

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: Mike Oliver (part 1)

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

This is Lynne Fox for the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project. It's the twenty second of June two thousand and six and I am talking today to Mr Mike Oliver. Morning.

Hi Lynne.

And if I could start first of all Mr Oliver by asking you when and where you were born please?

I was born in, in Edlington in nineteen forty, in Dixon Road; it's no longer there now, been knocked down., And all my early life was spent in Edlington until I got married in nineteen sixty eight. Went to school in Edlington Primary School, Junior School and the Senior School there. Leaving school about nineteen fifty five in, at which time I'm afraid I was a trained idiot as I left school. But then I got an apprenticeship with the National Coal Board and, I mean my family didn't want me to go down the pit, seven generations had been miners, and they didn't want their grandson to go down the mines you know. But basically the NCB, as it was then, were the only people that would educate me and, and so I got a job as a mining surveyor, and went and started going to night school and went from knowing absolutely nothing about mathematics to relying on it for my job and becoming quite good at it.

We then came into the Roben's era and Lord Robens said he'd got enough talent within his workforce and he was going to educate them, instead of putting in university students etc and so I got the opportunity once I was qualified as a certificated mines surveyor, I got the opportunity to carry on and do the RICS, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors which is a four/five year course. So, I got my diploma as a chartered surveyor in the minerals section and, spent many years working my way up the promotion line through mining surveying and eventually became a specialist in mining subsidence, working at area headquarters. Then I started breaking new ground in mining subsidence, looking at it in a different way to anybody in the coal board prior to me and, and things in mining subsidence had been basically two dimensional until then but I went in to a third dimension in mining subsidence and got the opportunity to attend Nottingham University as an external student. And so I spent another several years working up my views and turning out a master of philosophy thesis on truly, two dimensional horizontal strain. And all this gives me an insight into rock mechanics, how rocks behave, and how aquifers behave and how aquifers behave is very important when you start looking at the moors and how, how water moves in a moor. Now I'm not saying I'm giving a professional view on how water moves, but when I talk to experts about water in peat I realise how little is known about that and how water migrates in peat is quite controversial and, but when you've been, as a mining surveyor, responsible for working through an aquifer where the mine is at risk and the men in the mine are at risk that concentrates your mind a little but when you've got to do it coming upwards from below through the aquifer, that concentrates your mind a lot, and you learn a lot by practical experience of doing that, and, and basically that's my background.

And did you say you worked, did you work for the Council?

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Well, I worked my way up to be Deputy Area Chief Surveyor for the whole of this area, until the collapse of the industry in ninety one, nineteen ninety one, at the age of fifty one, I was made redundant in that collapse and I searched round for a job then. I mean I was quite old, I was the oldest one of my colleagues to get a position. I mean everyone older than me simply didn't work after then or what they did was join consultancies and things like that. But I was very interested in shall we say green issues, in the conservation side and I really wanted a job as a Mineral Planner with the local authority and indeed I finished up getting a job there I, I think I was out of work for about seven weeks and managed to get a job with the Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, as a Minerals Planner and I felt that I could contribute something to, to conservation from that position.

Minerals Planning is a high impact job as far as conservation is concerned when you think they're dealing with quarries, tips, anything mucky or controversial, Minerals Planners tend, it tends to fall in their lap and also of course peat working. Well with my green, interest, one of the first jobs I got when I, I went to Doncaster was as Case Officer for Thorne and Hatfield Moors, mainly because of my green interest but also it was a very, very controversial task that not many people wanted. But in fact, I got very, very interested in it and I soon became quite an expert in it because not even the local people know their way onto the moors so, and then when you start attending, I attended the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Conservation Forum on Doncaster's behalf, DMBC's behalf as an observer, and that was then quite a steep learning curve for me. And what I found was people know more and more about less and less and people I was meeting then, way beyond my level of knowledge on species and very, very rare species, but what they found from me, I mean what they said about me was, 'We couldn't have done better if we'd planted him in that position'. Because with my green interests they said they only had to say it once to me and I understood, whereas talking to planners normally they had to say it several times and still didn't get it through.

So they were quite pleased to have me in that position and I was very pleased to be doing it. It was always controversial, I always got hammer from the public and indeed from conservationists. But I trod a very, very fine path between English Nature, who became the land owners, they weren't the land owners at that time, Fisons as it was initially and then Scotts, the peat workers, Scotts UK and the conservationists. So I trod this very fine line between them all, and I mean, received hammer from all of them, then you think that perhaps you're doing the job probably just about right.

I was going to ask you about the controversy we've mentioned that a couple of times now, because it was a very controversial issue, can you just talk a bit more about that perhaps?

