MY BOLTON STORY (2015)

A transcribed three part podcast

Okay, here's my story of Bolton history. My struggle against local patriarchy. It's about Smithills, Bolton *Pre*-history, I suppose.

When I was a child, my parents lived on Walkerfold Road in the old houses called Colliers Row. These were stone, two up two downs, with a garden across the road, on the other side of Walkerfold Road. One of my first memories is of walking toward my dad, with a baggy nappy on, across the road. You wouldn't try that nowadays because you'd be mown down. But in the years after the war, there were few cars; there was not much traffic. My dad would go down to work at the Town Hall. He was a clerk in the Town Clerk's office. I think that's right. And he would walk into Barrow Bridge to catch the bus to work in the morning and then he would walk back up that Longshaw Fold Road hill. Back again. My mum would be dead bored, way out from her family, and she wpuld put me outside in the afternoons in a big dirty great pram, tucked up under, beside a drystone wall. And that's where I heard the moor, or became part of the moor. And I remember little birds, a robin and a wren. And there's a photograph of me as a little baby with a horse looking over the stone wall into the pram. And it's probably from there that I've; you know, I'm not frightened of animals - at all.

So I am *of* Smithills. I'm part of the Moor, in a way. Those are your formative years only. The first years are the ones that form you. And I'm 'of Smithills Moor'. My parents moved to a more sensible place. When I was young, still young, and for refuge, I would go back into the moors, you know, as a child, as a growing person.

So now we skip forward many years. As a middle-aged man, I used to visit my parents in Bolton and I'd do heavy work for them. You know, on my dad's allotment. I did all the heavy work on my dad's allotment for years and years and years until I got too old to do it,, in fact. So I spent long periods of time staying with my parents in Bolton when they were elderly and I was middle-aged and I became a pond warden, or *the* pond warden for Smithills. This was fashionable in those days. The 1990s, no, late 1990s. Looking back it seems stupid - daft - but in those optimistic days, it seemed sensible. I started off as a pond warden by myself. And then there was a Pond Life scheme from Liverpool, John Moores University. They got a European Union Development Grant, I guess. They got a lot of money, certainly. And they tried to collate, no, organise - create - collate - a network of pond wardens throughout Lancashire. Supposedly parish by parish, of volunteers, who would look after the ponds in their neighbourhood. And I signed on as the Smithills Pond Warden.

There was no money for the wardens, there was plenty for the administrators of course, and once we had a conference, a meeting, in the Maritime Centre in Liverpool and the catering was four star - luxury - but of course we didn't get anything for nets, or bicycle tyres. The pond wardens never saw anything. What the organisers of the Pond Life Project wanted the wardens to do first of all was to survey the ponds that they, the pond wardens, were looking after and, because of this, I crisscrossed Smithills looking for ponds. I went to places that I had not been to for years, - many years - some places I'd never, never been to at all. A pond we defined as being somewhere between one square metre and one thousand square metres in area. Above a thousand square metres it was a lake and below one square metre it was a puddle. So I attempted to collect all of the ponds in Smithills onto a form or some forms for the Pond Life database. And this is how I found the first stone rows. I worked for, it's not quite 25 years, I think it's 24. It doesn't matter. It's more than twenty. Worked for many years as a drystone waller in Northumberland in a single valley. So, consequently, I'm very familiar with stones. I know stones really well. I can tell when they've been carried by a glacier and when they've been set in place

