

SMITHILLS ANCIENT MONUMENTS

Avebury, Callanish, North 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 plenty left still for a keen explorer to discover. North Bolton was thriving farm land five thousand years ago, in the Neolithic Era, 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, such as those at Noon Hill, White Brow and Winter Hill but most are undisturbed and pose the dilemma of whether to open them up or to simply leave them as the undisturbed tombs of our ancestors. 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 east-west, as many long barrows are, and is a little higher at the eastern end. There was a decrepit drystone wall that probably closes the entrance to the tomb, but this has recently been vandalised, and a small horned forecourt that had an open view of the north-eastern sky. There's more stone revetment on the slope below, and both bits of wall are, perhaps, four and a half thousand years old. The wood-lined burial chamber of the communal long barrow has collapsed and is indicated by a round depression in the turf. Another hill abuts it, on the western end, and this is under trees too. Old maps show it as 'Sunny Bank' – there's been no coal workings nearby. There's certainly a later Bronze Age round or bowl barrow, as a satellite, that may be the same age as the walls. It's on the edge of the hill down to the Hill Mill Reservoir and appears to be in someone's garden. There's another round barrow nearby, by the turning at the top of the lane that comes up from the new houses, behind a couple of shaky garages. It was usually 'high status males' that were buried underneath round barrows, often in stone-lined cists at ground level. Some burials were accompanied by simple grave goods, others by elaborate displays of wealth. There's a lovely track beside Halliwell Hill but finding the beginning of it is now difficult.

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 boundary 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 new stone age, 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 reach. This barrow is without a forecourt and aligns nearly north to south. Its broadest part is in Darwen and the narrower section lies in Bolton. It also has a little satellite mound and there's another hill, called Priests Crown, beside the Three-cornered Plantation. This lines up East-West, is probably an altered 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 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, so the prehistoric lunar alignments no longer apply, but the solar positions remain intact.

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, 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 shaman squinting down the row as the sun appeared to sink into the stone in a ritual intended to capture solar beneficence. Toward Sandy Lane, which runs down to Hampson's Farm, is a low round mound with a pair of fallen stones before it. There are other parts to the stone row nearby, a hand-shaped stone beside the track above the old gamekeeper's cottage, and a couple of standing stones on the bluff above, one pushed over and another snapped off, leaving just a stump.

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 southern and eastern horizons, 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 skyline. At May Day the rising sun should emerge from behind Knowl Hill, on Scout Moor, Rochdale, and then again at Lammas, at the start of the harvest period. This evocative semi ruined stone row, with its little barrows, in the fields below, should be excavated and restored. The golfers tee off from an ancient barrow, halfway through the course, that had its top levelled off when the links were created around 1905. Three stones have been moved and reused as gateposts.

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 junction. The first section looks south-east, toward the sunrise at the winter solstice. The middle section points toward the TV mast, on Winter Hill, 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 short part of the row and the Holden's Farm barrow and gave warning that the summer solstice sunrise was imminent. The longer 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 rank grass. There's a small standing stone on the hillside above which points at the Two Lads cairns, and another northern moonset, but this time at the Lunar Minimum. There's another little barrow on the side of Sugarloaf hill nearby, with a chunky standing stone lost in the trees beside it, to the east. A distinct circular cropmark seen on aerial images of the row might just be the remnant of a large roundhouse. The Burnt Edge site is in urgent need of conservation and may be amenable to partial restoration.

There's 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 Holy Island on Anglesey (if it wasn't for the smog from Ellesmere Port) and which is probably the origin of the placename 'Winter Hill'. It's a double row of stones, with most of them still in place, though collapsed, with the largest of them now designated as a county boundary marker. This stone was carved in the thirteenth century with both a cross and the letter A - for Agnes. There's a tall upright stone preserved in St James the Great churchyard that has had an illustrious history. It formerly stood as a standing stone somewhere near Elgin Street, for two and a half thousand years. It was possibly part of a stone circle or beside a barrow. The Knights Hospitallers of St. John, who held land in Halliwell in the 12th C., chipped the top off and carved out a maltese cross. It then stood for a few hundred years as a landmark called the Shepherds' Cross. With the Industrial Revolution it was shifted to the bottom of Valletts Lane, where it was used as a bridge over Doffcocker Brook. When the stream was culverted, around 1850, the old stone was lifted and taken to safety at St. Marys on Palace Street. When the church closed in 1987 it was moved to St James. The stone shows the tread of very many feet, on one side, and has eroded ancient cupmarks on another. It is distinguished as both Bolton's only cupmarked stone and Bolton's only known artefact of the Hospitaller Knights.

Anyone that's been to the Pike Fair in Rivington, on Good Friday, can imagine the atmosphere of the prehistoric solar and lunar 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 the Pike Fair is a remnant of an ancient spring fair, perhaps for the Equinox or May Day. There's a fragment of Passage Grave Art – a piece of a Celtic spiral – incorporated into a wall on Harpers Lane and there's stuff in Harwood too. There's plenty more to discover – maybe other bits of rock art survived. There was a carved stone discovered in the reservoir at Rivington during a drought years ago. This cup-and-ring stone never made it to a museum, where it could be preserved and displayed, but has instead been dumped in some shrubs in Anderton. This is also the fate of the Smithills remains. The archaeologists must believe that if something seems too good to be true then it is – but they're simply wrong!