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Moss Farm, Bowdon.

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Archaeological Survey of Dunham Massey

Recent surveys, which included air photography, carried out on the Dunham Massey estate by Robert Woodside and Jeremy Milln, archaeologists to the National Trust, are producing very exciting results, including evidence of Bronze Age barrows, Iron Age farmsteads and Roman roads.

Examination of early maps indicate lost field systems and other documents suggest that there might have been three Medieval deer parks, as well as the one dating from the 14th Century.

The investigations, when complete, will assist in the future conservation programme of the National Trust, as well as help in the interpretation of the property, and members of Bowdon History Society await publication of the results of the investigations with very great anticipation. It will be of interest to know if any evidence is forthcoming regarding any castles which might have been built in Bowdon, other than the motte and bailey at Castle Hill, from which, historians inform us, the Normans launched their pincer movement attack to the South after the Battle of Hastings.

Claims have been made that a castle was sited at Dunham Massey Hall and that the ziggurat, or viewing mound, was a former motte, but this theory has been debunked as impractical by strategists, as the position was totally unsuitable for the defence of the main Chester road, and its crossing of the river, or for defending anything else of military importance. Further more the so-called moat at the Hall, by virtue of its proximity to the Bollin River, could be breached within a very short period of time by a few men with picks and shovels. Bodiam Castle, the only fortification to be built under similar conditions, caused such Royal disapproval and scandal that barons never dared to repeat this mistake again.

The Dunham Massey Sconces

In 1756 George Booth, 2nd Earl of Warrington, wrote "A Weakness of my Hand almost disables me to hold my pen". Over eighty years of age, and expecting the dissolution of his "old decaying life", he was putting his earthly affairs in order, which included, as he declared, "the Particular of my Plate & its Weight", which he had previously compiled and noted as being twenty-six and a half thousand ounces of silver.

This remarkable collection of silver had been acquired by the Earl after his marriage which brought him a dowry of £40,000. Unfortunately the Earl and Countess were totally incompatible and quarrelled and "lived in the same house as absolute strangers to each other at bed and board" resulting in him publishing a pamphlet advocating divorce on the grounds of incompatibility, something unheard of at that period of history.

Among the more important items listed in the Earl's "Particular" were a set of six sconces, or wall lights, which he had commissioned in 1730-1731 from Peter Archambo, a Huguenot goldsmith, for his Great Bedchamber at Dunham Massey Hall, and are one of the last sets to have been made before sconces became unfashionable in the mid-18th Century.

Each sconce was engraved with the Earl's monogram and coronet and had a very large backplate, to reflect the light from the candle and was richly adorned with an individual treatment of the central panel, each one showing different mythological scenes, such as Diana surprised by Actaeon and Prometheus Bound. It has been suggested that the Earl probably identified himself with Actaeon, and his wife with the vengeful Diana.

One compensation which the Earl gained from his disastrous marriage other than a large fortune, was the birth of a daughter, their only child, who later inherited his estate when she had married Harry Grey, 4th Earl of Stamford.

The silver collection was eventually moved to Enville Hall, a Stamford estate in Leicestershire, where it passed to a different branch of the family, who sold it in 1921 for £3,100, but the 10th and last Earl of Stamford bought back a large part of the collection, which he returned to Dunham Massey Hall. He was however unsuccessful in his attempt to regain the sconces, two of which were sold at Sotheby's in 1990 for £1,155,000. Fortunately two further ones were withdrawn from auction and offered to the National Trust, to whom the estate, including the silver collection, had been bequeathed on the death of the tenth Earl.

The price of the two available sconces was considerably below the likely value on the open market but with assistance from Sotheby's, and help from benefactors, they were bought and returned to Dunham Massey Hall, after an absence of 140 years, and are now on display with the rest of this magnificent collection.

Bowdon Parish Church Tower

In a recently published book a plan was illustrated of Bowdon Parish Church which was erroneously noted as having a Victorian chancel and a Medieval tower. This is incorrect. Working drawings and specifications by the architect Brakspeare, together with reports, required the complete demolition of the old church and rebuilding of a new one, between 1859 and 1860, with the new tower moved slightly away from the position of the old one and using stone from a different quarry. The only feature retained from the Medieval church was the wooden ceiling to an aisle.