Well, the peat workers always thought that I was on the conservationists side, because of course when I was talking to them and, and as a Minerals Planner and the representative of DMBC you've got to hold a firm line and a lot of the things that I was asking them to do, they didn't really want to do. And then you'd start talking to the conservationists and they would think that I was on the peat workers side and everything that they wanted doing on the moor you couldn't justify for them and you couldn't achieve it for them, because you hadn't got the, the legislation to support you basically. But then, even worse than that was the general public. So when the general public get involved then everybody tends to think that they can only achieve things by shouting and, that's the last thing they need to do as far as I'm concerned they won't get anywhere with shouting, by me.

But then, then we had what was referred to as the Donny Gate incident in Doncaster where the planning department came under a lot of, pressure, particularly from the general public and then when people start accusing you of corruption and things like that, that's the end of the interview as far as I'm concerned, they don't get any further than that, 'Good day Sir, on your way'. But yeah

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even using things like that to try and achieve their political agenda it's just not on. But that's the sort, I mean the Moors are a very, very controversial subject.

That's...

The fact that they've been worked for over two hundred years now and destroying, virtually unique peat land environment is very, very controversial. Even things like a butterfly, which I've become very interested in the Large Heath on Hatfield Moor, man has driven that to, well has actually probably driven it to local extinction, it's there present on Thorne. But Hatfield is slightly different to Thorne and it's thought to be a different, almost a different variety of the same species, just thought about the Large Heath, its environment being totally worked out, and it's probably locally extinct there now. That is very, very, very controversial.

The thing that's really controversial about the moors is people don't realise how big it is. It's three miles across, in like a big circle like a big blob on the surface three miles across, it's a massive area, each of the Moors is that size and the thing is that the peat workers work the whole of the surface and it looks like a farmers field, it's just a brown surface three miles across, not a, not a hedgerow, not a blade of grass. Part of this is that they, they need to keep the surface sterile, they don't want weed seed in their product and so they skim just a few centimetres at a time, probably do ten harvests per year, so the maximum depths they're working to is about twenty, ten to twenty five centimetres deep and so this three miles diameter area is kept like a brown field. It doesn't go through the seasons like a, like a farmers field, going green and then ripe and then being harvested, then being ploughed up again, it just stays looking like a ploughed field, three miles across for twenty five years. Takes them twenty five years at, ten centimetres per year of extraction to get down to depths of two and a half metres, that leaves no room for species to exist on the surface these very, very rare species. And what I tried to do as Mineral Planner was to change the method of working in order to allow some of it to be green and to work it in a, taking a bigger depth in one part and sweeping it around the moor so that the rest of the moor would be greened up. That still wouldn't suit the conservationists but I felt that that was a step forward.

But then legislation changed and, and, and then because of that the, the working of the moor had to change with, with new Town and Country Planning conditions being imposed on the peat working, still not to the satisfaction of the conservationists but much, much more than the peat workers wanted to do and then of course this culminated in the government buying out the peat working right, which is something I was very, very involved with as a Case Officer and pulled some strokes for the environment during that process and maybe we'll talk about that a bit later on in the history of the moors. But yeah, that was a very, very interesting time and a lot of it is not known, you've got to work in confidence with people, you've got to be able to trust, trust is very, very important, but sometimes your good intentions are often used against you and this is what I have found as a planner, you have to be very, very careful and keep within your remit. Otherwise you could be in very, very serious trouble.

When you talked there about, to some extent about your involvement with the moor and, do you want to go into more detail about your involvement with Thorne and Hatfield Moors, tell me a bit, you talked about your involvements in the decision to, major decisions, to, change the way things were.

Well, we, I suppose we start from so little being known about the moor and one thing that was not known was the value of the moor, the value of the peat working.

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Do you mean value in monetary terms?

Yes. Well if you've come about conservation, one famous, well, very well known, conservationist referred to it as a waste. Indeed that was one of its old names, Thorne Waste and Hatfield Waste and actually said there's nothing there. Well that led to the formation of the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Conservation Forum and they decided to prove scientifically what was there. So they've established the worth of the moor, from a conservation point of view. But what I'm referring to is the monetary value of the moor in terms of peat working, there was, a right to work that peat which couldn't be challenged in law and the peat workers thought they had a moral right to work that moor, much to the conservationist's concern. But indeed they did have a right to work the moor. And so, I mean I was working on a value of the moor of six million pounds and I thought well, where did that number come from and how old is it? Because the legislation changed, and once I got into that legislation and started reading the Natura 2000 legislation I realised that the local authority was probably going to become liable for the total value of that moor, because things had to change. Because once it became a European site, as a Special Area of Conservation, or a Special Protection Area, and the moors have got both those international designations now, once it came to that position and became subject to stopping the peat working as that legislation was obviously leading in that direction, then I knew I had got to get a better value of the moor.

