

God-dollies and the Somerset Levels: Facts, Fancies and Fictions

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GOD-DOLLIES AND THE SOMERSET LEVELS: FACTS, FANCIES AND FICTIONS

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The purpose of this paper is to review the history of discovery of a wooden object from the Somerset Levels, to provide some detail on its character and relationships, and to offer some comments on its presence in the peatlands. We begin with a brief note on the state of archaeology in the Levels in early days. A more detailed history of work appears in Coles and Coles 1986, and Brunning 2006 and 2013.

Well before the Somerset Levels Project (1973–1989) began to co-ordinate and present a unified approach to the archaeological potential of the Levels, discoveries were sporadic and sometimes abandoned in the peat-fields, and this applied particularly to many sightings of individual objects of wood as well as slender alignments of brushwood or clusters of wood held in place by pegs pushed into the soft peats. One more substantial structure, however, had a lengthy assessment beginning in 1864, with a visit by the *Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society* to a heavy plank-built walkway crossing the peatlands between the sand island of Burtle and the rock island of Westhay. Named the Abbot's Way, as it was thought to link a Burtle church to the Glastonbury Abbey, the walkway came again under examination in 1964, 100 years after the Society's visit (Coles and Hibbert 1968).

This work was initiated by one of us (JMC) who had been introduced to the Levels and its potential for archaeological work by two eminent Cambridge-based specialists, Professor Grahame Clark (archaeology) and Professor Harry Godwin (botany). In the years 1964–1966, a small team carried out several excavations along the course of the Abbot's Way, its eastern part detected in peat-cutting trenches in places and by posthole borings along the whole eastern line. In the course of this early work we were dealing with one major peat company and several farmers who allowed us to drill into the soils to detect the deeply-buried track woods.

In later years, our range of search was greatly

increased through the peatfields of the Brue valley, and we came into contact with about 20 extraction companies employing several hundred workers digging by hand or by machines, stacking and turning the peat blocks (a task often done by women from the villages around), collecting and transporting the peat, and working with the drainage specialists in the area. Some of the workers in the fields were particularly observant and/or interested in ancient things embedded in deep peats, others were less so but all came to offer space and time to mount investigations. At the edges of the peat fields and rock or sand 'islands', where farming work was predominant rather than peat-cutting, the farmers involved with our areas of inspection were uniformly welcoming, although if excavations were required the work had to be fitted into appropriate seasons to cause little disturbance to crops, cattle or sheep.

Work in 1964–66 on the tracing and examination of the Abbot's Way led us towards its eastern end near the Westhay island, and other more fragile structures were encountered in the farming and peat-cutting fields near the island. In 1966, Mr Maurice Bell, occupant of a farmhouse at the western edge of Westhay island, notified JMC of a potential structure deeply buried in the peats on his land and this has led to the subject of this paper which tries to assess afresh the circumstances of discovery and recognition of a unique object in the peat.

THE BELL TRACK

In digging a small hole for the burial of a farm dog, Mr Bell came upon some pieces of wood well below the ground surface. Having seen the brushwood tracks exposed in the fields to the west of the island, he considered that the traces in the burial pit warranted some attention. Archaeological work was being done in the peatfields of the Godwin Peat Works, to the west of Mr Bell's land, and a

small excavation was easily made beside the burial pit. This developed a year or so later into a more extensive examination which revealed a dense concentration of wooden pieces forming a slender platform and trackway near the edge of the rock island, where conditions of dampness were probably more severe than farther west upon the raised bog itself. The immediate area of the dog burial pit had been firmed up by a farm track mostly made of rubble, stones and wood, which had thereby compressed the peaty soils and some of the woods within them. Examination in 1966–67 revealed a quite complex ancient structure well beneath the scatter of rubble.

There was a full metre depth of wooden structural pieces beneath the surface. At the base was a scatter of birch stems and small stumps of alder and birch, almost all confined to a width of about 90cm of track, the edges of which were masked by a multitude of birch, hazel and alder branch wood pieces pegged into the peaty soils. This track, which we called the Bell A Track, was traced by our team about 90m westwards, away from the island, and it may well exist farther to the west and is well-buried at present. It is possible that the track might merge with one or more of the brushwood tracks known to exist well to the west.

