

Redlynch & District Local History Society

Myths and Legends of Stonehenge

by Matt Pike

Matt has been employed at Stonehenge for the past 14 years and is English Heritage's first official "Writer in Residence". Before Covid Stonehenge was hosting 1.6 million visitors a year and on a record day, 11,000 visitors. Matt has heard all the comments and questions which he worked through during his illustrated talk. One of the more fanciful is Stonehenge was built by Aliens, progressing through magic via Merlin and ley lines or dragon lines which may be the origin of the two Dragons building or guarding Stonehenge.



We do know that the archaeology supports construction of the 1st Stonehenge around 3100BC comprising a ditch enclosing a bank on which the 50 or so blue stones stood in a ring, with the Heale stone outside. Further arrangements of the stones relating to solstice events occurred with incorporation of the large Sarsen stones with their horizontal capping stones held in place by mortice and tenon joints up to 2500BC. Much information has been revealed by what lies directly underneath the stones rather than the stones themselves as the biological matter so obtained can be carbon dated. It is almost certain that some stones were taken for local building at various times but it is very difficult to tie up claims of lintels etc were from Stonehenge.

A hidden landscape project over a number of years using lidar and magnetometry has demonstrated the mass of barrows and features which surround the stones and give its context in the land. The cursus revealed two pits, one at each end which redate Stonehenge itself. Various persons have become fascinated with the origins of Stonehenge, the first being Geoffrey of Monmouth (1136AD) who suggested Merlin had guided giants to build it, whilst William Longboard thought the Romans were responsible. Charles II commissioned John Aubrey to study the stones and it was he who discovered the indentations where the blue stones had once stood hence the name Aubrey Holes. He made good drawings and plans of the site. William Stukeley (1687-1765) thought druids had built Stonehenge and began embellishing his own drawings with a symbolic figure. With time Stukeley's enthusiasm with this idea became so great that he took to wearing such garb whilst giving lectures

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and produced drawings of the stones with crowds of druids. Stukeley undertook a number of digs as well as producing his drawings. William Cunnington (1754-1810) undertook systemic excavation of burial mounds in the area and published his work in “Ancient Wiltshire” still recognised as a leading work; many of the findings are held in county museums.

A question often asked is “who owns Stonehenge?”, in short it is currently Her Majesty’s Government. It was privately owned by the Antrobus family who became subject to interested parties including MP John Lovelock, and the Wiltshire Archaeology Society who wished protection for the site which was subject to damage from picnickers and campfires. This led to the stones being fenced off in 1901 and an admission charge being made (primarily to pay for the upkeep). A legal case was brought concerning the ownership which Edward Antrobus IV won, his legal council tracing ownership via Alfred the Great, the Pope, Edward VIII and so on. After the First World War Cosmo Antrobus auctioned the site which was famously bought by Cecil Chubb, who after 3 years presented it to the nation; the following day he was knighted. In the 1890’s the Army had purchased a large acreage of the land mainly to the North of the stones (Larkhill and Bulford) and Matt showed us a drawing of soldiers manoeuvring within the stones. In 1912 aircraft flights commenced on the land adjoining the stones and a large aerodrome was built which was removed after the end of the Great War. Related to these air activities is a ghost story: a number of people have claimed to see an old aircraft heading earthwards towards what is now the site of an early memorial of a fatal air crash at Airmans Corner. There is little doubt that Stonehenge has been one of the most famous sites in Britain since Victorian times which may have led alternative lifestyle Wally Hope (pseudonym) to announce a free music festival at Stonehenge in 1974. This grew to a point where by 1984 enormous numbers were camping around the Stonehenge area, hard drugs were banned by Hells Angels burning cars and complete anarchy reigned. When arrested every camper claimed they were called Wally hence their nickname, and in the two following years Police blocked entry to the Stonehenge area eventually restoring the status quo.

Stonehenge now allows access at solstice times but this still results in 3.5 tons of rubbish being collected at the last summer solstice; the monument is now regarded as a cultural icon and it’s story continues to fascinate.

Our next talk is by Peter Roberts and Georgina Babey entitled, Secret Marriage (The Riddle of the Hamptworth Morrisons) on 4th January 2022 at 7:30pm Woodfalls and Morgan’s Vale Hall. Upcoming talks are :-

1st February - Lesley Self, The History of Salisbury District Hospitals

1st March – Dr Gale Pettifer, The New Forest and its communing, past, present, and future