

Geomancy Group Samhain 2005 – Derbyshire

The last Friday in October is apparently the busiest day of the year on the roads – or so I found out when sitting in a traffic jam on the M6 listening to the radio. What a miserable journey from Glasgow; although largely sunny, there were torrential downpours on the M74 where any speed over 20mph was suicidal, and then miles of traffic jams north of Knutsford.

So although I left at 11am, it was getting dark by the time I turned off at Stoke and tried to find the youth hostel in Dimmingsdale, which sounds like some dwarven stronghold from Lord of the Rings!

After a confusing detour round Alton Towers, I still hadn't found the place, but then had to drive back into Stoke to collect Barry from the bus station. A phone call to Sally had produced some clearer directions, so we eventually found the place without too much hassle. By this time it was totally dark however, so we didn't appreciate the natural beauty of the location until the next day.

The hostel turned out to be small but well equipped. The three bedrooms contained bunk beds, with duvets, pillows and YHA-approved sheet sleeping bags supplied. Apparently you're not allowed to use your own sheet sleeping bag these days – I wonder why?

Ros had prepared a welcoming pot of vegetable soup – or perhaps stew – that was warm, tasty and just what was needed.

Susie was last to arrive, having travelled in her usual circuitous fashion, and thus our number for the weekend was to be the magical seven – myself, Barry, Ros, Jon, Maryrose, Sally and Susie.

We held a “talking quaich” circle after food, which became considerably more loquacious as the quaich, containing some rather nice Highland Park, did the rounds. It was great to catch up with what everyone else had been doing since we last met. Jon in particular we hadn't seen since last Samhain. Jon was due for his initiation ceremony this weekend, so we had that to plan.

There was some discussion over Maria's letter at this point, and it was decided that the AGM should still go ahead as we had more members present than we had last year, and if Jon was initiated that would make seven full members. We have always said that whoever made the effort to attend the weekends would manifest the group energy at that time, so it was felt it would be wrong to postpone the AGM until Imbolc, and that we should use the energy of the moment and those present. The AGM was scheduled for Sunday morning, following Jon's initiation.

A vague plan was formulated for some site visits the next morning; it transpired that I was the only one who'd actually been to this area at all, and so I suggested an itinerary centred around the Stanton Moor area, with a planned lunch at the Druid Inn in Birchover (I knew they had a fantastic menu, including lots of vegetarian dishes!).

Saturday morning was slightly overcast but otherwise not too bad on the weather front, so we packed into two cars and headed north. There were some minor diversions due to my GPS unit (Barry) being unsure of directions at time, but eventually we arrived in Birchover. A brief rest stop, and we continued on up to the moor. Pretty soon we had climbed up onto the moors and were enjoying stretching our legs in the sunshine, heading

towards the Nine Ladies stone circle. Yes, sunshine! It was actually turning into a rather warm day.

There's always some sign of human presence at Nine Ladies when I visit, and today was not exception. Three or four tents were pitched, two of them rather close to the stones, and there was evidence of cooking fires around. Some blokes in combat fatigues were lethargically cooking breakfast on one.

The stones seemed very quiet, and we didn't spend a great deal of time there. Jon was frustrated by the lack of decent sightlines due to the tree cover, but was able to see that the surrounding hills provide a near-level horizon to the east and south from the elevation of the moor.

We walked back over the moor, pausing at one of the other sites, a rather ruinous cairn burial, and turned west towards our next site at Doll Tor. This is one that I hadn't visited before, so I was keen to see it on this trip.

Towards the edge of the moor, we came across the Cork Stone, a massive monolithic rock shaped vaguely like a champagne cork. Footholds and metal handholds have been added to the stone, and the temptation to scramble up to the top was too much for Grahame, followed by Ros. At the top is a circular bowl depression brim full of rainwater – a suitable blessing for those who brave the climb. And the view from the top was well worth it, although the top is narrow enough that I had no inclination to try and stand up! Off the moor, across the road and over some fields avoiding the cows, we came to a small wood that is the location of Doll Tor stone circle. Once very ruinous, this small circle was unofficially 'improved' back in the 80's by the addition of several more stones, before being properly restored to its original six, with adjoining cairn burial. A lovely little circle with a very peaceful atmosphere, although the surrounding woods were not quite as welcoming. It was slightly reminiscent of the little circle in Aboyne Wood that we visited last Samhain. Some visitors who arrived just before we did seemed resentful of our presence and refused to be drawn into conversation, eventually giving up on whatever their own mission was and leaving.

After walking back over the moor to where we'd left the cars, we repaired back to Birchover and the Druid Inn for lunch and some very pleasant Druid's Ale. The Ownership has been transferred since my last visit and the Inn has had a makeover, including the menus and prices, which were very upmarket at £8 for a sandwich! It was a jolly nice sandwich with smoked salmon and avocado, but definitely a bit pricey for what is in effect pub food. The place was very busy however, so they seem to be popular with the locals. Lunch was a rather protracted affair, and it was well after three by the time we managed to escape.

Ros had been drawn to the Druid Stones at the back that give the pub its name, and had wandered up there. Jon and I found her on the way down, and she insisted that we climb up to look at the stones, that are properly known as Row Tor. The top is very extensive, and has several caves and chambers, scrambly staircases and other features. There are a pair of stone animal heads, one looking very leonine, and other quarried features such as a gorgeous three-seater armchair with carved stone balustrade arms and a set of steps leading up to it.

A couple of guys were in one of the chambers setting up a laptop and microphones. One of them went out and stood on a large rock on the top of the tor. This is actually a

'loggan' or rocking stone, and by leaning back and forth on it he soon had it rocking and producing loud booms that echoed throughout the structure.