Above the Bell A, and seen only at the edge of the Westhay island, where conditions were particularly wet, was a slightly later complex terminal structure, called Bell B, and traced by us over a distance of about 17m (fig. 1). It consisted of transversely-laid ash branch or stem wood, some splitwood, with underlying layers of birch, hazel and yew twigs held in place by short stakes. The multiple layers probably represent repair work to Bell A and a thickening of the structure to counteract the wetness of the terminal area, with rainwater as well as stream water often flooding the peatland-dryland juncture. It seems likely that the Bell B Track, as we termed it, did not extend much farther out west onto the peatland; it was in effect both a well-defined platform, at junction of wetland and dryland, and a well-structured firmly-based track of quite restricted length.

VISITORS

The excavated Bell site lay adjacent to the road linking Westhay and Burtle, with only about 100 metres of pastureland between the road and the site. Many visitors came to see the work being done,



Fig. 1 The Bell Track structure. The Bell B mattress of birch, hazel and yew twigs, overlain by ash roundwood, lies above the Bell A complex of small stakes and stems of hazel, ash and birch. The ashwood figure was deposited within the Bell A structure. Bell B track was 1.2 to 1.5 metres wide and ran NW from Westhay island. The timber scatter of Bell A was 1.8 to 2.4 metres wide. Photo J.M. Coles, Somerset Levels Project 1966

especially in its second season, with an adjacent site, the Baker platform, under excavation at the same time. Such an array of visitors and inquisitive passers-by included students, occasional tourists enroute farther west, and local residents, both farmers and peat-cutters. Some interested parties wanted to be rather more engaged in the operations than just a short visit; over the several weeks of the excavations, there were perhaps 100 or so people who were keen to absorb or offer comments on the state of the site, its abundant wooden pieces, the surrounding peats, its structure and purpose, the cost of the work being done, where the team had come from, and why such interest existed in it all. We had some offers, and requests, from individuals

to work with us for a day or weekend, offers that we had mostly to refuse as the excavation techniques involved no metal tools at all, the use of fingers and plastic spatulae instead of trowels and spades, and sensitivity in the feel and the sound of things as well as the appearance of the wood or any other materials encountered. And it was quite hard work; all workers on site sat, squatted or lay on planks or balanced on what we called our toeboards (40x20cm pieces of wood), and all designed to prevent any risk of squashing or otherwise damaging the exposed surfaces of the delicate wooden pieces of the ancient structure. Notwithstanding such strictures, the student team on site were keen to understand and absorb the emerging features of the complex site, and doubtless to debate the rules and performance on the day's work in *The Bird in Hand* pub at Westhay in the evenings.

In all this, however, there were some slight and occasional signs on the site of interferences, not by those closely involved in the work, but by unannounced visitors whether planned or spontaneous in action. Such intrusions could usually be identified at first light and the beginning of a day's work, with the protective plastic sheets covering the site overnight being disturbed or in slight disarray, or signs of footprints upon the peat surfaces next to the exposed wood. On occasion, a wooden piece, perhaps a peg or horizontal slat, might have been removed, replaced or taken away, leaving its former presence clearly evident, as imprint, in the peat. This was observed more distinctly on another site worked by the Somerset Levels Project team where someone, identifiable, had removed a nicely-axed piece of ancient wood and bagged it for a souvenir. It was never identified that any object, whether wood or other substance, was introduced *into* any site, but here we, in retrospect, may have suffered, and it is only long after the work done that the matter is noted here in order to identify the possibility of a particular intrusion into the Bell Track structure.

THE FIGURE

During the later phase of excavation of the Bell complex, one of the student volunteers noticed a peculiar-shaped piece of wood held within the lower clusters of pegwood, brushwood and occasional heavier pieces, all within what we called the Bell A complex. The Bell B structure, above Bell A, had by now been exposed, recorded and mostly

removed. The 'curious piece of wood', as described by the excavator, was exposed in the array of wooden poles, sticks, broken pieces that formed the basal layer of the Bell track terminal (Bell A). The piece was clearly a part of this layer of wood, not protruding above or lying below the general body of many wooden pieces (fig. 2). It was, perhaps significantly, surrounded by vertical or obliquely-placed stakes but with no clear system or order in their placing; in this respect there was nothing unusual about the whole cluster of pieces, nothing to suggest a positive arrangement or intrusive structure.

