

A Visit to Wellow

Thoughts on the history and pre-history of the area

The BACAS excursion on 9th June 2009 to the peaceful village of Wellow, was on a fine evening. In near darkness, the more robust of the excursion members continued to Stoney Littleton Long Barrow, located a little further upstream on the Wellow Brook, in an area of utter tranquillity. But had things always been so quiet?

Roger Lawley

For many years, I have had a particular interest in the Wellow and Cam Brooks, because of their associations with William Smith, who came to be known as 'The Father of English Geology'. The story of his life caught the imagination of many local people, quite recently, with the publication of Simon Winchester's book *'The Map that Changed the World'*.

The 18th Century had seen the development of substantial coal mining activities in the headwaters of both the Wellow and Cam Brooks (*Figure 1*). The bright young William Smith, who came from simple farming stock in Oxfordshire and had had little formal education, must have been attracted to the area by the prospect of employment in this hive of activity. He spent a number of years working in the coal pits themselves, and developed his ideas regarding the nature of the coal seams and the interrelationships between the pits. However, it was the nearby surface construction work, which was to provide William Smith with the principal evidence for his theories. These were presented in 1801 in his *'General Map of Strata Found in England'*. He had been appointed a surveyor for the Somerset Coal Canals, which were intended to provide cheap transport for the coal to the barge heads on the Kennet and Avon Canal. The engineering works along the line of the two Brooks, which were separated from each other by about three miles, provided an excellent correlation in relation to the rock strata exposed in the two valleys, enabling the collection of numerous fossils and allowing calculations to be made for the 'angle of dip' of the bedding plains. In later years, Smith was to apply the principles of geological interpretation, first developed in relation to the canal network, in his country wide studies. These culminated in the publication in 1815, of his Geological Map of England. This very substantial work provided the emerging science of geology with a sound foundation, enabling its application throughout the world. The new technology was very relevant to Darwin, who embarked on the Voyage of the Beagle in 1831. It is now believed by many that the geological interpretations incorporated into Darwin's work, were central to the development of his theory of evolution.

But what of the Somerset coal transportation system, which by 1858 was enabling the movement of up to 166,000 tons of coal a year, at very competitive prices? While the canal works along the Cam Brook remained operational until the end of the century, those along the Wellow Brook had not proved so durable, and the whole of the Radstock Line was rebuilt as a tramway in 1815. The opening of the mainline railway from Frome to Radstock, in the middle of the 19th Century, put pressure on the conversion of the tramway to rail. By the latter part of the century, the Somerset and Dorset Railway had been constructed along the line of the tramway between Radstock and Midford. Wellow town must, at that time, have been a busy centre on this transport route. However, the business was to be quite short lived. The coal pits were progressively exhausted in the first half of the 20th Century, and the railway itself was closed in 1951. Surprisingly, a link road was not constructed along the Wellow valley. Vegetation now obscures much of the former railway route. The town of Wellow has reduced in size to that of a village, but has retained many of its fine old buildings, including the beautiful Grade 1 Listed church. Its current residents must now generally be those who have sought to live quietly in the countryside. It was designated a Conservation Area in 1983.

But what of Stoney Littleton Long Barrow, which had been constructed more than 5,000 years ago? Had some local chieftain chosen a quiet spot, overlooking the picturesque Wellow Brook, as his final resting place? Data revealed by a Google search, provided little speculation about the origins and history of this Neolithic monument. However, consideration of its location shows that it is situated within the triangle formed by Stonehenge, Avebury and Stanton Drew. Substantial investigation works have been carried out at Stonehenge in recent years, which have shed light on the purpose of

this monument and its relationship with the nearby Riverside Project. However, this can be only a first step in gaining a comprehensive understanding of what was going on in this part of the British Isles during the Neolithic period.

