

Bishop's Wood History, Culture and Speleological Expedition

Date: 12th February 2022

Expedition team on the day consisted of:

Richard and Della Calder, Steve and Sarah Hammond, Mike Hiscock, Ray Bunting and Flora (token dog), Andrea Percival, Selina and Mike Willis, and Ian Langford.

Predicted distance: 10 miles Actual Distance: Under 9 miles (shortened by leader for benefit of team moral)

Loggerheads in North West Staffordshire is not mountainous, not in a national park, not the first place you would think to walk, but it is very interesting and not far, not flat and not in Wales. The walk began from Chapel Lane where we managed to park three cars conveniently close to our route.

Setting off in the dry a pleasant bridleway lead us gradually downhill towards Chipnall Mill of which there was very little remaining. From the mill we gradually climbed through fields, which looked like they might be clinging clay but in fact were amazingly dry, until we met a narrow tarmac lane. Across a field we could see a strange cottage with a tall square tower on one end which called itself The Shooting Folly, bit ironic really because shooting can be folly.

At the end of the lane we met our next bridleway which ran along side a small farmyard. At this point the way was at its lowest point and consequently benefited from an unending supply of cow gifts, mud and rain across it's full width and stretching about 20 meters. SAS tactics were called for in either traversing across a steel gate then edging along a narrow grass ledge to freedom or splodging along the other side trying to find the least deep gunge at the edge. The party were split about 50/50 on this one but for me the traverse across the gate was the winner.

By now it was time for a coffee break before the weather decided to break and fortunately we soon entered the shelter of Bishop's Wood where we stopped for a while to let the rain start properly. Flasks away and off we went through the wood on a nice path between the trees. Twasn't long before we spotted our first human of the day, well actually a runner if they count, and carried on to our first little known point of interest.

The Medieval Glassworks

This is a stone enclosure about 3 metres square and 1 metre high which was built by the Bishop of Lichfield in 1580. The bishop lived nearby in Bishops Offley and probably named the wood after himself. Anyway he wanted glass and as there was a good local supply of sand, one of the main ingredients and plenty of wood to provide the heat he set up the glassworks here. Not knowing much about glass himself he imported experts from France to run the job. Inside the enclosure are the remains of four crucibles and the flue for the fire. The internal walls are beautifully glazed from the glass making process. The glassworks worked fine up until 1615 when Henry VIII noticed that someone was using his oak trees to make glass and he wasn't happy. Oak trees are for making ships for the navy so he passed a law banning the use of wood for glassmaking and that was the end of the bishop's glassworks. One of only a handful known to exist today it is a rare remnant of the past.

The history lesson over we pressed on through the woods and the increasingly heavy rain towards lunch. Stopping to admire a naked lady with her hands on her head a decision needed to be made. Do we do the full 10 miles or shorten the route. A vote was taken; it wasn't as close as Brexit! Shorter please. As leader I decided it would be best for moral if we could find somewhere sheltered for lunch and by taking a short out and back leg I could guarantee a dry lunch spot. Sorted, off we went.

Speleological Expedition

A short walk out of the woods up a grass field and we were soon under the welcome shelter of a sandstone outcrop with a wide low cave entrance to a mysterious underground world. Needless to say some were tempted to enter and explore and others, who will remain nameless but for the sake of argument we will call the ones left outside, declined. Inside we found a number of large chambers, obviously mined with some holding small lakes of crystal clear spring water which dripped constantly from the roof. What was mined here we don't know, perhaps it was something to do with the nearby glassworks? answers on a postcard please!

Culture

Lunch over it was time for the *pièce de résistance* or piece of resistance as the French say. Heading back to the woods our next delight wasn't long in appearing just off our path. There is no explanation for the group of rustically carved stone animals lurking amongst the trees. Some are life-size, the wild boar, some are less than full size, the two cows, some are unfinished, but they are all fascinating.

For once Mr Google is stumped and isn't able to come up with any answers on who fashioned them, when and why. We can't even guess if the rocks were there to begin with? Were they carved on site? Why weren't they finished? Who saw the animals trying to get out of the rocks? It's all a mystery and long may it remain so!

The rain wasn't getting any less and so we headed to the north edge of the woods and made a bee line for the cars. Needless to say it stopped raining when we got back to the cars and it was much drier in the Dysart where we carried out statutory rehydration.

Thank you to all who walked for your company.

Richard Calder