

ANCIENT TRACKWAY IN MEARE HEATH, SOM.

View looking south, showing destroyed Trackway in the face of the peat cutting and pieces of timber lying about

From a Photograph by Dr. A. Bulleid, F.S.A.

Ancient Trackway in Meare Heath, Somerset

BY ARTHUR BULLEID, L.R.C.P., F.S.A.

IN June 1933 a wood trackway was cut through and partly destroyed during the process of cutting peat at the Eclipse Peat Works about half-a-mile west of Ashcott Railway Station. The trackway ran nearly parallel with the peat cutting, the face of which lies almost due north and south, so that a length of some 50 yds. was exposed. The direction of the track is represented by a line 20 degrees east of north and 20 degrees west of south. This if extended northwards would strike Meare village near the road turning to Meareway, and at the other end southwards, Northbrook Farm, in the parish of Shapwick, at the foot of the Poldens. Taking this as the approximate line of the trackway, the distance measured between the high grounds north and south is about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles. The piece of trackway recently exposed is situated in part of ground No. 430 (acreage 21.260), Ordn. Sheet LII, 1, 25 in. scale, near the southern boundary of Meare Heath in the parish of Meare, lying north of the Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway and immediately north of Great Plain Farm, now the Eclipse Peat Works offices (*see* Map, fig. 1). (Ordn. Sheet LII, N.W., 6 in. scale). Meare Heath Trackway was met with a few years ago, and noticed by Herbert Vowles and other men employed at the Eclipse Peat Works when cutting peat in ground No. 309 (acreage 9.652) immediately north of and adjoining the present exposure. When the writer was exploring the turbaries and making enquiries for lake-dwelling sites in or about the year 1890, his attention was drawn to a peat ground lying to the south of the railway line where pieces of a recently destroyed trackway were lying about. From information obtained from a peat-cutter at the time of the visit, the writer has no hesitation in stating from the position