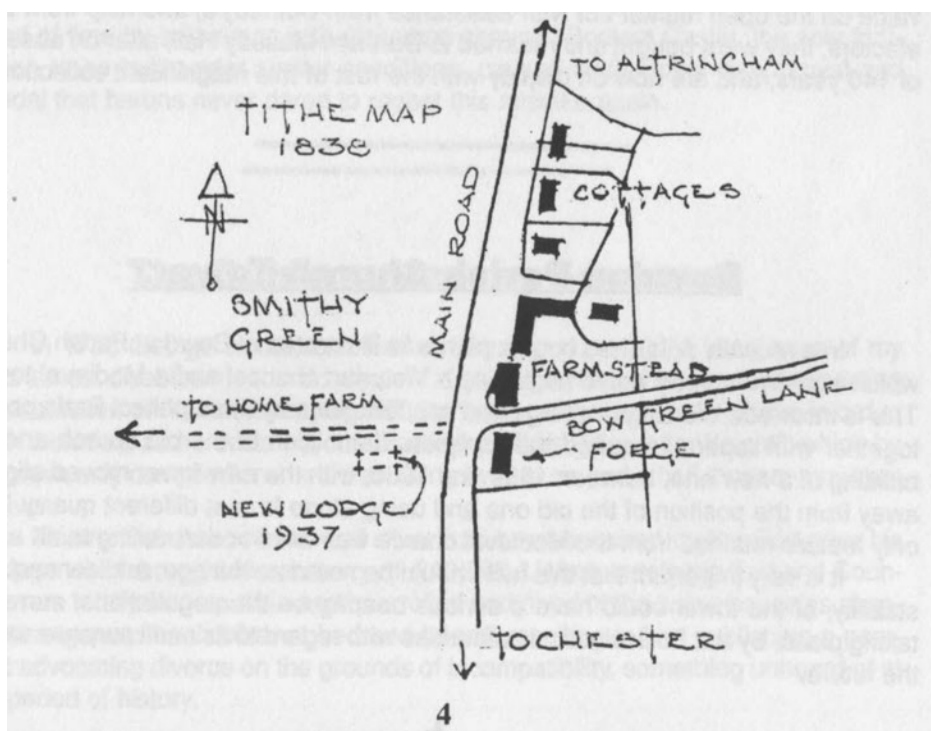
It is very important that this fact should be noted as the age, and consequent stability, of the tower could have a serious bearing on the negotiations, currently taking place, by the Ecclesiastical authorities with regard to its multi purpose use in the future.

Smithy Green by Ronald Trenbath

To most people, who live in Bowdon, the main road, known variously as Dunham Road, the Chester Road or by its Roman name Watling Street, is a dangerous and over-used speed track, but prior to 1914 its character was totally different and children would play safely on it, only to be warned by their parents to be careful of the traffic when a horse drawn cart could be seen approaching in the distance.

Today the main feature of interest along the road is Bowdon Filling Station where one may purchase food, plants, magazines and confectionary, among a wide range of products, or read the temperature or buy petrol, but in earlier days the main feature was Smithy Green, or Street Head as it was sometimes called. This quiet settlement at the junction of Bow Green Lane and the main road was situated on the crest of a hill, the road falling steeply down to the river Bollin on the south side, and into a deep decline on the north side, prior to rising steeply towards Altrincham. It was in order to avoid this deep depression that carters and other travellers, from very early times, used Bow Green Lane as an easier ascent to Bowdon Village.

The lane was a very narrow ancient track overhung with damson trees, while the main road, descended to the south through a narrow ravine also darkened by overhanging trees and massed with ferns, ivy and primroses, a haunt for gypsies, vagrants and robbers, and not a place in which to linger after dark.



On the east side of the road were six cottages, a farmstead and a smithy which did a good farrier trade in connection with horses distressed in their travels and waggons, dog-carts and coaches requiring repairs. A horse trough which provided water for horses exhausted in the haul up to the crest of the hill, was only moved after the last war.

Opposite the smithy a drive lead up to the Home Farm and, lower down, towards the river, the main entrance to Dunham Massey Park was situated and it is not difficult to realize that Smithy Green must have been very isolated a hundred years ago, as the following extract from the Bowdon Parish Magazine for December 1894 graphically illustrates:-

MEETINGS AT STREET HEAD

It may be of interest to those living in the more towny parts of Bowdon to know that an opportunity has been created for the clergy to draw together and to meet the cottagers and farm hands in the more distant parts of our parish, by the loan of a room in the farm of which Mr. Hall is the tenant. The apartment is not sumptuous; but it is clean, has a fire place, and is brilliantly lit up with oil lamps. Two meetings have already been held; and although the first was on a night strongly suggestive of the deluge and the second recalled the darkness of Egypt, the cottage and farm folk turned up nobly. There is not much change in country life; and merely to see one another all together; to listen together to a few words of cheer and sympathy; and to sing lustily together some well known hymn, does something to break the monotony of winter evenings, and to prevent a possible feeling of being left out in the cold.

