Printed and published in England by the APRA-NUFOIS Press, 443, Meadow Lane, Nottingham, NG2 3GB. 2nd edition (revised) © 1987. R.W.Morrell.

NOTTINGHAM'S ENIGMATIC HEMLOCK STONE

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APRA-NUFOIS PRESS

Nottingham
1987

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STANDING boldly out of the side of Stapleford Hill at Bramcote, one of the suburbs of Nottingham, can be seen the spectacular Hemlock Stone. The name invokes thoughts of mystery and imagination, not to mention dark doings on moonlit nights. Older inhabitants (and some not so old) have told me of witchcraft ceremonies at the stone, not that any of my informants admit to being present at them! Thus old traditions, whether based upon substantial foundations or not, are perpetuated.

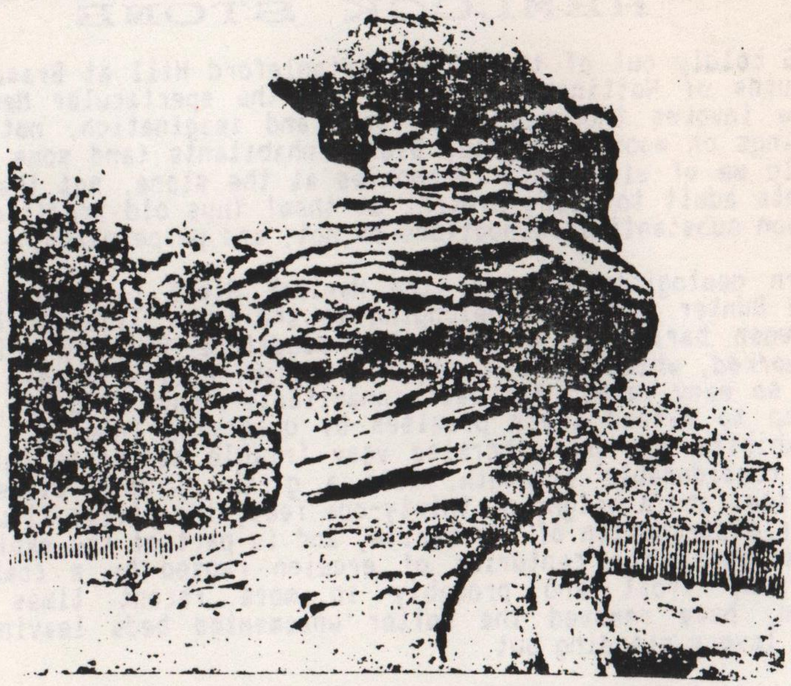
Modern geologists consider the Hemlock Stone to consist of barite cemented Bunter Sandstone belonging to the Lower Triassic Pebble Beds. Except when barite is present this sandstone is very soft and thus easily worked, which explains why Nottingham, a city largely situated on it, has so many caves, for past inhabitants found it quick, convenient and cheap to extend their premises by quarrying into it. The Hemlock Stone exhibits how the otherwise very friable sandstone can in places display considerable strength. With a girth at it's widest point of seventy feet and a height of thirty-one feet, the pillar illustrates the irregular distribution of the barite, and is part of the explanation for its appearance, for centuries of erosion caused by a combination of wind, rain, frost and probably in more recent times industrial pollution, have removed the softer uncemented beds leaving the well cemented layers standing out.

As mentioned above, contemporary geologists hold the pillar to be of Bunter Sandstone (see, for example, the paper by F.M.Taylor and A.R.E.Houldsworth, "The distribution of barite in Permo-Triassic sandstone at Bramcote, Stapleford, Trowell and Sandiacre, Nottinghamshire" (1973), *Mercian Geologist*, 4,3,171-177), in contrast to this the Victorian geologist, James Shipman, maintained the rock the pillar consisted of was from the Keuper Basement Beds ("The Story of the Hemlock Stone" (1892), *Trans. Nottingham Nats. Soc. for 1891*, 11-16).

THE ORIGIN OF THE STONE IN FACT AND LEGEND

William Stukeley (1687-1765), an indefatigable recorder of antiquarian and topigraphical curiosities, suggested the Hemlock Stone as "probably the remains of a quarry" (*Itinerarium Curiosum*,,,, Vol.1, p.53, 2nd. edn., London, 1776). A search of the available literature indicates there to have been no known quarrying on the site, although sand was quarried nearby. Shipman held the stone to have been the product of "the slow action of weather extending through vast ages" and glacial activity ("The Geology of Stapleford and Sandiacre" (*op. cit.* 10-19)). More recently F.M.Taylor of Nottingham University has revived the notion about quarrying, though without citing any evidence ("The Geology of the Area West of Nottingham" (1964), *Mercian Geologist*, 1,1,73-4).