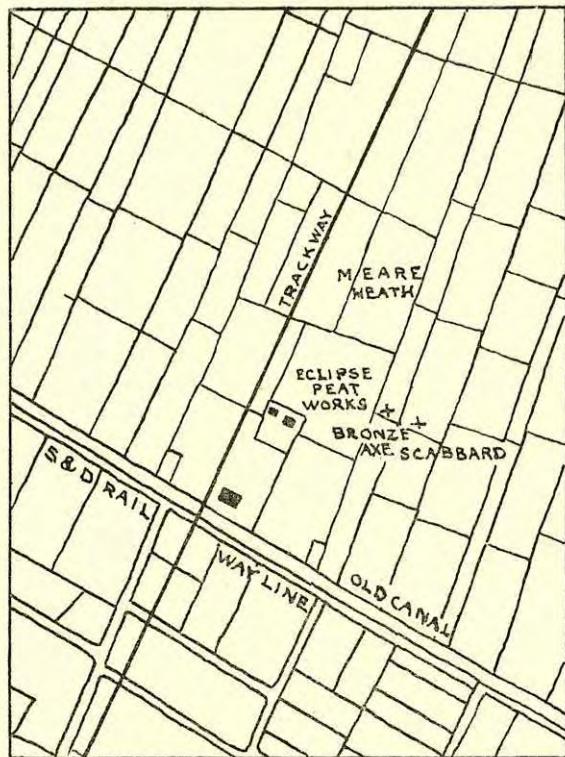


FIG. 1. TRACKWAY IN MEARE HEATH

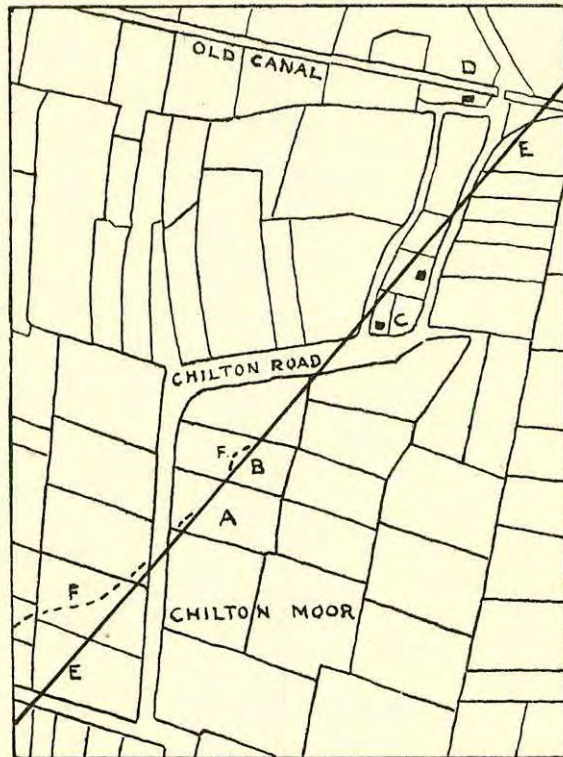


FIG. 2. TRACKWAY IN CHILTON MOOR
Dymond line E., Cox-Tidball line F

and direction in which it ran, that it was in line with the lengths since discovered on the north side of the railway and doubtless continuous with them.

With the kind permission of Mr. Alexander, the manager of the Peatworks, the writer has been able to examine the trackway on several occasions, during which measurements and photographs of the timber and peat-cutting were taken. Mr. Alexander states that when a boring was made some years back the peat was found to be 27 ft. thick, and that it was superimposed on a soft blue-grey-coloured clay.

The depth of the trackway below the original surface of the peat is estimated by him to be from 6 ft. to 8 ft. The peat now being removed is a second cutting which means that the superficial peat above the trackway was removed years ago. The remains of the trackway as seen to-day in the face of the peat-cutting is covered by from 18 in. to 2 ft. of light-coloured peat (Plate III). This layer appears to have been disturbed, and it probably represents in part the discarded litter and peat left by the first peat-cutters.

With regard to the construction of the Meare Heath Trackway, when visiting the site on 23 July 1933, there was a large number of broken pieces of timber lying about on the surface and partly embedded in the ground opposite the face of the cutting (Plate III). It appeared that the wood used was chiefly oak but some pieces of birch and possibly alder were also noticed. The piles were of oak sharpened to a tapering point. The upper parts being rectangular in section and 3 to 4 in. across. The lower ends were round or oval-shaped, and as seen in the face of the peat-cutting before excavating at a later date were arranged from 3 ft. 6 in. to 5 ft. 6 in. apart, and penetrated the peat from 2 ft. 6 in. to 3 ft. 6 in. below the trackway. Some of the split oak sleepers were of triangular shape in cross-section, but the majority were rectangular.

The following measurements were taken of sleepers apart from those pieces illustrated with mortise-holes that were lying about on the ground adjoining the peat-cutting:

Plank i, 8 ft. 6 in. long, 10 in. wide, 5½ in. thick.

Plank ii, 15 ft. long, 12½ in. wide, 3 in. thick.