by a human being. And that's how I recognised the stone rows in Smithills. At the simplest a stone row is;- standing stones in a line. People are familiar with stone circles yet there were just as many stone rows made by the ancients. Why they were made we don't know - probably as some part of a magical ritual, a religious ceremony, to bring down blessings on the people that lived there. Within a couple of years I'd found four stone rows, in Smithills; one's in the golf course, one's a tiny one on top of the moors. One's a big line of stones. Seven stones, I think. Maybe six. Certainly six, maybe seven. And an enormous stone row. It's a place called Burnt Edge. It's called Burnt Edge because the heather was burnt on the side of the hill. This is about 300 yards long, this Burnt Edge stone row. It's substantially large. I don't know how many tons of stone will be all together - a hundred? - a hundred tons and I found, you know, barrows, heaps of burial mounds, many of those, and bits of standing stones, broken, bashed, pushed over; I found quite a few of those too. When you find stuff from three and a half thousand years ago, you get quite excited. You believe, it's hard to believe that nobody has seen the things that you're seeing. That nobody's recognised what, what, they are, you know, as ancient monuments. But I became quite enthusiastic after finding the stone rows. And I was certain, or I felt certain, that they'd become well known. You know, that they'd be in the newspapers and there'd be a lot of fuss and I'd have to hide away. But there wasn't. There wasn't. There still hasn't been. I wrote to the County Archaeologist. I didn't go to the museum. I wrote to the County Archaeologist in Manchester but she didn't do anything. A lady. I probably wrote to the museum, Bolton Museum, but they didn't get back to me - they didn't do anything. I had a list, a list, of prehistoric features, prehistoric monuments. I pestered them quite a bit, I would I think. Eventually I heard that they were going to look at my list of stuff and after a long time, six months, nine months, I eventually got a copy of the report, their report, that they'd made. Two ladies went out; the Egyptologist from Bolton Museum and the County Archaeologist for Greater Manchester from Manchester but it was the end of January; it was an afternoon.

They didn't, they didn't take it seriously, you know, they must have whizzed round. One of the stone rows they said it's just three stones that are glacial erratics but it's seven stones, maybe it's six stones, one of them's carved. If they'd gone in the field and had a look at it, they'd have seen that. The, they didn't see the top stone row, the little one, on the moors; they didn't go to Burnt Edge. They went to the stone row in the golf course and they found some of the stones and said they were waystones, you know, way markers and that's crackers. It's just crackers. And that was the visit of the archaeologists to my finds. They were just written off. You know, as a crank's delusions. That would be about 2000, 2001. At exactly the same time, an old guy took an Egyptian statue to Bolton Museum, and said he'd been using it as a doorstop, you know, and it had come through his family for decades, and they'd been using it as a doorstop. And the Egyptology lady went out to see it, the statue, and decided it was ancient Egyptian and that they wanted it for the museum. And the statue became known as the Amarna Princess. So at the time they were looking disparagingly at my list of ancient monuments in Smithills, and not looking properly, they were also thinking about this Egyptian treasure that had been discovered on the outskirts of Bolton. A rare find. The Armana Princess. It turned out the Armana Princess had been made in a shed in Bolton. That it was a fake. And there was an enormous scandal, of course, because the museum had raised half a million pounds to buy it from the old man and his family. But this all came later there - the exposure.

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But when they were looking at my ancient monuments, they weren't looking properly. I eventually got a hold of the report, which is called Gatepost doc. It's posted on my website - you can read it. I was upset, I was really upset by it. Just because it was badly put together, there were spelling mistakes, there were procedural mistakes like - I should have been invited to go on the walk round with them and to explain what I'd found. But I never heard any ... I heard second ... I heard of their visit secondhand from somebody else at the museum, it was an utter botch up. Because I was so enthusiastic, about my finds. I wrote to many people, telling them of them. Archaeologists, you know, prominent archaeologists, musicians, trying to get hold of Badly Drawn Boy, Julian Cope. I thought they would write songs about these newly found monuments in Smithills and, er, I imagined that the Smithills farmers - there's not many of them, you know, just three or four, would curse me because of all the hippies that were coming to visit the stones that I'd found but, of course none of, none of that has

happened. The Pond Life scheme fizzled out - it was only for a fixed amount of time. When the money was gone, that was it. I did write to one of the organisers at Liverpool, John Moores, asking for a copy of the data that we, that I'd sent him. You know, kind of a printout or something. I never saw it. I never had any contact with other pond wardens around Lancashire - they were interesting people. This, this ceremonial lunch in Liverpool, at the Maritime Centre; it was interesting, you know, meeting all these people.before. But one outcome from the pond, Pond Life Project, are these archaeological finds in Smithills. Without being impelled to survey for ponds in Smithills. I would never have found the stone rows. I found four stone rows. There may be more. There may be some where the stones have been removed. You know, there may be missing stone rows. There is a site that has a good view. It's now over Manchester, but it would have been the Lancashire Plain when they were putting the stone rows there. But I've never been, I've never walked over to look at it.