The piece was lifted from the area of rather soft peats, exposing the stakes which had been driven or pressed down before the piece was inserted into the soft peat soils, and before the upper levels of the track, Bell B, were laid down. All of the excavation team were invited to see the object, our usual practice in the examination of structures and individual pieces. At the time of discovery there was some interest in the piece but not perhaps the usual enthusiasm that a stone axe, or worked flake, or potsherd might create on site. However, the multitude of well-shaped wooden pieces making up trackways and platforms in the peat were so unlike anything seen on more 'normal' dryland sites where preservation of organics was barely known, that the students and other members of the team were often overwhelmed by the abundance of such ancient objects as wooden pegs with neat facets or a shaped plank; so any piece of worked wood just added to the whole concept of a wetland site, and one more peat-covered lump of wood, even if clearly worked into shape, was nothing exceptional at the moment of discovery.

The object was a rather solid piece of ashwood and was clearly carved or axed into a shape that seemed strange. It was, to most eyes, upside down in its original position in the peat, but this instant opinion depended upon a rather obvious interpretation of the piece as a model of a human figure.

The carved figure (fig. 3) is 155mm in length, with a diameter of about 63mm, and a groove down what we termed the back of the figure. A knobbed 'head' is about 43mm tall, and irregularly oval in section with a flat top. There are two small and slightly flattened areas, sticking out 10mm, on what we called the front of the figure, of uncertain identity although they seem to be possible 'breasts', or perhaps representing a cloak or shawl held in place by a pair of clenched hands. The base (but see



Fig. 2 The ashwood figure upon discovery with some of the surrounding peats removed, and a scatter of hazel pegs and short pieces of the Bell A complex around the figure. Scale in inches.

Photo J.M. Coles, Somerset Levels Project 1967

below) of the object is flat, with a projection about 40mm long and diameter of 25mm, squarish in section, a so-called phallus. This whole description rather takes the 'humanness' of shape for granted, a point noted below. A more detailed description of the figure, including various points of wear and damage, appears in a note in *Antiquity* (Coles 1968).

In 2015 an opportunity was taken to re-examine the figure and take more precise photographs of its details, and some new observations were made and discussed with Bryony Coles and Richard Brunning. The figure was clearly created from a solid piece of ash roundwood, trunk or branch. Perhaps as many as 50 annual growth rings can be observed, showing a very slow-grown tree or branch of about 90mm diameter; the centre of the trunk is visible on the top of the head of the figure, near the forehead, and the whole axis of the figure follows the axis of the trunk. There are no certain facial features on the head, in the same way as the Irish Lagore Neolithic figure is bereft of such detail (B. Coles *pers.com*). When observed from the top of the

head, a possible arm, or cross-belt perhaps, might be detected on the right side of the body, but this is faint and perhaps accidental. The right shoulder of the figure is clearly depicted, and the left shoulder is damaged or carved less carefully. The penis is carefully carved with expanded tip, and is a part of the tree trunk and not a twig extending from the trunk, hence a good degree of carving was needed to create such an appendage. The two 'breasts' on the chest area might in fact be folded hands on the chest, as noted above, or perhaps large brooches fastened on a cloak; no nipples are depicted.

Before moving onto further observations on the figure and its recovery from the Bell track, a note on the dating of the site and also the Abbot's Way should be added. The Bell figure itself has not been dated by radiocarbon because of 'a too low carbon yield' from the sample submitted to the Oxford Research Laboratory. The Bell track wood however has had a series of radiocarbon determinations and the chronological range is c. 3040–2450 cal BC (B. Coles and M. Dobson 1989); a more recent calibration is c. 2900–2200 cal BC (Brunning



Fig. 3 The Bell Track figure, which is 155mm tall. Photos by L. Bostock 2015

2013). Perhaps contemporary with this was the Abbot's Way, dated c. 2630–2280 cal BC, but this heavier structure is probably a bit later based upon relative positioning in the peats of the field to the west of the island.

The figure was conserved by Carbowax in the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (soon to become Archaeology and Anthropology) in Cambridge, and was on display for a time, and now is in the Museum of Somerset, as part of the prehistoric collections from the Somerset Levels. In 1990 the figure was included in a survey of anthropomorphic wooden figures found in Britain and Ireland (B. Coles 1990), a study that demonstrates the great variations within the field of ancient wooden human figures.

