Wall Walk Report – 23.06.18

Walls and Boundaries in the Holcombe valley

The 2018 Greater Manchester Archaeology Festival was held from the 21st to the 24th of June under the auspices of the Greater Manchester Archaeology Federation (GMAF). The federation comprises over a dozen groups throughout the area, with each group endeavouring to put on an event to encourage the general public to take part and discover what is going on in their local area. Holcombe Moor Heritage Group (HMHG) have the limitation that we are generally working on the MOD land in the Holcombe valley, which has restricted access for the general public, hence we also need advance permission to be on site. However, this year, as well as the “dig” we have been collating information on the stone walls in the valley with the hope that we can produce an article, leaflet, or maybe a booklet (how long is a piece of string?) giving the information that we have gained. This was prompted by a survey being undertaken by the Dry Stone Walling Association of Great Britain (DSWA) starting early in 2017 and still ongoing.

We organised a walk on Saturday 23rd of June entitled “Walls and Boundaries in the Holcombe Valley”, and were very lucky to be able to involve Ken Howarth, who is associated with DSWA, has a keen interest in geology and has been called on to help local authorities with his expertise. He originally hails from Radcliffe, moved away a good number of years ago, but didn’t need much persuading to visit us again. The group of walkers, comprising members of the public and members of HMHG, set off from Lumb Carr Road in the early afternoon sun, fortunately with a slight cooling breeze. As soon as we reached Moorbottom Road, Ken pointed out a well in the wall and gave us lots of interesting information on that. There was much more information forthcoming as we made gradual progress via a stone trough with a benchmark, dry stone walls with a “hog hole” (or “cripple hole”), and past stone gateposts known as “stoops”.

On reaching Clarke’s Tenement we were able to view the wall of intermittent vertical stone slabs in the field to the west of there. Ken told us it was known as a “vaccary wall”, supposedly to keep cattle in (from the French for cow – vache, and Latin – vacca). As we moved further north along Moorbottom he was able to tell us that for the more usual dry stone walls, angled flat stones were likely to have been fashioned at a quarry, whereas rounder stones wound have been found in the locality of the wall. We descended into the MOD restricted area and the surrounds of Cinder Hill farm where we visited the site of the current archaeological dig. Neil Coldrick, the dig leader gave us an equally enthusiastic update on the exciting find of a medieval bloomery – for producing wrought iron from heating charcoal and suitable ore.

We crossed Red Brook to “Bottoms”, the site of the Cinder Hill Engine House which was our “dig” for the previous 5 years (see elsewhere on the website). Ken was able to show us estuary sand ripples and fossils on the surface of some of the flagstones. From the stream there he was able to point out some stones that had been brought down during the last ice age from Shap in Cumbria or even Caledonia, given that the valley had been under about 1 mile thick ice at that stage. There are quite a few vaccary walls associated with the Cinder Hill farm and Ken told us that similar walls at Pendle are known to be 17th Century in origin. Just upstream we looked at the excellent stonework associated with the weir and discovered remains of an old stone wall superseded by a row of trees, then trekked east along a ruined wall to Holcombe Head farm and off the restricted area.

If time had allowed we would have liked to visit the remains of the Old Grey Wall up on the Harcles Hill plateau, but as time was marching faster than we were, we decided to return along Moorbottom Road to our starting point. Everybody seemed to agree that the walk had been very worthwhile, especially with Ken’s input and enthusiasm, and we are very grateful to him for giving us the benefit of his knowledge. We would hope that this walk may be the basis for future HMHG walks in the area.

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