It seems there's a natural hill. The old name for it is Sugarloaf Hill. It's a drumlin - it's called a drumlin. It's from a glacier, when a glacier's melting it kind of drops a whole load of gravel, I think, and that becomes rounded eventually, picks up soil and becomes vegetated. But it's a very smooth, distinct hill. We don't know about the ancients' religion, their superstitious beliefs. We don't know about them. We can only kind of guess. They certainly worshipped nature, or parts of nature. And they seem to have a thing for hills. Perhaps they worshipped hills, perfect hill. I don't know but anyway in Smithills there's this hill called officially, officially it's called Brown Lowe hill and the local name is Sugarloaf Hill and it's very rounded, very round. This is this is the centre of the Bronze Age landscape. This is the focal point, it seems to me, from looking through, looking from the stone rows. The stone rows are about it, around it.

The largest stone row, the one at Burnt Edge, that has a clear unobstructed side view of Sugarloaf Hill. So there's a link between them. The stone rows roughly point towards parts of the horizon, they look toward the skyline. And some of them are marking specific days of the year. Two of the stone rows look at the sunset on the longest day, on the Summer Solstice. One looks at the sunrise on the summer solstice. One looks at the May Day sunrise. And the smallest stone row, the one that's right on the top of the moors, that looks at the sunset on the shortest day. And that one is very special because the sunset from there is into the sea behind the stacks of - what's that place called on Anglesey? Where the ferry goes from - the two stacks, that's Holyhead. It suggests that in the Bronze Age the sky was clearer than it is now. You know there was no industrial haze. It would be interesting watching the sunset from the stone row, on top of the moors, on the shortest day, to see whether Anglesey is still illuminated, whether you can still see Anglesey and the sun setting into the sea from there. They were mining copper there. This is on the other end, isn't it? There was an enormous copper mine there. It's curious, and I'm sure it must still be possible to watch the sunset into the sea behind Holyhead. It's curious that there's a connection there between Bolton and Wales. Bolton-Welsh connection. It suggests that there was, you know, traffic both ways. When the Romans came, this is the Iron Age. I know it's long after these monuments were built, Anglesey was full of Druids. You know, the priests of the Iron Age. And it's tempting to imagine that there were priests of the Bronze Age on Anglesey. There are certainly the ruins, the monuments, to support that view.

Archaeology, if you get an archaeology degree, you get a Bachelor of Arts. Scientific techniques are used *in* archaeology, but they're not *of* archaeology. Archaeology is not a science, it's an art. I complained formally about all the county archaeologists. And they, as the County Archaeology service was maintained by the University, the complaints went through the University complaints procedure, and it was ignored at every stage. I wrote to one of the chancellors, in fact, Anna Ford. No reply. They'd just think I was a nutter. Wouldn't they? And later there was another wave of finds. I'd found some more stuff. Quite close to my parents' house there's a playing field called Toothills and the local history suggests that the Knights Hospitallers of St John had an infirmary there in the Middke Ages. There are placenames that relate to the hospitallers about and it's believed on these playing fields, or near the playing fields,they had an infirmary or centre, headquarters, settlement. I think they were closer to the river, but never mind. But on the far side of the playing fields, there's a long low hill, shaped like a sausage, and it's called Toot Hill. And that means Lookout Hill in Saxon. It was called Saxon, but

Saxon farmers would stand on top to look for the Vikings coming. I figured that Toothill was a long barrow as it was the right size, the right shape and the right height. A barrow gets its name from the handled baskets that were used to carry the soil, turf, that made them. They didn't have wheels in those days just two people, one at the front, one at the back. And, er, the name for that tool has stuck both ways. A wheelbarrow *and* a long barrow.

