

Postscript

The preceding article was written after my survey of the military tent drainage rings exposed by The Heathland Clearance Programme in Longmoor Valley in the winter of 2011. It was amazing just how much military archaeology had been uncovered by the clearance of gorse and brambles, which had grown unchecked over many years so that many of the old footpaths were overgrown and impenetrable, in an area roughly bounded by the roadway alongside Westwood Coppice eastwards to the Longmoor Brook.

Imagine my chagrin when in July of 2013, while visiting the site to take another look at the tent-rings, I discovered considerable archaeological damage caused by heavy machinery. I remember taking photographs of some of the damage and immediately sending this evidence to Dr. Mike Hodder, who at that time was the Planning Archaeologist at Birmingham City Council. The damage had been caused by the subsequent clearance of tree debris when the indiscriminate use of heavy machinery on very wet ground caused the tyres to sink into the heathland surface thus destroying much of the archaeology. For me, the saddest loss was the once well-preserved drainage channel of a large marquee (No. 99 on the map) in the south-west corner of the site close to the roadway alongside Westwood Coppice.



An example of tyre damage to the heathland floor in Longmoor Valley
(Author's photo – 06/07/2013)

Lessons were learned about how these schemes could be better managed in the future, although the brutal operation of coppicing hundreds of trees, mainly holly, for The Holly Clearance Programme undertaken in the semi-ancient woodland of Holly Hurst during the winter of 2015-16, proved that the lessons learned after 2013 were hard to implement when so many organisations are involved. This latter project involved the co-operation of Birmingham City Council, Natural England, Historic England and the Forestry Commission. A lot of individual work was undertaken by Dr. Mike Hodder and Danny Squire, Sutton Park Senior Ranger, during the clearance programme to ensure that known sensitive archaeological sites within Holly Hurst were marked clearly to establish no-go areas for the contractors machinery.



Felled tree trunks lining the side of Wyndley Glade during the holly clearance in the winter of 2015-16.

Author's photograph – 28/01/2016

However, it was gratifying to learn from Mike Hodder, on the last FOSPA archaeological walk in March 2020, that the contractors working on the Heathland Clearance Programme recently undertaken in the area of the Longmoor Brook and Rowton Bank have employed sensitive measures to protect the heathland floor from long-term damage. The accompanying photograph on the following page shows a heavy-duty wooden roadway constructed to protect the heathland floor from the damaging effects of using heavy machinery and the transporting of heavy tree trunks. Associated damage to paths has been kept to a minimum.



Higher Stewardship work being carried out near Rowton Bank and Lord Donegal's Ride in 2018 – note the heavy-duty wooden roadway in centre of picture to provide protection for the heathland floor. The view is across the old peat-beds (middle distance), Westwood Coppice and Chester Road North, with Lord Donegal's Ride on the extreme right of the picture.

(Author's photograph 28/10/2018)

Because of the damage cited above, readers who, having read my article, would like to explore the Longmoor Valley near the Banners Gate entrance of Sutton Park in order to inspect the archaeology will be sorely disappointed and lucky to find any remaining tent rings. However, the area is interesting to visit when one remembers that it was once a racecourse (1868-79) before it became a long-distance firing range (1881-95). Also, because of the heathland clearance programmes, the Longmoor Valley provides a pleasant area in which to walk and explore the fauna and flora.

To summarise, the bad news is, of course, the destruction of military archaeology. The good news is that the features were recorded immediately after they were uncovered, logged and mapped, and published first of all in the Proceedings of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group and now on the Group's website for all to share.

Roy Billingham, April 2020