And working very, very closely with the late Steven Warburton, who at that time worked for the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, and when he first started talking to me, in confidence about his objectives on the moor, and, having a moratorium on peat working and eventually down to the point, which was probably my idea actually, in, in some of the silly conversations that we had, I quoted the Scottish Wildlife Trust, that they had actually bought out the peat working rights on Flanders Moss, which has a tremendous reputation, Flanders Moss indeed it was a massive site at one time of day, but the peat working rights on there, the remaining bit of Flanders Moss, was sixty five hectares and you could lose that in a corner of Hatfield, or in a corner of Thorne. It's so much bigger I mean each is over two thousand hectares in extent. Massive, massive area and Scottish Wildlife Trust had bought out the peat working rights for just over a million pounds. So they said to me, 'well why can't you buy out the peat working rights here?' I said 'Don't be ridiculous! The size is ludicrous! You're talking about four thousand hectares' and. But that's how it started basically. And then I was being pushed in a certain direction and I realised that I had to get a valuation.

So I had to then think of all the reasons why Doncaster needed a valuation on that and what's more I've got to go for a professional valuation. I mean Doncaster Council has got valuers, but if it came to litigation it'd got to be specifically the mineral valuer basically they work for the income tax department, but I knew them personally, having been through the, sort of, professional education system, you'd have all been a class of lads at one time of day and then it gets split up all over town and you'd develop fantastic contacts and I actually knew the people I was dealing with and so the, having talked to my Director, explained the problems and that I really needed a valuation now.

We got a valuation on the moors, which turned out, to be a number that, that I felt I needed to keep confidential and whilst that number got bandied about in sort of confidential discussions, it was a lot more than six million pounds and it wasn't much above what I'd guessed at anyway, but it was still above what I'd guessed at. And that valuation became very, very, very significant in the process. But I tried to keep it confidential and in the end I let it go to English Nature because Michael Meacher needed it and er, or I believe Michael Meacher needed it. I was very interested to hear him refer to it after I'd disclosed that to English Nature as, 'shall we say, tens of millions of pounds.' He wouldn't give the number, which was, I think, I'm forgetting now, I think it was thirty

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eight million pounds. Thirty eight million pounds! That was for both Thorne and Hatfield, for the remaining part of Thorne and Hatfield Moors, and, and...

Can I just clarify, that's the value of the peat?

No that's the value of the right to work the peat and, and eventually Michael Meacher, bought out the, the rights to work peat from Scotts UK, through the good auspices of English Nature. So English Nature became the landowner, the freeholder and Scott's retained the right to work peat for another two years. Even to the extent of limiting what they could stock during that two years, which again didn't meet with the conservationist's agreement, but at least it was a major step in the right direction.

[Clock chimes]

End track 1

Track 2

And yeah, so allowing them to work the peat for another two years, which actually was three seasons, you know the end, you've got the two ends and the one in the middle so two years is three seasons, so giving them an additional three weeks, sorry three years, three seasons, working before peat working was stopped, that halves the value of the right to work peat. It's based on the present value to receive one pound in the future so by the time you get to in perpetuity it's worth nothing. But to delay receiving that, sorry stopping, stopping that peat working, for three years to stop that halves the value, so there was eventually a buy out of the right to work peat on both moors for about 17.3 million pounds. Which is still a very, very significant sum. So it was very interesting to be involved in that cut and thrust and that cat and mouse game for several years.

What made, what was the impetus that, made it possible for the government or why did, what made the government want to buy out peat?

The point about it was, the local authority would have to buy it out in any case, and that would have been too much, really to contemplate. If you're talking about seventeen million pounds for some peat for some, a few beetles and bugs and one or two birds and spuggies, er, but people talking about "why can't we have a hospital" or old age pensioners and all the other sympathetic groups, that would have been very controversial. I've no doubt that the, the way that Doncaster organises its finances it could have dealt with it over a period of time. But the point was with the changing legislation, I mean basically the, the Wildlife and Countryside Act, the Natura 2000 legislation, as far as I was concerned was based on something the size of somebody's backyard basically. You know, the responsibilities that you had to conserve, and then you transpose that legislation to something that's three miles across, not only one of them, two of them, in Doncaster. They are the largest lowland heaths in Doncaster, lowland peat mires, sorry, in Doncaster, in the country, sorry.

The largest lowland peat lands in the country are both in Doncaster. And so that, that puts an enormous responsibility on the local authority. The peat rights would have had to have been bought out in any case. So the government chose to buy it out and the government has also said that they will support the local authority of any more massive, expense that they have. If they didn't have to buy anymore out.

So that was the reason behind the government purchasing the peat bogs it had to be done because of a change of legislation. Following the change of legislation which Doncaster MBC was very involved in and also the conservationists, was, the very, very important thing was in er, I think it

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was in about eighty seven, I've forgotten when, there was a famous meeting at Thorne Grammar School where English Nature had proposed to de-notify the triple SI status of the moor. The conservationists thought at that time that there was a hidden agenda and certainly Steven Warburton, the late Steven Warburton, thought there was a hidden agenda and we didn't know what the hidden agenda was, if there was one. But that was a very, very intelligent audience that turned up that night and all the conservationists, me amongst them if you like, because I was involved through the Forum at that time as an observer for Doncaster, they decided that they would allow the local accents to talk. Anyone with a local accent, let them talk, but the, the expert conservationist would keep the pot simmering, as it were, in any breaks that happened and it was a fantastic meeting.

