

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: Mike Oliver (part 2)

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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. I'm talking to Mr Mike Oliver and this is disc two.

We were talking about the causeway across Lindholme.

Yeah, and the impact of Abraham de la Pryme, who I find a fascinating historian and has some very, very interesting things to say about the moor and Lindholme Island. I, with the help of Colin Howes of Doncaster Museum, I got hold of his original manuscripts. Now Abraham de la Pryme is quoted quite a lot, but basically it's not by people reading Abraham de la Pryme. Someone originally does, er, read him and then that person gets quoted again and again and again, again, and the story changes slightly, and, just to give an example, he is quoted in modern literature as saying that 'there is a low causeway', on, on Hatfield Moor. Which then the archaeologists and geologists and people investigating the moor say 'Ah, low causeway, this is the track way, they were using this track way'. There is this low causeway its the glacier, it's the, glacial moraine that crosses the moor, you know, 'Eureka', that's it. But as a mining surveyor who has been involved in very detailed legal work, and, public enquiries, and what have you, I understand the need to check original work. And so, with the help of Colin Howes I got copies of his actual manuscript and read them for myself and they're not very easily written, read, sorry. It's, is on, from what he's written and what he said he obviously burnt the midnight candle and I do mean candle, and sometimes his, his script is quite rushed, and then other times it's very neat. But, it is not a low causeway, he specifically does not refer to a low causeway, he refers to a large causey and I've already mentioned the importance of dialect and the importance of being a local person. As a child I could have said 'He tripped over t'causey edge and fell on t'flower'. Causey is important and flower, is important because he refers to an ancient floor of quality, but he writes it flower, f-l-o-w-e-r. Now the F and the L could be mistaken with his flourishes as a fancy T. It could be read as Tower, indeed I read it as Tower, 'cause you can't possibly be talking about a flower that smells nice, he's talking about made of all large squared stones, well flowers aren't made of large squared stones. This leads modern people to think that it's a hunting lodge, made with these square stones and it might be a tower on a hunting lodge, and so it's dismissed as not being part of a monastery, the chapel floor of a monastery, the chapel floor associated with a monastery, that, that de la Pryme conjectures about, it's a hunting lodge. Well, as a local born and bred, I can understand him saying 'flower' and writing it in days before dictionaries were well used, writing 'flower' as he said it when he was burning the midnight candle. Indeed, many, many manuscripts later, he tells the same story again and describes the same feature again, now other people that misquote him don't search for that one, it's not as interesting as others, but because it referred specifically to Lindholme, and that was my interest, I searched for that other manuscript, which took some finding. You'd got to read something on every manuscript basically, because he'd numbered his manuscript pages but then he'd got ready for publication when he died, he'd died quite suddenly visiting the sick, because he was a priest. So he visited the sick and died of the distemper within a week at the age of thirty four. But he was preparing for publication and he'd renumbered all his pages, so it took a bit of finding but eventually I found it and you had to actually read words on every page in order to find the page that referred to Lindholme. But on that one he described the same, er, circumstances which

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separated two ambiguities for me but one of them was floor, on this occasion he spelt it f-l-o-o-r. So that was QED as far as I was concerned. But that's the, well the importance of being able to speak in the local dialect to recognise and talk about a 'flower' and a 'causey', I was told that causey is a corruption of 'causeway', no it isn't. Causeway is a corruption of 'causey'. Causey is Anglo-Saxon and is still present in the local dialect. Causeway is, received English, it's modern English, so causey is much earlier and er.

What does he say, what does he, tell me again what he actually says about this?

He refers to a 'large causey', not a low causeway, a large causey, made of stone, crossing the moor, crossing the island, he describes it only, crossing the island part. I think I've found that causey made of stone, the archaeologists haven't found it yet, but I followed it down to the other end of the island, and I looked at the peat at the other end of the island and I think I've found the track way, possibly, leaving the island going south. If that were the case, and I'm not saying it is the case, the archaeologists have got to look at it, the peat is totally different to the south of the island it's still a metre deep or more, two metres deep, so I can't get down, to the base but I've seen where it leaves the island and it might not be the track way it could be roots, it's so difficult to say. But I have noted that there is fibre above the timber, in the part that I have seen, I want to see the whole of the track way profile. I think there are fibres laid on top, being basically cotton grass root, I think once all the trees died out by the encroaching mire, over the next thousand years or so the route across the moor was maintained by throwing reeds, rushes and cotton grass from the, from the developing peat land onto it. I think the fibres are more important than the wood at the bottom, but so far all that the archaeologists will accept for now is the wood, they expected to find wood, they found wood, I don't think they expect to find fibres thrown on top of it, but this would be the sort of legendary secret ways over the fens and marshes, certainly the people who lived on the marshes knew their way across and could cross the moors.

