

Avebury Landscape Walk

Exploring Avebury and its surrounding sacred sites and monuments

Tim Lunt
Avril Porter

Avebury stone circle, the largest in the world and one of Britain's major Neolithic sites, is just one part of a broader landscape with a high concentration of other sacred sites all dating from within a thousand years of each other. Avril Porter, a National Trust guide at Avebury, led a full day circular walk of approximately 13km over this part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site in May 2014.

Starting from The Sanctuary site on top of Overton Hill by the A4 we had clear views to the southern horizon, the location of Wansdyke and closer, both the east and west Kennet long barrows and the top of Silbury Hill could be seen. Out of sight about 13km to the south-west was Marden Henge and 32kms to the South lies the large Neolithic settlement of Durrington Walls, and beyond that Stonehenge. The Avebury Henge and Circle, only about 3km to the north-west, was completely out of sight behind Waden Hill.

The Sanctuary site today consists of a field with concrete markers, indicating where the 162 wooden posts were laid out in six concentric rings around 3000BC, followed 900 years later by a double ring of stones. We were shown a drawing by the antiquarian William Stukely from 1723 with some of the stones still visible, but they were removed soon afterwards.

From The Sanctuary we made our way north along the ancient Ridgeway track passing several large Bronze Age barrows and also the surviving agger of the Roman road running west to Bath from Cunetio. Turning left off the Ridgeway there is an atmospheric setting with three Bronze Age barrows concealed beneath large beech trees and views down to the valley below where the standing stones of the West Kennet Avenue could be seen. Windmill Hill was visible in the far distance, the causewayed enclosure 1.5km north-west of Avebury, with occupation dating from as early as 3650BC.

Figure 1
The BACAS group at the Avebury circle.



We took the footpath down from the ridge to join the West Kennet Avenue where pairs of standing stones line the route, most re-erected from burial under the topsoil by the archaeologist and marmalade heir Alexander Keiller in the 1930s. Originally the route joined The Sanctuary circle where we started our walk and from remains found under some buried Avenue stones it is estimated to have been built between 2600 - 2300BC. These are the same sarsen stones as we later see in the Avebury circle, a very hard sandstone naturally occurring in the area, and still lying today in nearby fields to the east. On average these standing stones are around 3m high and are often positioned as opposite shapes, triangle or pillar, along the corridor. The walk up The Avenue took us past a marker for a Neolithic midden which was excavated last summer, and a polissoir low down on one of the stones. To the right over the road, the site of a small stone circle, Faulkner's Circle, and to the left, some large Bronze Age barrows on Waden Hill were pointed out.

Walking up the West Kennet Avenue towards Avebury, literally in the footsteps of our ancestors, gave us contact with its likely function as a processional way. The route weaves its way across the landscape with the henge itself hidden from view below the horizon, only revealed at the very end of The Avenue when the henge bank, originally stark white chalk about a metre higher than today, comes into view, masking the stone circles inside. We entered the stone circle over the causeway through the southern entrance, looking down at the ditch on the inside of the bank which was once 9m deep (but is now silted up to about 3m deep). We passed between the two large portal stones that have remained in place for nearly 5,000 years.

When Alexander Keiller bought the Avebury site in the 1930s only 15 stones were left standing. He set out to excavate, record and preserve the remains, re-erecting buried stones and placing concrete marker posts where his excavations showed they had been sited. He excavated only part of the site, but enough to establish that there were two inner circles of standing stones within the larger circle, which is by far the largest anywhere at 427m diameter and with an outer circumference of over a kilometre. As we were guided round the circle site some artist's impression drawings helped us to imagine how the site would have looked during the late Neolithic.

We stood within the southern inner circle which has one arc of standing stones still remaining. At its centre stood a 5.5m single obelisk stone, recorded by Stukely in 1723 shortly before it was broken up. Trying to overlook the modern intrusion of the busy Devizes to Swindon road cutting through the centre of the site, we crossed over to what was the northern inner circle. This had a central cove of originally three (now two) very large standing stones facing north-east. The first evidence for the erection of the stones is from the largest stone, The Cove stone, inserted in a 3m deep socket in the ground in about 3250BC (dated by Optically Stimulated Luminescence, OSL).

