FIELDWORK IN THE SOMERSET LEVELS AND MOORS 1994

by Richard Brunning

During the year much post excavation work was carried out on existing projects and new investigations were initiated in the Brue valley studying the peat / estuarine clay interface at Ham Wall and Roman salt making mounds in the Burtle area. By April 1995 a desktop re-examination of many archaeological sites in the Levels and Moors area should have been completed as part of English Heritage's Monument Protection Programme.

Ham Wall, Glastonbury Heath

Ham Wall is an area of land formerly used for peat cutting which is now being turned into a wetland habitat of reed bed and open water for nature conservation by Somerset County Council and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. It is located roughly two miles west of Glastonbury and will encompass an area of 140 ha when complete (McDonnell 1993a).

Most of the peat which existed in the area has been cut away by commercial extraction but isolated pockets of the lowest peat do survive and these have been sampled for dating and palaeo-environmental analysis.

Clay and peat filled palaeochannels have also been located running through the top of the blue grey estuarine clay and these have also been sampled. It is hoped that they will provide information on the local environment, changing drainage patterns, and possibly sea level changes.

Roman salterns at Burtle

In a field roughly two miles west of Burtle in the Brue valley remains of Roman salt making mounds were discovered. The field surface had become distorted probably as a result of peat desiccation and the landowner wished to level the field by ploughing or shake-aerating. As the field was in a Levels and Moors Environmentally Sensitive Area management agreement archaeological investigation was possible beforehand.

Many Romano-British salterns are known from the general area, the majority surviving as upstanding mounds. Very few have been subjected to modern excavations, however (Leech *et al.* 1976).

A small 2 m by 1 m trench was opened in an area where briquetage pottery had been retrieved from molehills. This revealed a large quantity of briquetage and some finer wares scattered throughout the trench at depths of between 8 cm and 22 cm below the ground surface, with an especially compact undulating layer of pottery extending into one corner of the trench over an area of 1 m by 0.5 m. Peaty topsoil overlay the pottery and undisturbed peat lay beneath to a depth of at least 0.5 m below the ground surface.

Just under 10 m west of this trench the topsoil was composed of alluvial clay, found by coring to cover most of the rest of the field to a depth of between 31 cm and 40 cm. Beneath this was a layer of peat ranging from 50 cm to 61 cm in depth overlying blue grey estuarine clay. A small trial hole dug 40 m west of the partially excavated salt making mound revealed a vertical drop in the top of this peat surface of 14 cm. It is hard to envisage how this would have occurred naturally and raises the possibility of the peat having been cut, probably before it was covered by alluvium. The depth of peat noted in the field is less than that recorded by the Soil Survey in the

same general area in 1979.

Dendrochronology

During the year dendrochronological samples were taken from a number of sites. As a result of watching brief work on Glastonbury relief road the trunks of fourteen 'bog oaks' were salvaged and sampled for dating. Several samples were also taken from a single oak used in the construction of the southern terminal of the Sweet Track, which was excavated last year (Brunning 1993). Some pieces of bog oak recovered from Godney Moor were also made available for analysis courtesy Mr. H. Battiste the publican at 'The Bird in Hand', Westhay.

Analysis of these samples carried out by J. Hillam and C. Groves at Sheffield University has resulted in seven of the trees being dated to the fifth millennium B.C. One Godney sample was growing between 4408 B.C. and 4256 B.C., the Sweet Track timber between 4651 B.C. and 4415 B.C., and five of the Glastonbury trees between 4655 B.C. and 4173 B.C. None of the samples had any sapwood, however, so their last year of growth is not known.

Several individual samples of bog oaks had been taken from the Somerset Moors over the last few decades but until now none of these had been datable by dendro-chronology. As a result of the new sampling, however, bog oaks from Westhay, Stileway, and Meare Heath in the Brue valley have been tied into the fifth millennium B.C. tree-ring chronology. As a result of the new work this chronology for Somerset has been extended back over 500 years from 4202 B.C. to 4769 B.C. One of the many interesting pieces of information this yields is that the builders of both the Meare Heath and Sweet Tracks used bog oaks in the construction of the terminals of their routes. In the case of the Sweet Track the 'bog' oak had died several hundred years before the felling of wood for the trackway, which was known to have occurred in 3807/6 B.C. (Hillam *et al.* 1990). A fuller summary of this work will be produced next year.

Resampling of wood excavated from the Skinner's Wood trackways has produced a felling date of 982/983 B.C. The timbers that produced these dates are however thought to have been reused from another structure and therefore do not reflect the actual construction date of the trackway.

Combe Pond

Last year at Combe Pond, cut roundwood was found in a mollusc rich peat deposit, disturbed by the excavation of a fishing lake (Brunning 1993). A radiocarbon date has now been obtained from this cut wood with a two sigma range of 2456-1890 CAL. B.C. A Bronze Age date is consistent with the limited toolmark evidence.

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