



Ancient monuments, new discoveries

Archaeological research at Avebury

“World famous stone-circle at the heart of a prehistoric landscape.”

National Trust

The village of Avebury, in Wiltshire, lies amongst one of the most impressive complexes of prehistoric monuments in Europe. This distinctive historic and cultural landscape provides an extraordinary record of past civilizations and our national heritage.

Archaeological research can help develop an understanding of this heritage and a sense of appreciation for historic environments such as Avebury. It can also encourage the public to become involved in the care and protection of such environments for the benefit of future generations. The existence of many amateur archaeology societies and groups demonstrates the level of public engagement in this field. Such engagement in turn creates a sense of shared human identity, encouraging community cohesion and enhancing the quality of life.

Recent research undertaken at the Avebury site has involved a wide range of different groups, including locals, spiritually-motivated groups, heritage groups, researchers and conservationists, interactions which have helped develop an understanding of how new research findings might in turn influence future heritage and conservation activities.

“Heritage... is now recognised as an issue which affects everyone’s quality of life, touching many aspects of public policy.”

English Heritage Strategic Plan 2005-2010

In 1882, the Ancient Monuments Protection Act was introduced, giving statutory protection to Avebury and other monuments in Great Britain. This signified the first legal protection for archaeological remains in the UK. Currently, the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological

Areas Act 1979 builds on this earlier protection. The foundation of the Council for British Archaeology established in 1944, to promote all aspects of British archaeology, reflects the growing acknowledgement of its importance for society.

“The historic environment is not an exclusive place, nor is it a kind of reserve to be visited only in our leisure time. It is the context within which we live our lives.”

English Heritage Strategic Plan 2005-2010

What is the Avebury site?

The Avebury site in Wiltshire contains a significant group of major Neolithic and Early Bronze Age ceremonial monuments, dating from the 4th to the early 2nd millennia BCE, which together represent one of the most impressive complexes of prehistoric monuments in Europe. The site, which partly encompasses the village of Avebury, has been of interest historically, with a substantial number of antiquaries and archaeologists choosing to study the Avebury monuments, generating public interest and media attention.

The site plays an exceptionally significant role in the development of thought about the British Neolithic period, and is viewed as having the potential to inform on aspects of social and economic organisation, belief, ceremony and materiality. Spread over a large area, the site includes numerous monuments: the Avebury henge, which encloses the largest stone circle in Europe, the West Kennet and Beckhampton megalithic avenues and the Sanctuary, and also a complex of palisaded enclosures and Silbury Hill, a giant artificial mound, along the floor of the Kennet Valley.

Avebury has a local site museum, with exhibits informed or produced by research projects at the site. The learning value of the site is reflected

in the large numbers of educational groups that use the museum.

The site was given UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1986, along with nearby Stonehenge, and as such is classified as demonstrating 'outstanding universal value'. The main monuments have been owned and managed by the National Trust since 1943 and the Trust works in partnership with English Heritage to care for the site.

Over the years, research at the site has highlighted Avebury's importance, generating interest in preserving it, and underpinning the widespread recognition of its significance. Indeed without such research, it is highly likely that the site would have experienced greater deterioration, and may even have slipped into decay.

Recent research: Avebury and the Longstones Project

Between 2000 and 2004 the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded the 'Longstones project', which built upon the existing body of Avebury research (see timeline). This collaborative project involved academics from the Universities of Leicester, Bristol and Southampton.

The research team made important discoveries about the remarkable group of structures at Avebury, revealing wholly new prehistoric monuments, such as the Longstones enclosure, and confirming the existence of others. The team was able to draw on Keiller's work, using his records and unpublished archives. Describing the 'rediscovery' of Beckhampton Avenue in British Archaeology Magazine, the Longstones team commented that it "must rank as one of the most dramatic developments in British prehistoric archaeology" providing a sense of the "megalithic scale of Avebury". Through their excavations, the team found evidence of missing stones, and in some cases the stones themselves. The team's discoveries served to effectively double the area known to be covered by the monument complex and developed understanding of the chronology of monument building.

