

SHORTER PAPERS

AN UNRECORDED PREHISTORIC “STONYMAN” AT WESTBURY-SUB-MENDIP

Barry Lane

Summary

A previously unrecorded 2m high standing stone was knocked down early in January 2014 by a milk tanker that had been sent down Stancombe Lane, Westbury-sub-Mendip by a Sat Nav. It was initially removed by SCC Highways but quickly returned to the site owners of Westbury Quarry, on whose land it had stood. While there it was measured and recorded before it was replaced at its original location. Map and documentary evidence suggest that it may date from the medieval period, as does its crude sculpting into a ‘stonyman’. However it is further suggested that the stone may originally

have been a marker for a prehistoric transhumance route onto the higher common grazing grounds of Mendip.

Site location

The stone stands on the east side of Stancombe Lane, which runs northwards up from the village of Westbury and onto the top of the Mendip plateau. Its location is approximately ST 5045 5025 at a height of about 200m OD.



Fig. 1 The Lipyeat stone before the recent accident. The smaller stone was inserted as a wedge after a previous incident. Photo courtesy: Nick Mayor 2013

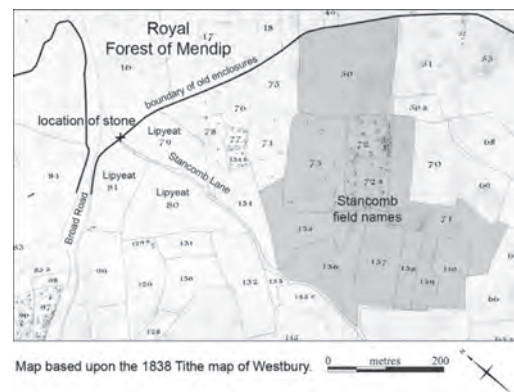


Fig. 2 Location of the Lipyeat stone, Westbury-sub-Mendip

Stone description

While the stone lay at Westbury Quarry, before its re-erection, it was possible to photograph and measure the complete stone, which has not been done before. Fortunately it did not appear to have been damaged. It is a large slab of Dolomitic Conglomerate about 25-30cm thick, 60cm wide and 200cm tall. Moss still adhering to one side of the stone shows that about 130cm stood above ground, indicating that 70cm or 35% was buried beneath the ground surface. It appears to have been crudely carved to create a rough “head and shoulders”. On one side only there was a small 3cm drilled



Fig. 3 Left, the complete stone lying at Westbury Quarry, outlined to reveal its shape clearly; right, the stone after re-erection on Stancombe Lane in 2014

hole, still containing an iron rod, wedged with a handmade iron nail. It has now been re-erected at the original location, but rotated 90 degrees so it now 'faces' across the road. It had previously faced down the lane.

History, geology and landscape

The stone is known locally at the Lipyeat Stone, but as far as is known there are no documentary references to it. It stands on the boundary between the Old Enclosures around the village, probably of medieval date, and the areas of former common grazing on the open hilltop and royal hunting Forest of Mendip. The Parliamentary Enclosure of Westbury Hill took place after the Inclosure Act of 1788. It also stands just 100m. below the geological boundary between the Dolomitic Conglomerate, from which the stone was made, and the much older Clifton Down Limestone, which was being extracted from Westbury Quarry above until recently (Farrant).

Stancombe Lane cuts diagonally across medieval fields lower down the hillside and it therefore

likely to be late- or post-medieval in origin. It runs between two banks and dry stone walls, crosses three fields each called "Lipyeat", immediately before it emerges into the Parliamentary enclosures on Mendip Hill. Lower down it passes eleven fields that are all named "Stancomb" in the 1838 Tithe Award of Westbury. The lane emerges into an earlier "funnel" or droveway called Broad Road, which comes from the direction of the neighbouring village of Rodney Stoke, up onto Mendip. This road climbs roughly parallel to a long combe or glacial meltwater channel, which would have provided a reasonably easy route for the movement of stock at any period.

Interpretation

It is unlikely that the name element "stan" in the fieldname "Stancomb" refers to this standing stone. The combe, that descends from Mendip on the east side of Westbury Quarry through those fields called Stancomb, has rocky or stony outcrops at its highest point, where the underlying geology changes from the softer Triassic Dolomitic Conglomerate to the

older and harder Carboniferous Limestone. It is almost certainly those rocks that are referred to in the name.