Isn't that similar to what happened, to what they found in the Roman road, that they repaired it by throwing on turf and that kind of thing?

I don't know, but what I'm looking at, I mean these fibres are there naturally and they appear in the profile of the peat naturally, so I can't say that the, I mean they must have grown there adjacent in order to be thrown on, er. But I see, when I see a hundred percent fibre in the peat profile where, within a few feet you could cut it like butter with a knife, but when you get onto the route of the track way it's like cutting through a rope with the strength of the fibres that are present, I think that's worth investigating.

But what we need to find and what the archaeologists will find as I pointed out to them, an area where there is a depth of peat over the line of the track way and they intend to excavate that this year. I would love to see the full profile of the track way. Repair is so important to archaeologists, evidence of repair, the fact that there'd been repair to a, we'll just wait for my...

[Noise of clock]

[Both talking]

Ah, it's one clock, so it's only one strike!

Sorry.

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The fact that there was some repair to a coral, er decoration on an old chariot type of, whether it was a, a burial hearse or, or whether it was a chariot, the fact that there was repair to a coral, er, decoration on it, meant that it had been used for a long time, so it wasn't a hearse. It wasn't just to bury her with. That is so important to the archaeologist, evidence of repair and because there's no evidence of repair on the bit that they've excavated, this fifty metres, they say it was only short lived and I say 'No, no it's all gone in compost bags, they've taken off the top of the track way, and stopped, purely by accident at the base.'

I've, as a surveyor, I've levelled it myself with a friend went on with me. We took surveying equipment out and levelled, we got an, a rise up to the island of eight hundred and sixty millimetres. That represents eight hundred and sixty years if it was, if they main, lifted the track way in line with the developing moor, that represents eight hundred and sixty years. I think that, if that was more modern horizon of the track way, that it means that eight hundred and sixty millimetres of it have been ripped away by the mining process, and that's why there's no evidence of repair, the top of the track way has gone and so what I want to see is the full extent of the track way and I want them to dig a trench across where there is existing peat on the island. They don't accept that that part that I've found there is the track way, yet, only exposed just a few inches of it where it crosses a ditch, and that's been damaged now, by other people kicking at it which is why we had to keep it confidential in the first place for a year. But I think the track way is more extensive than they can professionally accept yet. They are very, very careful, if I ask them a question, they've got to dig for at least three hours before I can get one syllable of answer out of them. It's so slow, archaeology and they're professional people and they've got to prove, what they say before they say it, I accept that. But what I am very, very keen on seeing is the whole profile of the track way. Cos' I think the upper part of it has gone into compost bags.

Have you any ideas, you say it's from Wroot to Thorne?

I think it's much more extensive than that, and in my further research I've done there is actual routes of er, Charles, Charles I, and how he went through the moor, which I've got illustrated, and photographs of, just in case we have an argument with these archaeologists or anybody else. I can actually, with the power of PowerPoint, the power of these computers now! I've got all my photographs stacked up in a file that I'm not showing basically, 'cos you've got to limit it, I was showing three hundred slides at five seconds a slide, you know, twenty minutes show, but behind that there's hundreds of exposures that you simply haven't time. But if anybody wants to argue about it say, well, if you want to say its 'tower' rather than 'flower' here it is. That's his actual handwriting now let's talk about it and zoom into it and enlarge it. The power of these modern computers is fantastic, and actually put Abraham de la Pryme's script up onto the screen and then discuss it, now is it 'flower' or is it 'tower'? You know this is er, it's so good with this modern equipment.

Do you think this may not be, do you think this is like a major track way?

Yes.

And then there was smaller ones?

