

WNFC Field Meeting 14 May 2022 being the President's Walk 'Around Hereford in the Footsteps of Alfred Watkins'

On a warm and close afternoon, which resulted in a thunder storm during the following night, the President continued his campaign to re-instate the reputation of Alfred Watkins as a serious antiquarian and field worker. Twelve members gathered on Castle Green to admire the well-shorn grass where in 1924 Watkins first noticed that the Green had once been a burial ground.



Figure 1. David Whitehead introducing his subject at Castle Green.

This was confirmed after a particularly dry summer in 1933 when several buildings were also noticed, one of which Watkins' conjectured was a small church, which after some basic research he identified as the chapel of St Martin, dating he thought from the reign of Henry III. Equally prescient was his sketch plan, published in the 1933 *Transactions*, of a complex building, which, when excavated in 1973 by Ron Shoemsmith was shown to be the early minster of St Guthlac. Watkins had hoped to carry out some excavations of his own and had permission from the City Council in 1934, but was delayed by a visit of the English Folk Dancing Society. Sadly he died the following April. The President pointed out that although by this time he was a nationally known figure, famous for his 'ley-lines' etc, he still displayed a remarkable skill as a scholarly field worker.

The party moved away from the Green to the site of the lower ford below the Victoria Bridge. In 1923 Watkins examined several trenches being dug in the Bishop's Meadows for sewers. The sections showed the profiles of metalled causeways leading to the ford—proof he believed of the earlier significance of the ford. He also pointed out that on the east side of the river, up against Bartonsham Farm, there was a large marker stone, which he had photographed. The undergrowth made it difficult for us to pin-point the exact spot but the general point was made about his acute observations, notwithstanding that he also made further connections relating to remote features in the landscape linked to this spot by 'ley-lines' or track-ways.

The group walked up the footpath from the river to St James's Road where the uncertain future of Bartonsham Farm was discussed. The President mentioned his futile attempt to persuade Historic England to list it as a good example of a typical and, relatively, unaltered example of Hereford's late Georgian classicism (Fig. 2). The walled garden to the east of the house was also commented on.



Figure 2. Bartonsham Farm

The group turned-off the public road and into the Bartonsham Meadows where the President produced a Lidar image, which showed that in the past the meadows had been regularly ploughed. Hence the 'barley-ham' recorded in the place-name. Watkins noticed the Row Ditch, a prominent bank, which separates the 19th century housing in Park Street from the meadows. In the *Transactions* for 1931 he noticed that it was mentioned in the city records in the 12th century and was sceptical about its association on successive Ordnance Survey maps with the Scottish Army, besieging Hereford in 1645. In fact he suggested that this was the invention of John Webb, the author of *The Memorials of the Civil War in Herefordshire* (1879). The President drew attention to the excavations, which took place in 2017, which appeared to confirm Watkins' scepticism.

At the eastern end of Row Ditch Watkins commented on the place-name 'Crozens' which he considered significant, suggesting, rather typically, that it marked the crossing-place of track-ways, aligned with the churches of St Owen and All Saints. The President pointed out that the survival of a large open space here was probably a result of the place being used in the Middle Ages for public assemblies. According to a 12th-century document the Bartonsham assembly was held 'at a tree nigh to Rough Ditch' and the modern name suggests that it was perhaps marked by a wayside cross.

Following the Hampton Bishop road under the railway bridge, the Eign Quay was noticed and the group paused at the bottom of Old Eign Hill, close to the Whalebone Inn, now the veterinary surgeon's premises. The President pointed out that there had been much speculation in the local newspapers in the late 19th century about secret passages in and around a feature called Scots Hole or Mouse Castle. This had been intensified by the engineering work in the last decades of the century when the new Hampton Park Road was pushed through a small estate called the Vineyard, which had revealed caverns and openings, which were reputed to be secret passages built by the monks of St Guthlac's Priory. Watkins lived on the new road at Vineyard Croft but was instinctively a rationalist and rejected the folk tales. He consulted the City Engineer and Surveyor (and archaeologist), G.H. Jack who confirmed that the 'caverns' were entirely natural and typical of an extensive glacial deposit.



Figure 3. Club members enjoying welcome refreshments in the President's garden.

After a tiring slog up Eign Hill via Elgar's House at Plas Gwyn, and a view of Watkin's home, further along the road, the company took tea in the President's wild garden, upon which apparently Alfred Watkins had no views (Fig. 3).

David Whitehead