

BEACON HILL WOOD

Beacon Hill Society Newsletter

March 2005

Dates for your diary:

Sunday 13th March 2005. 10.30am

Beacon Hill Tidy-up.

A walk round the wood in the morning to decide what needs to be done.

Peter Leach will be joining us to help assess the situation.

Litter Picking and a bit of work in the afternoon perhaps?

Please contact the Secretary for more information.

Sunday 24th April 2005. 2.30pm

Wildlife walk led by Les Cloutman.

A gentle walk round the wood at bluebell time; looking at features and wildlife.

Open to the public. Meet at the main gate.

Monday 25th April 2005. 7.30pm

Beacon Hill Society A.G.M.

A brief meeting to set the Society on course for the coming year.

Followed by an illustrated talk:

Peter Leach on last summer's Excavations at Fosse Lane Shepton Mallet.

Meet at **The King's Arms**, Leg Square, Shepton Mallet.

Sunday 26th June 2005 2.30pm

Resistance in Beacon Hill Wood

Tim Wray will show us where a secret army was to go to ground in the event of invasion in WWI.

Open to the public. Meet at the main gate.

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.

CHAIRMAN'S VIEW

Well it's still bitterly cold but spring is obviously on the way; blossom showing on the trees and the bluebells already pushing through the leafmould up on Beacon Hill. At least they are where they haven't been chewed up and spat out by idiots in 4 wheel drive vehicles; they have been causing a lot of damage throughout the wood lately. I don't know if it's considered selfishness or rank stupidity, but you have to wonder at the mentality of the perpetrators, don't you?

It feels like our poor old wood has been getting this treatment for ages now, before the current wave there was the damage done by the contractors as they thinned the wood; perhaps this was inevitable but it was still a mess. However there are lights on the horizon; the contractors are more or less finished and are supposed to come back to level the paths they've chewed up, while there's been a flurry of activity to counter the jeep-born morons. The barrier at the eastern end of the wood is going to be replaced as a priority and signage is being organised; (apparently there is no point trying to enforce the 'no vehicles' rule without prior notification), Mendip wardens have been asked to keep an eye on the wood, and Somerset CC has been asked to stop up the bottom of the Fosse Way at Yelling Mill Lane to allow only horses and motorcycles through to continue on into the wood. You might like to ask your County councillor why we were told there was no money to do this small but important job! The committee certainly doesn't believe this and will continue pressing to get this done.

We've our AGM coming up, on Monday, April 25th, when the society elects a new committee. As before we have a good speaker, our own Peter Leach, who is proposing to talk on the Fosse way findings down at Shepton Mallet. I will keep the business part as short as possible, simply reports, elections and a chance for members to discuss the general direction of the society, so please come, it will be a good evening, I promise! If you have any worries or ideas about how the Society should develop this would be a good time to air them. It's in the convivial atmosphere of the King's Arms, Leg Square, Shepton Mallet at 7.30. The King's Arms does a good meal too.

The year's events are being settled. We have what I like to think is a nice round of interesting events in the annual calendar but we are always looking for more ideas; equally Beacon Hill wood is a public place and available for people to use, so if you know of anyone with an appropriate interest send them along to talk to one of the committee. Our bottom line tends to be that if an activity doesn't damage the wood or alarm or offend casual visitors unduly then it's probably OK!

I'm upbeat about the future, despite my miserable opening paragraphs. It's a problem that has to be gripped by the throat but we WILL win, and in the meantime we've almost beaten another winter. We're on the turn point now. The countryside is about to become inviting again, after months of cold and mud and rain. I can't wait. See you in the wood!

David Gardiner

BLUEBELLS

One of the most beautiful sights of Beacon Hill Wood is the annual show of bluebells from the end of April to the end of May. The British Isles are the only place in the world to have this wonderful display. The name 'bluebell' is only used in the southern end of the country, as in the North of England and Scotland it is called the Wild Hyacinth. The 'bluebell' for these areas is what we in the South call the harebell. Confusing, isn't it?

