

## The Fire-clay Tunnel near Dowles Manor MIKE AVERILL

This article is intended to record the survey carried out in 1992 of the Fire-clay tunnel at the bottom of Dry Mill Lane near the Dowles Brook. The survey was part of a concerted effort to find possible bat hibernacula in Worcestershire at the time. All the known tunnels and ice houses were visited and this clay tunnel was one of the sites. The old fire-clay tunnel is located at SO772763 in the area once known as the Fred Dale Nature Reserve.

In the early 1800's the lower Dowles Valley was a bustling area of industry with 5 watermills including Knowles and Coopers Mills, fire-clay workings and a brickyard all within a mile of Dowles Manor. The Manor House itself was still prominent after 500 years, although the land associated with the house was much reduced to what it was and after 1902 much of the parish was split up at auction. Back in the 1800's, the local tracks would have been busy with carts carrying corn and flour, and later in 1863 any tranquillity would have been shattered when the Railway to Tenbury was opened.

The fire-clay workings were for digging clay to make bricks and were situated on both sides of the Dowles; those on the Dowles Manor side were owned by Foley and those on the opposite side by Skey. According to Jannion Elliott, owner of Dowles Manor and author of the history concerning the Manor House, Dowles and its Demesne, a poacher once used the tunnel as a refuge: James Mann, a noted poacher of fifty years or more ago, took refuge one night when chased by the gamekeepers on the estate. He was tracked to the hiding place by means of their dog, and was afterwards,

with the help of a borrowed light from a neighbouring cottage, followed into these workings, captured, and eventually brought to justice.

Could this tunnel have been big enough for that to have taken place? The answer is probably yes. The survey in 1992 was carried out using a surveyor's theodolite and although the entrance was only 1.7 metres wide, it was larger inside being 10 metres long with two diverging arms at the furthest extent. The lowest ceiling height was 0.7 metres which was approximately 5 metres in but the ceiling rose to 1.5 metres after 8 metres. The author recalls that the floor level contained ponded water at the time and so getting to the larger area meant ducking down and getting wet.

At the time of the visit no bats were found but there were a few droppings near the entrance and so some years later a grill was fitted to the entrance to make the site secure from human entry but passable for bats. Locally there was an oak tree only 20 metres away that had a large roost of Pipistrelle bats in the late 1980's. There were over 300 bats each summer until the tree blew down a few years later. There is also a record for a Lesser Horseshoe Bat in the accounts of the Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club when Jannion S. Elliott recorded the bat on July 6th 1904 at the Manor, Dowles.

### REFERENCES

- Concerning the Manor House, Dowles and its Demesne, Jannion S Elliott Herald Press (approx 1917)
- Caradoc and Severn Valley Field Club No. 44. Issued May. 1935 record of bare facts for the year 1934.

