

THE STOKE BONE BED.

This fossiliferous site has been known since early Victorian times. The original Ipswich railway station, opened by the Eastern Union Railway in 1846, was in St Mary's Stoke parish, south of Ipswich town centre.

When the approach cutting to the southern (London) end of the railway tunnel through Stoke Hill was excavated, the workmen could hardly have expected to find the remains of fossil elephants. The Ipswich Journal of 4 December 1847 recorded tusks, teeth and bones of elephant from Stoke Hills donated to the newly opened Ipswich Museum (then in Museum Street) by Mr Girling. The Suffolk Chronicle 18 May 1849 recorded 'in a glass case in the Museum was a group of mammoth teeth, found at this site, of various sizes, showing that the animals had died at all ages.' The Ipswich Journal 29 May 1849 gave a report of a lecture by John Brown of Stanway: 'so plentiful that the teeth were carried about and offered for sale - two were purchased in Colchester' (the railway ran between Ipswich and Colchester). John Brown presented specimens to the British Museum in 1852. Robert Fitch of Norwich had specimens in his collection (he originally came from Ipswich).

In 1908 Nina Frances Layard opened up a small section at the side of the cutting for examination. Remains found included an enormous tusk of an adult mammoth, an uncut tooth of a baby mammoth and part of the claw bone of a lion. The tusk was in a fragmentary condition and fell into hundreds of conical pieces. The investigation was recorded in the Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and Natural History 1910.

In 1919 a large portion of cliff to the east of the cutting was removed to enable construction of new railway sidings. Mr Woolford, Mechanical Engineer of the Great Eastern Railway acquired bones and teeth from the workmen. He then granted permission for Nina Layard to excavate, the work being carried out under auspices of the Percy Sladen Research Trust. On 2nd March 1920 she picked up the bone-bearing bed, an extremely tenacious deep purple clay. Bones were in a good but fragile condition and comparatively few could bear removal. However 22 teeth of mammoth were recovered, in some cases still retained in the jaws, and also foot bones and teeth of a large lion. Members of the Ipswich and District Field Club visited the Stoke Bone Bed excavation in April 1920, where they found Nina Layard working in wet clay, with an umbrella in one hand and a knife to excavate with in the other. Dr Smith-Woodward visited the excavation in June 1920 and discovered portions of shell of freshwater tortoise (Emys). Nina Layard described the work in the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society of East Anglia 1920, with drawings by Mary F. Outram, and she donated the finds to Ipswich Museum.

In September 1975 archaeologist John Wymer carried out a small excavation at the north end of the wagon repair works and close to the main

railway line. 50 cm of railway yard materials rested on 1-2 metres of sands, clays and loams, on dark purplish-black clay on which lay fragmentary bones.

On the 5th August 1977 a JCB machine was used to excavate a section in the Stoke Hill Beds, for inspection by members of the International Quaternary Association (INQUA). Permission was obtained from British Railways Eastern Region Divisional staff at Norwich, with the Divisional Civil Engineer constructing a length of chestnut fencing between the dig and the main running line, to protect visitors. In consultation with Mr V. J. Dallimore, Area Maintenance Engineer (Colchester) I accepted the general provisions of the Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act, the applicable parts of the Factories Act and the overriding Health and Safety at Work, etc., Act, together with extant Transport Acts as mutually covering the situation of the work. Mr L. Frost, the foreman in charge of the Carriage and Wagon Workshops Depot at Croft Street, in which the site was located, was of help locally.

The information board on the Stoke Tunnel SSSI site, off Worsdell Close, was sponsored by Abbey Developments Limited. 'A Day in the Life of Lake Ipswich' (below) is used on the board.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF LAKE IPSWICH.

A long long time ago where you are now standing was the muddy edge of the freshwater Lake Ipswich.

Let us, in our imagination, go back some 210,000 years before the present day. The climate is slightly warmer than the present. The coldest part of the Ice Age is over, although further freezing times would follow this warm interglacial time. Let us spend a day here in this beautiful valley, watching the drama of the hunters and the hunted.

At night-time the sky is swash with stars but their patterns are different to those we know because it is so long ago.

It is very still just before sunrise, but with the first light of dawn, the quiet time is broken by the early morning chattering of birds. Another day begins. A herd of large wild oxen start the show, visiting to drink the water. There is a scuffle at the edge, some of the bulls are beginning to fight.

As the sun comes up, lions begin to roar, first one, then others, as the local Stoke pride keeps in touch.

Other animals are moving. Wild horses are the next to quench their thirst. They have come from an area of shorter grass, where they felt safe to sleep at night. They are in small family groups, but there is also a large group of young stallions. They drink as fast as they can, for they have seen a mother lioness by a tree in the distance. She is enjoying

a stretch while some of her cubs play with her tail. One of them rips her tail but a cuff with mother's paw soon puts a stop to it. A timid horse bolts in panic, risking being ambushed by lions.

The day is warming up, the air is full of the buzz of insects and the smell of flowers. A bear next visits the shore. Sudden ripples on the surface of the water tell us that a water vole is looking for food. A freshwater tortoise swims leisurely by.

Slightly later in the day the lions come to drink. The pride is predominantly a group of related lionesses - sisters, cousins and aunts. Further away is a group of adult males not yet old enough to challenge for a pride of their own. All wonder where the older adult male is. The lions are not in a hurry and take up to 20 minutes each in lapping the water. What is that noise? Is it one of them purring? It is now time for their siestas.

Further away, a rhinoceros gives its resting position away by raising a small cloud of dust as it breathes.

Some mammoths - elephants with large curved tusks - come to drink. One of them has a good scratch against a large sandy sarsenstone. A sad site nearby - a mother mammoth and her calf have died. Could they have been killed by the lions, or by the next visitors to the lake?

It is mid-day and some human beings arrive. They are carrying flint implements for hunting. They made them by chipping a block of flint, but exactly how? They know the answer but we can't communicate with them. They don't speak any language that we know.

Nearby, a group of old bulls are resting in the long grass during the early afternoon. They no longer live with the main herd of oxen, but would still be formidable foes for any lion or human hunting them.

In the early afternoon as shadows lengthen, more large animals search out the water.

Red deer arrive, followed by four straight-tusked elephants. One is a big male with enormous tusks. Ears flapping, each drinks about 150 litres of water, sucked up the trunk 9 litres at a time, and squirted into the mouth. They have come from their feeding grounds, three from the Chantry woodland and one from the Dales woodland, having wandered some 6-7 kilometres during the day. A rhinoceros also comes down to drink and wallow.

A deep red sunset tells the humans to head for a safe place for the night.

With the light not quite faded, howls from a pack of wolves suggests that they will soon be hunting. Dusk falls and the hunted must be even more watchful.

High overhead the myriads of stars again appear. But the night here belongs to the lions - the hunters. Elsewhere in the darkness, but helped by a little moonlight, eyes stare nervously to

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pick up the slightest movement, noses twitch and ears listen for the rumbles of prowling lions. Sometime after midnight three hunting lionesses from the Stoke pride burst from their hiding places and in three or four strides death came quickly to a horse - even its speed did not see it through the night.

The lions were still feeding when a red glow in the eastern sky heralded the end of a long night and the beginning of a new day. How well would you survive the last 24 hours?
