

Burrington Combe and Stanton Drew

Caves and Circles

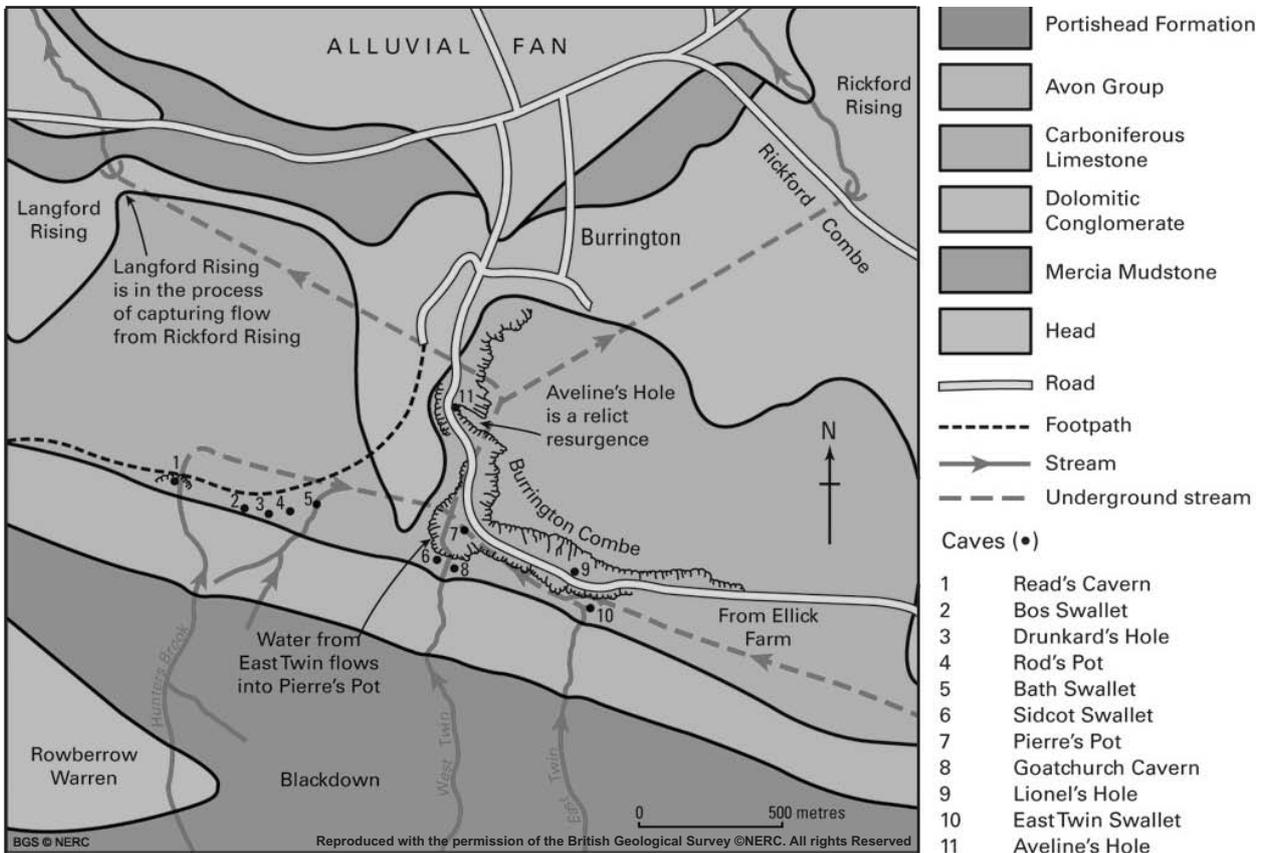
Tim Lunt

Our last excursion of 2011 concentrated on two aspects of the prehistory of North Somerset; a morning walk (guided by Tim Lunt) around the caves and swallets of Burrington Combe on the north edge of the Mendips, followed by an afternoon (with John Oswin) amongst the stone circles at Stanton Drew.