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Toothill is oriented. North-east, south-west, which is common, a common, orientation for long barrows. It has a flat area. At what I call the front, the north-east. And this is, the hill is scooped back and edged with dry stone. And this is a characteristic shape called a horned enclosure. Horned enclosure. .Like the horns of, you know, cattle. Or the horns of the moon. But that is very distinctive and typical of long barrows. It's a defining feature, if you like. Also its length is 90 metres long and it's 6 metres high. Me and my dad measured the height of it with a piece of homemade geometrical equipment, called a clinometer. The soil of the long barrow. The soil that makes the long barrow has an agricultural value and it's described then as marl. And it can be spread as a fertilizer. It's not a strong fertilizer but in the late medieval most long barrows were robbed for their covering, for the soil that covered them, the marl, which was spread on the fields to fertilize them. Consequently, subsequently, there's not many long barrows left with the mound still attached. There's not many intact long barrows remaining. There's only half a dozen. There's only one that's never been opened. That's known to the archaeology community. There's one in Bolton, it's called Toot Hill. It's not a slag heap, it's not a geological hill, it's a long barrow and somehow it's survived, surrounded by houses, bordered by a football field. Inside, but we've no idea what's inside. Many long barrows have got tunnels and some kind of bones, perhaps, artefacts, bones, usually, inside. Now if there *are* bones inside Toothill, in Halliwell, not Smithills, then those bones are the bones of my ancestor. You know, hundreds of generations back. About a hundred generations back. No, a hundred and twenty.

But no archaeologist has ever seen Toothill and speculated on it. There was the boss of the Bolton Museum - I rang him up out of the blue. I can't remember his name, thank goodness, and I suggested we meet near Toothill, in Halliwell, and I show him some of my finds and surprisingly he agreed and I went and met him at 11 o'clock somewhere on Halliwell Road. He was driving a daft Mini - too big for it. And I took him to Toothill and I showed him the horned forecourt, you know, the characteristic orientation, the characteristic height and length. But he wasn't, he didn't, he couldn't, he didn't know which way up he was really. He couldn't make anything of it. Then I walked, walked him all over twenty yards, thirty yards and showed him a round barrow that's, you know, next door to the Toot Hill. It's in the back of someone's garden, or two gardens, in fact. And he recognised it straight away. He said, “I've seen things, things, like this in Sheffield”. But he got really, you know, really excited. I couldn't restrain him, he was hopping about then. And I said, there's some more, just below, you know, but they're not like, not as good as this one. There's a couple. But we went looking for these other two; one's behind a garage, prefabricated asbestos garage; couldn't really find that. Another had been walled off for some building work and we couldn't find that.

The museum director then wanted to see some more of my finds but it was my, it was my lunch time, you know, I was with, I was staying at my parents - I had to get back so I went back and then, I was, I thought 'Well he's really going to do something now, isn't he?', you know, he was clearly excited, he recognized the round barrow that's attached to Toothills but nothing happened, nothing happened.

Also we had - not a cousin - an auntie, I don't know whether they were an auntie or uncle lived over in Harwood in a smallholding that had a standing stone in one of the fields. And I walked over to Harwood, went over to Harwood one time; looked at the standing stone - lovely - and looked around and found all odd things. Odd bits, if you like, you know a barrow in the school playing field and part of a stone row - what they call a terminal stone, working as a stile off the main road. And another barrow down a lane. But they didn't, you know, they - there's a standing stone in Bolton, clearly a standing stone,,and nobody wants to know about it. It's two hundred yards down a public footpath.