Legend reaching back to medieval times tells of another origin. According to this the stone was hurled by the devil at a particularly pious Abbot of Lenton Priory whose prayers he found disturbing, the stone missed and ended up where it now stands. A variation of this tale has the stone directed at Lenton Priory itself (*Nottingham Topic*, January, 1980). Such tales are in keeping with the medieval idea of the devil as Prince of the Power of the Air, and contrary to what many think the sounding of church bells, for example, were not so much to call people to services but rather to ward off the devil. No less an authority than the so-called angelic doctor himself, Thomas Aquinas, wrote of bells: "Provided they have been duly consecrated and baptised"



An early photograph of the Hemlock Stone.

they are the primary means of "frustrating the atmospheric mischiefs of the devil" (cited in, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* by A.D.White, Arco, London, 1955, pp.343-350). The Hemlock Stone is by no means the only missile hurled according to legend by the devil. A monolith in the grounds of Rudston church (Yorkshire) is said to have been thrown at the church door, while the name of the Devil's Arrows near Boroughbridge, also in Yorkshire, almost speak for themselves, though the devil was supposed to have been aiming at Aldborough itself when he fired them. Clearly, Old Nick was no marksman!

THE DEVIL AND THE STONES

The name, Hemlock Stone, is suggestive of witchcraft or diabolism, and throughout the country can be found other pillars which have attracted to themselves similar suggestive titles. In pre-scientific times the "explanation" for the origin of structures considered too large or spectacular to be of human origin (geology is a relatively modern scientific discipline) was found by invoking the supernatural power of the devil, though Merlin the legendary magician was also a candidate.* The Devil's Arrows have already been mentioned. Only three of these millstone grit pillars remain in situ, the tallest being twenty-three feet in height, and each weighs an estimated twenty plus tonnes. On the side of Leckhampton Hill near Cheltenham can be seen the Devil's Chimney. Many a tale has been told about this structure, which several local antiquarians looked upon as an ancient religious centre. The eminent invertebrate palaeontologist and stratigrapher, S.S.Buckman, concluded it was a natural creation formed through erosion over a period of five hundred years (*Cheltenham as a Holiday Resort*. Cheltenham, 1897). Well, scientists, even distinguished individuals, can be fooled,

and the story of the true origin of the pillar is rather different from what Buckman and others thought. The structure in fact dates only from about 1795, and was created "as a remarkable publicity stunt..." when a railway was laid down to a quarry on the hill (D.E.Bick. *Old Leckhampton, Its Quarries, Railways, Riots and the Devil's Chimney*. pp.35-7). How those old-time workers would have laughed to read the tales which grew up surrounding their pillar.

The association of stones with the devil is widespread, being found not only in Britain but other parts of Europe. At Loggerheads in North Wales there is a stone bearing the devil's hoofprint made when he jumped off to the top of a nearby mountain, another tale attributes it to Merlin's horse. A rock in Brittany is said to show the imprint of the devil's thighs, and rocks said to have been thrown at churches in Cologne and Saint Pol-de-Leon are claimed to display his claw marks. The heel stone at Stonehenge is said to have been thrown at a friar, hitting him on his heel, hence its name, and to prove the tale the incredulous are shown the imprint of his heel. The late Edmund Taylor, Treasurer of the East Midlands Geological Society, told the present writer that one of the ledges on the Hemlock Stone was known in his boyhood as "the devil's seat", because Old Nick was supposed to have been seen sitting there. Mr.Taylor was brought up as a Roman Catholic and trained as a Jesuit, though eventually became an atheist and left the church.

WHAT IS IN A NAME?

As mentioned earlier, the name, Hemlock Stone, conveys hints of witchcraft, for the hemlock plant (*Conium maculatum*) has been traditionally associated with this supposed cult. It could be in the past it was abundant in the vicinity of the stone, although such is not the case today and I have come across no reports of this being so in the past. The name Hemlock was used by Stukeley (*op. cit.* p.53), the first antiquarian to write, albeit briefly, of the stone, hence the name was established when he visited the site and so we can reasonably consider it to predate the 17th century.

