

# BEACON HILL WOOD

Beacon Society Newsletter

January 2004

## Dates for your diary:

**25<sup>th</sup> January 2004. 10.00am**

**Clearing brash in the bluebell dell; meet at the main gate.**

**23<sup>rd</sup> February 2004. 8.00pm**

**Committee Meeting at the Kings Arms, Shepton Mallet**

**5<sup>th</sup> April 2004. 8.00pm**

**Annual General Meeting,**

**Following which, Paul Newman will introduce us to some pond wildlife. Venue to be announced.**

Other events for which exact dates are not yet available;

Archaeological walk led by Peter Leach.

Wildlife walk led by Les Cloutman.

Family Arts Event led by Nell Pickering.

Revisit by the Road-Up Gang.

Litter picking.

Chairman's picnic.

Besides the above, projects on which the Society is busy working include:

Preparation of an 'education pack' for teachers.

Publication of Archaeological reports.

Dredging the pond.

## VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

Well, Christmas seems a long way away now; I think I can still just about wish you all 'A Happy New Year' but writing this after a seemingly endless period of rain, with more promised, all the partying seems far off. However, there are things to look forward to. Particularly, the society has a working session clearing the debris left by the woodsmen in the bluebell dell so that the bluebells recover as fast as possible. It's on Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> January and I hope those of you who came on the pond clearing party last autumn will back me up when I say that we had a gratifyingly productive morning which was also sociable and fun, complete with 'après-wood' in the Waggon and Horses (it's nice to drink a pint that one feels has been truly earned!). We can get some fresh air and benefit from our efforts later in the year when the bluebells flower. I'm looking forward to it.

On a different matter, I was asked recently if members should come to committee meetings. Well, they usually involve 'progression' rather than drastic change, so don't feel obliged. But if you have something to say, or simply want to see what happens, do come. You should receive an agenda beforehand so you will know if there is anything to be discussed that you have a particular interest in and you are welcome to propose matters for the committee to discuss. (By the same token we would not discuss a topic that had not been notified to members beforehand except in the rare event of time pressure. I would always ask for it to be carried over to the next meeting).

On the other hand, in the spring we will have the annual general meeting which is quite different and your attendance is important; we are twisting your arm by combining it with a rare chance to see the Crested Newt in person with friendly expert Mr. Paul Newman. I have waited many years to see this most spectacular member of our native fauna and, as the man in the hot seat, I promise to try to keep talk focussed and concise and newt time maximised.

See you in the wood sometime.

David Gardiner

## ARCHAEOLOGY IN BEACON WOOD

Beacon Wood contains an important group of archaeological remains, spanning some 4,000 years, whose preservation owes much to the presence of the wood itself. Conservation and management of the wood's environment is now the priority, of which its historical use is no less a part. To assist in this process and gain further insights into the archaeological legacy surviving here a programme of investigations have been undertaken over the past two years or so, with the support of LHI grants obtained through the Woodland Trust.

Central to this has been a full and detailed surface survey of the entire wood, undertaken in two stages over the winters of 2002 and 2003. This has provided an accurate plot and provisional interpretation of all visible remains preserved here. Some features, such as the prehistoric round barrows, have been known of and recorded for hundreds of years. Others, like the evidence for Roman and Iron Age stone quarrying have only been recognised recently, but can now be much better appreciated. There are also remains of more recent times, including 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century boundary banks, a tree ring, various boundary stones, and even traces of the activities of the Home Guard during World War II. The summit of Beacon Hill was also an important crossing point for two major Roman roads – The Fosse Way and the road from the Mendip lead mines which ended at Southampton Water. The exact course of the Fosse Way through the wood has always been something of a mystery, although its general line is clear. The survey has provided new clues and attempts have been made to enhance this through geophysical prospecting and some excavation.

Geophysical survey using a magnetometer to plot anomalies that register magnetically beneath the ground has been tried on several occasions in attempts to locate the course of the Roman road where nothing is visible above ground. So far the results have been inconclusive, probably due to factors such as the present tree cover and its disturbance of the ground, the nature of the local geology, and the extent of more recent disturbances, including a large iron service pipeline which follows the supposed course of the road through the wood. Elsewhere, a more recent survey adjacent to some of the Bronze Age round barrows indicates the former presence of ditches beneath or around them. This suggests some potential for discovery of further buried remains within the wood, but conditions are generally poor for carrying out such surveys and results are likely to be of limited value. Excavation is a more invasive technique for investigation, but path clearance along the holloway close to the suspected line of the Fosse Way in 2002 gave an opportunity to cut a section along its sides in an attempt to discover any surviving remains of the road. Regrettably, no such evidence was found, although a flint arrowhead of Neolithic type was found in pit cut into the underlying bedrock. There is still much potential for carrying out small-scale exploratory excavations within the wood, not only to search further for evidence of the Fosse Way, but also to sample and investigate some of the quarry remains.

