

Bedwyn Footpaths Group walk

Saturday, 27th July, 11.00 am – 1.00 pm

A guided tour of Bedwyn Brail's veteran trees and a visit to the archaeological dig

This Brail event was by invitation of Richard Charles.

Archaeological investigations are unearthing new information about previous occupants of Bedwyn Brail and 25 Bedwyn Footpath Group members were treated to an explanation of recent discoveries on this walk.

Poor weather in the morning prevented us from visiting the current dig but Robin Holly (lead archaeologist) and Richard Charles talked about recent discoveries under the cover of a barn at Hillbarn. Previous LIDAR mapping (Light Detection and Ranging technology had produced a map of the terrain with scrub and trees removed) of the woods showed a circular feature, about 25metres across which upon further investigation, revealed a raised bank with a ditch on the outside.

Robin explained that Bronze and Iron Age pottery fragments had been unearthed along with cremated human remains, some of which have been sent to Glasgow University for carbon dating. The remains were removed under licence. Robin believes that the site would have been very prominent in the landscape (walls of white chalk) and is a probable burial site. Further investigations are ongoing and more is to be uncovered. Unusually for the Brails, no Roman artefacts have been found here despite its close proximity to the Villa.

After questions and thanks to Robin, the rain finally eased and we left the shelter of the barn and set off to visit some ancient trees. During the walk, Richard explained that sadly there were few Veteran Trees in the Brails. In the mid 1500s the Pembroke family (Wilton, Salisbury) had removed 2000 oak trees to build a house at Ramsbury, so no very old oaks (as in Savernake Forest) have survived. However, the Brails are managed under a High Tier Countryside Stewardship agreement and one of its requirements is the creation of an ancient tree register. The register contains 28 trees of considerable age or importance.

These trees are managed on their individual requirements. The group visited five of these trees in Bedwyn Brail – two magnificent oaks, a coppiced sweet chestnut (a possible Champion tree), an ancient coppiced field maple and a native black poplar. Richard explained the principle of 'halo' thinning around such trees and the possible downsides of such thinning. Also discussed was the importance of removing ivy and leaving deadwood under these trees to rot down and provide nutrients for their roots, as well as insects/grubs for the birds.

The sweet chestnut and the black poplar are particularly interesting trees. The sweet chestnut has three live limbs on the ground over 23 metres long (!) and two living uprights (Champion Trees of Briton & Ireland by Owen Johnson records a sweet chestnut at Kateshill House, Worcestershire, having one branch 23m long resting on the ground). The native black poplar is probably the only one in Savernake and according to the Forestry Commission, the black poplar is a rare and endangered species, so definitely deserving of the special care it is receiving.

The group were very grateful to Richard and Robin for organising this interesting morning. It was a real privilege to hear about the current dig and to be shown these special trees not visible from public rights of way. We returned home with a better understanding of the management in the Brails – and rather drier than we expected to be when we set off!