According to several local antiquarians the original name for the stone was the Crumlech, or Cromlech Stone, and William Stretton, who published the first illustration of it, displays no doubts about this, stating "its present name of *Hemlock Stone* (is) only a corruption of *Cromlech Stone*, and must have been of British or Danish origin" (*Stretton Manuscripts*. Privately published, Nottingham, 1910. p.20). Stretton relied upon earlier writers in support of this claim, though he failed to cite them, nor does the author of the article in the *Nottingham Topic* for January 1980, who adopts this claim. Just to make the matter more confused is the reference to the stone as "The Himlack Stane" in the *Nottingham Guardian* for June 6, 1908, although this appears to have been derived from the mispelling of the name by W.T.Aveline in his Geological Survey *Memoir* of 1880.

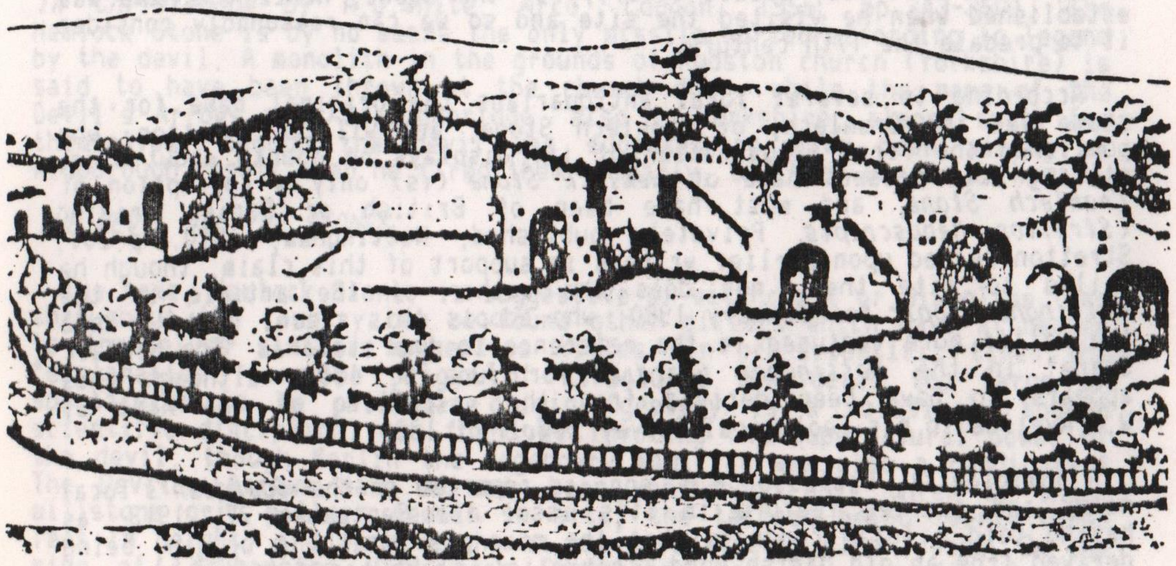
A philologist, Professor H.M.Leon, is reported in the *Guardian's* local notes and queries feature in it's issue for September 27, 1913, as having told a local congress that the name was Danish in origin, being derived from an old Danish word, 'hemmelig', which means cover, close or something which overspreads, the latter a description which certainly fits the appearance of the Hemlock Stone. The Danes certainly settled in Nottinghamshire leaving traces of their presence in local place names. A transition from hemmelig to hemlock over several centuries would be quite natural. Leon rejected the theory of the name being a corruption of cromlech on the ground of the word meaning 'stone'. He regared the title 'bent bent stone' as "a needless and stupid reiteration".