One might wonder if the male cottagers and farm folk would not have been happier, and found greater cheer, if they had braved the road over the river and spent the evening at the Nag's Head, as it was known at the time.

In the 1930's the road, and bridge over the river, was greatly widened and realigned and a new lodge built at the entrance to the Home Farm. In December 1940 a German land mine, aimed probably at the bridge, destroyed the old lodge gate which was never rebuilt, due largely to a disagreement between Lord Stamford and the Local Planning Department, and so, apart from totally altered cottages and farmstead, little is left of the, perhaps too quiet, settlement on the periphery of the parish a hundred years ago.

Ale-house Keepers in 17th Century Bowdon by Peter Kemp

The history of the two Bowdon inns, the "Griffin" and the later "Stamford Arms", has been researched and ably recorded in the past and since then evidence has come to light that there was an inn in 1761 "at the house of William Yarwood known by the sign of the Green Dragon in Bowdon, near Altrincham in Cheshire" (Harrops "Manchester Mercury" - Owen MSs, Manchester Central Library). Further research may reveal that the "Green Dragon" became the "Griffin", since a slight change of tail and rear feet on the sign would make the transition easy, or, maybe, the sign looked like a griffin already. The name change could be laid at the door of the new Victorian residents of Bowdon who possibly thought that the common pub name of "Green Dragon" was not suitable for their new mansion community. At this stage, we can only surmise.

So, where did people go for refreshment in Bowdon before that first known inn? Here there is evidence for the 17th century in the records of 'Alehouse Recognisances' at the Cheshire Record Office (QDL72/2/2, QDL72/2/4, QDU2/2/6 & 7). The licences are in Latin, taking the form of the 'binding over' formula used until recently by Court clerks, for people either to appear in Court or to keep the peace on pain of financial penalty. Some of the conditions they were bound over to keep were, not opening on the Sabbath, not to permit unlawful games, not to allow access by vagrants and wanderers, and to observe the local Court Leet and parish vestry regulations for maintaining order and respectability. All the entries follow the same form, which can be roughly translated thus: "Johes (John) Lether of the same [Bowdon] has acknowledged that he owes to our Lord the King ten pounds. Thomas Sanderson and Radus (Ralph) Devias both recognise that they owe to our Lord the King five pounds under the conditions set out above". Each principal is so named with the two sureties. A licence was easy to obtain unless the township had more than enough alehouses already.

In 1639, there were 7 licences granted to :- John Lether, Thomas Sanderson, Ralph Devias, Ralph Joanes, John Eaton, Roger Daniel and John Saracold. In Dunham Massey that same year, only 3 men were given licences :- James Birch, and John Lether and Ralph Devias, presumably the same pair who held Bowdon licences. In 1640 in Bowdon, there were 9 licensed premises belonging to the same people as in 1639 but with the loss of Roger Daniel and the addition of William Foxley, Thomas Goolden and Richard Rowlinson. The brewing and selling of beer and ale was often combined with another occupation since no apprenticeship was required for its skills, and home-grown barley would make the malt needed in the brewing. John Lether was a yeoman and butcher as well and had a house with a kitchen and 3 hearths where he lived with his wife and 3 children ; Thomas Sanderson was the parish clerk with a 4 hearth house for himself and his 3 children; and John Eaton was a yeoman who lived in a house with 5 hearths - all of them living in larger-than-average Bowdon houses. William Foxley was a gardener as well as being an alehouse-keeper.

Bowdon, with its population at that time of 150 contained in some 35 houses, of which nearly a quarter were alehouses, seems at first sight to have had more provision than was necessary. Ale brewing and selling was a profitable business even after the cost of the licence, and the prevalence of alehouses in Bowdon is not unexpected when the importance of the church with its large parish is considered. People who had walked or ridden from Carrington or Timperley or Baguley, all within the parish, to funerals, and baptisms, or even weddings, would need refreshment and a place to gather to discuss the event, to gossip and hear news, and generally to enjoy themselves. The alehouse provided this in the form of small beer for the children and strong ale for the men and women, and a room with forms and settles, with perhaps a fire for warmth in the larger alehouses kept by people like Lether, Eaten and Sanderson. There the gentry would mingle with the husbandmen and yeomen, smoking a clay pipe or two and drinking a few quarts of ale, while talking about their crops, the weather, market prices and other country interests. The people of Altrincham, with no church of their own, would have great need for this provision of refreshment and rest, especially after, say, carrying a coffin up the hill from Altrincham along the Narrows and Burying Lane [The Firs].