It's four metres, four metres wide, I thought it was one metre wide and four metres long when I found it, yet in fact it's four metres wide. Now as a planner, if I was asking for a country lane to have kerbs put beside it, in order to have lorries to be able to pass I would ask for five metres minimum. This, thousand, five thousand years ago is four point two metres wide, associated with

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it, there's an expression in bird watching, the jiz of a bird, you know, when a blackbird lands it cocks it's tail, you don't need to see anything else, it's a blackbird, this track way has a jiz. I identified about six features which I listed and once I got near to it, you could, once you'd seen two of three of these features you knew you were getting close, one of them is heavily compacted peat. Much more heavily compacted than you get with just human beings walking with their feet. I think that they've been impacted by, by hooves, by animals hooves, being driven along them over a long period of time and that's one of the features of the track way it's, it's so strong it comes up in layers like bark. At first, I said to the archaeologist, I said 'Oh for goodness sake, I hope it's not brattish cloth.' Thinking that we would disprove that it was ancient at that time because it, it peeled up like bark, but on the photographs it breaks like tiles, it's so heavily compacted, and that's one of the features of it. This is not a platform where they've gone to follow religious rights or to bury their dead. This is a through route in my humble opinion and I don't mind arguing with PhD's on that one.

So how would you envisage the moor to look, when they'd initially laid, or at the early stage when they laid this track way before the water started to rise?

Well I think the, the, geology is fairly well established now. It was er, the Wolds was continuous, and went through from Lincolnshire, across the Humber, and there's a great ice sheet in the ice age. And then as, as this area started to warm up, water began building up in what is called the Humber Lake, which was dammed by the Wolds crossing the line of the Humber. As the water began to build up in there the ice sheet, the Escrick ice sheet was de-stabilised and broke and this led to this, er, water coming rushing out in a straight line and taking this linear glacial moraine. So the water, I mean, we've identified boulders there which are probably from the North Pennines, there are no boulders in this area, boulders are very, very scarce and when you find one it's a glacial erratic, it's not local and we've identified them as coming from millstone grit, probably from the North Pennines. So this shot out this glacial moraine and then the Humber gap broke. At that time the North Sea was probably sixty metres lower than it is at present. That must have been an absolutely cataclysmic event. All the local river channels are known to have deepened at that time er, as they were scoured out by the tremendous volume of water that rushed out. But that must have been a cataclysmic event, that really is global warming, and if it wasn't for global warming we wouldn't be here now.

But then after this date, then they start walking along that moraine at a time when they're walking through a forest, a woodland. But the climate changed again and the water level raised because of global warming. The North Sea raised something like sixty metres to where it is today. That slowed the water down in the Humber area and the area turned wet and became a big marsh and then it became sufficiently isolated is the word, I think, from, from mineral water run off, it became subject just to, rain, rainwater basically. So ombrotrophic conditions commenced and then the peat started to build up. And at about that time, the people going along that route were faced by a big puddle to cross, on the route that they actually wanted, which was just at the side of the glacial moraine. It was at the side, the glacial moraine is very stony and I wouldn't like to walk on it barefoot or in primitive shoes like moccasins or whatever they wore, but behind it is a wind blown er, sand and that's what they were walking on and there's actually a ramp in that sand, which can be seen today, up to Lindholme Island.

So they walked up that, I think, instead of walking on the stones. So the actual moraine is large pebbles, which would be difficult to walk on, but in the lea of that, there's this wind, this sand drift has built up as part of the moraine. And I think they walked on that initially until even that was flooded out and then I think they went up onto the moraine, and indeed I think there is another track

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way which will probably be found on the line of the moraine. Some evidence has already been found there, I think it's another track way, at a later date than when they couldn't walk on the one that I found.

So that one that you found is on the sandy..?

It's on the sandy, it's in the lea of the moraine. But I think the conditions they walked in was initially trees, and indeed they chopped the trees down and laid them on tree roots, so often these er, transverse, er, timbers that they laid are placed on tree roots to give some stability to what they were laying down, they'd take stability from the roots that's formed the foundation for the track way.

So they were, they were increasingly faced by wetness, so you said they'd had a large puddle to cross?

Yes.

And that's when you would envisage them putting down the track way to cross the puddles?

Yeah, and then, and then the rising water level killed the trees off, so they'd no trees to chop down and throw down, so at that point, and this is where I go out on a limb, this is where I'm a total maverick, er, and I, but I enjoy that. I think at that time, faced with not having any trees, they then started ripping reeds and rushes up and throwing them on top and I think that they probably did that for a long, long time in order to make a firmer drier route through the water. I think eventually that over took them and they diverted to another point, er, across the actual moraine and they probably did the same there and I think that whichever, I think there was probably one on top of the moraine after the one that I found, only two hundred yards away, less than that perhaps. But that route was then connected by a stone causey over Lindholme Island, which I think I've found, with the help of a local resident as well, and also with the help of looking at aerial photographs, which I'll show you in a short while.