The outcome of that was that English Nature did not de-notify the triple SI station, status. Then we found out about the new legislation that was coming into force the Natura 2000 legislation and we thought 'oh, oh!' if there was a hidden agenda then this is it. Because had it not been a triple SI it couldn't have become an SAC or an SPA because being of triple SI status was an essential endorsement qualification before it could get European recognition so that meeting at Thorne Grammar School was absolutely crucial. A very interesting thing about that was, right at the end of the meeting almost as they were shutting it down, a housewife, and I am not being derogatory to housewives, whose husband actually worked on the moor, and she was basically putting him out of a job! But er, Derek Langslow, Chief Executive for English Nature had spoken brilliantly and I'd turned to my boss and said 'he's gonna get away with this'. You know, he spoke so well, but this housewife boxed him very, very cleverly boxed him into a corner talking about future sand and gravel working after the peat has gone. And she, she was helped by people sat around her chivvying her along but she spoke very well, and he actually put his hand out towards the planners sort of appealing for help I suppose, to get him out of this er, this hole he'd been boxed into, this corner he'd been boxed into and said 'It's up to the local planning authority to defend the moor against any future application for sand and gravel extractions' and that's verbatim and I blew up, I hit the roof really, and er pointed out to him that if they take the one weapon, one big weapon, the big gun out of our arsenal to defend the moor, we'll never be able to defend it. If he removes triple SI status from the moor, we will never be able to defend the moor against future applications for sand and gravel. I told him and the audience that if they went down that route they, they would lose this unique peat land habitat to a sand and gravel restoration.

At that point the, the meeting erupted and it was like watching television with the sound turned off, I couldn't hear anything obviously people were applauding and shouting, but I couldn't hear anything, I think it was blood pressure. I think I was so incensed by what he'd said that er, I just blew my top and, there was four councillors in listening to them as well as my boss and I received not one word of criticism from the council. So, so that was a major step forward for the moor and that meeting led to its designation of European status and eventually the buy out of the peat working rights. That was of crucial, importance and the driving, the driving, personality for that was Steven Warburton, and I wouldn't like him to be forgotten in the, in this phase of the history, which is not written down anywhere and as I say you need to trust people, you need to be able to trust people.

You know diamond merchants, millions of pounds worth of diamonds are swapped on a hand shake, no legal, lawyer, no contract, no nothing, if they let them down they'll never receive any diamonds ever again. It's all done on trust, trust is very, very important.

Can I ask you about public opinion as well? You described very well the way that turned the tide from a, a planning and a legal point of view, that meeting, can I ask you a little bit about public

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opinion? Was there a groundswell of public opinion in support of one side or another at that time or just no awareness whatsoever and did that change after that meeting?

Well certainly at that meeting, as I've referred to, a very intelligent meeting, the public were brilliant and the public spoke very, very well and they wanted to get onto the moor, even the local people, people that lived adjacent to the moor they'd never been on it, they don't know their way on to the moor and, and yes they wanted, to get back on to it, a lot of the people there did have conservation interests, you know, bird watchers and other sorts of wildlife type of interests. A lot of people there had family working on the moor as well. So it, it was a very, very good meeting but as I've said I very, very quickly became an expert because nobody else knew anything about it basically! To the point I had a policeman rang me up and said his daughter was doing a dissertation on the moor and he, they were local, they lived at Maltby, and had spent a fortnight driving round and round trying to find their way on the moor and eventually they had been directed to me at the local authority and could I take his daughter onto the moor to do this dissertation and indeed I did, and he said 'Can I come as well?' And I said 'Of course you can'. And so I took them onto Thorne Moors and he, a policeman had spent a fortnight trying to find his way onto the moor and simply couldn't do it. So even knowing where the moors are, cause they are in a wilderness really, they're, they're, roads go round them rather than through them.

I did my PhD thesis on Hatfield Chase in the Medieval Period in the eighties and I.....

Then you and I've got an interesting discussion to have because I've done quite a bit of research on it since finding a track way on the moor.

Cause I was told then, that I couldn't, when I wanted to go and have a look, that I was, I was told then that I couldn't go on it was private property and there was no way on to it.

Yeah, well you should have approached me! Maybe it was er; maybe I wasn't there at that time.

And so the public opinion was already there, in the, in the area?

It was very heated, yes, yes. But, but again you don't know whether you're looking at the whole population or a percentage of the population. I found that in, as a planner I found that a very small percentage of the population is very, very vocal so it's difficult sometimes to separate, but apart from that I talk to people. I talk to people that I meet. When I go on the moor as a conservationist, I'm now retired, I go and knock on people's doors who live in very remote places and let them know who I am and what I'm up to and let them see my car and my face, offer them my mobile telephone number, cause sometimes they need help in a hurry. They are very suspicious at first, but once they see you, once you've done that and then they see you a few times they're very relaxed about you being nearby.

