

A New Long Barrow In Bolton: the transcript

I worked in that mill for a few years, a very long time ago. They call it 'hiding in plain sight' – and that's what's going on here. Playing fields in Halliwell; about, not even a mile north of the town centre. The Knights Hospitaller of St John of Jerusalem had a headquarters - a preceptory – in late twelfth century north Bolton and we think it was here, on this grass.

There's cropmarks in the turf when it parches, in the shape of a building, and placenames about, as well as large masonry incorporated into the old house on Harvey Street.

Right at the top of the field is the long barrow. It's shown on early maps as Halliwell Hill. It's a sausage-shaped mound eighty metres long and twenty five wide. I call it the Toothill Long Barrow,

When I found the forecourt, twenty five years ago, the closure wall was intact and I have some photos of it then. If there *are* burial chambers in the barrow they will be at that end - behind here. It's the tomb of my ancestors. The long barrow is at the top of an escarpment and would've been very prominent. What was riverine meadow is now a very busy dual carriageway that we call the Ring Road. Scrambling down on the northern side we find what is known as revetment wall and is now protected by moss. Old photograph.

It's not doing badly for five thousand year old walling. If only mine were to last as long as this. How rare is it? Five thousand year old drystone wall - original and intact? It's as rare as hens' teeth. (It's very rare). It kind of defines the long barrow on the northern side.

Coming back to the forecourt and making a little way toward the houses we find the little barrow. Here it is hidden by trees; we can get closer than that. I've called it the Toothill Oval Barrow - it has a twin, not a mile away, to the nor'west. It's beautiful, isn't it?

I don't know which came first - the oval or the long barrow. There is perhaps a hint of an enclosing ditch around this oval barrow on LiDAR. Harvey Street. Coming back to the forecourt On the hillside below the long barrow are two springs; one fresh, one ferruginous. The chalybeate spring - the rusty one - is probably the Holy Well that gives Halliwell its name and was the attraction for the Hospitaller Knights, who maintained it. It was dedicated to St Catherine of Siena - and has healing properties.

Here's a brief musical interlude which shows the Holy Well of Halliwell in context.

Back to the top of the long mound - there's a walking trail comes through here. It has a grand view out over the moors. Far away, through the trees, is another long barrow, called Priests Crown. It's an earthen long barrow - no chambers - and is beside what was a moderately-sized Neolithic cursus. At the western end of the Toothill Long Barrow is another mound. attached to it, almost at right angles. On the old maps it's called Sunny Bank and LiDAR shows it to be an ancient bank barrow. It's about a hundred and fifty metres long and tapers down to the end, near the bottom of the field. It's also from the Neolithic – some time in the fourth millennium B.C. So it's going on for six thousand years old!

You can walk down the whole length of it, although it's now densely wooded. It would have had two flanking excavating - excavation trenches, one on either side, that have now silted up but the playing field-side trench shows up on LiDAR very clearly and explains the boggy area under the trees. Not many bank barrows are known in the U.K. and this one is especially well preserved.

This might be the best remaining bank barrow known anywhere and for that we should thank the Hospitaller Knights, who have also survived and are now called simply 'St John Ambulance'.

There *are* officials, both in local and national government, whose role is to save and protect these ancient monuments. I can name them all but will simply describe them as entirely lazy and incompetent. I'd love to see them all resign and to begin new careers as volunteers - as tour guides and lock operators, for instance, on the canals.

How much is the site worth? Internationally important, Neolithic, best preserved, untouched? It has to be at least a billion quid, doesn't it? Three different Neolithic monument types - on the same site - that has to be a one-off. It's all unprotected.

Bibliography:

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