PUBLICITY

Because of various University contacts, the Bell object and its discovery were soon reported in *The Times* for August 22 1967; the description of the object was brief, with a summary of the archaeological excavations in the Somerset Levels that rather compressed the variety of structures discovered in the peatlands. Nonetheless, the newspaper notice attracted a number of letters and questions and opinions, including an invitation from a London auction house offering to sell the 'statuette' should the owner wish to dispose of it. More interesting was a sequence of letters from an elderly woman who had a variety of ideas about the object and related to JMC her history of small wooden doll-like figures that were popular in late 19th century Norfolk.

THE DOLL

According to this correspondent (a lady called Miss Alice May), young children in this region had wooden dolls, most armless and some with arms of leather stuck onto a simple body, and with painted eyes and mouth on small heads. Miss May, born in 1884, had such an object in her young days in late 19th-century Norfolk, and spoke of the numerous dolls being carried about by both boys and girls, the dolls wrapped in a rag of some sort, like a shawl, or a handkerchief or even a large leaf, and swung about through the air with wishes for good fortune; they were therefore called god-dolls. Other contemporary dolls did not have such

an association with good or bad luck according to Miss May.

More detailed information about such figures from Norfolk in the historic record is not well recorded, but a likely version, perhaps an originating figure, is known from London in the centuries leading up to about 1855. These wooden figures, shaped like a skittle with no distinct legs, were carried about, some dressed in scraps of cloth, at St. Bartholomew's Fair from the 17th century onwards; the Fair was held in West Smithfield in August, and came to develop a reputation for rather gross behaviour patterns due to excessive consumption of alcohol; the figures, simplistic in shape and carried about by children, had nothing to do with the name Bartholomew Baby, a term apparently reserved for those experiencing an excess of drink.

Miss May's remembrances of the Norfolk wooden figures did not include the word Bartholomew, and she commented on their youthful owners, the boys sometimes carving such simple figures as gifts to the girls; ownership was a sign of good luck, bad luck should the figure be lost or broken. Miss May sent a number of letters about the Norfolk god-dolls, emphasising their roughness in the carving, and essentially their unsexed nakedness; sometimes, wooden clothes pegs were pinched into the head to mark the eyes and mouth of the figure.

She had seen and possessed a number of these Norfolk god-dolls during her childhood, which was spent as the oldest of 6 children in a life of some poverty with few opportunities, but the several Census forms from 1891, 1901 and 1911 list how all of the children of the May family were schooled and then employed locally as teachers, clerk, dressmaker. Their father was in the printer/compositor line of work, assisted in part by his wife, and Alice, the eldest child, was earning one shilling per week as an unqualified teacher at age 14; by 1911, aged 27, she was a certificated teacher, and eventually moved to a school in Cheshire where she spent most of her last years. It was from Stockport that she communicated with JMC about the god-dolls; she died in 1973, aged 89.

Among the letters sent to JMC, Miss May made many comments about how she still treasured her association with god-dolls as a child, and had always assumed that all children 'from the beginning of the world' had possessed them or their equivalents. They had strong connotations for good fortune, fertility and family life. The straw dolls made after harvest represented the same aspects.

Furthermore, because ancient roads through the landscape created cross-lines where roads met, the bad fortune such places created could be reduced by burying god-dolls of wood or straw at such intersections. Miss May had a multitude of such comments, ideas and philosophies that did not necessarily refer specifically to god-dolls or trackways, but were interesting to read and discuss with her over several years of correspondence.

The defining element in all such letters remained the god-doll from the Bell Track, and here Miss May had clearly devoted a good deal of time, magnified inspection of the figure's photo and drawing in several publications sent to her, and a variety of observations were thereby inspired. One particular letter ended with an assertion that the Bell track object was not published correctly, and it was designed to be held the opposite way – the so-called head was the handle for waving about and became the base when the figure was stuck in the ground. The object, viewed now from a new perspective, had, for her, traces of a human face with prominent nose and the so-called 'breasts' were the knuckles of a cloaked figure clasping the cloak about its body. When the figure was found in the Bell track it was 'upside down' to us, but the right way up with such an interpretation – a human figure with an eye socket, a protruding nose and a cloak from the shoulder held in place by visible hands. This all seems to us today to be rather improbable but might help explain the asymmetry of the human body if that is the preferred opinion; the so-called phallus is well out of line with the so-called breasts. In the formal publication of the Bell track (Coles and Hibbert 1968) the wooden figure is described and illustrated, and note is made of its unworn condition, with comment added that it may have been little more than a toy, idly made and idly thrown away. The term god-dolly was chosen to reflect a lack of decision about our knowledge of its significance.