It is reasonable to assume that the alehouse with the best location in the centre of the village opposite the church and the school, and facing the open space used by the inhabitants for pastimes on Saints' days and holidays, became the inn now called the "Griffin".

Primaeval Bowdon by A. T. Longbarn

The raised ground, later known as Bowdon Hill, which included present day Bowdon and part of Hale and Altrincham, is bound by the Bollin Valley to the south, the Mersey Valley to the north, the confluence of the two rivers to the west and Hale Moss and Lindow Moss to the east, all of which was originally marshland, with the result that Bowdon Hill was virtually an island surrounded by swamps known as the Great Mosses.

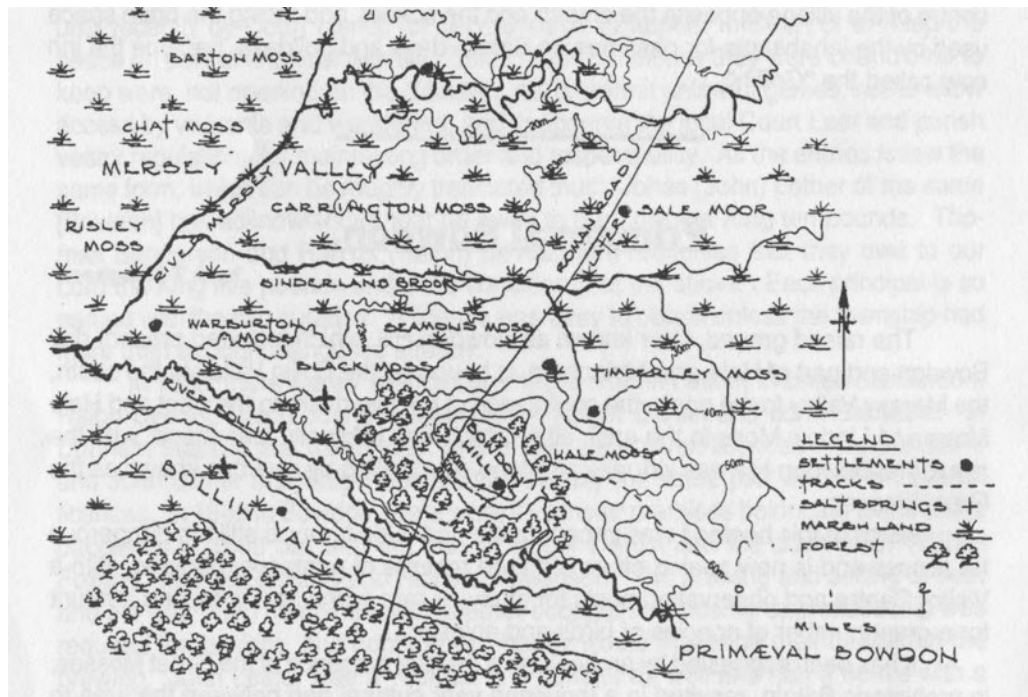
Much of this bogland was impenetrable and even today is still too dangerous for access and is now sealed off as a nature reserve of primaeval bogland, with a Visitor Centre and observation posts for studying rare fauna and flora, and a haunt for a great number of species of birds and animals.

It has been suggested by archaeologists that the presence of the Great Mosses, in prehistoric Britain, resulted in a thousand year cultural gap between the area to the south and that to the north. Islands of hard soil provided facilities for establishing settlements where tribesmen could build their huts and hunt and fish from dug- out wooden canoes which, with human and animal remains mummified by the peat, are occasionally revealed during excavations. Bowdon Hill and the higher ground to the south of the River Bollin was at the time covered in oak forest.

Originally the only point where these marshes could be crossed was at Warrington to the west and on higher ground of the Pennines to the east. The Romans constructed Watling Street to cross the area between Bowdon Hill and Stretford but it is thought that they always experienced trouble and that the preferred route was via Warrington. The Duke of Bridgewater curved his canal through firm ground running across the moss but Stevenson had to undertake a great deal of drainage and soil stabilisation before building the railway over Chat Moss.

The profusion of wild fowl on Black Moss and Seamons Moss provided sporting facilities for the Earls of Stamford and their guests in the Nineteenth Century, as recorded in the archives at Dunham Massey Hall.

Drainage and reclamation of the land for agriculture or development was carried out over a long period of time by Flemish emigrants and later German prisoners of war between 1914 and 1918. John Dalton, when teaching at Sale, collected methane gas from these mosses which he used in experiments prior to formulating his Atomic Theory, which ultimately gave rise to the creation of the nuclear industry and it is ironical that the British Atomic Energy Authority should now have its laboratories and headquarters based at Risley in the heart of the Great Mosses.



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