefits they bring to the environment, the landscape and to people's lives. However in terms of the benefits to biodiversity certain trees are more valuable than others. It has long been known that some species can support a greater range of insects than others; with Oaks topping the league (associated with over 400 different insect species alone!). However, we have more recently come to realise the important difference made by the age of the tree.

As trees age they provide a greater range of niche habitats. These include deadwood within the crowns, sap runs from old wounds, water pools, hollow trunks, flaking bark, the list goes on... Each of these features provides a unique home for rare fungi, lichen, insects and bats. In fact so important are these old trees that it has been said, "A single oak of 500 years is worth 10,000 oaks of a 100 years"!

Fortunately for us the UK has exceptional numbers of ancient trees, mostly in the former royal hunting forests and historic parklands, but they still survive in undisturbed hedgerows and commons throughout the land.

Q. So how do you recognise an ancient tree?

Obviously it is mostly due to the age of the tree, and natural processes occurring during the last few hundred years of the tree's life cycle (don't forget some trees have the potential to live for over 1000 years). But some of these 'ancient' characteristics can start to appear in much younger trees for a variety of reasons. It is through these features that the tree becomes increasingly valuable. However, to make life easier here is a general rule of thumb to help:

"If the tree is over 1/3 of the diameter of the largest known tree of the same species then it is likely to be of significant interest"

Of course this still requires some in-depth knowledge of the champion trees (the biggest known tree in the country is the 'champion'). An easier rule is that any tree that stops you in your tracks and makes you stare in wonder is noteworthy.

Q. So you have found a beautiful old tree like one of the beeches in Beacon Hill Wood. What next?

The Woodland Trust has joined together with the Ancient Tree Forum to set up a website where we encourage people to record their findings. Once we know about these amazing survivors we can hope to protect them. It is a sorry fact that even though they are as beautiful and as historically valuable as old buildings (for instance the yew under which Magna Carta was signed) these trees have little or no legal protection from development, pollution, poor forestry practices or even uninformed but well meaning assistance. Only with your help we can find them and hope to save them. The first step is to record the trees at Beacon Hill. Any willing volunteers?

For more information on how to measure a tree, see the Ancient Tree Hunt website at www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk

Jonathan Burgess

Tree Quiz

At a Beacon Hill Society meeting last Spring the group were discussing events for the coming Summer. As Peter Leach has led quite a few archaeology tours and, Les Cloutman, nature tours, I felt it was my turn to contribute. I then found myself saying 'I'll do a quiz on tree identification'. It all seemed so easy at the time!

Before the next meeting in July Paul and I went up to the woods and devised a rather simple quiz identifying 12-15 trees found there; some are superb specimens. The walk would go down the holloway, along the bottom up to the far side of the wood and back along the path we all cleared last Winter finally leading across the tumulus to the start. A beautiful walk to introduce new people to the woods.

The quiz was to be deliberately easy so participants would be surprised at how many trees they could identify. Everyone should get a prize. We contacted Somerset Wildlife Trust and got permission to buy small prizes for the day and

any unused to be returned to the shop. Paul found free pencils made from recycled materials. So how easy it all is - we thought.

Peter Banks reminded us to let the Woodland Trust know about the event and get permission to hold it. I e-mailed Sally Glass at the Trust. She answered with enthusiasm BUT please fill in a Health and Safety report first. Before going ahead we had to wade through 7 pages of H&S. The first thing they needed to know was who would be the first aider for the event. That question had us stumped; we knew of no first aider to ask and did not know how to proceed. From there the rest of the H&S report was a challenge I did not wish to pursue. There seemed to be no one to turn to for help.

Result : as we are unfamiliar with the bureaucracy involved in holding an event of any sort we reluctantly decided to cancel it. We have kept a copy of the quiz - so if anyone wants to tackle that H&S report we would love to proceed with the quiz - when the trees are in leaf.

Biz Gibbs and Paul Newman

Archaeological excavations in Beacon Wood 2007

In continuation of a programme of archaeological research at Beacon Hill Wood, Shepton Mallet, further excavations were undertaken during the first week of July to investigate the remains and condition of two suspected prehistoric round barrows within the wood. Under the guidance and direction of archaeological consultant Peter Leach, the project operates through the Beacon Hill Society, with the support of The Woodland Trust (owners), and the Somerset Aggregates Levy Support Fund. The project provides extensive opportunity for community involvement and the participation of local volunteers, including members of the Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society, Charterhouse Environs Research Team, Frome Local History Society, and students from Strode College, Street. Subsequent support for scientific analyses has come from the Maltwood Fund of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society and through the Woodland Trust.