Well, if you think that's confusing, the history of the bluebell's scientific names is more so. At one time it was called *Scilla nutans* (nodding squill), and later *S. non-scripta* and *Endymion non-scriptus*. Endymion was a character in Greek mythology who was loved by the goddess Artemis, and was doomed to never-ending sleep by the jealous god Apollo. Apollo was also responsible for the fate of Hyacinthus in similar fashion, so we apparently have a lot to thank him for in our plants!

The 'non-scriptus' refers to the lack of the true hyacinth's marking said to resemble the Greek word 'AI' (alas) and means 'not written'. The most recent name now usually accepted is *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, but given the propensity for name-changing amongst botanists, this may well change in the future. Watch this space.

The true native bluebell can be distinguished from the garden hybrid (*H.x variabilis*) by the one-sided appearance of the flower-spike or panicle, whereas the hybrid and the very much rarer true Spanish bluebell (*H. hispanica*), which is the other half of the hybrid's parentage, both have a more balanced panicle. Another distinction is that the native has cream anthers, the others blue. If you really want to look for details, the native's bell-shaped perianth segments are parallel, the others diverge or appear to split from the base. So now you know!

Many text books refer to the garden bluebell as the Spanish, but according to a recent analysis by Plantlife, the national (woodland) ratio is about 15 to 1 in favour of the hybrid, and to the Atlas Flora of Somerset (Green, Green & Crouch 1997) the Spanish is only found in 12 2km map squares (tetrads) out of 977 (the hybrid 381) so is quite rare.

As far as I know, the bluebells of Beacon Hill Wood are all true natives, but given the possibility of well-meaning members of the public adding to them by introducing hybrids, we should all keep an eye on things to ensure the purity of our beautiful flowers. Incidentally, the white flowers found particularly along the southern edge of the main bluebell area are natural variations, and no cause for alarm.

Paul Newman
March 2005

BEACON HILL WOOD EDUCATION PACK

The finishing touches are being put to the Education Pack which has been commissioned from Rachel Shaw by the Woodland Trust and funded by a grant from the Local Heritage Initiative fund.

The pack is designed to be used by school groups ranging from primary school year 5 to secondary school year 8, and includes a wide range of materials on the geology, archaeology and history (the 'secret past) of the wood, and on its flora and fauna.

There are notes for leaders, information sheets, photographs, drawings, photocopies of original maps from the 17th to the 21st centuries and worksheets, including delightful 'I Spy' sheets.

These materials will encourage children to explore, to observe and think about what they see, to make connections, and to enjoy the wood.

While the pack is designed for use by school groups, families – and even unaccompanied adults – will be able to get a lot of information and fun from it.

Once finalised, the Pack will go on the L.H.I., Woodland Trust and Beacon Hill Society websites, also CD Roms, and paper copies if needed, will be available free.

Mary Newman

RESISTANCE IN BEACON HILL WOODS

After Hastings in 1066 rebel Englishmen made for the woods and marshes which they used as bases from which to attack any Normans they encountered. Thus was born the guerrilla movement of the *silvatici* (woodsmen, foresters or wildmen) as the Normans called these men. It is believed that the symbol of this English resistance was the Green Man motif.

During the summer of 1940 patriotic Englishmen were once again heading for the woods, marshes and remote parts of the country. This time the threat was not from the French but from Nazi Germany who looked poised to invade Britain.

The evacuation from the beaches at Dunkirk had been something of a miracle, but had come at a huge cost. Admittedly 330,000 fighting men had been snatched to safety, but the British Army left behind 2,472 guns, about 400 tanks, 63,879 vehicles and its entire stores. At the same time the RAF lost 100 aircraft and 85 pilots, mainly from Fighter Command, and the Navy lost 243 ships. Britain's armed forces had been severely weakened and the entire country had its back to the wall.

While the Army and the Home Guard prepared to fight off the invaders, the Secret Intelligence Services formed a covert British Resistance Organisation to carry out a guerrilla war of sabotage and attack in the event of a successful invasion of Britain. Around 700 secret bases were established across the country in caves, old mines and specially prepared underground bunkers. Groups of local men, all civilian volunteers, were formed into Operational Patrols and trained, armed and equipped to carry out missions of sabotage in enemy held territory from these hidden bases. This government sponsored guerrilla network was given the innocuous title of Auxiliary Units.