THE HEMLOCK STONE AND THE DRUIDS

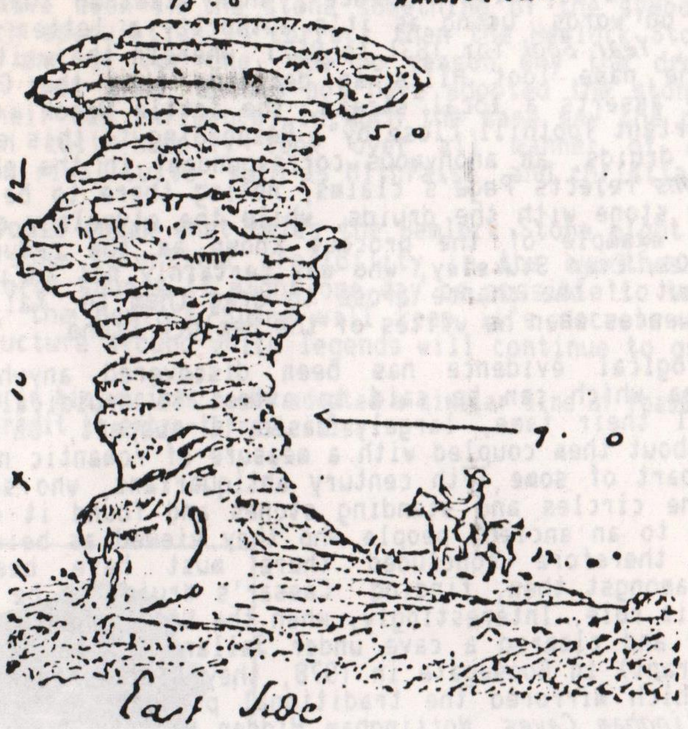
The notion of the Hemlock Stone serving as a centre for Druidic activities was at one time popular amongst Nottingham antiquarians. In White's, *History and Gazetteer of Nottinghamshire* published in 1884, reference is made to the belief the stone was a druidic temple. An unsourced and undated newspaper cutting in the collection of Nottingham Central Library (probably late 19th century in date) states it to appear "highly probable that it (the Hemlock Stone) was a druidical altar", for "it stands in an area commanding an extensive view over a plain". Indeed it was not until after 1918 that any major building took place nearby, according to Mrs.Kathleen Henley who frequently visited the stone with her father. She also speaks of standing with her back to the stone, shouting and listening to an echo returning (pers. comm.). The anonymous writer of the newspaper article just mentioned speculates that in druidical times the area was covered with a wood of native oaks.

In the Park area of Nottingham that were once called 'Druids Holes' because they were thought to have been the homes of the local druid priests; our anonymous author displays no doubts about this being a matter of established fact and readilt ties these in with the Hemlock Stone. Such beliefs, though, find no support amongst modern students of Nottingham's past, and their origin seems to date no further back than the early 18th century, when local antiquarians having read their Stukeley and others quite naturally sought for evidence of similar druidical associations here, and as there exist no circles of standing stones or known monoliths decided the Hemlock Stone provided an acceptable substitute.

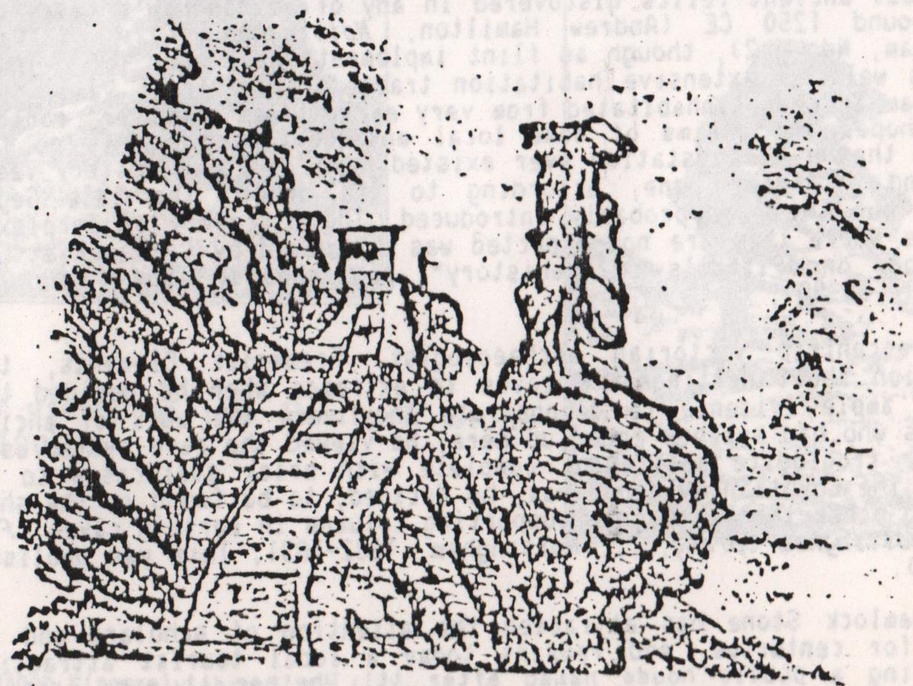
Imaginative ideas about the supposed druidical associations of sites such as certain caves and the Hemlock Stone did spill over into the 20th century, for one Samuel Page, in no less a place than the *Transactions*



The so-called "druids houses" on Castle Boulevard, Nottingham. Actually the remains of a medieval chapel, the Rock Chapel of St. Mary.