Lunch was a leisurely 90 minutes to allow visits to the Keiller Museum following which we returned down the West Kennet Avenue and then turned west to climb up Waden Hill. From here the top of Silbury Hill was suddenly revealed below us and at 40m high and 160m wide it is the largest man-made prehistoric mound in Europe. It has been extensively researched, most recently in 2007-10, when repairs were necessary after the unfilled tunnels of earlier excavations caved in. The latest evidence is that it was built progressively between 2400 and 2490BC with continual additions and adjustments requiring an estimated 4 million working hours and using 500,000 tonnes of material. A ditch was scooped out around Silbury that often still fills with water from the many springs in the area. Other large mounds were constructed around the same time; one within Marden Henge in the vale of Pewsey and another to the east along the River Kennet, at Marlborough.

We descended and crossed the A4 and the fast flowing River Kennet to continue to Swallowhead Springs, the source of the River Kennet, and to look back to Silbury Hill. These springs are thought to have been of ritual significance not only in prehistoric times but also during the Roman period. Recent geophysics has shown a large Roman settlement in the field between the springs and Silbury Hill.

We ascended the low ridge above the springs to the West Kennet Long Barrow which at 100m long is one of the biggest long barrows in Britain. The central chamber is high enough for us to walk inside and

examine the impressive sarsen stone construction infilled with oolitic limestone dry stone walling. Radio-carbon dating has shown that the earliest human bones inside it are exactly contemporary with the construction of the causewayed enclosures at Windmill Hill, 3650BC. The remains of 40 to 46 individual skeletons, from a 50 year time span at most, were found jumbled inside the five chambers. Most were piles of disarticulated and sorted bones, with many skulls and long bones missing entirely. The construction allowed people to have ready access to the mortuary remains and there is evidence these were moved about over time. The entrance faces east and was finally blocked by three huge sarsen stones, probably at around the time of the main stone phases of Avebury and The Sanctuary and perhaps explicitly marking the end of an older tradition focused on ancestors and the past.

Returning to the Sanctuary along the River Kennet we passed the site of the Palisade enclosures only discovered in 1950 from aerial photography and extensively excavated between 1987 and 1992. This major structure 600-700 metres in diameter consisted of two adjacent enclosures with palisade trenches 2-3m deep holding continuous rows of high close-set timber posts requiring an estimated 40,000 metres of mature timber. Radio-carbon dating has given overlapping construction phases of 2500-2200BC. It appears there was limited occupation here by large numbers of people who were probably feasting and sacrificing. A large quantity of animal bones were found here, mostly pig, slaughtered young.

The path proceeds further down the river before returning up the slope to The Sanctuary and the completion of the walk. A leisurely pace with the 90 minute stop for lunch took from 10:30am until 4.30pm. Free parking is available at the start of the Ridgeway opposite the Sanctuary.

Hartham Park Quarry

**Hartham,
Corsham and
the Bath Stone
Quarry Museum
Trust Collection**

Just over two hundred years since the stone quarry opened at Hartham Park in Corsham, a BACAS group gathered on a bright July morning to venture underground. It had been raining hard overnight, and the rain which falls on the ground also eventually percolates below ground. Wellington boots were therefore the order of the day.

Henry Lowe The visit had been arranged with the kind and much appreciated agreement of David Pollard, who is not only the owner of Hartham Park Quarry, but also the repository of many years' knowledge and experience in this specialised field. Given the health and safety precautions it was deemed wise to split the group in two, the first going underground and enjoying a question and answer session with David afterwards, and vice versa. All visitors (like the workforce) underground are issued with a token to be handed back on returning above ground. By this means all are safely accounted for.

Bath stone is not only cherished locally; it is nationally renowned; it was good enough for John Nash in Buckingham Palace. And if you visit the Bristol City Museum or the Bath Assembly Rooms, you will see oolitic limestone from this very quarry. This stone has been prized for its colour and versatility for hundreds of years. Today, hi-tech equipment such as the state of the art Fantini excavator enables the quarry to operate at peak efficiency. (Italian stonecutting equipment is of the highest order, hardly surprising from the country that brought you the glories of the Roman Empire and the marbles of Michelangelo).