Within the Auxiliary Units, but not in direct contact with the Operational Patrols was a separate Special Duties Section. These men and women were trained in the use of communications equipment and methods for gathering intelligence information and this organisation had its own underground shelters.

In Beacon Wood, within sight of the standing stone, was an Auxiliary Unit underground base. It was buried in one of the hollow-ways in the wood, but has long since been destroyed, perhaps during forestry work in the 1950's. Several people have recently reported as having witnessed the shelter during its construction in 1940 and also during its later use. However despite countless hours of research the names and details of the people associated with it have so far not come to light. It remains unknown whether it was 'home' to a group of local saboteurs, or if it was the secret location for one of the Special Duties Section radio sets.

It is probable that the answer to this puzzle might remain hidden for eternity, given the dearth of official records on the Auxiliary Units and the time elapsed since World War II. But maybe there is someone out there with a snippet of information that could help sway the argument one way or the other.

Tim Wray

BEACON HILL'S INDUSTRIAL PAST

Walking through parts of Beacon Hill Woods today the evidence for past human activity and its impact upon the ground are all too evident. Some of this is readily identifiable as the remains of earlier trackways, boundary banks or prehistoric burial mounds, and the whole wood has now been mapped to record all surface features of potential archaeological significance in some detail. Other disturbances appear more confused and extensive, comprising pits, mounds, deep hollows and generally uneven ground. These are reminiscent of small-scale ancient quarries, not dissimilar to the landscapes of quarrying found around the Charterhouse lead workings on Mendip, early coal workings along the Mells Stream valley, or tin working sites on Dartmoor and Bodmin Moors. On Beacon Hill it was stone rather than metals or coal that was the objective, and recent archaeological discoveries from around Somerset have added a new chapter to the history of Beacon Woods.

In the Iron Age the volcanic tuff stone from the hill was used to temper some of the pottery made at the Glastonbury Lake Village, while the red sandstone that caps the hill was also made into quernstones and rubbers for grinding corn, found at Glastonbury and other settlements such as South Cadbury Castle. However, it was in the succeeding Roman period that stone quarrying on Beacon Hill was probably most intensive. Recent exploration of the small Roman town alongside the Fosse Way at Shepton Mallet show that the stone was used extensively for querns, millstones, grinders and sharpening stones – the coarse grit and pebbles embedded in some of the sandstone beds making it particularly suitable. Examination of similar material from other Roman sites in Somerset show that the stone was being exported more widely – to the settlement at Camerton, probably to Bath, and certainly to the town at Ilchester.

Most recently, excavations on a new development site in the Shepton Mallet settlement revealed crushed Beacon Hill sandstone incorporated as metalling into one of the earliest road surfaces of the Foss Way.

All of these discoveries suggest that Beacon Hill was a busy place during Roman times at least, and that many of the quarry remains within the wood should be attributable to the last centuries BC and early centuries AD. There is no known evidence of later stone quarrying, nor of any quarry workers settlement on the hill. These and other questions relating to the nature or extent of the quarries, and the distribution of its products, have still to be addressed, and could be researched by further work within the woods.

Peter Leach

Earthwork Survey of Beacon Hill Wood

See fig. 2 on attached Adobe PDF file: ArchaeologicalSurvey figs

Has site of bunker indicated by an arrow added later.

VEHICLES IN THE WOOD

Our Chairman will not be the only one to have noticed that Beacon Hill Wood has taken a bit of a hammering this winter. So just what right do vehicles have to be in the wood? First a disclaimer; I am not an expert in this aspect of the law and I accept no responsibility for accuracy. What follows is my interpretation of part of what is a very complex subject.

First, as I understand it, all highways are public and all land is owned by someone. Highways come in several varieties; there are those you may only walk along, called footpaths, those you may walk or ride a horse along, called bridleways, and those you may also use with a vehicle, called roads. Driving a vehicle anywhere other than on a public road is an offence, unless done with the landowner's permission. Using a vehicle on any road requires the user to fulfil certain statutory requirements, licence, insurance, MoT, etc., etc., according to the vehicle. A bicycle is also a vehicle, but its use has very few legal requirements; it can also be legally ridden on bridleways, but not on footpaths.