On 4 September 1933 two pieces of the mutilated trackway

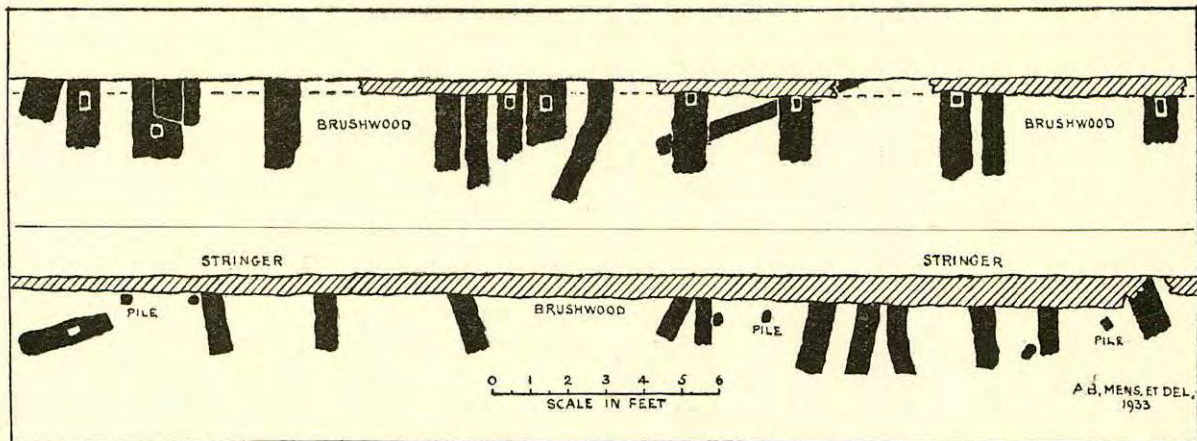


FIG. 3. ANCIENT TRACKWAY, MEARE HEATH, SOMERSET

Portions of the Stringer that bordered the west side of the Track and some of the transverse Beams or Sleepers on which it rested

were exposed of about 30 ft. in length. This digging disclosed portions of the stringer that bordered the west side of the track, as well as some of the transverse beams or sleepers on which it rested (Plate IV and Fig. 3). The sleepers projected 1 to 3 ft. beyond the stringer, many of them being perforated with square-cut mortise-holes that still retained the piles which held them in place. The piles were arranged along the outer edge of the stringer projecting 9 to 15 in. above the upper surface, and were evidently so placed to prevent displacement of the stringer outwards. There were also piles independent of those driven through the mortised beams. No mortise-holes were noticed in the portions of the stringer that remained.

Besides the transverse sleepers there was a layer of birch and alder brushwood varying from 10 to 15 in. in thickness, lying under and between the beams and parallel with them.

One part of the stringer was a perfectly straight and squared piece of oak measuring 34 ft. in length, and from 4 to 7 in. in thickness. The original width of this piece of timber is uncertain because the peat-diggers had cut it away longitudinally, and at least one-half of it had been broken up and thrown out with other timbers. The larger end of the piece that remained *in situ* measured 9 in. wide (Plate IV).

Without further excavation it is impossible to state what the width of the trackway was when complete, but it is hoped in the near future that this may be disclosed in some ground where peat-cutting has not taken place.

With reference to the age of the trackway. If an attempt were made to estimate this from the depth it was buried in the peat, we should be faced with many difficulties, and the result would probably be unreliable. Fortunately we have some associated discoveries (position shown in Fig. 1); these though not actually in touch with the trackway are sufficiently near to help in arriving at an approximate date.

A bronze socketed celt (late Bronze Age) was found in August 1928, 650 ft. east of the trackway at a depth of about 3 ft., probably in a second cutting of peat.¹

In an adjoining field 800 ft. east of the trackway in 1928, an

¹ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* lxxv, lxxviii.

Early Iron Age scabbard was discovered in a peat-cutting at a depth of from 4 to 5 ft.¹

In the same year two pieces of Roman pewter were discovered in Meare Heath 3 ft. 6 in. below the surface of the peat, but the exact position in relation to the trackway is unrecorded.²

In years gone by numbers of Bronze Age implements have been found by workmen when cutting peat, and it would be safe to state that the majority of them have been found within 10 ft. of the peat surface. Although the depths are seldom given, there are a few exceptions; for instance, in Edington Burtle Heath a hoard of bronze implements was discovered by a boy named Murch 3 ft. below the surface of the peat.

Ancient causeways and timber trackways have been met with from time to time in the swampy parts of central Somerset. One of the first to be recorded is the so-called Abbots Way, a timber structure which runs across the moor from Westhay to Catcott Burtle, and is approximately $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles in length. This has been exposed on several occasions during the past hundred years. The earliest authentic information we have regarding its existence is in 1834, when it was accidentally discovered by the tenant of Honeygore Farm. Its importance was however unrecognized and it remained known only to a few of the local inhabitants until 1864, when the Somerset Archaeological Society visited the locality and saw a short length of the track recently exposed by Mr. G. Poole, the owner of the land.³ In 1873 Mr. C. W. Dymond recorded and measured a second length 7 ft. below the surface on Honeygore Farm, lying north of the Westhay and Burtle road, and about 350 yds. s.e. from the bridge over Black Ditch or Maze Wall as it was formerly called, where it is the boundary of Meare parish.⁴

The writer remembers seeing a third length laid bare in or about the year 1883, in a field situated near the south side of the Westhay to Catcott Burtle road.