What do you mean by need help in a hurry?

Well if the wife's in there on her own and there's somebody suspicious about you see! Or if there's a fire coming nearby or anything like that, it's a very, very remote place. Yeah, it takes some time for a fire engine to get there.

Can I just ask you before we move on to one of the key things I want to talk to you about, specifically about the track way, but before we move onto that, can I ask you a bit about the fires because there seem to be quite a, a thing that people notice. I mean I have talked to people in

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Thorne and Moorends, that's the thing they really remember is, they couldn't go onto the moors [inaudible] but they remember the fires.

Yeah, well the fires were very, very damaging and they're difficult to put out the fires usually happened at the dry time of year so, so water is scarce, and the fire engines sort of, can't convey enough to fight the fire, to the extent that they sort of opened up sluices and let water onto the moor, in order for the fire engines to be able to pump it into the tenders and then go and fight, er the fires. And again conservationists turned up with spades and beaters and things like that digging the fire out and hammering flames or smouldering stuff. And er...

Are they something that happened as part of the natural course of events or are they...?

Who knows, who knows. I mean a cigarette dropped could start it but there are some that have potentially been started deliberately. I mean there was an era when things weren't moving satisfactory that er, Earth First got involved; now I wouldn't even speak to them, because people who slash the fuel lines of vehicles on the moors and put oil straight down onto the moor are not conservationists in my view. When the peat workers proudly boasted that they continued working and it didn't interfere with production at all, the next week the peat stacks, the stockpiles were set on fire. Now I can't say whether that started accidentally or not but it seemed very suspicious to me. So people who actually set fire to the moor are not conservationists, these are anarchists you know it's, eco warriors gone mad. So I can't say whether they were natural fires, or not, but certainly there have been fires. There was one in er, that swept across Hatfield Moor, did a lot of damage and the wind turned at the last moment basically and blew it away from Lindholme Hall in the middle of the moor there. And it got very, very close within about three hundred metres, and the wind was forecast to change about nine o'clock in the evening and it did! Yeah.

And when was that, do you know, around....?

Well it was before I started doing conservation work on there because with my interest developing I then started going on the moor and doing conservation work as a member of the public, and it was before then. So, I've been doing that for about fourteen years now, so I would think it was sort of ten to twelve years before that so it's in the, two decades ago era. But you could still see charcoal, in stumps, quite close to the hall, within, I would say, within about two hundred and fifty metres of the Hall.

Can you tell me a little bit more about your own conservation, you talked about your green interests and your green issues, can you tell me a little bit more about what they are?

Well, I'm interested in many things to do with er; with the countryside shall we say. Not just natural history. I'm interested in photography, and so that's part of it, I'm interested in walking, and that's part of it and a lot of my interests pull together, in actually going out and walking on the moor and getting interested in the moor. Some people walk and walking is, is the be all and end all, they walk for fitness or whatever, or just the sheer physical effort, you know, I'm a man, I do all this wonderful walking sort of idea. To me walking is a means to an end, I walk to get in to the things that I'm interested in, and that involves the landscape, the view, photography, the weather. I don't go when it's chucking it down basically! Although you can see some interesting things when it's chucking it down, you see, a site exhibits it's problems when it's chucking it down with rain, but erm, the interest in wildlife all, they all come together and so, it's, it's, going out getting exercise, enjoying the landscape, enjoying the weather, enjoying the wildlife. I'm not an expert in getting down to species identification obviously I know better than the average guy in the street, a

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lot of species, but as I've said, when you're talk to people who know more and more about less and less, you realise how much you know yourself. So we've always got to be careful about our identifications. Because they're prone to error when you are talking to such expert people.

And, was it as, when you were out on one of these walks that you made the discovery that we now know a bit more about?

Well, I

Tell me about that, tell me about how that happened.

Well, I'd been, I'd been out doing conservation work, and basically I was blocking up drains with the land owners permission, on, on a refuge where there's some very, very rare beetles and, nothing that will get a high PR you know. But there is also nightjars there as well, so, we attracted help from other volunteers because of the nightjars, but whilst they're doing work for the nightjars, they're doing very, very good work for so many other things as well. But because of my particular interest as far as I've already said about aquifers and then I start, I realised that, you've got to get down to the, what's causing the trouble, it's no good treating the symptoms, what you've got to do is treat the disease. And I decided that the disease was lack of water and it was caused by lowering the surface two and a half metres all the way round this particular refuge and this refuge was now a little hill and all the water was running away from it, so what I tried to do was stop the water running off.

