



THORNCOMBE VILLAGE TRUST NEWS

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THORNCOMBE VILLAGE TRUST

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FINGERPOSTS

In the 1740s turnpike trusts were encouraged to mark every mile, and in 1766 this became compulsory to help stagecoach and mail services keep to timetables. In 1773 the General Turnpike Act required trustees to erect signs informing travellers of the distance to the nearest town, and often to London.

In the 20th century the earliest signs were erected initially by cycle clubs followed by the Automobile Association (AA) and the Royal Automobile Club (RAC), but with the Motor Car Act of 1903, the government passed responsibility for the provision of all traffic signs to local authorities.

There are in the region of 1000 traditional fingerposts in existence across Dorset and there are two main designs. Some have a hollow circular shaped finial with DORSET C.C. written around the top edge – occasionally with the C.C. shifted to the bottom edge. Others have a similar design, but with a horizontal bar through the middle, making it resemble the London Underground sign in shape. Mileage was typically measured to the nearest quarter mile.

There are examples of intriguing, possibly accidental, spellings - 'Winterborne St Martinstown' rather than 'Winterborne St Martin' or 'Martinstown', as the village is known, and instances where letters have been missed off - 'Marswood' instead of the proper spelling, 'Marshwood'. Due to their age, some fingerposts have the historic spelling of places that was dominant at the time of their construction. Examples in Dorset include 'Portisham', rather than the modern spelling 'Portesham' and the pre-decimal '6D Handley' for Sixpenny Handley. A local example in Thorncombe parish is the spelling of Ford rather than Forde.

Although most fingerposts are a combination of black, white or grey, other variants exist. The most well known are the small number of **Red Posts** which are found in southern England. These are painted red with white text and four exist at junctions within Dorset. Again we have a local example.

Hewood in the parish of Thorncombe
Anderson on the A35 between Bere Regis and Winterborne Zelston
Poyntington on the B3145 between Sherborne and Wincanton
Benville Bridge on the unclassified C29 between Evershot and Rampisham Down

Various theories have been put forward as to their colour, including being to mark routes used by prisoners on their way to port for transportation to Australia, or the site of a gibbet.

TVT CHRISTMAS SALE

Please make a note in your diaries for our Christmas Sale & Coffee morning on Saturday November 23rd from 10am to noon. There will be craft stalls, bric a brac and cakes and Dorset Wildlife Trust will be also be there with many interesting gifts and cards for sale. Ideal for Christmas presents. Any donations of bric a brac and cakes (also jams and chutneys) would be most appreciated. We look forward to seeing you there.

TIME FOR HIBERNATION

Hibernation differs from regular sleep in that it is a state of inactivity and decreased metabolism. With true hibernation, the animal appears dead. There is no movement and it takes a long time for it to wake up enough to even walk around.

The only British mammals that hibernate are the hedgehog, the bat, and the dormouse. All other mammals seem to be able to eke an existence out of the meagre pickings of winter. Some animals like frogs and toads also go into a state of torpor, which is a state somewhere between sleep and full-blown hibernation that involves a significant drop in body temperature.

At this time of year, hedgehogs in the wild are relentlessly foraging for food - conserving as much fat as possible for the cold months ahead when they'll head off to a suitable location to hibernate. The hedgehog's staple diet consists of beetles, caterpillars and earthworms and it's in the winter months that these are increasingly hard to come by.

When a hedgehog begins hibernation its body temperature drops so low it almost matches the temperature outside. Similarly, the heart rate will slow down from 190 beats per minute to a mere 20. Respiration almost stops altogether, with just one breath being taken every few minutes. As a result of these physiological alterations, the hedgehog is able to conserve a massive amount of energy - surviving through the winter months on the fat reserves it has worked hard to build up.

Dormice hibernate in an underground nest between October and April/May. Before they hibernate they fatten up to twice their normal size and they can lose up to half of their bodyweight during hibernation so have to feed up when they emerge. When they hibernate their heartbeat and breathing slow right down, and the body temperature drops to only a few degrees above freezing.

The 17 species of British bat all hibernate during the winter months when insects are scarce. They generally hibernate between November and April. Hibernation sites can be hollows in trees, roof spaces, caves, cellars or even purpose built bat boxes. During hibernation bats can take as few as five breaths per minute and their heartbeat can drop to about 20 beats per minute as the entire body slows down to save valuable energy. They can wake up for short periods to search for food and water and excrete waste, but this uses up a lot of energy.

To encourage hedgehogs to your garden, leave some piles of cuttings, leaves or logs in a quiet area for them to use, and try not to disturb such areas in winter. Don't feed them milk as it makes them ill but cat or dog food is fine. Only light a bonfire if you have checked for hedgehogs first. Finally, use slug pellets that are not toxic to mammals if you have to use them at all.

Remember that winter is a harsh time for all your garden visitors so keep putting out nuts, seeds and fat balls for the birds. It's also important to leave out some water.

In the last 50 years many of our hibernating creatures, which were once common, have dramatically declined mainly due to loss of habitat, over-intensive farming, road building and development. These days they really do need our help. Every garden, no matter how big or small, has the potential to be a mini nature reserve.

We are looking for a volunteer to help with the publicity of Thorncombe Village Trust. This will include helping with the advertising of forthcoming events as well as general publicity. If anyone is interested please email us at villagetrust@hotmail.co.uk

WITCHES MARKS

From the late medieval period onward there was an increasing fear of malevolent witches and the harm they could inflict on an unsuspecting household. It was widely believed that a witch or their animal familiar could enter a house through doorways, windows or the hearth. Apotropaic or 'witches' marks were carved into doors, windows and fireplaces, to invoke protection and good fortune for the property. As the open chimney was thought to be particularly vulnerable, they are often found around fireplaces.

Most of these date from the period of the 16th to 18th centuries and were made by carpenters and builders at the time of construction. Common marks include interlocking, overlapping and concentric circles, intersecting lines creating crosses and M's representing the Virgin Mary or double V's for 'Virgin of Virgins'. However the most common and also easily recognisable is the so-called 'daisy wheel' which was not only used to ward off evil spirits but was also considered to be a good luck symbol.

So if you live in an older house, or are visiting one, have a look at the lintel over the fireplace and see if there are any strange marks or symbols carved into the wood. If so these may be witches marks.