There's a horse in the field; it's boggy. The horse is using the stone as a rubbing stone, so it's making, it's eroding a track around the stone, so the stone's getting undermined. One time the horse is going to rub itself against the stone and it's gonna be pushed over. Then next it'll be on a trailer, going, going to be in someone's back garden.

There are other archaeological finds in Smithals that are not prehistoric that have had poor outcomes. I have not mentioned this really,have I? Time, the time between finding the stone monuments - the ancient things - and now; there's been damage. Several, several of them have been damaged. Some have been stolen. We've lost a couple of Celtic heads. There was a mark,stone, a boundary marker, from Smithills, with an M on it.Was it an M? With an M on. That's gone. So I complained about the man at the museum. I formally complained and formally complained and nobody took any notice. It went through the council complaints procedure and then to the Local Government Ombudsman. And the ombuds, I can't remember the ombudsperson's name, ruled that a local museum doesn't have responsibility. I can't remember what it was. I can't remember what it was. A local museum doesn't have responsibility for the local, you know, the ancient monuments in its area. The Local Government Ombudsman ruled that the museum doesn't have to do anything. It doesn't make any difference - they can ignore them.

I should talk about the Egyptian things. In late Victorian times, Bolton was a thriving industrial town, er, spinning cotton, primarily spinning cotton. The mills had owners generally, weren't they? Despotic, rich, usually sometimes they were benevolent, usually despotic. And they had buyers, they had men, I assume they would be men, who travelled to the countries where the cotton was grown and sold. They would buy the cotton, you know, arrange for shipments of top quality cotton. And Bolton bought lots of cotton from Egypt. So there were a lot of Bolton cotton buyers in Egypt. As well as buying cotton they would also buy antiques for the mill owners and the mill owners would compete to have exotic collections of artefacts and then they wouldn't have many children so, a few years down the line, the mill owners would, the mill owners' descendants, would, would pop their clogs and they would give the collections of artefacts to the museum. Subsequently Bolton built up a big collection of Egyptian artefacts. There's a whole room in the museum dedicated to Egyptology and there's either three or four full-time workers working on the collection, presenting the collection, interpreting the collection.

And this Egyptian collection has supplanted Bolton's prehistoric collection. You know, there were barrows on the moors that were excavated in historical times. And the contents and, you know, descriptions of the digs are of the museum, but they've not been on display for many, many years. They've been supplanted by the Egyptology. Which is wrong. As the Egyptian artefacts were collected, I don't know, not unlawfully. They were looted. They were looted. mostly. Blood artefacts. Egypt still relies on cotton. Er, you know, there's so many children in Egypt not going to school. But that, however many don't go to school all the year round, that number doubles when it's cotton-picking time. And that's where the Egyptian artefacts in Bolton Museum should go to. You know, Egyptian schools. I don't know how many original Boltonians there are in Bolton's population now. Perhaps a half of Bolton has immigrated, in the last fifty years. But Bolton's history is not from Egypt, it's from the moors. It's from Bolton; you know, it shouldn't be kicked under the table, lost, forgotten about, ignored.

So, what have I found? Well I've found Bolton's history, haven't I? Bolton's ancient history. It's that of a kind of a druidic nature. Ermm. Smithills Dean. What is literally Smithills Dean was a ritual centre connected with a fertility cult based on a round hill. There's a spring comes out of the hill, at its base. You see a heron there often and you could interpret that spring as the start of a river. It isn't actually, but it *could* be interpreted as that - if you were superstitious and illiterate - and lived in roundhouses. I've written to a few of the schools, the history teachers; no response. I've written to the mayor of Bolton - no response. Bolton Evening News, countless times. They're not interested. I hope they don't get the story until, when it breaks, until late. I've had some interesting experiences along the way. Trying to track down Badly Drawn Boy was one of them. I went to the Twisted Nerve headquarters on Oldham Street in Manchester. And this is just as they were breaking through. That was fantastic. But I didn't get through to Badly Drawn Boy, perhaps things would have been different. Ian McKellen, I didn't get

through to him, he grew up in Barrow Bridge, on the edge of Barrow Bridge, a massive gated house, a beautiful view, Victoria Lake, a fishing lake, and I found a dirty great Bronze Age temple, within walking distance from there; didn't write back,