Hartham Park Quarry is one of many in the hills surrounding Bath. Although the business of stone quarrying continues, many sites are now used for storage of wine and document archives, though over the past 80 years they have served as mushroom farms, repositories for military hardware and personnel, and safe places for precious artworks and artefacts – even the Crown Jewels!

Access into the quarry is via concrete steps that descend at a comfortable angle, but which, with 159 in total, demand a reasonable level of fitness in order to return to the surface. The steps were only

slightly hazardous, and most people kept a firm grip on the handrail, but conditions even now must be challenging for the quarryman. It is damp and cool below ground (also wet and muddy when we were there). Thankfully we visited at the weekend, but when all the machinery is running it must be an intense, noisy experience. It comes as no surprise that the workers have a rigid safety protocol, involving lights and gestures as well as words; in this environment, each worker's life literally depends on his colleague, and the importance of supportive camaraderie was perhaps the strongest impression we received all day. Stephen Ainsworth, Mine Development and Safety Manager, led our group through each gallery, explaining the process of extraction, from the initial survey of the stone, to the cutting, lifting and hauling away. Each gallery is vented, each ceiling reinforced, before the real work begins. The site is large and there is enough stone within this quarry alone to keep the mine operating for many years yet, but the ceilings are surprisingly low, and quarrying can simply advance horizontally, rather than be forced vertically.

The Hartham Park quarry site extends underground across the A4, and to access this area a new tunnel has to be driven to replace an earlier access that has been blocked. The worksite we were looking at will therefore become the main route into an entirely new quarry area, adding to the 65 miles of tunnels which reportedly exist in the area.

Horses no longer toil in the quarry; picks and hammers have been replaced by sophisticated saws and cutters. The danger of dust is minimised by water and filters, making the working environment safer, though still not terribly agreeable. The work is well paid, and rewarding, but the right kind of applicants are few, according to Stephen. Perhaps the recompense of decent pay, job satisfaction and good mates doesn't offset the physical nature of the work.

Moving from the constant 11deg.C underground temperature to the relatively milder 18 degrees above ground, our group was treated to a highly informative talk by David Pollard about the history and future of the quarry. Appropriately enough, BACAS decamped to the Quarryman's Arms in Box, for a very sociable lunch. The pub décor includes numerous implements associated with quarrying, which provided a neat introduction to our visit after lunch to the Bath Stone Quarry Museum Trust collection.

Here David continued to engage us for over an hour and patiently answered all questions. The collection includes many examples of lamps, batteries, found objects, as well as quarrying gear; picks and levers used to prise the stone blocks; and a variety of rails and trolleys used to transport them to the surface. All were organised by category and neatly displayed on utility racking, ideal museum material. David's wealth of knowledge was challenged, but not found wanting!

Our thanks go to Stephen Ainsworth and Adrian Boniface and to all at Lovell Stone Group, as well as to David, for making this such an interesting and successful excursion.



Figure 1
Leaving the
quarry up the 159 steps!

Saltford Village Walk

An Historic Village on the Avon

Roger Wilkes

BACAS carried out some geophysics surveys for the Saltford Environment Group (SEG) in recent years (*see report page 43*), and in return members of SEG organised and led a guided tour of Saltford for us. For most people their only experience of Saltford is from travelling through on the main A4 road or rushing through and under the village on the railway, thus not being aware of the 'old village' that lies between.

We met on an early summer evening in the Shallows car park, alongside the River Avon, which was overrun by young canoeists at the time. We began by being challenged to suggest the origin of the name 'Saltford' – was it 'Salt-water ford' (the Avon was tidal this far until it was dammed downstream in medieval times) or 'Sal-ford' (ford of the willows), or even 'San-ford' (because the banks are sandy!), there is no definitive explanation apparently. We were shown a replica of the Iron Age Carthaginian Coin (struck in the western Mediterranean. between 300-264BC), that had been found on the bank of the river after floods in 2012 - it may be one of the oldest coins found in Britain.