Land is owned subject to any highway rights which may cross it. When I was buying my house, I was surprised to learn that I was also buying the tarmaced road alongside, as far as the white line that is! But there is nothing I can do about all the HGVs that use what was once a quiet country lane; they have a right to be there. So where are all the other types of highway I mentioned? Throughout history landowners have, on occasion, disputed the right of people to walk or ride across their property. This was all to be resolved by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (NPACA '49) which required the Highway Authority (HA) to draw up a map showing these routes; the so called Definitive Map of Rights of Way.

Complications started when it was realised that lots of old roads, which had not been tarmaced because they were too steep or boggy for the new fangled motorcars, were being used mainly as foot or bridlepaths and so needed recording. It was decided to put these on the Def. Map as Roads Used as Public Paths (RUPPs); and this is what we have running through Beacon Hill Wood, from Yellingmill Lane up to the main entrance.

All worked reasonably well until Countryside Act 1968 (CA '68) when the then Labour government decided to require all HAs to review their RUPPs and consider whether the historic vehicular use was as a public right or only with adjacent landowners permission. If public vehicular rights could be shown to exist the routes were to be designated as Byways Open to All Traffic (BOATs) (heaven knows who had that bright idea, but at least there was no requirement to have them tarmaced). If no public vehicular rights were found, the route became a Bridleway.

Somerset HA never carried out this review, but to the north, Avon, as it was then known, did, and they now have no RUPPs but plenty of BOATs (If you think this is getting complicated, you have seen nothing yet). The present government, being pressured to 'do something about vehicles in the countryside', enacted the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW 2000). This was brought in mainly to give walkers a right to unrestricted use of certain areas of open countryside. But it also included a section which redesignated all RUPPs, without review, as Restricted Byways (RBs) and these could only be used by walkers, horse riders and NON-motorised vehicles. It was then realised that the terms in this section of the Act contravened the European Convention on Human Rights and it is still, five years later, in the process of being revised. The final result is not likely to

change the fact that any motorcyclist or car driver wishing to continue using a particular RUPP, which will become a RB, must apply for the route to be recognised as a BOAT (clear?); and they will have a limited time (at present undecided) within which to do this. In other words individuals and voluntary organisations, such as the Trail Riders Fellowship (TRF), have now got to do the job the County failed to do in over 35 years.

If motorcyclists are to continue enjoying a recreation which they have pursued since the motorcycle was invented, they are compelled to apply for a change in designation of the many RUPPs (i.e. RBs) throughout the country. In Somerset this includes the Fosse Way through Beacon Hill Wood. Good thing, I hear you say, that will stop the scrambling bikes we hear in the wood so often. Not so, the lads who are causing the present problem are illegal already; not old enough for a driving licence, so no insurance and the bikes are not road legal anyway. So why should they stop? Only law abiding citizens, such as TRF members will be affected. They ride through the wood, on legal bikes, keeping to the designated route and are gone in a couple of minutes; so no problem there. And don't forget it was TRF members who voluntarily helped do the work to make the hollow-way usable for everyone.

So what about the four wheel drive (4x4) vehicles? Yes, they can legally use BOATs as well; the government in its wisdom makes no distinction between 4x4 and 2x1 vehicles. However, to stop New Age Camping back in 1993, a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO), which prevents use by all four wheeled vehicles, was placed on the section of RUPP through Beacon Hill Wood. This does require the placing of signs to inform prospective users of the restriction. The absence of signs leaves a possible defence for use of the hollow-way by 4x4 drivers. Driving elsewhere in the wood will remain as it always has been, illegal, unless done with Woodland Trust permission.

Over the coming weeks we should see measures being taken to stop the damaging activity. Fences replaced at the east (contractors) entrance, bridle gap reduced in width, temporary information notices and HA TRO signs; unfortunately the latter have to be permanent. We will then be looking at repairing the rutted areas in the wood and re-erecting the stone which was knocked over.

We shall also be carrying out work to improve the hollow-way. The main problem here is storm-water; this softens the ground which is then disturbed by hoof or wheel. Loose soil, together with leaf-mould etc, then gets washed down-hill to lie where the gradient flattens out; forming the rather large boggy patch we now have as you enter the green lane going south. This is the process which formed most of the hollow-ways we see around the countryside and they always were rather muddy and unsuitable for foot traffic.

Peter Banks