The experts told me that I couldn't possibly achieve a water dome on Hatfield Moor, ever again, but in fact, I did. And over a period of about ten years I managed to restore the water dome and started affecting the surface vegetation, which I was very, very pleased about. And I'd been continuing this on one particular day, a lovely day, and I was going on the next day, but the moor had just been opened up by English Nature, they'd stopped the peat working on the seventh, I think it must have, September, the thirtieth of September it was a couple of years ago and er, and so the following week I think it was about the, yes, it was the seventh, the seventh of October, er, I decided, 'no, I'm not gonna put two days in on the trot, with a shovel, I'm retired now'. I'm going for a walk. So I went for a walk, and I'd also been very irritated by an article in the paper about the first walk that was conducted by English Nature, the week, on the Saturday before and they'd enjoyed it a lot but one of them had said and it was reported that 'it's not very scenic is it?'

Well truly it is a damaged place, there's no question about that, but I still think it's beautiful, but with the conservation work that had been done, to bund and contain the water, and it's black water, it's peat water, and when it's still it's like a perfect mirror and people talk about the size of the sky, it comes right the way down to the horizon in flat land. But I can tell you, it goes a lot further on Hatfield Moor, and in walking down one of those bunds, which you are not supposed to do, but I do, I advise everybody to keep out of the water there because of the deep channels, and you can't see two inches into the water so you're prone to falling into a deep channel. You might not drown, but you're gonna get wet, and you're gonna get wet in a remote place and if it's cold you're gonna get hyperthermia. So never, I mean when I go in such places I walk with two sticks that I've cut, not my hiking sticks, but sticks that I've cut and I can probe every step of the way, but I'm daft enough to do it, and so somebody else might, but I don't advocate doing that.

So as I'm walking down this bund with this beautiful mirror reflection of the sky, it didn't stop at the horizon it came right down to my boots all the way round, and that's something I have tried to project to other people now, that it is a beautiful place and the sky right down to your boots is

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changing constantly, just stand there and look at it you know, watch it, changes through the day. Changes through the week, it changes through the month, and it certainly changes through the seasons, it's like a kaleidoscope really. But there I am wandering up, down this er, bund thinking just how beautiful it was and looking at all sorts of things because when I'm doing such things I follow the Bermudan motto, which stemming from a ship wreck, I mean the Bermudan civilisation comes out of a ship wreck, their motto is 'Wither the waves take us'. So that's my motto when I'm going on a wildlife walk. If anything takes my eye I go and have a look at it, wander over that way. And I saw this straight line, this unusually straight line on the bit of a beach ahead and to my right. Normally in nature things are curved, but this was straight and it seemed from a distance to be striated, to be sort of almost like a grain, and I thought to myself 'that looks like a bog oak at the bottom of the peat workings, I'll go and have a look at that.'

So I carried on walking down the bund, not looking at the bog oak, looking at other things that took my eye until I knew I was about at it and square to it and I turned to walk to it and as I turned to step off the bund I thought well that's not bog oak and literally stood there with my foot paused in space thinking that's not a bog oak and what I could see was seven poles aligned parallel to each other. They weren't scattered in a random fashion, and they were all about the same size and diameter. And as I stepped off the bund I thought, well maybe they formed a platform to repair a machine, because I immediately recognised the hand of man. And so I walked up to it, and er, I could see immediately because I am fairly experienced on the moor, I could see immediately that it was timber rather than root, root is contorted, and timber is straight, because it's grown in a very dense woodland environment, so it was straight timber and no more than six inches in diameter, less than that, and about four metres long. But as I got on site, I, I, because of my experience, I realised I could see milling machine damage on the upper surface, so that immediately said to me that that timber was there when the milling machine passed over it, otherwise it wouldn't have been damaged by the milling machine and so I went straight to the thick end, the trunk end if you like, the bottom, the thicker end of the timber and the first one I looked at was charred, not by burning it was charred with brown fungus rot, and it wasn't terribly well preserved but I could see that it hadn't been sawn down and I could see that it had probably been chopped down. Its neighbour was much better preserved, and there was no charring on that and I could see that that had almost certainly been chopped down with a blunt axe. So I went straight to the slender end of the poles and I could see that they'd been lopped to a chisel point probably with an axe, and I thought if they'd made a platform to repair a machine they wouldn't have used an axe, they'd have sawn it down.

Now, it's difficult to explain the nature of the timber, but you wouldn't pick it up and nail it to a fence, if you want to make a fence out of it, you would expect it to disintegrate. It's, it's obviously old, it's lost some of it's er, its nature. If it was music you would say it had no timbre, some of it's gone, it, you can tell by looking at it that it's old. But with my knowledge as Case Officer, knowing how long that area had been worked and as a surveyor, to just cast my eye around at the peat railway line adjacent and other things that I knew hadn't been worked adjacent, up to half a mile away.

End track 2

Track 3

I estimated that there'd probably been two to two and half metres of peat worked from that spot. And I thought if this timber was here at the bottom of the workings and had been hit by the milling machine at less than one millimetre per year, the rate of building up of peat, it grows faster than that but by the time it's four thousand years old and its been consolidated and dehydrated the current

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profile is less than one millimetre per year of growth of the moor. So if it's down two metres to two and a half metres that meant immediately to me that it was two thousand, to two thousand five hundred years old. So that logic, together with the axe marks, together with the peat milling marks, within two, within two minutes of arriving, not with any archaeological expertise but just a mining engineer's logic, I decided that it was probably two to two and a half thousand years old.

