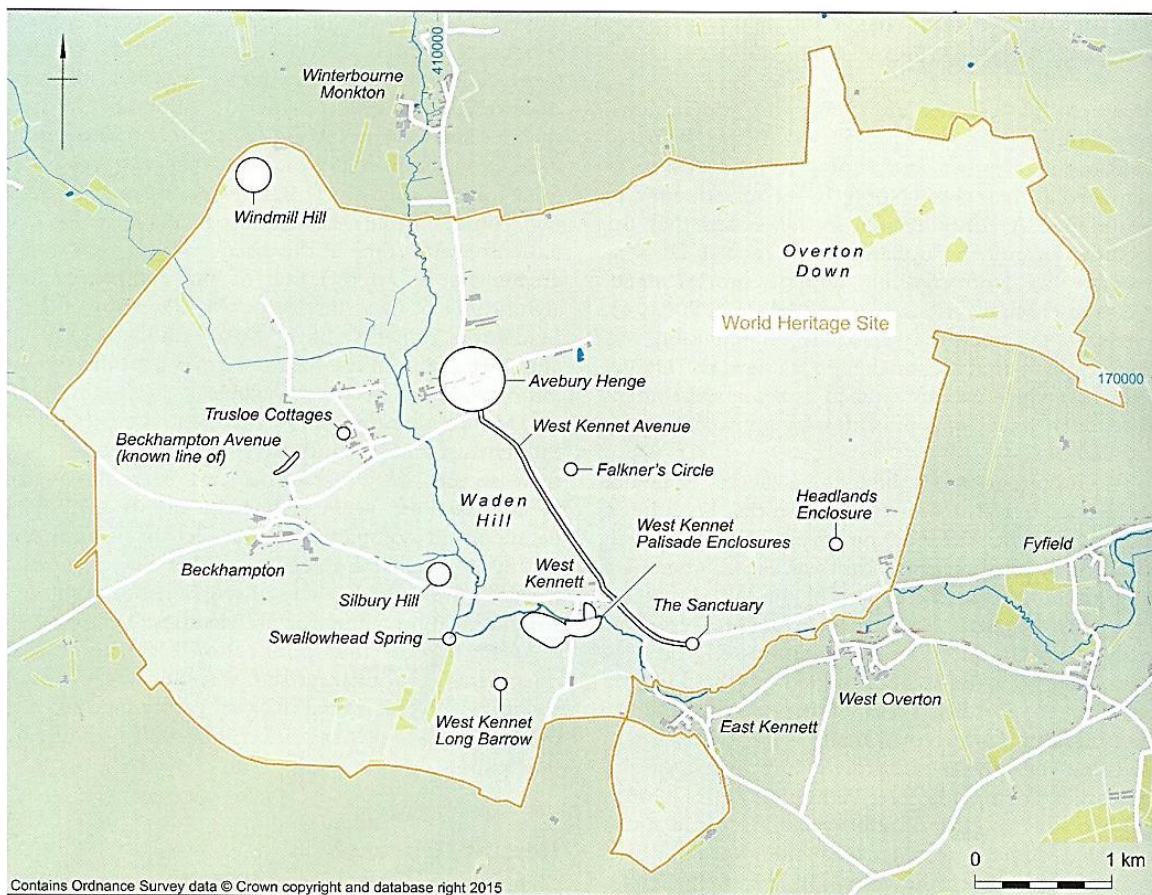


**Avebury, Wiltshire: archaeology and history** (summary for visitors prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

Together with Stonehenge (see separate on-line entry), Avebury and the area around it are part of the World Heritage Site. As well as the henge and the avenues, the West Kennet long barrow, Silbury Hill (see separate on-line entry) and other archaeological monuments are included in the WHS, but substantial areas are privately owned and can only be visited by public paths, such as the track called the Ridgeway across Overton Down; until recently that was thought to have been the only prehistoric north-south route, but has been shown to be no more than one of several tracks that can be identified as a 'Ridgeway zone' in the area (Fowler 2000, 254-7).



The Avebury part of the World Heritage Site (map from Leivers and Powell 2016, 4, reproduced by courtesy of Wessex Archaeology)

**Avebury in Prehistory.** By Joshua Pollard

By the second quarter of the fourth millennium B.C., Neolithic communities were well established in the area around the headwaters of the River Kennet. It is during this period that we witness the beginnings of monument building, and on quite a scale, with the construction of several of the region's long barrows, including that at West Kennet, and the enclosure on Windmill Hill. The latest fourth and earliest third millennia B.C. may have been a relatively quiet time in terms of monument building within this landscape, but visits to and deposition at early Neolithic Windmill Hill and several of the region's long barrows occurred, and part