The local name for the stone – Lipyeat Stone – and the fact that it stands amongst fields bearing the same name – suggests that it was part of or close to a structure that would allow deer to leap out of the Old Enclosures and into the Kings’ open hunting Forest of Mendip, but not the other direction. Neale notes that there are Lipyeats on roads up onto Mendip at Shipham, Cheddar, Churchill and Holcombe, and that they are mentioned in local Saxon charters (Neale 1978, 90). The Somerset Historic Environment Record notes the English equivalent “Deer Leap” stones (PRN 24388) less than 2km to the south east again in Westbury and where they are also close to the boundary between the Old and Parliamentary Enclosures. Deer were being bred and protected on Mendip well into the 13th century.

It is more likely that this stone was a boundary marker, rather than part of the leap gate itself. Boundaries on Mendip were often marked by standing stones. A record of the perambulation of the “Hillbounds of Westbury” in 1723 (Somerset Archives D/P/wby 4/1/1) uses four standing stones as boundary marks, and twice they are called “stonyman”. This Lipyeat stone was not mentioned in the Hillbounds; the nearest part of those bounds lies 600m to the west. It is of course possible that it has been moved from that boundary to become a gatepost when Stancombe Lane was created. If so then the pintle hole may have been drilled at this time.

It is not known when the present highest boundary between the Old Enclosures and the open Forest of Mendip was built as a stone wall, but the most likely moment would be during the 12/13th centuries when the population pressure for land and the displacement of Westbury villagers from their land lower down the hillside by the creation of the Bishop’s deer park would have forced them to encroach onto higher land. It is possible that the stone was erected at that time.

This Lipyeat stone appears to have been carved into an anthropomorphic shape with a head and shoulders. Whether this carving is the origin of the term ‘stonyman’ or vice versa, that of turning it into a stonyman is not clear. The shape may have arisen as a practical solution to making a rope noose or loop secure when trying to close a routeway (Frances Neale, pers.comm). This shape



Fig. 4 Nineteenth century Draycott stone gatepost at Old Ditch Farm, Lynch Lane, Westbury-sub-Mendip

clearly developed into a tradition. It is notable that Victorian Dolomitic or Draycott conglomerate limestone gateposts in the area are also often carved with similar round ‘heads’ and ‘shoulders’ as is here illustrated by one now standing at Old Ditch Farm, Lynch Lane in Westbury.

However Savory (1980) and Burrow (2011) have argued that standing stones may have marked routeways to seasonal pastures in prehistoric times and Bell has suggested that three examples in the Severn Estuary area are likely to be Neolithic or Early Bronze Age in date (Bell 2013, 321). He provides a sketch landscape transect diagram during the Bronze Age which shows standing stones marking both ends of a transhumance route (Bell 2013, Figure 17.2, p327). In addition Fleming

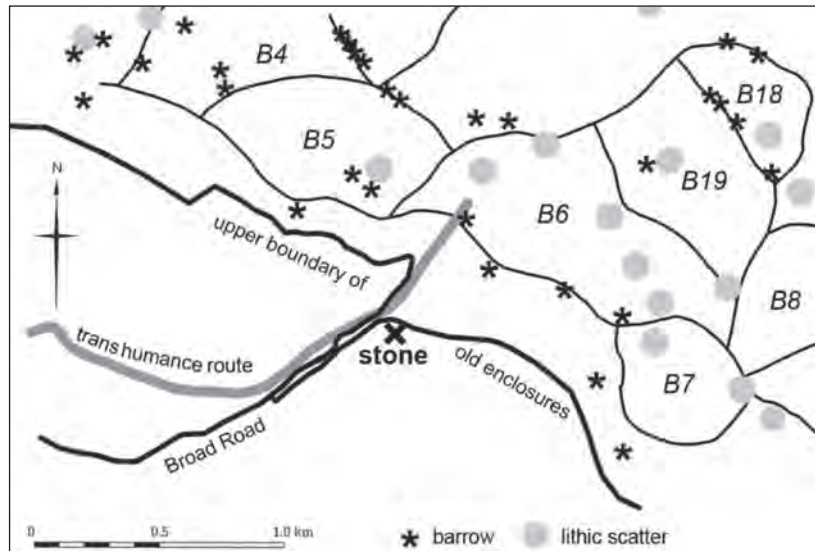


Fig. 5 Location of the Lipyeat stone in relation to the proposed transhumance route, seven of the closed basins, round barrows and the lithic scatters

(1971) records that concentrations of barrows in upland areas reflect seasonal grazing lands, an hypothesis that accords well with evidence from Mendip. Bell continues with the argument that, in the coastal and wetland areas of his study, a system of lesser transhumance was widespread in the middle Bronze Age and continued in some places into the later Bronze Age and Iron Age. Lesser transhumance is the movement of animals and their keepers from lower valleys to higher pastures in spring and summer.