The Abbots Way is constructed of alder and birch planks, averaging 4 ft. 9 in. in length, 6 to 9 in. in width, and 2 to 4 in. thick, arranged side by side, and held in place by two lines of birch stringers about 3 ft. 9 in. apart. There were small piles

¹ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* lxxv, lxxvii.

² *Op. cit.* lxxv, 105.

³ *Op. cit.* xii, i, 67.

⁴ *Op. cit.* xxvi, 107-116.

driven into the peat along the edge at intervals of 3 ft., and none of the planks showed any attempt at mortising, whereas at Meare Heath a large number of the timbers were mortised.

Phelps mentions a British trackway that passed across Brent Marsh from Cross to Highbridge;¹ this was succeeded by a Roman Road possibly following the same course, found 6 ft. below the surface of the alluvium, and on the top of the subjacent peat.² Bearing on this subject Phelps also states that at Highbridge Roman pottery was found on a stratum of indurated peat under 7 ft. of alluvium.³

The causeway between Glastonbury and Street, which runs parallel with and about 45 yds. east of the present road, has been considered by Mr. John Morland to be a Roman structure built probably on an earlier British Trackway.⁴

The writer was told by his father, the late J. G. L. Bulleid, that a timber trackway was discovered 'near the junction' when the Somerset and Dorset Railway lines were being made. Whether the line of the track ran from the foot of the Glastonbury hill in the direction of Wells, and probably parallel with the modern road, or across the moor in the direction of Crannel Farm which would be near the junction of the railway lines from Wells and Evercreech, the writer has been unable to ascertain.

Another wood trackway in Sedgmoor ran near the east side of Greylakes Fosse and nearly parallel with it. The oak piles of this structure have from time to time appeared above the surface of the field at the north end, and have had to be sawn off before the grass could be machine-mown.⁵

Mr. Dymond mentions another or possibly two trackways in Chilton Moor about half-a-mile west of Edington Road Railway Station; the line of one of these lies in a N.E. and S.W. direction roughly defined as between Burtle Farm and Cossington village and passing through the orchard at the back of Horn Farm (Map, Fig. 2, EE). After making enquiries from the inhabitants now living in the locality the writer has to some extent been able to verify this statement, and has obtained the

¹ Phelps, *History of Somerset*, ii, pt. ii, p. 100.

² *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* iv, 104.

³ *Op. cit.* iv, 98-107.

⁴ *Op. cit.* xxvii, ii, 43.

⁵ *Op. cit.* lxxii, 86.

following information regarding the site and direction of one of these, that shown in Mr. Dymond's map at C.¹ Mr. Marcus W. Cox of Chilton-upon-Polden owns a field adjoining the east side of the Chilton road in Chilton Polden Moor (A), and when a boy in or about the year 1887 helped his father cut peat. He remembers the finding of a 'fascine' trackway which passed diagonally across the field in a N.E. and S.W. direction. The writer happened to meet Mr. Cox on his ground recently, when he pointed out a low ridge some 10 ft. wide crossing the adjoining field north of his (B). This ridge was the continuation of the track and was made noticeable by the grass over it being of a somewhat lighter shade than that in other parts of the ground. He also recollects that the trackway was made of alder and birch branches placed horizontally, and that these were held in position by occasional piles or pegs driven vertically into the underlying peat and clay.