An amazingly powerful place, quietly ignored in most books on the area, and it was hard to believe that I had visited this pub on two previous occasions and hadn't bothered to go and explore them.

On from there to the Nine Stanes, of which there are four remaining. These are nonetheless the tallest standing stones in Derbyshire, and always feel very energetic to me. The weathering on the stones leads to many interesting faces and patterns on the surfaces. These stones have a southerly aspect to Robin Hood's Stride, another enigmatic rocky tor "resembling the upturned ears of a hippopotamus", according to Burl. Burl also says that the major standstill moonset happens between the 'ears'; however Jon and I thought from the azimuth that it must be too far south. However this is definitely a place to revisit over the coming year to check on the full moon. Could be a job for Sally, our nearest resident!

It was getting late in the afternoon now, so it was back into the cars and off to Arbor Low, our last site for today. As ever, it was very windy up in the henge, but this only adds to the site's grandeur. Those who hadn't been before were impressed by the sheer scale of the site – photographs don't really do it justice. It justly deserves its title of "Stonehenge of the North". The argument over whether the stones ever stood upright still rages, but more evidence is coming forth to support the theory that they did in fact stand upright at one time; although to judge from the extensive weathering, that time was very long ago indeed. To the southwest, the imposing barrow of Gib Hill would seem to mark the Beltane sunset, and I found the stump of a stone on the outside of the henge that might once have been an outlier to mark this alignment. Faint traces of a possible earthwork causeway from the henge to the barrow can also sometimes be seen in low sunlight.

It was too much to comprehend in the now-fading daylight, so we trudged back down through the farm, where Maryrose bought a dozen "Real" eggs for breakfast tomorrow, and back to the hostel. We arrived just in time for the nightly fireworks display at Alton Towers, perfectly framed by the trees outside the lounge window. It was lovely to stand on the lawn with a glass of whisky and watch the nightly display, which started at 7pm and lasted a good 30 minutes.

On Sunday morning, we planned to do Jon's initiation ceremony and then have the AGM. We had a round in circle without Jon to decide what we were going to do with him. There was a lovely large rock in the woods outside that looked like a coiled serpent, or possibly two. On the top was a young oak tree with three large branches and a little stubby protrusion just right for sitting on. We decided to have a circle smudge, then blindfold Jon before leading him into the woods and up atop the rock. There we would each present him with a gift for his medicine pouch, and bless him with the four elements, plus a circle toning (for Spirit). Susie smudged him again, using a fern frond in place of a feather, Maryrose sprinkled him liberally with Chalice Well water, then Barry held his hand over a glass containing a tea-light for fire; possibly a bit too close for comfort, but Jon bore it stoically. Finally I smudged him with a bundle of fern fronds for earth, before getting him to bend over and scourging him with the ferns seven times, once for each of us present. This caused great hilarity. Next we sat him down on the triple tree, still blindfolded, with

stern admonitions not to move sideways (or he would have fallen off the rock!); we each presented him with individually with our gifts and blessings, then gave him his new medicine pouch and removed his blindfold. A group hug finished it off, and Jon was very surprised to see what he had managed to climb up on blindfolded!

Back to the hostel for tea and the AGM, which has been minuted elsewhere.

After lunch, we bade farewell to Susie, who had to get back home.

Jon wanted to go back to Arbor Low for some more observations, and Sally went along as she'd been asleep in the car the day before and had missed it completely. Ros, Barry, Maryrose and I went off in search of Thor's Cave, a site Ros had found on an OS map that sounded promising. It didn't look too hopeful when we arrived at the tiny car park beside the River Manifold; still there was a paved path next to the river (although on the wrong side), so we set off to see what we could find. We didn't of course have any idea what the cave looked like, and were constantly peering into the undergrowth across the river for any sign of a cave. Then we saw the huge thrusting wedge of cliff that dominated a bend in the river. There was a small opening high up in the face, but surely that couldn't be it? The hostel warden had said it was "a bit of a scramble", but this was definitely inaccessible without climbing gear. But as we rounded the bend in the river and could see the other side of the cliff, a gigantic opening in the cliff became visible, a good couple of hundred feet up. That looked more like it! Some passers-by assured us that there was a path with steps all the way up to the cave, and pointed us across a footbridge. Here the path quickly became steep, yet well made with stone steps where needed. One section was a very long and steep 'Jacob's Ladder' type stair, and it was with no small sense of achievement that we arrived at the top to find a platform in front of the enormous cave mouth. From here, it was water-worn smooth rocks up into the cave – "a bit of a scramble" indeed! Well worth the effort however, as the cave is pretty awesome inside; a true stone cathedral. There is a huge rock pillar with bit gnarly roots, like some stone Ygdrasil world-tree. The walls and ceiling are pockmarked with water-worn cupmarks, and green-coloured streaks running from these would seem to indicate copper-bearing minerals in the rock.

Two main passages continue further back quite some way and interconnect behind the 'tree'; Barry and I explored these with our little torches, but these weren't bright enough to really see much. Back at the entrance, which is pretty much aligned north, we could see another cave on the opposite side of the valley floor, with a south-facing aspect – the summer residence, perhaps?

As the sky turned pink with the setting sun, we made our way back down to the river and the car, and managed to arrive at the hostel just in time for our last fireworks display!

With the clocks changing the night before, we were all pretty tired that evening and, sad gits that we are, most people went to bed shortly after 9pm.

Just time on Monday morning to scavenge whatever breakfast stuff remained, pack up the car, and head on home. Another great Geomancy Group weekend was over.