The lengthy correspondence with Miss May opened up these possibilities for the figure, a human with head, breasts, phallus, or a handled figure with cloak and, it was suggested, facial features. And a third possibility was advanced a year or so later, after the object had been conserved in the Cambridge Museum. Grahame Clark was Head of the Department of Archaeology and had numerous visitors from many parts of the world. When a leading prehistorian came to visit him from the Netherlands, Clark asked JMC (a junior lecturer) to bring him the figure, then being held in the Museum

pending its study and publication. The object was delivered, and the two professors spent some time debating its character and significance. When debate ceased, the object was returned with a rather non-committal comment on its interest, but later we were told that the Dutch professor considered it not to be a prehistoric human figure but merely the topmost embellishment of a structural and ornamental upright post from a small prehistoric building such as had been found in the Netherlands. Clark was not at all convinced by this and remained entirely content with the eventual publications which stressed the human-ness of the figure, and the belief that it was upside down beneath the upper layer of the Bell track.

Several other wooden figures have been recovered from ancient trackways in western Europe. The book *Mosens Guder / Immortal Images*, edited by van der Sanden and Capelle (2001), begins with a chapter titled 'Wooden figures everywhere', and lists and illustrates human shapes of varying detail and condition from the Mesolithic through to the Roman period. The figures discovered beside, or as part of, wooden trackways include the Irish Corlea roundwood ash pole with human head-like terminal, of the later first millennium BC (Raftery 1996), and a pair of schematic human shapes from the Wittemoor in Germany were apparently stuck on the edges of a substantial wooden trackway. A rather flat-faced head from Pohjankuru in Finland is broadly contemporary with the Bell figure but a majority of the dozens of carved human figures from western Europe are much later in date, and exhibit a huge variety of approaches to the human form, from small in size to exaggerated full-sized human shapes, with facial features, or totally faceless, and many have survived only in part, through decay over time, loss in the recovery process, delayed recognition or other problems of survival.

In assessing Miss May's ideas and opinions about the Bell figure after a gap of about 50 years, we might take a more theoretical standpoint about what we think now, and thought then, that the god-doll might represent. Images of ourselves, human in concept and creation even if distorted or abbreviated can prompt us to consider them as somehow readable, as if a human message is embedded within. But of course these images are silent, often solid and unmoving, obscure in identity, in behaviour, in logic and reason. If a figure has moveable elements, arms or legs, or a turning head, we perhaps can relate more closely with it by performance, flexibility, human-ness.

Faceless, entirely plain and rigid figures offer little in the way of a guide to meaning, and here it is that their presence in a particular environment creates the best opportunity of assessing their former role. The Bell god-doll is unread and unreadable, unable to be manipulated or amended, and it remains distinctly itself, keeping its message to itself, yet quite clearly it was of some significance, whether profound or superficial, firstly to its creator and his or her immediate collaborators, then to its audience when viewed more widely, then to its deliberate depositor and observers within some cultural situation, if something more than mere discard was intended, and finally to its unexpected and unanticipated discovery when crucial aspects of its previous life cycle could be discerned, or wholly damaged by surprise or curiosity. So, like Miss May, we should explore the god-doll's messages by thinking of its idea, its maker, transporter, depositor, even its finder, and finally us, the distant observer. We can but content ourselves with exploring the possibilities, while acknowledging that the life history of this figure lies in a remoteness far beyond our human reach.

Returning now to the Bell figure, there are some circumstances about the excavation and the figure's discovery itself that deserves comment if not any finality of conclusion about the local conditions and interests at the time of discovery. That it is only now being addressed is due entirely to the fact that, once published, the Bell structure itself was rather neglected by our research in the Somerset Levels; today a reassessment of archaeological work in the Levels has become more personalised and curious about individual events and involvement of the public, and, perhaps, more memories of those involved in the work are still aroused by visits to sites worked upon long ago.