The earliest known illustration of the Hemlock Stone, dated 1818.



The Devil's Chimney, Leckhampton Hill, Cheltenham

of the Thoroton Society, claimed the evidence of druidical activities might "very definitely be traced" at the site of the Hemlock Stone (1906, 20-23). However, his "evidence", when examined turns out to be merely a play on words, using as it's authority a letter published in William Hone's, *Year Book* for 1831 (p.867), wherein the writer sought to demonstrate the name Toot Hills as deriving from the Celtic deity, Teutates. Page asserts a local stream, the Tottle Brook, was so named after "an important Toothill close by". Responding to this exposition of belief in the druids, an anonymous correspondent in the same issue of the *Transactions* rejects Page's claims, noting there to be no evidence to connect the stone with the druids, while the etymology of "Toothill" is merely "an example of the process known as the reduplication of synonyms" (p.20). Even Stukeley, who was certainly not an individual to leave druids out if the chance arose to drag them in, fails to allude druidical influences when he writes of the Hemlock Stone.

No archaeological evidence has been discovered anywhere in the Nottingham area which can be said to attest to druidical activities. Indeed for all their fame, largely based, I suspect, on what Julius Caesar wrote about them coupled with a measure of romantic nationalistic pride on the part of some 17th century antiquarians, who saw Britain's legacy of stone circles and standing stones and found it difficult to attribute them to an ancient people who they viewed as being crude and barbaric, so therefore concluded there must have been be some intellectuals amongst them, finding Caesar's druids to be as good as any to fill this role. Interestingly, when the Nottingham Hidden History Team excavated and cleared a cave under Jalland's Wine Merchants (now Brown's Restaurant) in Goosegate in 1978, they discovered a head carved on one wall which mirrored the traditional picture of a druid's head (P.A.Nix *Nottingham Caves*, Nottingham Hidden History Team, Nottingham, 1984). The excavators do not claim the head to be druidical, or that the cave is really ancient, but the likeness did strike them as interesting. It is just possible that the cave might once have been a chapel.

The most ancient relics discovered in any of Nottingham's caves date from around 1250 CE (Andrew Hamilton, *Nottingham, City of Caves*, Nottingham, Nd. p.2), though as flint implements have been found in the area, as well as extensive habitation traces in the Trent Valley, the Nottingham area was inhabitated from very early times. However, contrary to the hopes and claims of some local antiquarians there is no firm evidence that a Roman station ever existed here. A Roman pottery vessel was found in Friar Lane, according to its owner, the late George Campion, but this was probably introduced. The discovery of perplexing artifacts where they are not expected was discussed by C. van Riet Lowe in a paper on "Pitfalls in Prehistory", published in 1954 (*Antiquity*, XXVIII,110,85-90).

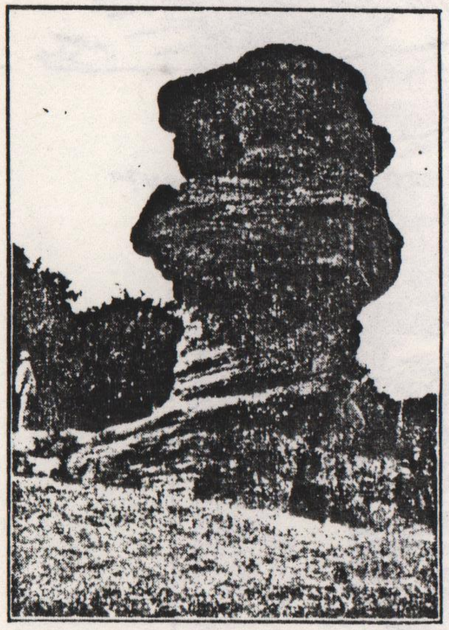
An eccentric Victorian archaeologist, Frederick Clements, took speculation about Nottingham's caves to extremes when he decided they provided ample evidence to demonstrate they were the work of ancient Egyptians who had somehow ended up here. He viewed the cave system as an extensive troglodite settlement complete with brick staircases to the surface. The Egyptian evidence was, he decided, to be found in the shape of, among other things, square supporting columns in certain caves (*From Whence Nottingham Sprang.....* Nottingham, 1882-1891. This was published in parts).

