

## FIELD INVESTIGATIONS ON SMITHILLS ESTATE 27<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2003

### **Background**

The Head of Museums, Steve Garland approached Robina McNeil, County Archaeologist and director of the Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit and Angela Thomas, Keeper of Egyptology & Archaeology at Bolton Museum to make an archaeological assessment about the potential and significance of standing and fallen stones at Smithills Country Park, provisionally identified as being of Prehistoric date by a local amateur enthusiast, David Aspinall.

His research has led him to identify a number of stone alignments, groups of stones, or cairns in the vicinity of the following areas

- Sandy lane from Coal Pit Road to Hampson's Farm
- Beyond Holden's Farm
- The Golf Links
- Adams Hill
- SD 678 118

These findings were published by him in a press release in May 2002.

Subsequently images of a number of stones can be viewed on the Modern Antiquarian Web Site:

[http://www.themodernantiquarian.com/browse.php?site\\_id=2772](http://www.themodernantiquarian.com/browse.php?site_id=2772) in which they are described as Cup and Ring Marks/Rock Art at Barrow Bridge and named by David Aspinall as the Thurlstones. The name Thurlstones derives from the first edition Ordnance Survey Map (Sheet No 86, published 1849) and can be found south east of Dakin's and south of Twitchills., today occupied by the Golf Links.

Typical structures in the upland areas of the region include:

- Stone Circles - A good example is Cheethams stone circle
- A reputed Cup and Ring stone was found at Anglezarke Reservoir
- Mere stones - Large stone boulders used as boundary markers, which in no way would have impeded the movement of livestock. Examples are recorded at Ogden Edge and Bleakgate Moor in 1626
- Boundary stones - Can be a variety of shapes
- Tenter posts/stones and stretcher gates - typically in some Pennine areas stone tenterposts are found standing in tenter fields or by the side of tracks/fences. Wooden frames were fastened to these, on which the cloth was stretched, dried and sun-bleached. A row of 30 upright notched stones at Thimble Hill Farm, Watergrove is believed to be part of a stretcher gate. A listed example of 11 tenter posts of 1840 is found at Saddleworth. Here the posts stand approximately 2 m high and at 2 to 5 m intervals and have a square projection on one side. In contrast to this example is a stretcher gate above Cowpe, Rossendale where at least five low-standing stones form the stretcher gate and the warp was stretched along a series of horizontal supports supported by the stones. It is located by a local trackway so the weavers avoided trespassing on farmland.

- Gate posts- There are a number of variations, but features include the post on which the gate is hung and the post to which a gate is fastened when closed
- Hazard stones – These are often found on bends of roads

### **The Rapid Field Survey**

Angela Thomas and Robina McNeil carried out a rapid landscape survey on 27 January 2003. Conditions were far from ideal and low mist and rain contributed to poor visibility.

A study of the images indicated that the majority of pictures of standing or fallen stones were taken close to roads, trackways, fence lines and stone walls. The intention was to visit the sites and verify or otherwise David Aspinall's findings. In the event it proved almost impossible to match sites with the photographs and descriptions of them, as grid references were generally not available or inaccurate.

The rapid field survey was carried out alongside roads, tracks and stone walls and focused on three areas:

- Coal Pit Road as far as Holden's Farm
- Colliers Row Road and Walker Fold Road
- Barrow Bridge and the Golf Course

Although the survey failed to identify specific stones, it did identify general site areas and some observations are possible.

- A number of examples examined during the survey were clearly gateposts and five different types were identified.
  1. An apparent early type was square, flat-topped and rough cut. One post had an iron hinge on which to hang the gate. The other stone of the pair had an iron projecting strap or sneck through which to place the bar.
  2. Another type was also square, but the stone was more worked by pecking. One pair noted had one post with two square holes in the side and the other had two downward sloping grooves so that two bars could be inserted by a downward push.
  3. A different type was square and straight rather like prehistoric menhirs and had a roughly semicircular top. This type also occurs with a flat top.
  4. A later type of gatepost had a semicircular top, was flaring in shape towards the base, and was more heavily tooled with holes on the front. It was found with both the broad face and narrow face to the gateway.
  5. A further type also had a semicircular top, but was squat and thick with pairs having respectively holes in the lower side and upper face.

Undoubtedly other types of gateposts will be identified in the area. Of those examined all appear to be of locally quarried millstone grit and there are earlier and later types up to the 19<sup>th</sup>/ early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Further investigation and assessment of these would be valuable and informative.

Comparison with the photographic images would indicate that a number of standing stones believed to be prehistoric are gate posts of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but given the evidence of early farms in the area, it is likely that some of these may date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century

- In fields either side of the lane leading from Coal Pit Road to Hampson's Farm and before the farm is reached, Sheep Cote Green being to the west – three boulders were noted which appeared to be in a possible alignment but widely spaced. All were glacial erratics and may have been used as boundary stones for fields or enclosures.
- In a field on the left of the lane from Colliers Row to Hampson's Farm behind Colliers' Row Cottages was an area of boulders, which might be interpreted as a man-made grouping. There was little evidence for this theory and it is more likely that these are glacial erratics left over from the Ice Age.
- The track from Barrow Bridge to Walker Fold passes by and across the Old Links Golf course. This is probably a 17<sup>th</sup> century track linking farms and folds and later served as a track for mill workers. Here a number of marking stones were seen, one semicircular topped straight gatepost and one possible tenter stone (perhaps reused as a marker). The track itself contained boulders as markers.

#### **Assessment of remaining web images**

The web shows a number of stones which were not paralleled during the field survey. These include:

- a) Tall shouldered or flaring stones, c 1.75m – 2.00m x 0.75m x 0.30-.40m with a square hole near the top. These are found *in situ* by dry stone walls or by openings into fields and appear to be set at right angles to the wall. The remains of a shouldered stone is incorporated into the wall at Harpers Lane, but was not viewed. These are interpreted as gate posts or tenting posts.
- b) A long thin slightly waisted stone c2m x 0.30m x 0.10m with three small holes on the upper face and a smaller hole on the side. This is interpreted as a gatepost or possibly a sleeper associated with an industrial tramway.
- c) Curved stone, probably a glacial erratic but no firm conclusion is reached.
- d) Two stones in a line by a modern fence line. One is rhomboid in shape with a horizontal top and the other is a rounded boulder. Both are quite low and have a maximum height above ground of c0.70m and have a hole through the middle. These may well be tenting stones.
- e) A 'cup marked earfast boulder' with a line of square chisel holes. The holes were probably formed when wedges were driven in to split a block off

#### **Conclusion**

The rapid field survey identified a variety of worked and unworked stones. The majority can be confidently recognised as gate posts, but a number

may well be mere stones, boundary stones and tenter posts. Such a study on the location and use of such stones would be a useful area for further research. Of the boulder stones observed, all appear to be randomly spaced glacial erratics. Elsewhere where there is a tradition of standing stones and stones with cup and ring marks, such stones were the subject of great antiquarian interest and were noted and described by them and then later recorded on early Ordnance Survey Maps, but this is not the case at Smitjhills. The opinion of the authors is that there is not enough evidence for prehistoric cup and ring stones in this area.