The current surface topography of England was largely shaped by glacial action, during the past two million years. More comprehensive understanding of the extent of the early very severe glaciations, may solve the vexed question of how the so called 'blue stones', which originated in Wales, got into the area of Stonehenge. Rising sea levels after the last Ice Age, which resulted in the flooding of the English Channel in about 6000 BC, put a stop to the free movement of hunter gatherers between mainland Europe and the land projection to the west. Thereafter, it was sea navigation, which determined the extent of contact between the British Isles and mainland Europe, and this was the position during the period of the building of the great monuments in the south west of the country. Analysis of the composition of the teeth of the so called 'Amesbury Archer, King of Stonehenge' has indicated that he was not of British origin, since it revealed that water with the required chemical composition, is not present in this country. The display boards for the Amesbury Archer in the Salisbury Museum speculate that his place of origin may have been central Europe. However, the Middle East was technically far more advanced than Europe at the time and the navigational activities of the Phoenicians are thought to date from at least 3000 BC. It seems to me more likely that the technical know-how required for the major construction work in southern England, came from that part of the world. The lecture planned for the Society in March 2011, in relation to early developments in Upper Mesopotamia, and which will include reference to the ritual centre at Gobekli, may well provide interesting insights in this context.

All that may appear to be of limited relevance to the peaceful nature of Stoney Littleton Long Barrow today. On the other hand, if the activities in the vicinity, during Neolithic times, were in fact influenced by the goings on at the nearby important sites, the area of the Wellow Brook may not have been a haven of peace. Perhaps the place chosen by the 'local chieftain' (or whoever) for this burial site was actually, at that time, an area of bustling activity!

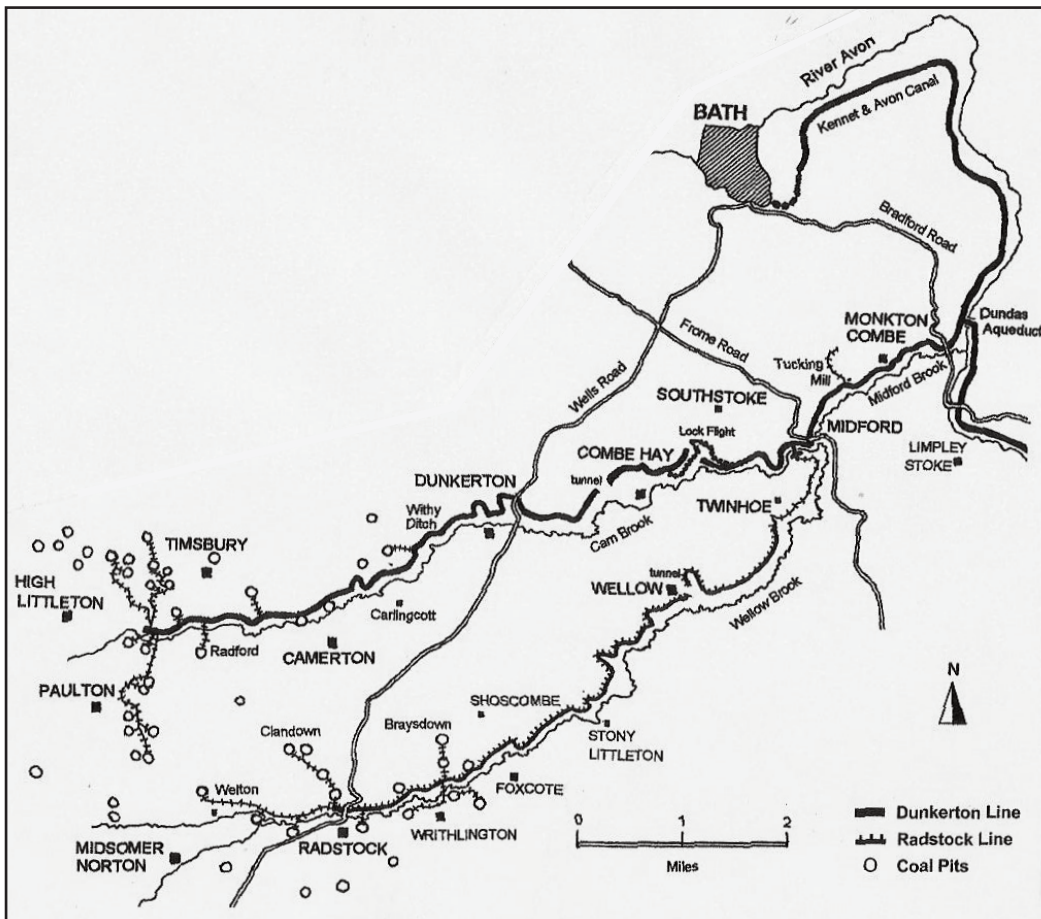


Figure 1
Map of transport routes from the local Somerset coal pits.