LOCAL NEWS

News of the Bell track work and discoveries in 1966–67 was easily communicated to the Westhay village inhabitants, and the figure in particular was doubtless debated in The Bird in Hand pub. The news spread and a number of visitors arrived on site over the next few days, including members of another excavation team working on a wooden trackway about a mile from the Bell site, and several farmers, and the young sons of Mr and Mrs Bell, and these lads in particular were very curious about the track and the figure, making various comments

and fanciful suggestions about the figure's shape and meaning. A rather difficult matter to us all was that the Bell site lay some distance from any house or barn, yet near the Burtle-Westhay road, and was left unattended overnight during the couple of weeks of daytime excavation. This was standard practice at the time on all our sites in the Levels, and of course the peat-cutters and farmers passing by the site every day, evening and perhaps later hours did keep an eye on unexpected traffic, parked cars and bikes. Very occasionally our Bell site, covered overnight by plastic sheets and canvas, was surreptitiously inspected by uninvited visitors, and, as noted above, small signs of disturbance could be detected by us the following day.

COMMENTS AND OPINIONS

All of these comments arise because of the possibility, not explored in any real depth, that the Bell figure and its position were disturbed before we saw it, or, more seriously, the figure was introduced into the track structure. In the recollections and assessment of the director of the excavations (JMC), the peat surrounds of the wooden figure were rather loose, while the small upright pegs around the figure were firmly embedded. This situation was in all probability the result of the excavation process, with finger and spatula-based removal of peats above and around the upper edges of the wooden object, as its presence and identity were first recognised, loosening it and thereafter careful removal of it from the peat surrounds. The imprint of the head remained clearly in the peat, at about the same level as the bases of the small pegs. When removal of the figure was completed by the student excavator with the observation and assistance of the director, the whole small team of workers was invited to come and see the figure and its former location in the peat; some interest was shown in it all, but not much excitement, and a degree of puzzlement and perhaps suspicion that all had not been undisturbed before the excavation and exposure of the object. The matter of disturbance versus intactness is probably without resolution, the opinions varied and the circumstances of work done, overnight isolation, traces of unrecorded visitations now and then, yet clear imprints in the peat, *in situ* pegs around the object, all combine to leave a degree of uncertainty and inability to identify possible intruders to the site on the evening preceding the recognition of an unusual wooden

object bedded in the peats at the uppermost level of the Bell A Track, and thus previously well covered by the densely-packed woods of the overlying and sealing Bell B Track, just at the juncture of the open bogland and the edge of the Westhay island.

If it comes down to personal opinions, which almost every carved wooden human image of western Europe encourages and necessitates, then the Bell track god-doll is, to some of us, a genuine and prehistoric artefact of significance within the society which created, employed and eventually deposited the figure within a carefully-constructed trackway or platform at the edge of one of the relatively few dry islands within the low-lying wetlands. To others who were involved with or informed of the discovery of the piece, suspicion might remain that the figure is modern and may have been made for amusement only, and deposited within an exposed area of ancient wooden pieces, when the archaeologists had departed from the site after another day of painstaking and careful work where every piece of wood, when exposed, was noted and treated with care. This seems quite improbable given the complexity and the skill with which it was carved out of a substantial piece of slow-grown ash roundwood. Only those intimately involved in the work, or close observers of the work, could have possibly identified such an intrusion, and no one did at the time of discovery when the evidence was fresh, nor did anyone hint at any interferences within the complex structure of twigs, branches and larger pieces of wood that shaped, refined and consolidated the Bell track.

The inability to provide a radiocarbon-based date for the figure is unfortunate, although the dates for both Bell A and Bell B wooden pieces are appropriate for their positions within the overall peat stratigraphies in the area. Future analytical techniques may help refine the figure's chronology, and perhaps something may emerge that will allow comparison of the surface of wood exposed by carving or chopping with the surfaces of other relevant pieces; the wood selected for uses might well come from a single source, but the working of individual pieces might well be widely separated in time. Here we must leave the options open for any future evidence, in dating and perhaps in the character of the shaping of the god-doll, a name provided by our lady correspondent Miss Alice May and which could well summarise the current position and its options, which in any event has encouraged research and appreciation of the great

local interest shown in the remnants of the ancient past so well preserved in the Somerset Levels.

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