Peter Leach  
12/03

## POND CLEARANCE

On November 9<sup>th</sup>, about a dozen members and children assembled at the pond on the northern boundary of the wood. Following the long dry spell, the pond was in fact completely lacking in water, which meant we were able to work in the middle of the hollow without any need for wellies or waders. A good deal of the surrounding overhanging branches were cut back and removed, and some willow trees which had colonised the centre of the pond were grubbed out, and removed with the aid of an ingenious method of ropes and a pulley, plus lots of muscle power.

We agreed that it would be necessary to employ mechanical aid to remove the accumulated leaf-mould and silt which had built up to about a foot in depth across the pond area. This will be undertaken in the New Year, by Alan Connock and his small digger.

My own personal involvement came about as a result of the small advertisement in the Fosseway Magazine, advising readers of the work party, and as a representative of English Nature (voluntary), I was a little concerned that if the pond was a potential breeding habitat for great crested newts, and therefore had protected status, it might be necessary to obtain clearance from English Nature before work could in fact be carried out. In the event, as the pond had dried out, and there was thus no evidence of newt occupancy, there was no problem. I have agreed with the Committee that I will carry out a number of surveys in the early months of 2004, starting in February, both to establish the presence of any amphibians, and also the colonisation by aquatic insects and other invertebrates. It is also possible that some aquatic plants may appear, although this is unlikely without human intervention. There are various pond weeds which are both non-native and invasive, and if these should appear, rapid action needs to be taken eradicate them from the pond.

There are also several other ponds or potential ponds within the wood's boundaries, and hopefully we can re-establish these as well; the provision of a number of ponds within close proximity is of great benefit to wildlife, and if amphibians do appear, which is quite likely, their populations will increase rapidly, and could provide a valuable educational resource in the future.

Paul Newman  
12/03

## **A VISIT FROM THE ROAD MENDING GANG 26-27 JULY**

Most of you will know that we have a vehicular right of way through the wood; nominally following the route of the Fosse Way (if you want that ‘nominally’ explained we’ll need another article!). Horse riders, cyclists and motorcyclists, but not cars, have every right to use this track, although anywhere else in the wood they are trespassing. The committee felt that a sympathetic improvement would ease the passage of these riders through the wood while removing the often-repeated excuse for leaving the track ‘Well where the devil is the right of way supposed to be, then?’ Various methods were tried, including a couple of very effective sessions of handwork by Trail Riders Federation volunteers and we were nibbling away at the problem steadily but slowly when a cunning plan was conceived.

A regular feature at steam fairs in the West Country is local agricultural engineer Alan Connock and his vintage road up gang. Under normal show conditions they cannot really use their antique road mending kit because organisers are precious about how their showgrounds are returned, so when Alan, a keen Beacon Society supporter, was asked if he’d like to use his machinery in anger he and his crew jumped at the chance.

The date of Saturday, 26/7/03 was agreed. After a long period of dry weather it rained heavily on the Friday before; knowing that dryish ground was necessary everyone was dispirited by this. However Saturday dawned dry; it was felt that conditions were ideal and that the damping was ‘just enough’ to make the ground workable. A few passes were made with the grader, but by mid morning it was beginning to rain seriously and the attempt was abandoned as it became increasingly evident that the ground was getting too sticky and the weather showed no sign of lifting. I went up late morning, just as this was becoming evident and met Peter Banks there; upon having the position explained we agreed that there was no point in expecting any useful work that weekend and left the team to ‘bivouac’.

They did not expect to charge even the agreed expenses in the circumstances and, despite the rain, enjoyed themselves and are happy to come back again. For my part I felt that they presented an interesting and attractive show with their period dress and ancient machines to anyone who stumbled on them; the little they achieved before the weather beat them seemed exactly what we expected and there was no mess after the event.

They were busy with prior engagements for the rest of the year; however I recently (mid September) asked Alan when they could come back and was told that they felt next April or May was probably the next time the weather could be relied upon to any degree. Once we have formalised a date you will be notified and I would recommend that you make an effort to go and see them in action.

David Gardiner  
12/03