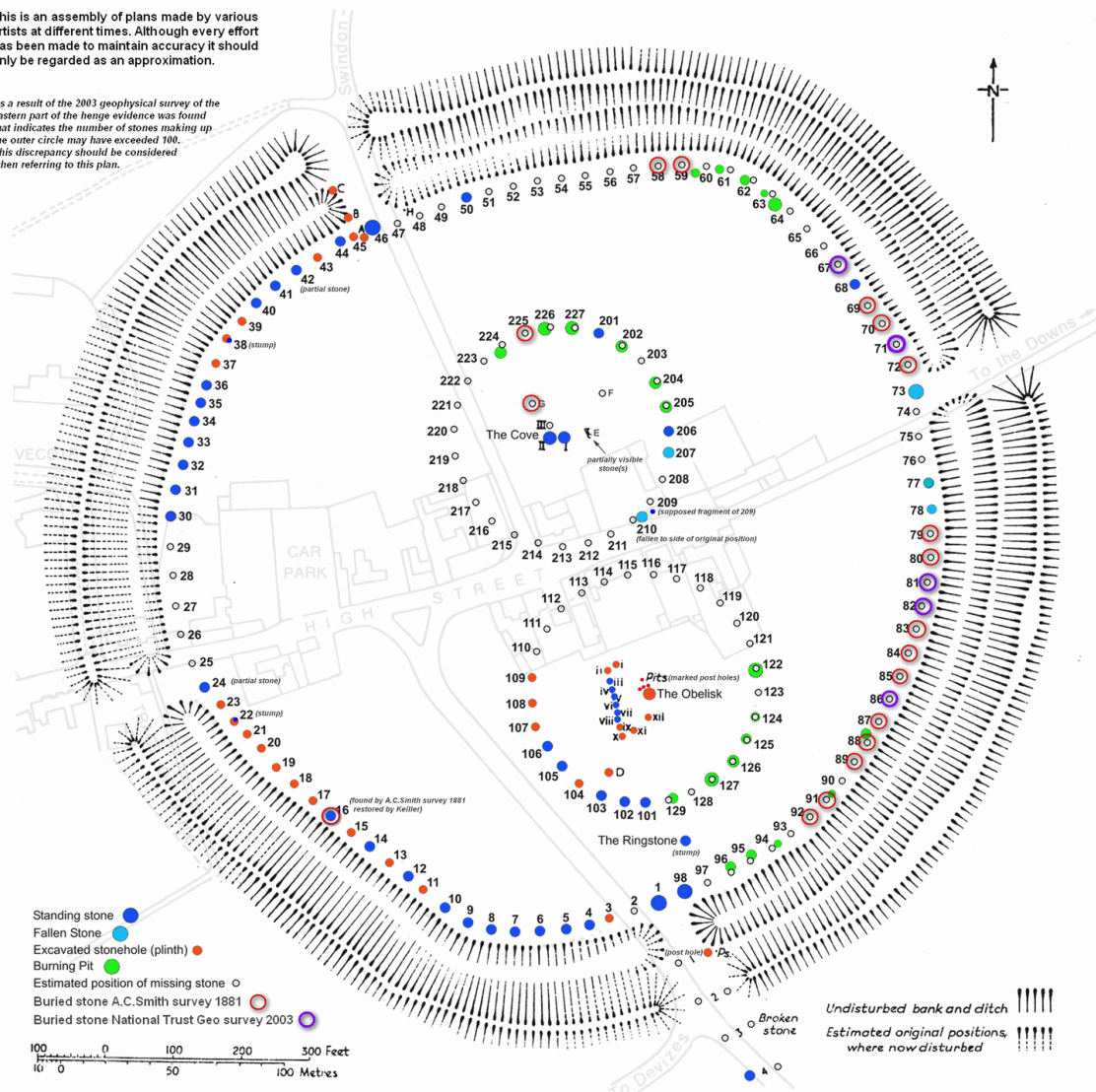
of the outer circuit of the Windmill Hill enclosure was re-defined. It was during the late Neolithic (c. 2800-2200 B.C.) that the remarkable complex of ceremonial monuments centred on the valley floor was created. The result is an archaeological landscape that is equal in scale and complexity to those around Stonehenge, the Boyne Valley of eastern Ireland and Carnac in Brittany. The constructions that make up the late Neolithic complex at Avebury include the henge and stone circles, the West Kennet and Beckhampton megalithic avenues, the Longstones enclosure, the Sanctuary, Falkner's Circle and – occupying the floor of the Kennet Valley – the complex of palisaded enclosures at West Kennet and the giant artificial mound of Silbury Hill (see on-line entry). Further afield, the creation of the Marlborough Mound (see Marlborough on-line entry) is now known to have begun during the latest Neolithic.