This Lipyeat stone may be part of other local evidence which supports this transitory settlement model. From the start of the Middle Bronze Age the Axe Valley was increasingly subject to sea level rise and flooding, reducing the grazing opportunities on the Moors and perhaps encouraging more use of the hills (Mullin et al). The Lipyeat stone stands at the head of a long, largely dry combe, called in places Ryeditch, which runs from the village of Rodney Stoke close to the Moor edge and up onto Mendip close to Brimble Pit Pool. This pool lies at the lowest point of a large closed basin of glacial origin. Ford & Stanton (1968) first described these features and identified nineteen basins on Mendip, of which a dozen lie along the southwest flank of the hills between Wells and Cheddar. They also noted that some were floored with clay of some

depth. Brimble Pit Pool (B6) still holds standing natural water today, and others may well have done so in the past, making it an ideal spot for summer grazing.

Ford and Stanton did not note the many round barrows that were sited on or close to the watersheds or viewsheds of these basins, nor that within the basins significant prehistoric lithic scatters have been recorded. Figure 5 shows the location of the Lipyeat stone, the suggested transhumance route up the dry valley, seven of the closed basins (B4-8, B18-19), over thirty round barrows and fourteen lithic scatters. This evidence strongly suggests that the Lipyeat stone may be prehistoric in origin and was re-used, and perhaps shaped in the medieval period.

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A SECTION THROUGH THE BANK OF THE SOUTHERN-MOST CIRCLE
OF PRIDDY CIRCLES, MENDIP, SOMERSET
Recorded in June 2011

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The section is located across the southern side of the bank of the most southerly of the group of three circles, located to the south-west of the Castle of Comfort Inn (Scheduled Ancient Monument no.29037). Most of this circle lies in the north-east corner of a single field to the east of Harptree Lodge and survived as a well-defined earthwork surveyed in detail in 2008 (Jamieson and Jones for English Heritage). The section was exposed during unauthorized works that involved the levelling of some of the earthworks, in particular, a 10m long section of the bank and ditch adjacent to the stone wall defining the eastern boundary of the field. This wall crosses the earthwork, following the contour of bank and ditch, and the recorded section lies parallel to the wall and about 0.30m west of it (ST53985247). The recording was commissioned by English heritage.

The archaeological evidence of the recorded section.

Because of the circumstances of the archaeological exposure, nothing remained to be seen in plan, and the sequence of deposits described below is based entirely on the evidence of the standing section Fig 1.

The underlying geological stratum was a yellow brown compact clay (15) with a thin band of stonier clay above it in the southern part of the section (14), which appeared to be an element of the geology rather than an archaeological deposit. The bank was formed of the same clay (layers 3, 6 and 7),

probably quarried from the ditch to the south, and comprised a low mound 0.70m high with shallow sloping sides and an overall width at the base of 5.60m. This, however, was the present form of the bank following erosion and collapse over time, and the section showed evidence of this process and of the original form of the bank. In understanding this form, it is unfortunate that nothing remained to be seen in plan, as this may have confirmed what can only be suggested from the section.

A distinctive buried soil lay beneath the central part of the bank, being a compact blue-grey clay, with veins of ferric staining and a fairly consistent, thin iron pan along its base (layer 13). It was 50mm thick and formed a band up to 3.60m wide, with very distinct north and south limits, corresponding with changes in the composition of the bank above it.

The central part of the bank, layer 6, was a compact, yellow-brown clay with scattered limestone fragments and flecks. It lay above two layers, (11 and 12), which comprised the primary deposits of the bank, and appeared to have defined its original width, corresponding with the edges of the buried soil 13 upon which they lay. Layer 11 was a grey-brown, clayey loam with much angular limestone rubble in it (it could indeed be a layer of stones with clay); its northern edge was steep, coinciding with the sharp northern edge of the buried soil 13; its southern edge was more gentle. Layer 12 was similar, though with less apparent rubble and bands of re-deposited clay in it, and lay over the southern edge of the buried soil 13. The