

PREHISTORIC SMITHILLS

The ancient history of Bolton is forgotten now but there was a thriving community of early farmers in Smithills. We know this from the traces they have left behind, as well as some of their large monuments, none of which have ever been investigated. Bolton's deep roots have officially been cancelled.

The old curator of Hall'ith'Wood, John Winstanley was fond of walking the moors looking for flints and he collected quite a selection, which he exhibited in glass cases at the museum. He showed that there were migratory hunter-foragers in the Middle Stone Age who stayed in Bolton and made flint tools here. Mr Winstanley drew nine areas on the moors where the flint scatters occur but his collection, which included classic Bronze Age tanged-and-barbed arrowheads, is now lost.

Derek Billington was a pioneer local historian whose approach was more archive based. He researched the history of Bolton-le-Moors and his book on local placenames – From Affetside To Yarrow – is essential reading. He suggested that the Smithills placename was based on 'smooth hill' and suggested that Sugarloaf Hill – shown on the map as Brown Lowe - was its source. He didn't explain the plural form and it seems likely that the long barrows were included in the description.

The long barrows are perhaps the oldest constructed monuments that remain and they are certainly mysterious. The amount of time and effort that has gone into raising the large mounds of earth is prodigious and modern commentators suggest that it was the act of building them that was the important part, as it helped communities bond in a common task. These were the first farmers and they imported cattle and sheep from the continent to begin the first domestic herds.

The Neolithic – or New Stone Age – farmers built two ditched and banked enclosures in Smithills and these are known as cursus monuments or cursuses. They are simple rectangular structures with a couple of causewayed entrances. They survive mostly as cropmarks, nationally, but our pair, separated by half a mile and intervisible, still have remnants of ditch in place. John Winstanley believed the near square ditch and bank which enclosed the Two Lads cairns to be the remnants of a Roman fort but he worked before aerial images were available. The cursus sites are associated with other nearby monuments, particularly the barrows, but also Dean Ditch, which is an ancient marvel.

The later farmers in the Bronze Age respected these ancestral monuments and built their temples and burial mounds nearby. There's two thousand years between the cursus and stone row construction and the changes in society over that time must have been enormous. Metal tools made of bronze were an obvious development and the miners at Alderley Edge will have traded tools, particularly axes, with Smithills.

The Middle Bronze Age farmers left smaller round barrows and cairns as well as the stone monuments known as circles and rows. The people were setting a calendar, measuring the movement of the sun, moon and fixed stars with reference to the horizon. There are four known stone rows in Smithills and they are easy to find. The smallest one known anywhere, near Winter Hill, shows the sunset, into the Irish Sea behind Anglesey, on the shortest day. One row shows the sunset at the Summer Solstice; another shows the rising of a particular bright star and another shows the setting of this same star as well as the Summer Solstice sunset and the Winter Solstice sunrise. The solar alignments to the horizon still work now, of course, and may be watched yet, with a clear sky and a patient heart. This is an unbreakable connection with our distant ancestors.

Perhaps there were other stone rows or a circle nearby that have been lost and quarried for stone, perhaps to build the Victorian field walls. The fixed star that was indicated by two rows is called Deneb or Alpha Cygni and rose just as the sun was setting on the longest day and then set just when the sun was about to rise. This was in 1500 BCE and it has moved away now. It does suggest that

the Summer Solstice was very important to ancient Boltonians and probably celebrated or commemorated by a festival and ceremonies. Perhaps there was a vigil between the sunset and sunrise as at Stonehenge. Anyone that's been to the Rivington Pike Fair on an Easter Good Friday will be able to imagine the atmosphere of the gatherings that took place at the ancient festivals.

There are plenty of stone monuments to explore. The easiest to find is the Thurstones stone row above Barrow Bridge and it's beside the track that runs through the golf course. After zigzagging up the hill the path takes a sharp right turn and there's a few trees, a wide view of the eastern horizon, a low rounded hillock (a Neolithic oval barrow) and a line of almost buried upright stones overgrown by heather. A couple of upright flagstones at the low end are free of obstruction and one indicates the rounded Knowl Hill on the skyline in Rochdale fifteen miles away. This surviving double stone row, with its many associated little barrows, should be carefully excavated and preserved. The golf course is an ancient barrow cemetery 3500 years old and the odd placename of Thurstones comes from the Saxon name for a mythical giant or spectre. It's certainly spooky there in the mist.

There is Rock Art in Bolton and it's lost and neglected, but easy enough to find. In a church garden at Johnson Fold is a seven foot carved stone, called the Doffcocker Cross. It's best seen from the bus, which passes nearby. Originally it was a large plain pillar of Millstone Grit with a small rectangular hole carved through the top. The stone was part of a lost ancient monument, perhaps standing beside a Neolithic passage grave around 3000 BCE. Cupmarks and channels have been carved on one side of the pillar but these are now quite eroded and not obvious

Much later the top of the stone was snapped off and it was carved into the rough shape of a Maltese Cross. This was done by the Knights Hospitallers of St John, who held Bolton-le-Moors in the twelfth century. The Black Knights' preceptory or headquarters was at Howell Fold where they organised Bolton's first hospital and left the placename Temple Road. They raised the stone cross in fields nearby when it became known as the Shepherds' Cross. The Maltese Cross remains the symbol of The Order of St John, the modern branch of the Hospitallers, and is supposed to represent sword strokes.

After the Civil War Bolton roundheads derided the ancient stone as a papish artefact and relegated it to be a footbridge over a little stream near what is now Ivy Road. As the cotton mills developed the stone bridge was very well used and more than two hundred years' footfall wore one side of the stone perfectly smooth and concave. The stream was culverted in Victorian times and the cross then taken to St Mary's church, near the town centre, where it stood for more than a century. Then it was finally shifted in 1987 to St James the Great church on Bowland Drive. This has now become the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria and the gardens are open for visitors. The stone wears its history well, though the cup-and-ring art on the one side has never been drawn or acknowledged.

There was an archaeological survey carried out in Smithills Estate during 1996 by the Greater Manchester Archaeology Unit. It contains simple mistakes that should have been corrected years ago. An ancient long barrow is described as a 'glacial knoll' and a prominent round barrow, once a parish boundary marker, is classed as a spoil heap. Two specialists – the County Archaeologist and the Egyptologist from Bolton Museum - spent an afternoon investigating some sites in January 2003. The report they produced, Gateposts2.doc, is an untidy mess and clearly shows that the two professionals didn't leave the road, describing the seven stones of the Brownstones row as 'three glacial erratics'. They called the Thurstones waymarkers and missed the oval barrow entirely.

The university rubberstamped these reports and, while they have prominent archaeologists that have done fieldwork at Orkney and Stonehenge, the same are unwilling to travel just ten miles to investigate the untouched long barrow in Halliwell. (The only long barrow with a bus stop). This denies Bolton its ancient history and its well earned place in British legend. The Woodland Trust, who now own Smithills Estate, have absolutely no interest in ancient history and just want as many trees and visitors as possible.