We know prehistoric Smithills exists, we know they were druids, They weren't druids, druid-like, druidic people would have visited Smithills in the Bronze Age, to these temples. I imagine there would be some kind of fairground atmosphere there, I don't know. I assume that the festivals that they held were when the, you know, when the alignments worked when this when the stone row was pointing towards the sunrise I think the festival would be there. The night before as well, maybe people would stay up all night waiting for the sun to come back. With men, with long white beards, white flaxen robes, predicting the movement of sun and stars and the outcome of the next year's harvest. Maybe people were getting married and becoming betrothed. That's the good side. Now the bad side, you tell everybody, deformed people being sacrificed, torture, slavery, slaves, malnutrition we can only imagine. Some great songs though. I wonder what instruments they had. It's about eleven miles from Smithills. Say to Toothills, Halliwell. It's about eleven miles from Toothills to Manchester University.. Manchester University has an Archaeology Department - I went to a short conference there once (quite good) and *two* of the lecturers, maybe three of the lecturers, have written books about archaeology and are considered to be head honchos. Neither of them have got on the train or the bus or their bikes to travel the eight (eleven) miles to look at this toot hill which is an unopened, undisturbed, long barrow, so I think they're idiots. Aren't they? They're crap. Dr. Dead? Dr. Dead loss. Bolton Museum - Wants a check up, from the neck up.

Where do we go from here? I don't know. My website, if you Google 'Smithills Archaeology', you'll get to my website, somehow. I can help direct people to the monuments. You know, you could ring me up and I would say, left a bit, right a bit. They need protecting. They need saving. Bolton foolishly, stupidly, sold much of the Smithills Estate to the Woodland Trust. Now the Woodland Trust, they haven't got a clue what's going on. They're just out of it. So I assume at the first opportunity they're going to plant trees, probably inappropriately. You know, the wrong trees for the wrong landscape; oak trees in wet land and holly trees on peat. My website has my postal address and the letters written to that will get to me. I'm easily emailed.. I don't know. The story's out there, isn't it? I wonder what kind of song Julian Cope would have written had he taken up the opportunity. I don't know.

We're not far from May Day. Now, we celebrate it on May the 1st, but there was a calendar, there was a few days put in, weren't there, in the 1700s. So May Day now is May the 6th or May the 7th. It's what we call a cross-quarter day. It's halfway between the Solstice and the Equinox. That was important for the, for the ancient Boltonians. I guess that was the start of summer. They would be up at Thurstones Stone Row in the golf course. It wasn't a golf course in those days; it was a Bronze Age temple. There's a little round hill on the horizon, in Rochdale;. Knowl Hill. Another knowe. The sun on one day, just that May day. Oh no, and the one in the autumn as well, when the sun's going back, would rise. You'd stand in the right place. Just outside Barrow Bridge this is, in the Golf Links, at the Thurstone Stone Row. You stood there, looked down the row, The sun would rise from behind Knowl Hill on just that day. I think there was only one or two people actually watching it. You know, in the place where you can see it. A priest, I suppose, and the king, or whatever, you know, petty chief. I don't know where the most, the hoi polloi would be. Maybe behind, on the hilltop, watching. It's. It's funny watching nowadays - families out walking on a Sunday afternoon and coming down through the golf course. They haven't a clue that anything's going on. They don't know that they're surrounded by the Bronze Age monuments. There's a standing stone in the hedge on the way down to Barrow Bridge. There's barrows that they used as obstacles on the golf course. Barrow Bridge is supposed to be named after a farmer called Tom Barrow, but there's plenty of barrows at Barrow Bridge as well. They're up on that hill just towards the golf course, just little ones, they've never been excavated, recognized, and that's my story ...

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