

# SMITHILLS ANCIENT MONUMENTS

## Avebury, Callanish, Bolton

“There are a great many prehistoric remains in Smithills and most of them are easy to find. Almost all have fallen down or been vandalised but there's still plenty left for a keen explorer to discover. Bolton was rich Neolithic farmland five thousand years ago and we have the barrows to prove it”.

There were many prehistoric Boltonians, judging from the barrows they left behind, and some of these have been excavated, at Noon Hill, White Brow and Winter Hill, but most are undisturbed and pose a dilemma of whether to open them or simply to leave them as undisturbed ancestral tombs. The largest barrow has been known as Halliwell Hill and it's hidden from the Ring Road by the young trees that cover it. From Toothills Playing Field it seems to be a natural steep hill about a hundred yards long and five or six yards high. It's aligned northeast-southwest, as many long barrows are, and is a little higher at the eastern end. There was a decrepit Bronze Age drystone wall that probably closed the entrance to the tomb, but this has now been vandalised, as well as a small crescent moon-shaped platform that had an open view of the north-eastern sky. The wood-lined burial chambers of the communal long barrow have collapsed and are indicated by round depressions in the turf. There's a well preserved later Bronze Age round or bowl barrow nearby, known as a satellite, which may be the same age as the wall. It's at the edge of the hill down to Smithills Vale Estate and appears to be in someone's garden. It was often 'high status males' that were buried beneath round barrows, often in stone-lined cists at ground level. The Toothills long barrow has two wells in the hillside beside Moss Bank Way – one fresh and one ferrous. This latter is probably the holy well that gave Halliwell its name and is also preserved in the late medieval settlement name of Howell Fold. Howe - hill from the Old English 'hlaw' and well. It does look like blood flowing from a wound.

Ancient Smithills was an open farmed landscape. Perhaps there was a feudal system, with a chieftain as the 'lord of the manor', and orders of workers and slaves beneath him. There would certainly be a group of advisers that counselled and informed such a leader – perhaps the term 'druid' is appropriate - and they must have purveyed the traditions of weights, measures and land boundaries orally. The actual druids trained for almost twenty years, according to Julius Caesar, more than two thousand years later. It is quite possible that the parish boundaries that are evident now came into use five thousand years ago. Maybe it was the early farmers, in the Neolithic Era, that originally divided the land. Certainly their stones are often found on these margins and have, more recently, been adopted as Boundary Markers. Dean Ditch may be described as a 'lineal feature' and it now divides Greater Manchester from Lancashire. It is a ditch without a bank and the mystery of where the spoil from its excavation went to is partially solved by the hill-like long barrow that terminates its eastern end. This barrow is plain and aligns nearly north to south. Its broadest part is in Darwen and the narrower section lies in Bolton. It too has a little satellite mound, with excellent panoramic views of the countryside. There's another hill, called the Priests Crown, beside the Three-cornered Plantation. This is perhaps a natural hill and contained a prehistoric inhumation.

Farming runs on a fixed calendar – to know when to sow seed, when to harvest and preserve crops and when to cut hedges. Maintaining this was the druids' main role and they studied and learned what is now called astronomy. In those days the movement and cycles of the stars was immersed in superstition and myth. Some of this oral tradition is still remembered. 'When the moon hath horns it shall snow'. and 'Ne'er cast a clout till the may's out'. The moon has a complex cycle of motion, which is now mostly forgotten, lasting eighteen and a half years, and which was very important to our ancestors. At one end of the cycle, the moon rises and sets in the far north then, a fortnight later, rises and sets in the far south. Our ancestors aligned their monuments toward these distant rising and setting positions of the moon, as well as to annual solar points, such as at the equinoxes and solstices and what's known as the cross-quarter days – Candlemas, May Day, Lammas and All Hallows. As the solar system has moved through space, over three and a half thousand years, the extreme setting points of the moon have shrunk a couple of degrees, so the prehistoric lunar alignments no longer apply, but the solar cardinal points are identical.

A good way of helping decide whether a site is prehistoric or not is - does it have a footpath beside it? If it's yes then that path was originally used to get to and from the stones and has now been formalised as a Right of Way. There's a little used public footpath that runs between the field gate beside Green Nook and Walker Fold Road. It's shown on the old Ordnance Survey maps, and it passes beside a line of seven stones which were once raised as a single stone row. They look westward, toward a crease on the horizon, which indicates the sunset on the longest day. One of these seven stones is certainly carved, with well-defined grooves in the Millstone Grit, and another may have been scratched with a simple design. The first stone in the row, the terminal, has had a round notch chipped into what would have been its upper surface. One may imagine a Bronze Age priest squinting down the

row as the sun appeared to sink into the stone in a ritual intended to cultivate solar blessings. There are associated parts of this stone row nearby; a low barrow in the same field and several stones both near and far.