The Hemlock Stone has attracted the attention of scholars and the curious for centuries, and remains today a local tourist attraction, even having a public house named after it! Whether it ever inspired religious awe and reverence I have no means of knowing, though one

cannot help but suspect that people who scattered standing stones around the country, presumably because of certain religious convictions then held, would have seen in the stone something of the symbolism of their faith. If such speculation is correct then the Hemlock Stone might have been sacred, and I, for one, see no reason why the druids, if they flourished in this area, should not have adopted the stone and used it to promote their own influence, in much the same way the priest kind of the Christian cult happily took over all manner of doctrines and practices from rival cults, such as Mithraism, and christianised them.

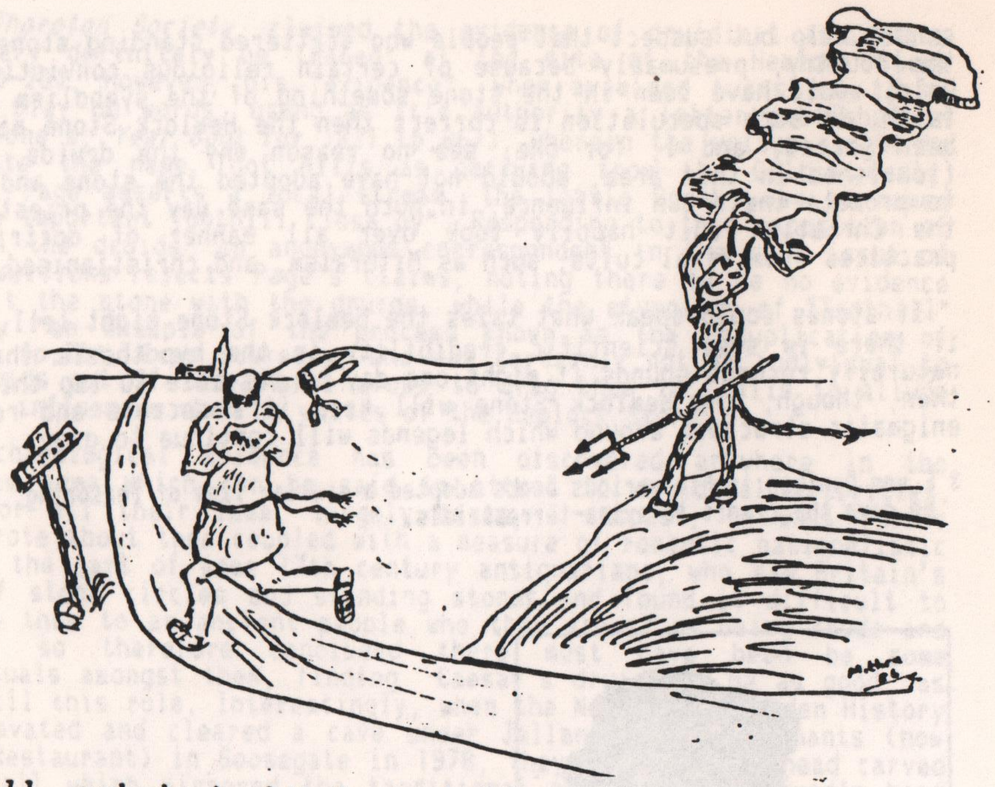
If stones could speak what tales the Hemlock Stone might tell. Perhaps if there is some scientific credibility in the hypothesis that stone naturally records sounds it might one day be possible to tap this. Until then, though, the Hemlock Stone will keep it's secrets and remain an enigmatic structure around which legends will continue to grow.

* E.von Daniken in his various books adopted a similar line of reasoning, though he gave the credit to extra-terrestrials.



Two views of the Hemlock Stone in 1905.

The author sincerely thanks the following for their invaluable help: Mrs.K.Henley, Paul Nix, Syd Henley, George Bull and the staff of the Local History Department of Nottingham Central Library.



"Well, nobody is likely to believe it, are they?"

The Hemlock Stone as shown in an early Geological Survey publication.

A photograph taken between 1900 and 1914 showing a group of unidentified children posing before the Hemlock Stone.