The site of the surviving remains of Saltford Brass Mill (a Scheduled Ancient Monument), opposite the car park was described as having a value of £6 in the Domesday Book (1086), and was used as a fulling mill until the 1720s when it was converted into a brass battery mill and continued in that use until 1908 but carried on as a rolling mill until 1925. The mill used water-powered trip hammers to beat sheet brass into 'holloware', i.e. pans and bowls and would have been a dirty and noisy industry!

We began by walking up onto the former Midland Railway Saltford Station site – closed in 1970, following the line closure in 1966 - it is now part of the Avon Cycleway which in 1986 became the very first part of the National Cycleway developed by Sustrans. We walked back along the cycle path, over the River Avon, down the former station approach to the bottom of the High Street and then up to Queen Square passing former brassworkers cottages and pausing to learn about the current St Mary's Church Hall which had originally been endowed as a school by the wife of Admiral Kelly. St Mary's Church is believed to have Anglo Saxon origins (the base of the tower has late Saxon stonework and the font is believed to be Anglo Saxon), but was enlarged in early Norman times and renovated again in 1832 when the entrance was relocated to the bottom of the tower at the West end.

Adjacent to the church is Saltford Manor House of Norman origin, thought to be the oldest continuously occupied private house in England. The house which belonged to Keynsham Abbey and still has fish ponds nearby, contains a Norman window and medieval wall paintings, including a 'wheel of fortune' said to be the only surviving domestic one of its kind in Great Britain, but unfortunately we were not invited in to see it!

Further up the High Street is Saltford House (1771), the one-time home of Admiral Kelly. Benedictus Marwood Kelly was born in Holsworthy, Devon and joined the Royal Navy aged 13 then with help from his uncle Captain Kelly, he served in the Napoleonic Wars, including time on 'HMS 'The (Fighting) Temeraire' that later saw action in the Battle of Trafalgar. He rose to become Admiral in 1863. During his distinguished career one of his ships 'HMS The Pheasant' was a member of the West Africa Squadron on anti-slavery patrols operating up and down the coast of West Africa, during which they captured three Portuguese slave trading ships amongst many, freeing hundreds of slaves and receiving a bounty. Admiral Kelly married his second wife in 1855 (his first having died in childbirth) buying Saltford House in 1856 and dying there aged 82 in 1867. He was buried with his ancestors in the churchyard of St Mary's Church, Kelly, West Devon. He died childless and bequeathed a large sum of money to establish Kelly Naval College at Tavistock, Devon.

Next door is Saltford Villa, later renamed Tunnel House after it was secretly acquired by Isambard Kingdom Brunel in order to construct the Great Western Railway (GWR) through Saltford via a short tunnel. It is not known if Brunel ever lived there but some GWR employees did.

Saltford is criss-crossed by old pathways and we walked to the A4 along one of them to see The Crown Inn, an old coaching inn dating from the 1760s, on the old main road from Bristol to London. In 1793 the landlord welcomed 150 men from the sea-service marching from Frome to Bristol, led by Captain Henry Edgell, by 'causing a sheep to be roasted whole, and given to his men, with plenty of liquors!'

Walking down Bath Hill we were taken into the garden of a house with a panoramic view of the Avon Valley. There we heard about a fatal accident that occurred at the bottom of the hill in 1791 between a single-horse chaise carrying two men and a broad-wheeled carter's wagon, in which the chaise overturned whilst trying to pass the wagon, killing both men under its wheels. It caused an outcry and as a result, 25 years later in 1816 the road was upgraded by the eminent engineer John Loudon McAdam working for the Bristol Turnpike Trust.

At the end of the walk we crossed over the mainline railway and descended towards the Shallows where we were approached by a lady in 2 Mill Cottages (relating to the original fulling mill) who showed us some bits of clay pipes she had dug up in her garden and a coin found in the house.

Stoney Littleton

An evening in a square mile of Somerset

Tim Lunt

We gathered on a breezy May evening in the car park below Stoney Littleton Long Barrow to meet Chris and Carol Paul who were our hosts for the evening. They are BACAS members, have lived at Stoney Littleton for many years and as founder members of the local history society know the local area very well.