There are plenty of other stone monuments to explore. The easiest to find is the Thurstones stone row above Barrow Bridge and beside the track that runs through the golf course. After zigzagging up the hill the main path takes a sharp right turn and there's a few trees, a long view of the eastern skyline, a low rounded hillock (another barrow) and a double line of upright stones mostly covered by rubble and heather. A couple of upright flagstones at the low end are free of obstruction and one indicates the tower on Holcombe Hill, and the minor northern moonrise, while the row itself points to a prominent large hill on the horizon. At May Day the rising sun will emerge from behind Knowl Hill, on Scout Moor, Rochdale, and then again three months later at Lammas, at the start of the harvest period. This evocative semi ruined stone row, with its many little barrows, in the fields below, should be excavated and restored. The golfers tee off from the round hillock barrow, halfway through the course, that had its top flattened when the golf links were created around 1905. It'll give advance warning of the sunrise.

The longest of the Smithills stone rows is at Burnt Edge and it must be a discovery of international importance. It has the shape of a stretched out Z with a low ring cairn at the lower join. The first part, of single stones, looks south-east, toward the winter sunrise. The middle double section of big flagstones points toward the Winter Hill TV mast, broadly, and to a good sized barrow, behind Holden's Farm, particularly. Over midsummer nights the sun barely sinks below the horizon and the fixed star Deneb followed its progress just a few degrees above the skyline. The setting point of this star is indicated between the middle part of the row and the Holden's Farm barrow and gave warning that the summer solstice sunrise was imminent. The longest section of the row points toward two small mounds on the horizon and indicated the major northern moonset. At the western end of the row are some stones that may have made a small circle – but are now lost in tussock grass. A distinct circular cropmark seen on aerial images of the row might just be the remnant of a large roundhouse, though nothing is visible on the ground. This former building has become known as The Vicarage. The Burnt Edge stone row site is in *urgent* need of conservation and might be amenable to partial restoration. The Woodland Trust commissioned a useless desk-based archaeological survey, when they bought the estate, and will move heaven and earth to afforest Burnt Edge.

There was a superb little stone row above Counting Hill, at the top of the moor, that should beautifully demonstrate the winter solstice sun setting into the sea behind Anglesey and which is probably the origin of the placenames 'Counting Hill' and 'Winter Hill'. It's a double row of stones, with most of them still in place, though collapsed, and the largest of them is now a county boundary marker. This terminal stone was carved in the 13<sup>th</sup> C. with both a cross and the letter A. It will certainly have been damaged by the dreadful uncontrolled fire of 2019. There's another little barrow on the side of Sugarloaf hill nearby, with a damaged standing stone lost in the trees beside it, to the east. This smooth hill gives Smithills its name and is central to the prehistoric monuments.

There's a tall upright stone cross preserved in St James the Great churchyard, in Johnson Fold, that has had an illustrious history. It was originally a standing stone with a hole through the top, somewhere near Elgin Street, for two and a half thousand years. It was possibly part of a stone circle or beside a barrow and has channelled cupmarks on one side. The Knights Hospitallers of St. John, who held land in Halliwell in the 12<sup>th</sup> C., chipped the top off and carved out a crude Maltese Cross. It then stood in pasture for a few hundred years as a landmark known as the Shepherds' Cross. With the Civil War it was derided as Papish and dragged to the bottom of Valletts Lane, where it was used as a bridge and informal parish boundary stone at Doffcocker Brook. The stream was culverted in the 1860s and the stone lifted and taken to the safety of St. Mary's churchyard on Palace Street. When this church closed in 1974 the Shepherds Cross was carefully moved to St James the Great at Montserrat. The stone shows the tread of very many feet, on one side, and has the eroded ancient cupmarks on another. It is distinguished as both Bolton's only known cupmarked stone – the town's earliest artwork - as well as Bolton's only remnant of the Hospitaller Knights. It is the only Bolton prehistoric monument to be safe and well cared for.

Anyone that's been to the Pike Fair in Rivington, on a Good Friday, can imagine the atmosphere of the prehistoric festivals. The big feast was around the shortest day, when farming was slow, which we now call Christmas, and at the longest day, now described as Bolton Holidays. Perhaps Rivington Pike Fair is the remnant of an ancient springtime May Day fair. There's a good chunk of Passage Grave Art – a roughly carved piece of a spiral – incorporated into a wall on Harpers Lane and there's stuff in Harwood too. There's plenty more to discover – other pieces of rock art must survive. There was a cup-and-ring stone discovered in the reservoir at Rivington during a drought years ago. This stone never made it to a museum, where it might be safe, but instead has been dumped in the garden of Anderton Leisure Centre. This is also more or less the fate of the Smithills prehistoric remains.