Mrs. Roland Norris, wife of the tenant of Horn Farm (formerly occupied by the late Mr. Isaac Tratt), situated north of the Chilton road (C), informed the writer that she is a native of the locality and has heard that an old trackway had been found passing either near or through the orchard at the back of the house. Mr. Albert Tidball, who occupies a house near the old Glastonbury canal (D), tells the writer he has found the remains of a 'fascine' trackway in his garden, and that the alder and birch branches of which it was made were about the size of his forearm and neatly arranged side by side horizontally. This position is distinctly out of the line of the track given by Mr. Dymond and lies a hundred yards or more west of it. Mr. Tidball also mentioned that there is a ridge in the fields lying west of the Chilton road and on both sides of the Edington-Bridgwater branch line, on which the grass grows differently or 'sweeter'. It has been noticed that cattle prefer the feed on the ridge to the grass in other parts of the fields. This fact was also mentioned by Mr. Lucas Grant of Hurst Farm, and appears to be known generally in the locality. On 19 August the writer accompanied by Mr. Tidball traced this ridge across several fields (Map, Fig. 2, FF). The ridge is distinctly seen as it is raised a few inches above the surrounding level of the

¹ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* xxv, 107-8.



ANCIENT TRACKWAY IN MEARE. HEATH, SOM.

View looking north, showing portion of west stringer and ends of sleepers under it; also two piles. (Two 30-ft. cuttings were made, but only the northern one is seen in the photograph)

From a Photograph by Dr. A. Bulleid, F.S.A.

field, averages 10 ft. in width, and is of lighter green colour than the adjoining grass. The ridge is not straight but meanders through the fields. In one field Mr. Tidball dug a test hole in the ridge; this produced peaty soil 1 ft; then from 15 to 18 in. red-coloured earthy deposit; and, under this, peat and a few alder branches. The burnt-like material appears to be restricted to the track or ridge.

The trackway Mr. Dymond mentions in Chilton Moor is described as being of similar construction to the Abbots Way, but he does not say that he had seen it and probably wrote from hearsay evidence.

At the present time the writer would not like to state definitely that the ridge he has seen is the site of an old trackway or the same that Mr. Dymond has described; neither can he say of what the red material consists. From the way the ridge meanders through the fields it might be supposed that it was the site of an old waterway, but its raised condition apparently contradicts such an explanation.

The exact formation can only be settled by excavation, and the writer has thought it advisable to put these notes together in order to assist future investigators.

PIECES OF TIMBER WITH MORTISE-HOLES (Fig. 4)

i. Portion of an oak plank, perforated with a mortise-hole 3 in. square, and part of a round one diam. 4 in.; space between mortise-holes 18 in. Length of plank uncertain; width 10 to 10½ in., thickness 3 in.

ii. Portion of squared oak plank with rectangular mortise-hole; length of plank uncertain, width 12 in., thickness 3 in., mortise-hole 7 by 4 in. placed 18 in. from complete end of plank.

iii. Portion of split oak plank with two rectangular mortise-holes 8 in. apart; the plank is flat below and for part of the width above, the edges being rounded. Length of plank uncertain, width 10 to 10½ in., thickness 4 in. One mortise-hole filled with a small oak pile measured 3½ by 2½ in.; the second mortise 4½ by 2½ in.

iv. Portion of an oak plank split longitudinally, showing two mortise-holes placed 4 in. apart. Length of plank uncertain, max. width 5 in., thickness 4½ in.; one mortise-hole is 2½ in. wide, the other 2 in.

v. Part of an oak plank with round mortise-hole. Length uncertain, width 9 in., thickness 3½ in., mortise-hole 3¼ by 2¼ in.

vi. Portion of a rough oak plank with two mortise-holes placed 4 in. apart. The under-surface of the plank was flat, the upper somewhat rounded. Length of plank uncertain, width 11 in., thickness 4 in. The mortise-holes are somewhat rectangular, larger above than below, measuring above 4½ by 2 in.,