A short climb up the slope from the carpark brings you to the chambered long barrow dating from 4000 -2500BC. The mound is about 2.7m high and 30m long with an entrance facing uphill and aligned with the midwinter solstice. The first recorded opening was about 1760 when the farmer-occupier forced an entry into the gallery through the roof to obtain stone for road mending and for some time afterwards the site remained accessible to local people who entered it and removed human bones and anything else which took their fancy. The Rev John Skinner took a great interest in the restoration and excavation of the barrow in 1816. A number of skeletons were found, some of the skulls are in the Bristol Museum. The most recent excavation by the Cotswold Archaeology Trust in 2000 found evidence of prehistoric and Roman pottery.

At present the barrow is open to all to explore the 3 pairs of side chambers. It is built of blue-grey lias stone thought to come from Newton St Loe, 8km away, and is unusual in having several ammonite fossils clearly displayed as part of the construction. A discovery was made on the night in question by Maurice Tucker, who with his geological background recognised a dinosaur footprint inside the tomb!

Looking north from the barrow, a patch of rough ground can be seen in a field on the opposite side of the valley. This is the site of the Wellow Roman Villa which has been excavated at various times, the first dig being in 1685. A number of mosaics and tessellated pavements have been found and some finds are at the British Museum. The main mosaic at Wellow, covered over and still in situ, is similar to others displaying 'Christian, Dionysiac and Gnostic Imagery', in the form of a 'cantharus between confronted dolphins, fish, panthers or peacocks', which have been found at Littlecote Park in Wiltshire and at Withington in Gloucestershire. It is possible that these three mosaics were laid by a single school of mosaicists operating out of Aquae Sulis (Bath).

South-west from the barrow along the valley of the Wellow Brook, Stoney Littleton hamlet runs for about a mile to the hamlets of Single Hill and Shoscombe. Known as Littleton in the Domesday Book it had a total population at that time of 7 households, 1 mill and 1 cob, 5 cattle, 15 pigs and 200 sheep. Originally it was part of the Hundred of Wellow under King Edgar (965) and then became part of the Hundred of Frome and then back to the Hundred of Wellow.

Our next stop walking along the south side of the valley was The Butts, on the way crossing a lost turnpike road from Tuckers Grave to Wellow that was in use between 1768 and 1830. The toll house is opposite Tuckers Grave Pub. Butts were originally designated for archery training during the medieval period and were often located on the margins of villages or towns on common land. Whether these butts are from that date is uncertain but a firing range with slit trench and metal target frame still survives in the Target Field at Stoney Littleton Farm. The farmer believes that the range was used by Anzac troops prior to the Gallipoli landings in WW1 and it continued to be used during WW2 for training. The Butts certainly predate WW1 as they are shown on a 1904 map as Rifle range, targets and butt with markers up to 600 yards.

Further on south we came to Stoney Littleton Manor House and Farm. The farmhouse dates from the early 1700s with extensions in the 1850s. It is adjacent to the buried foundations of an Elizabethan manor house built by Captain Andrew Colthurst around 1580. There was probably an important house on this site for centuries before as we know that a Wybert de Littleton lived here around 1324. It was sometime in the 1300s when Littleton started to be recorded as Stoney Littleton as an early tax (tithe) dodge!

Captain Colthurst was recognised by Sir Walter Raleigh who granted him lands in Ireland and there is a possibility Raleigh stayed at Littleton manor. Colthurst died in 1603. Passing through various hands the building lay derelict for over 50 years until by 1840 it was uninhabitable but there is no record of its demolition.

Continuing on along the drive to the lane at Dairy Hill, it is clear that in the fields around the farm are the well preserved earthworks of a small and deserted Medieval Village made up of banks and lynchets forming small enclosures and probably the area of habitation recorded in the Domesday Book. Descending the hill, we passed first a Lime Kiln before coming to the Mill.

Assuming this is the site of the original Norman mill, it operated for over a thousand years as a fulling mill and a grist mill. Grist is grain that has been separated from its chaff in preparation for grinding. A fulling mill or tucking mill was used for the cleansing of cloth to get rid of impurities and would have had wooden hammers to beat the cloth. The cloth was then stretched on 'tenters' (frames) and so came the saying 'held by tenterhooks.' The Mill was held by the Bamfielde family for centuries until sold in 1795. It was offered for sale again in 1828 and by 1840 there was a farmer in residence. It probably stopped working around that time and was demolished by 1904.