"one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of the century"

The Independent newspaper's description of the team's discovery of the Beckhampton Avenue



An example of the social impact of archaeological research

The Longstones project team engaged with the wider public through public lectures and tours of the site, maximizing the value of their research. In addition, the project created a valuable environment for developing social networks and building social capital, as well as opportunities for education and training. Through involvement with students and local volunteers, the project enabled enthusiasts to gain experience in the excavation and interpretation of heritage sites. Following introductions made at Avebury, at least two young people went on to study archaeology and gained employment in the sector.

The future of the site

Research, particularly the Longstones project, has contributed greatly to our knowledge of the Avebury monuments, yet there is still a great deal to discover. The preservation of this significant facet of our cultural heritage relies upon the site being valued and looked after, and archaeological research has an important role in this, for example, in revealing new information and engaging the wider public.

Avebury timeline

- 1649** John Aubrey 'discovers' the Avebury stones.
- 1663** John Aubrey undertakes the first measured plan and detailed description of the site.
- 1719-24** William Stukeley produces surveys and recordings of the site over a series of visits.
- 1723** Thomas Twinning – exploration and schematic survey of the site published.
- 1743** William Stukeley's work published.
- 1751** Society of Antiquaries of London founded by Royal Charter – charged with "the encouragement, advancement and furtherance of the study and knowledge of the antiquities and history of this and other countries."
- 1812** Sir Richard Colt-Hoare undertakes a new measured survey, supplemented by a detailed description.
- 1829** Joseph Hunter undertakes perambulation of the site, checking and updating the records of Stukeley and Colt-Hoare.
- 1829** Institute for Archaeological Correspondence established.
- 1833** Henry Browne describes the surviving site and undertakes first recorded excavation in the vicinity of the Cove.
- 1865** A.C. Smith and William Cunnington III undertake series of 14 discrete excavations within the Avebury henge, including the Cove, Obelisk and bank close to the eastern entrance.
- 1881** W.C. Lukis and A.C. Smith undertake two month season producing a definitive measured survey and Camera Lucida portraits of surviving stones.
- 1894** Henry Meux excavates a single trench through the bank of the Henge.
- 1908-09** Harold St. George Gray heads a major campaign of excavation designed to determine the date of Avebury, centred upon the earthworks in and around the southern entrance.
- 1912** Excavation of the socket of the remaining stone of the Longstones Cove in advance of its re-erection. Rediscovery and excavation of the timber and stone circles of the Sanctuary.
- 1934-35 and 1937-39** Alexander Keiller – campaign aimed at restoring the site to its 'former glory'. Excavations at the West Kennet Avenue, re-erection of fallen stones with pillars and excavations of the Outer and Southern Inner Circles.
- 1944** Council of British Archaeology established, the organisation now has the mission statement "Archaeology for All."
- 1957-60** W.E.V. Young – small-scale excavations, undertaken on behalf of the Ministry of Works, approximately two thirds down the line of the west Kennet Avenue.
- 1960** Stuart Piggot heads the digging of 12 adjacent trenches in the North East quadrant of the henge.
- 1969** Faith and Lance Vatcher carry out excavations in the grounds of Avebury school in advance of building work.
- 1975** Ancient Monuments Laboratory undertake geophysical survey in the area of the Longstones – looking for evidence of Beckhampton Avenue.
- 1979** Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act.
- 1982** John Evans and Mike Pitts undertake a small excavation into the bank and buried soil beneath it – during alterations to the Great Barn.
- 1982** Department of the Environmental Excavation Unit – small scale excavations within and adjacent to the henge carried out in advance of building work.
- 1989** Ancient Monuments Laboratory – geophysical surveys within the henge and lines of the West Kennet and Beckhampton Avenues.
- 1980s and 1990s** Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) undertook ongoing campaigns of topographical survey in and around Avebury.
- 1993** Wessex Archaeology – excavations along Beckhampton avenue reveal a stone burial.
- 1996** RCHME transcribe a series of parchmarks revealed in aerial photographs of the interior of the henge.
- 2000-04** AHRC-funded 'Longstones project' – presents new information about the structures at Avebury – revealing wholly new prehistoric monuments.
- 2001-02** Oxford archaeology investigate possible burial pit of one of the Southern Inner Circle standing stones revealed in advance of renovation works to the Church.
- 2008** 'Landscape of the Megaliths: Excavation and Fieldwork on the Avebury Monuments, 1997-2003' the final monograph publication from the 'Longstones project.'
- 2008** 'The Big Dig: Avebury' – an article about the Longstones project is published in the magazine British Archaeology.