Any visit to the Burrington Combe caves and swallets is as much about geology as archaeology. Water over the millennia has gently eroded the limestone to form the gorge that is the Combe. It is similar to the other spectacular dry gorges around the Mendips at Ebor and Cheddar which began as melt-water runoff during the ice age and held running water until this found underground routes. Mendip streams all disappear where the impermeable sandstone and shale strata meets the limestone layer and the water is then able to penetrate this softer rock and form extensive cave systems. These dark entrances into the underworld were clearly very significant to prehistoric man and around Burrington Combe, as all over the Mendips, human bones and artefacts have been found in them.

The walk started at the Rock of Ages and proceeded a short distance up the Combe to Aveline's Hole. Beside the road this large cave entrance leads into a passage, 50m long, descending into the hillside. The entrance was hidden by a landslide until uncovered by two men digging for a rabbit in 1797. Early reports describe 70-100 skeletons laid in rows in the upper part of the cave but these had been largely dispersed by the time Boyd Dawkins undertook the first recorded excavation in 1850, digging a deep shaft but finding only silt. It was the University of Bristol Speleological Society (UBSS) from 1919-27 who exposed the natural cave floor by removing 150 tons of material and finding the remains of 21 individuals together with flint and pottery objects. UBSS described a stalagmite floor that had developed above the deep silt layer in the cave and in which the bones had become embedded. Most of these finds and the excavation notes were later destroyed in 1940 wartime

Figure 1
Burrington Combe – Geology and Caves.



bombing in Bristol but sufficient material survived to recently radiocarbon date all the remains at early Mesolithic (8400-8200BC) with isotopic tooth analysis showing that the population had remained very local to the site. The Cheddar Man skeleton found nearby in Gough's Cave, Cheddar was found to be of a later date at 7150BC but other bone material recovered in that cave in 2010 was found to be approx 12000BC.

A further discovery in 2005 of a series of inscribed crosses, also early Mesolithic, was made on a wall at the end of Aveline's Hole and these are very similar to marks found in caves in France, Germany and

Denmark. The very early date of these remains, just after the ice age, and the cemetery context make this site the earliest known in the UK of this type and very unusual in that such burial concentrations are not seen again for another 4000 years, in the Neolithic.



Figure 2
Aveline's Hole.

Further up the Combe on the south side, the West Twin Brook flows down a small valley to disappear into a swallet or sink hole. All the streams flowing into the caves below Burrington Combe have been found to combine and later emerge in two places on either side of Burrington village. Near the West Twin Swallet are a series of caves (Sidcot Swallet, Goatchurch Cavern, Whitcombe's Hole) in which various animal (mammoth tusk, bear teeth) or human (ox, deer, goat bones and pottery) occupation evidence has been found. Our path continued up the valley beyond these caves on to Blackdown and immediately became nearly overgrown by high bracken, which grows vigorously on the Mendip sandstone. The Mendip Hills AONB have a policy to cut the bracken annually but it is a major task; other vegetation is grazed intermittently by Exmoor ponies, cattle and goats. At the valley top, the view reveals the south-facing limestone scarp on the other side of Burrington Combe which is grassland and full of many alkaline loving plants. This makes the southern limestone slopes very important for butterflies and other invertebrates.

Moving west, further cave entrances are apparent in deep depressions at Bos Swallet and Rod's Pot where Beaker and Neolithic items have been found. The furthest cave west of the Burrington Combe group is Read's Cavern where the Hunter's Brook vanishes beneath a limestone cliff. The main chamber in the cave was dug originally by UBSS between 1920-4 who found significant charcoal deposits and considered some sort of metal-working to be in evidence. The cave was dug again by the University of Bristol in 2010 who again found much charcoal together with human bone and votive depositions (e.g. La Tene brooch, fine pottery) dating from the Iron Age, but no metal slag at all. These finds, the proximity of Dolebury Iron Age Fort less than a mile away and the difficult cave entry passage preclude likely use for occupation or industry and suggest a more ritual function.