A number of cottages are shown on early maps in the area around the Mill and old bridge but all have now disappeared including the Stoney Littleton pub which is thought to have gone by 1795. No date is known for Stoney Littleton Bridge but the Rev. Skinner in his diaries of 1820 suggests it was 300 years old then making it now 500 years old.

Over the bridge and up Grays Hill, we came to the Somerset Coal Canal. Constructed in the early 1800s to run from the Radstock coalfield to the Kennet & Avon Canal at Dundas it passed through Stoney Littleton with an aqueduct crossing a small side valley. The canal proved unsuccessful and was quickly replaced by a tramway along the towpath with trucks drawn by horses to move the coal. The coal trade on the tramway declined and by 1871 it was sold to the Somerset and Dorset Railway (S&D) who built the Bath to Evercreech line over much of its course. The railway opened in 1874 and closed in 1966. The canal aqueduct was incorporated into the later railway viaduct but can still be seen within the structure.

Beyond the canal/railway are the houses of upper Stoney Littleton which were built in the 1890s either as miners' cottages or due to the increase in commerce in the area. Close by is the Pauls' smallholding. Their land lies along the GHQ Green Line which, in the dark days of 1940 when invasion threatened, was intended to provide an outer defence for Bristol. A pillbox still remains beside their house and there are concrete tank traps in the brook. Chris and Carol welcomed us in for much appreciated coffee and cake and rounded off a fascinating evening. We were all surprised how much history and prehistory could be appreciated in such a small corner of Somerset.

SAVERNAKE FOREST TOUR

The diverse history of a Forset

Les Hayes

A full day's outing in September was led by Graham Bathe the local expert on the ecology and history of the Forest. We met at the Ailsbury Column about half a mile off the lengthy straight Grand Avenue. Now completely surrounded by trees it was intended to be seen at the end of a long promenade from the Grand House.

The Forest was one of the largest of the Royal Hunting Forests at nearly 130 square miles (now only 13 but you can still get lost in it). It is unique in having been in the hands of a single family (David Brudenell-Bruce, Earl of Cardington) since AD1086. Although the House has had to be sold, the family still owns the Forest which is leased out to the Forestry Commission.

We visited the site of the Late Iron Age and 1st – 2nd Century Roman pottery manufactory. This pottery was not produced as fine tableware but a heavy utilitarian product that did not need to please the eye. As is usual with kiln sites, the main effort seemed to be the manufacture of variously sized sherds!

As the commoners and charcoal burners intruded on the Forest the quality of the timber, particularly the oak timber, gradually deteriorated. When the Forest was inspected in the Napoleonic War only four oak trees were deemed to be of commercial value and on cutting those down three were found to be hollow. Evidence of landscaping by Capability Brown was observed but the Forest largely slumbered until the 2nd World War when massive stocks of ammunition (mainly American) were held in large Nissen type huts. The troops were billeted in old railway carriages positioned on dwarf brick walls. Two massive explosions in 1946 assisted in reducing the disposal problem after the war.

The walk culminated in a demonstration of how to age an oak tree. There are a number of aged oak specimens and there are two means to ascertain their ages. The easiest is for adults to link hands around the tree at about 1.5 m high. Each adult contributes towards a hundred years. It took nine of us to encircle this particularly venerable tree (*Figure 1*), thus suggesting it is 900 years old. The scientific solution relates to careful scrutiny of the known girth of particular trees over a period of centuries. It has been proved that after a slight increase in growth above the norm in the first 100 years, thereafter it is a straight line graph. Variations such as the soil type and fertility are fed in and our specimen at 10.5m girth at 1.5m high was calculated to be 850 – 900 years old. An interesting but surprising exercise. Although the introduction of beech trees 250 years ago has changed the forest, the new plantings of oak seem to be thriving and the Forest is reviving.



Figure 1
The BACAS group in Savernake Forest, calculating the age of this very beautiful oak tree. It is thought to be 850-900 years old.