So then I wondered what to do about it. So then I took my mobile phone out and rang, Colin Howes at the museum and he was not available. So then I rang English Nature's Moors Manager, er, no answer. So then I sat down on mi' rucksack which has a stool slung to it and contemplated the, the timber whilst I was eating mi' lunch.

Eventually when the press got hold of this over a year later, which we had to keep it confidential for, a time for the archaeologist to carry out a proper investigation, the press were more interested in what sandwiches I ate whilst I was, and they took the line of this doddering old age pensioner out for a stroll, forgotten all the conservation, all the wonderful conservation input, I'd been involved in and were more interested in what sandwiches I had! Yeah, but I sat there looking at it and thinking this is so incredibly rare, it can't be right. If, I'm gonna finish up with egg, this is literally what I was thinking, I'm gonna finish up with egg all over my face on this one, because it can't possibly be a bronze age track way. And so, I sat there and had mi' lunch, and I thought well, if I dig around a bit with, with mi' knife, with mi' field knife I'll get a better idea, and then I thought, well, what if I'm right. If I'm right I mustn't dig around, you know then it's an archaeological artefact, I mustn't touch it.

I'd been involved in the potential of finding such a thing and trying to find it as part of, putting a gas main down, er before we had to establish that there wasn't a track way on that particular route, before the track way could go ahead, so I knew the importance of it, it's immediately schedulable as an ancient monument I know that. So that half an hour was quite er, quite, it was quite an experience in its own way the, the exhilaration, of, 'wow! This is a Bronze Age track way!' And then again say, 'what! It can't possibly be, a Bronze Age track way' because that is so incredibly rare, it's not my luck to turn it up. So, what am I gonna do about it? Once I tell somebody who knows what they are talking about they'll come and see and say 'Nah, that's not a bronze age track way', and I'd finish up looking a fool. So what do you do?

So by the time I'd finished mi' lunch I'd decided that it was mi' duty to report it, and so what shall I do, and I'll say "I've found some interesting wood, can you come and have a look at this interesting wood?" [Laughing], "I've found at the bottom of the peat workings on Hatfield Moor". So I took three digital photos. Wonderful these digital cameras to be able to actually look at the display two seconds after you've taken a photo and what's more be able to enlarge and zoom around the display, as I can on my camera. So I took three photos and it was a fabulous day as well, it was blue sky and I just wished I'd switched up onto high resolution because as far as I was concerned I was just taking a record to discuss it with the archaeologists and to try and get their interest to go out on site.

But in fact it turned out to be a crucial photograph, never to be repeated again, because of the weather, the reflections, and, and, it became more progressively damaged from that day onwards. People just walking round, and footprints and the wetness and stuff like that, and then actually starting to investigate it. So that was absolutely a crucial photograph, I just wished I'd switched up to high resolution and got the exposure a little bit better than I actually did. But at that time, all I was doing was taking a record to discuss it with the, the Doncaster Museum and so then after I had finished mi' lunch I immediately left the site and went and reported it to Doncaster Museum. It

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took me about three days to get the local archaeologist on, and then once he'd seen it then things took off, and, and everybody and their granddaddy, was on.

I attended all the meetings on there, just out of interest and then when eventually the specialists started digging, they couldn't get rid of me, I was on there everyday whilst they were digging, I got quite a good photographic record of that part of the investigation. It also inspired me to do a lot of research myself, and so I researched the history of that area especially the Lindholme Island, turned up some fascinating stuff, and now I've got to respect the, the very, very expert PhD's, specialist wetland archaeologists that are involved, but I'm afraid I've a slightly different opinion than some of them and stand my own ground. I believe I have a right to hold my opinion and it doesn't conform with theirs, but I'm prepared to argue my ground I've got photograph's to prove my point as well. So, yeah, been very, very friendly with them, but at the same time, I've been a bit of an irritation, which I think is healthy. Healthy for them.

Do you want to outline what your idea is?