Both sites lie within the upper western part of the wood, close to the main track and the seat, and were damaged by tree planting over 50 years ago. The larger mound to the north has long been identified as a partly levelled round barrow mound surviving little more than 1m high and with a diameter of 17-18m (PRN 23062; Ashwick 5 - Grinsell's Somerset Barrows catalogue 1971). Excavation of a 2m wide trench from its centre southwards showed that the lower surviving part of the barrow was constructed of laid turfs set upon the remains of an organic-rich buried soil. This survived above clean weathered sand where protected by the mound, but any further investigation of these deposits or areas beyond the mound for features such as an outer ditch or satellite burials was hampered by exceptionally wet ground conditions. Near the centre of the barrow a large flat-bottomed pit had been cut into its upper part and backfilled with many large blocks of the local Beacon Hill sandstone. Despite extensive disturbance from earlier forestry ploughing and animal burrowing, a small intact pit at its base contained a decorated pottery funerary urn of Middle Bronze Age type, sealed by a large flat sandstone slab.

This vessel was carefully lifted as a soil block to keep it intact, and was transported to the laboratories of Wessex Archaeology Ltd at Salisbury, for detailed dissection, analysis of its components and reporting by their team of specialists, which is now completed. The pottery burial urn was a coarse, bucket-shaped jar surviving 220mm high and with a rim diameter of approximately 180mm, although the rim was degraded through pressure from the sandstone capping slab. Although complete, the vessel was fragmented – probably after its deposition – being of a coarse, poorly fired fabric, tempered with grog (ground pottery/fired clay fragments) and decorated with simple applied, finger-impressed cordons, one on the shoulder and four vertical strips extending up to the rim. This is identified as a vessel in the Middle Bronze Age Deverell-Rimbury tradition, found commonly in the Wessex region, and compares closely with pottery from Dorset and more locally from the Tadley Acres development site at Shepton Mallet. A reconstruction drawing of the urn is in preparation.

Within the urn were over 500g of cremated human bone representing the probable remains of a young woman aged between 18 and 25. There was no evidence of anything accompanying her, although remains of the funeral pyre survived within and around the top of the urn, deposited immediately after it had been set into the base of a shallow pit cut into the earlier round barrow

mound and then sealed by a freshly quarried slab of local sandstone. Analysis of the pyre material suggests that the cremation ceremony probably took place close by, using mainly oak wood for a hotter fire, with some hazel, woody shrubs and grass roots as kindling. The remainder of the shallow burial pit had then been filled by a dump of tumbled sandstone blocks.

The pottery urn has already identified this as a burial of Middle Bronze Age date, but completion of its processing has allowed a small sample of the cremated bone to be submitted for Radio Carbon dating to a laboratory in Scotland. A date around 1400 BC might be expected but the result should be available by March of this year. The next step is to commission a restoration of the pot to preserve it and facilitate its future display. This will eventually be in the new County Museum at Taunton but it is hoped to arrange for its display more locally in the meantime.

Research is also underway into the local contemporary environment, as reflected by samples taken for pollen identification. The acid soils of Beacon Hill preserve this form of evidence well, and samples taken from the barrow mound material and a buried soil deposit beneath it are currently being analysed at the University of the West of England in Bristol. It was apparent during the excavation that the barrow was built largely of turfs, almost certainly cut locally, rather than with the upcast from any surrounding ditch. Analysis of the pollen from these should give a good impression of the local vegetation and environment of this part of Mendip when the barrow was built, although this was probably several centuries before the cremation burial was made.

Less than 100m to the south a second trench was excavated to investigate a low mound claimed by previous researchers as the site of another prehistoric round barrow (PRN 23063). In the event no such evidence was found, but instead were located two alignments of tumbled stone blocks set at right angles, within which were thin spreads of charcoal and scattered worn stones indicating a floor level. This was associated with occasional sherds of coarse Roman pottery, some iron nails and shoe hobnails. The stone alignments suggest two sides of a rectangular building of unknown full extent, possibly acting as supports for timber uprights, all trace of which had vanished.

This unexpected discovery is best interpreted as evidence for occupation on the hill during the Roman period, probably associated with the stone-working quarries whose remains are still preserved within the woodland. The latter have been the subject of previous archaeological excavation sampling as part of this project, along with attempts to locate and characterise the Roman Fosse Way road that passes through the wood.

Much has already been learned through these discoveries, but even the completion of ongoing work should not be the end of the story. The cremation discovered in 2007 had been inserted into the top of an earlier barrow, in all probability only one of a small contemporary cemetery of such burials located on and around the barrow. There is no current necessity to find or excavate these, but the barrow itself deserves further exploration. The exceptionally poor summer of 2007 restricted the scope of our excavations then, but with the continued backing of the Woodland Trust, financial grants, and above all the commitment and enthusiasm of our local community volunteers and societies, another season of excavation is proposed. The absence of evidence

for later excavation of the barrow argues in favour of the survival of a primary burial in the centre of the mound, at or below the original ground level. An attempt to locate this, in tandem with more research on the barrow mound and the contemporary environment, would be worthy objectives for fieldwork in 2008.

Peter Leach
January 2008