So it would be the, track along the moraine that was the stone, that, that they'd made into the stone causey not the...?

That was joined by stone.

Yeah.

There was a, a rough track way of wood and rushes coming over the bog, but they used stone from Lindholme Island, where the moraine breaks the surface of the bog, today even, and is elevated. They excavated that and made a stone causey, or a large causey made of stone is what de la Pryme actually says, across Lindholme Island, but they would not do that, they wouldn't use stone to dress a road in Neolithic times. That wouldn't be done, I'm told by the archaeologists, I do take some notice of archaeologists, occasionally, that wouldn't be done until the Stone, er, until the Iron Age. You know, early Roman times, before that.

That suggests to me that, I don't believe that this was for the religious to divert themselves on. It was, it was clearly, that was conjecture on de la Pryme's work, indeed, because of the criticism that he gets, I separated his work into three categories, conjecture, opinion and fact. The fact that there was a stone causey is a fact, his opinion of it being for the religious to divert themselves on being in such a lonely remote place, is conjecture. I separated them into them so that I was able to withstand

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criticism myself. But that wouldn't be done until say, the birth of Christ, zero in our dating calendar. That means it was maintained, that's two thousand years ago, so that means being as it's five thousand years old, if it was still there, at about the birth of Christ, it means it was maintained for three thousand years, and I think that's significant and the archaeologists won't damn well get down to it yet and I want them to dig a trench across a part of it where the whole, er, profile of the track way is there. And I think there'd be a big linear pile of a hundred percent fibre, on top of the track way. And I'm er, I'm really looking forward to being proved wrong. I wish they'd get on with it, instead of just saying I'm wrong.

[Laughter]

And what's more I want to be there to see it when it happens. But I am now banned from that part of the moor, from the centre of the Island, I've been asked not to go on that land ever again.

By?

By the land owner. His parents welcomed me onto that land and it was with their permission that I did all the conservation work that I did do, but my conservation interests are now in conflict with the land owner's business interests. So, it will be interesting. I will be attending as a trespasser if I look at that part, and actually the bit I am interested in, this bit that I want the archaeologists to dig out, and the bit I'm recommending that they dig up is actually on English Nature land, where I am welcome, and I'm encouraged to go on because, although I fall out with English Nature occasionally, they know they get the truth from me and so they welcome my presence on there.

What do you fall out with them about?

Ah, some of the things they do, erm, not that I've said don't do it. I'll be specific, although it is getting near to the bone as it were, but they've done some chemical wiping as part of the programme, because they're not gardeners, they're not dealing with, they're dealing with thousands of hectares and so, where they've chopped down a lot of trees to control the re-growth of birch they, wiped the higher growth with a big sheet of blotting paper, shall we say, up on legs so that it doesn't touch the lower vegetation but it gets the birch that's growing and I thought they'd got it wrong because they'd killed some of the very, very choice vegetation down on the ground and so I told them so. And, and said to them 'I'm not asking you not to do it, I'm asking you to re-examine your wiping policy because I believe it ought to be modified, not stopped, modified, cos' something went wrong.' I actually took some very choice dead plants, I took Andromeda, which is er, bog rosemary, and an even rarer plant, Cranberry. They didn't even know they'd got Cranberry growing on Hatfield Moor still. But I took them dead Cranberry and said this is not right. 'Don't stop doing it but reappraise your wiping policy', which I thought was quite reasonable. They said it was strong language, I said 'I didn't swear once'. They said 'No you didn't swear, but it's strong language you're using'. I happened to refer to it as poorly piece because it was near Poor Piece, a place there is known as Poor Piece and I said 'its poorly piece' and I'm afraid that title stuck, so it was referred to then as Poorly Piece because of the damage, you know.

Yeah, so we do fall out occasionally but, they get worse than me, sometimes you've got to stand your ground and er, and they respect that eventually when tempers have a cooled a little bit. Yeah.

Well I don't know what you think but I think that's a natural conclusion to, a good place to end to be quite honest, so...

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Ok.

There's a lot more.

Is there?

And I'll show you something, c'mon I'll show you something. I'm gonna give you that.

[Recording Ends]