Dolebury Fort, its magnificent earthworks and amazing views over North Somerset and the Bristol Channel, was just too far to go this time and lunch awaited at the Burrington Inn. There was brief concern for half the group who were lost on the way back down but they were saved by their map-reading skills!

We reformed at Stanton Drew in the afternoon for the tour of the Cove and Stone Circles, thought to date from between 3000-2000BC. BACAS have been conducting geophysical (with resistivity surveying and depth profiling, magnetometry and Ground Penetrating Radar) and other surveys of the area during 2009-10 in collaboration with the Bath and North East Somerset (BaNES) Archaeologist, Richard Sermon (see *Camertonias 48 and 49*). Our first stop on the tour with John Oswin was at the Cove, an impressive set of two standing stones and one broken recumbent stone in the garden of the Druid Arms pub. There is a possibility that the recumbent stone was broken during erection.

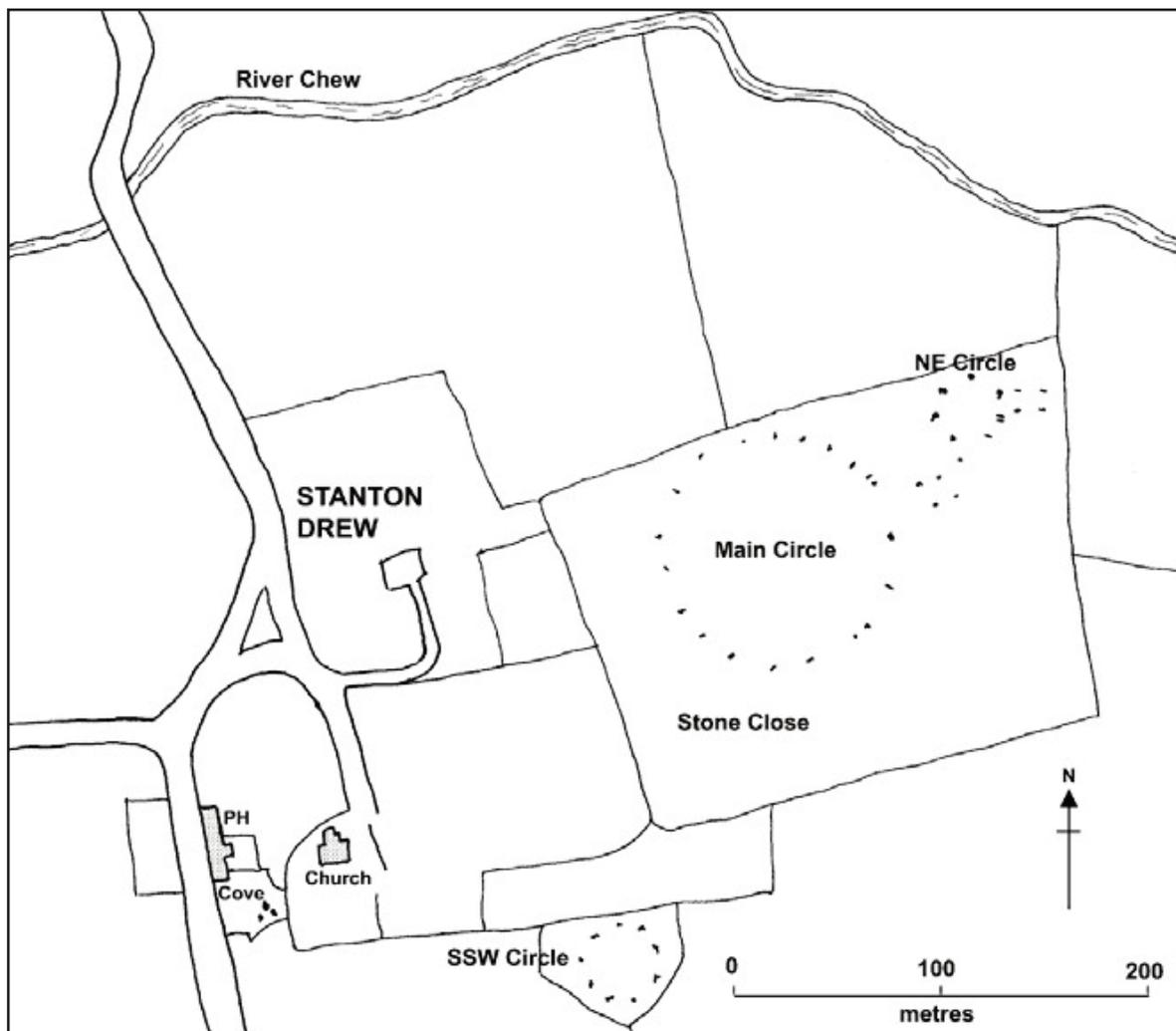


Figure 3
Stanton Drew: Stone Circles and Cove.

Geophysics has identified areas of high resistance around these stones which suggest a possible stone cyst or burial chambers beneath and this was also confirmed with resistance profiling to allow a view at greater depth. Although no sign of a mound remains visible in the pub garden, the surveys there and in the adjacent churchyard also indicate that the Cove was probably a chambered long barrow of approximately 40m length with the three visible stones being the portal. This cannot be proved conclusively without excavation. If it is a long barrow it would predate the stone circles by 1000 years. The Cove lies at the western edge of a ridge which extends from the South West (SW) circle. Intervisibility between Cove and stone circles is likely to have existed in Prehistoric times but is now disrupted by the Church and the buildings of Church Farm.

Stone Close is a large field to the east of the village, close to the River Chew, that contains the Main Circle, the smaller North East (NE) Circle and their associated avenues. The Main Circle is 113m in diameter and the second largest stone circle in Britain after Avebury. Examination of the stones at Stanton Drew show three main rock types (Oolitic limestone, Dolomitic conglomerate, Pennant sandstone) have been used with likely sources up to 15 miles away. An intriguing square stone of weathered limestone lies flat on the west side of the Main Circle. Its shape suggests it was never intended to be vertical and it is directly opposite the NE Circle.