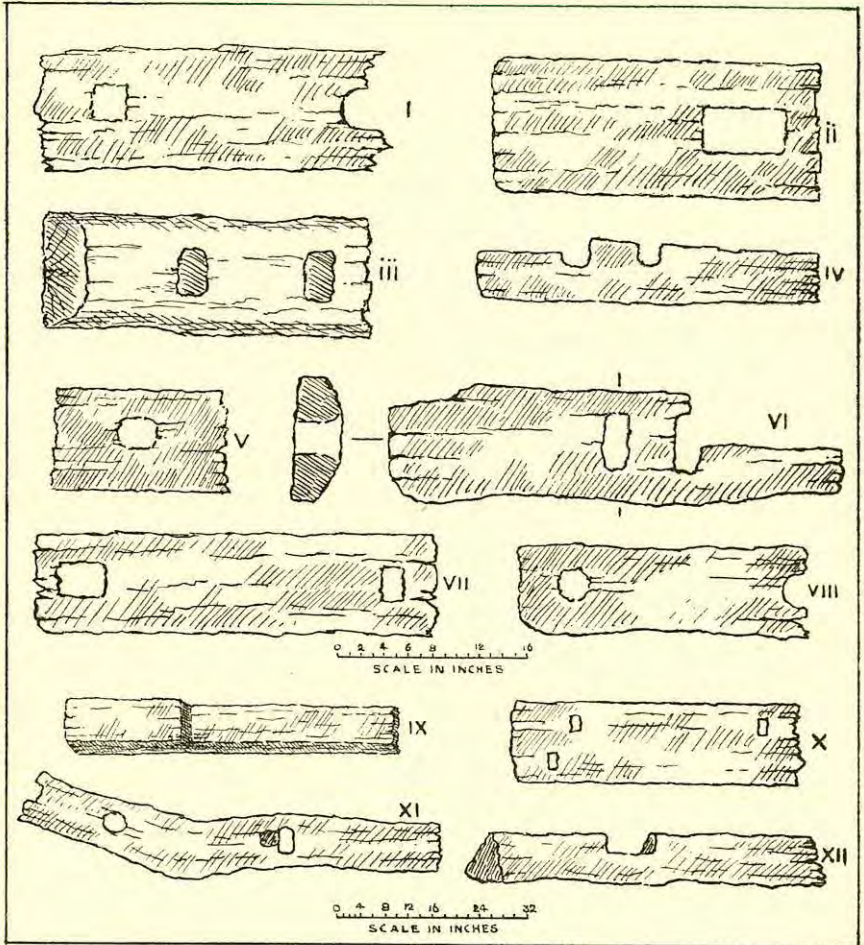


FIG. 4. ANCIENT TRACKWAY, MEARE HEATH, SOMERSET
Pieces of Timber with Mortise-Holes.

below 3 by 2 in. The first mortise is placed 18 in. from the complete end of the plank.

vii. An incomplete oak plank with two rectangular mortise-holes placed 23 in. apart. Length uncertain, width 9 in., thickness 3 in. One mortise-hole measured 4 by 3 in., the other 3 by 2 in.

viii. Part of an oak plank perforated with one round mortise-hole and a section of a second; both measure 3 in. in diam. Length of plank uncertain, width 8 in., thickness $2\frac{3}{4}$ in., space between mortise-holes 16 in.

ix. Piece of oak squared and half-notched, length 4 ft. 8 in. (incomplete); top nearly square $7\frac{1}{2}$ by 7 in.; length of top to the notch 20 in.; length below notch 3 ft.; depth of notch 4 in.; lower end broken, measured 6 by 3 in.

Another piece of similar shape was noticed, but not quite so massive.

x. Portion of an oak plank perforated with three rectangular mortise-holes. The plank is incomplete but the piece measures 4 ft., width 14 in., thickness 2 in. The mortise-holes measure $2\frac{3}{4}$ by $1\frac{3}{4}$ in., and the space between the two placed near the upper edge measures 2 ft. 6 in.

xi. Part of a rough oak plank perforated with three mortise-holes, and a fourth hole which goes half-way through the thickness of the wood. Length of plank 6 ft. (incomplete), max. width $10\frac{1}{2}$ in., thickness 5 in. The first mortise-hole is incomplete and measures 3 in. long; the second is round 4 in. in diam.; the third, rectangular, measures 4 by 3 in.; space between 1 and 2, 11 in.; space between 2 and 3, 22 in.

xii. Piece of split oak of triangular shape in section, with a notch measuring 8 by 3 in. The length is incomplete.