Well, I think it's a through route, and I've got very good reasons for, for, thinking that which I'll explain in detail. They think it's a platform to go onto the moor, and I disagree. So they've excavated about fifty metres which come to an end. But the mining horizon, the peat working horizon has gone through the track way and has excavated below the track way. At the bottom of the track way are two rails, two parallel rails as the archaeologist calls, call them, and thrown across them are the timbers that I saw, that I first saw, they're thrown as transverse timbers across the rails, the function of the rails is to keep the surface of the, of the, track way, which are just round posts thrown down on top of the rails to keep the unevenness of the settlement out of that, so there's a fairly even track to walk on because the transverse poles are, are kept in line by the rails. Rails as we know em, when we see them, are on top of the sleepers, in this instance they are underneath the sleepers, to keep the sleepers level is the easiest way I can describe it. But as a mining engineer I can see that the, the mining horizon, has gone through the track way, which is very important, and what's more I photographed the, the rails fortunately, and the milling machine flaying is on the end of the rails. So, the milling machine, smashed off several of the base, er, transverse timbers and damaged the top of the rails, the rails being below the timbers, and then there is nothing beyond there. Well there's nothing beyond there not because it's a platform, but because the milling machine has put it all into compost bags. So the track way beyond that point has gone into compost bags. What's more it's on the line of a geological feature, just beside of the, the Devensian age, glacial moraine. A linear moraine rather than ones that we see that are almost mountainous. This is a linear moraine, which was produced when the ice sheet disintegrated. And it goes right across the moor and by my research it comes from Snaith, it was the dam that formed Thorne Mere. So, it diverts all the, water courses, they all bend as they meet this, the line of this moraine and it comes to through Thorne, through Bradholme, Tudworth, Lindholme, Wroot and then turns to Stockwith. So this is a dry route, at times before the moor started forming, and this is a dry linear route, north south route, through these lowlands, miles to the east of the Roman's lowest crossing point. There is known to be a place now called Stainforth, which was called Stoneford, there are letters about that in history, about the farmers blocking up navigation, interfering with navigation along the Don, Stoneford is at Stainforth which is only two miles up stream of this particular point. I think this is a through route and, I, the archaeologists disagree with me on that, but it is a through route a pre-historic through route, pre-historic north south through route.

Now, to argue against myself, there are there is a line that can be seen on modern maps, on the eighteen ninety four map you can see this route basically with remnants of track ways of, agricultural ways of actual highways running along this route. Now to argue against myself they

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are there today as more modern features because of the presence of the Devensian glacier, they've taken advantage of that, but what I'm saying is they are modern day remnants of this, this route through. So it's far too close to that, once I found what I think is the track way, seven hundred metres away from my original find, which has not been investigated yet, then they're gonna look at that in the future. But as soon as I spotted that, with being a surveyor I took the compass bearing of it and being a mining surveyor I looked at the geological plan, er, map and realised that it was on the same bearing as the, as the, geological glacial moraine and I thought this is not coincidence, it's not coincidental that that track way's on the same bearing and adjacent to the moraine, they've been using that moraine as a through route. And so I then went to the other side of Lindholme Island and tried to find it there, and thought I had, but that's a future argument.

Can I just summarise, what you're saying is that this track way forms a way over the wet bits, that are, a continuation of the little dry bits that keep occurring along this..?

Well what happens is, I mean this track way is Neolithic, they've dated that, from radio carbon dating, it's not Bronze Age, it's actually Stone Age, it's before, Stonehenge, it's dated before Stonehenge. At that time, that area became colder and wetter and the moor began to grow, it was actually in response to the wetness building up and the peat beginning to be laid down, so its age is contemporaneous with the commencement of peat building on the moor. So what they'd been doing was using this north south route which became increasingly wetter, and, and they started throwing timber down to be able to cross the wet, the wettest part of the moor. And so I think they were maintaining a historic, pre-historic, route five thousand years ago.

What's more, in my research I turned up Abraham de la Pryme who was the first historian in this area in the late sixteen hundreds, brilliant, brilliant work, he gets a lot of criticism for putting down stuff that he can't scientifically justify, but what he said and what I agree with, he was the first to do it and at least he recorded things, and he recorded things about a large causey, had been there and I've got a lot to say about that. But I'd like to break now, but we will get onto that, but in the, in the late sixteen hundreds turn of the, seventeenth to eighteenth, becoming the eighteenth century, he recorded things on there which we can still find today and which I think I've found today, but the archaeologists haven't found it yet. But, yeah, it then becomes a stone course, causeway, a stone causey, I'm gonna use dialect as he did, which is very important, there's a stone causey over Lindholme Island, and I think that's, well I'm certain that joins the ancient routes that he refers to, from Thorne and from Wroot, which he says it can't be so, this causey must be for the religious to divert themselves on, being a community on Lindholme Island, a religious community on Lindholme Island.

He can't see, he can't envisage that this road comes from Thorne and goes to Wroot because of the wetness of the place that no horse can travel on, unless in such a severe winter when the moor, when the moor is so frozen as to bear, is the way he puts it. No horse can travel, so how did they get all these large stones that he's referring to there, but then he conjectures about that. But what that means to me is someone put a stone road connecting the track ways at sometime in history. Well that wouldn't be before the Iron Age, stone wasn't used as a road making material before the Iron Age, so that's means to me that that track way was maintained until such time as stone would be used, which is over, a thousand years. It's five thousand years old, your coming up to Roman times, you're talking about two to three thousand years of maintenance of that track way over the moor before someone would connect them with stone over Lindholme. I think that's very important and that's one of the, the areas, areas, with which I have some disagreement with the archaeologists and I think they find some difficulty in arguing with me on that one! Yeah, that's the common sense, view on it.

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[Recording Ends]
end track 3