Geophysical work by English Heritage in 1997 on the Main Circle revealed a surrounding ditch with entrance towards the NE Circle and nine concentric rings of postholes within the Main circle. This finding suggested a possible wood henge existed before or contemporaneously with the stone circle. The recent BACAS geophysics work extended the area surveyed to confirm these findings and add further detail with a new north east entrance to the circle, a Medieval trackway route, further posthole circles and other anomalies around the Main Circle perimeter.

The NE Circle comprises 8 large stones and the surveys have shown 4 large square pits surrounding the centre of the circle. From the east of the circle a short stone avenue runs towards the river to meet a similar avenue from the Main Circle. Beside the NE avenue may be a place where stones were broken in Medieval times for building use or due to superstition as several parts of large stones lie here.

The site of Stone Close is on a low plateau just above the river which in prehistory may have been a lake. The countryside appears to surround this small area and it would have been a secluded place in ancient times. Conversely, the SW Circle of 12 visible stones stands above Stone Close on an apparently levelled platform on the hill brow with much more extensive views towards Mendip and along the valley towards the Severn estuary. Stone Close can only be seen from the very northern edge of the SW Circle so the two sites appear to have different uses or construction periods. Geophysics shows another three circles of postholes within the SW Circle and other possible buried stones.

Outlying standing stones were recorded by early antiquarians close to Stanton Drew, of which only Hautville's Quoit (HQ) on the far side of the river remains. A geographic alignment has been noted SW Circle–Main Circle–HQ and another between Cove–Main Circle–NE Circle. Research on astronomical alignments also shows, among other possibilities, a winter solstice line between the NE Circle centre and the Cove and a lunar alignment between the NE and SW Circle centres.

BACAS and BaNES plan to continue further activity at Stanton Drew by extending the survey area into the fields south and east of the SW Circle and Cove as well as further investigations around Hautville's Quoit and the Tying Stones, now gone, sited half a mile to the west.

Figure 4
BACAS magnetometry plot of Stone Close.