## THE AVEBURY HENGE

Showing the full numbering & estimated positions of missing stones.  
Also the estimated position of the original bank & ditch at the entrances.

This is an assembly of plans made by various artists at different times. Although every effort has been made to maintain accuracy it should only be regarded as an approximation.

As a result of the 2003 geophysical survey of the eastern part of the henge evidence was found that indicates the number of stones making up the outer circle may have exceeded 100. This discrepancy should be considered when referring to this plan.



The Avebury henge is a complex, multi-phase, monument created in a series of stages between the early third and early second millennia B.C. Enclosing a low ridge to the east of the Winterbourne, and overlooked by low hills on most sides, the Avebury henge is



defined by a massive earthwork 420 metres in diameter, broken by four entrances. Set immediately inside the ditch are the stones of the Outer Circle (the largest stone circle in Europe), themselves enclosing two Inner Circles (Northern and Southern) with complex settings at their centres (the Cove and former Obelisk). Several additional megaliths are scattered along the low ridge running north-south through the henge. Avebury henge can best be conceptualised as a series of nested spaces, the ‘deepest’ and surely most sacred of these being defined by the central settings within the Inner Circles; locations that also offer the greatest visual field of the landscape outside the monument (including views to Silbury Hill and Windmill Hill). The henge earthwork itself is of two phases, the first (Avebury 1) being represented by a smaller bank observed in section in the south-east and south-west quadrants. The earthwork we see today (Avebury 2) was constructed probably in the 26th century B.C.; and the massive Outer Circle of local sarsen stones a little later. The chronology of the other megalithic settings within the henge is poorly understood, although an Optically Stimulated Luminescence date for the western stone of the Cove – at 100 tonnes the largest of the stones – indicates it could have been erected as early as 3000 B.C., while artefactual and radiocarbon evidence shows that megaliths were being erected and re-set within the henge well into the early second millennium B.C.

The role of the henge is often assumed to have been that of a centre of gathering and worship. In fact very few later Neolithic deposits that might indicate such gatherings have been encountered during excavation: either the monument was kept ‘clean’ or it was visited by only a few (in this sense a ‘reserved’ sacred space within the landscape). By the early Bronze Age, deposits of human bone were being placed in the henge ditch, suggesting an increasing connection to ancestral rites and perhaps ancestor worship. While defined as a ‘henge’ and so linked in archaeological categorisation with other later Neolithic-early Bronze Age ceremonial enclosures, the format of Avebury is unusually elaborate and complex. It has been suggested that the undulating henge banks mimic, as a form of landscape homology, the surrounding downland: certainly, it is not unusual for monuments to represent aspects of the physical world in microcosm. Likewise, individual architectural elements could have served as monumentalised symbolic representations of other structures. The Northern Inner Circle and Cove, for instance, share the format of contemporary ‘square-in-circle’ timber monuments and even the shape of later Neolithic houses.



Stone 9 in the south-west quadrant of the outer circle, with the henge bank behind. This stone is known as the ‘barber-surgeon’s’ because of the fourteenth-century A.D skeleton found below it when it was excavated and re-erected. (Photograph by Jim Champion through CCA-SA3.0, accessed from Wikimedia)

### *The West Kennet and Beckhampton Avenues*

Two avenues of paired stones lead from the southern and western entrances of the henge. The West Kennet Avenue links the henge with the Sanctuary, some 2.3 km to the south-east; while the Beckhampton Avenue runs from the western entrance of the henge to the Longstones near Beckhampton, a distance of 1.3 km and crossing the Winterbourne stream. Structural relationships place the construction of the Avenues to around 2600-2000 B.C., with a range in the third quarter of the third millennium B.C. being favoured. They are, therefore, an addition to, rather than a primary feature of, the Avebury henge. They are similar in format, comprising for most of their lengths paired settings of sarsen stones, presumably to make a physical connection, or to monumentalise existing pathway connections, between the henge and two other monumental constructions: the Longstones enclosure at Beckhampton and the Sanctuary on Overton Hill. Along their lengths they take in locations that had earlier witnessed occupation such as the midden spread at the base of Waden Hill.



Excavation within the West Kennet Avenue in 2015, looking south towards the Sanctuary. Some of the flint found was not from local sources. (Photograph by Joshua Pollard, University of Southampton)

### *The Sanctuary*

By contrast with the valley floor setting of many of the late Neolithic monuments, the multiple timber and stone circles of the Sanctuary occupy an unusual location on the end of Overton Hill (albeit one with vistas over the river and West Kennet palisades). On the basis of analogy with other late Neolithic multiple timber circles, associated artefactual evidence (Grooved Ware and chisel arrowheads) and structural relationships, the timber settings of the Sanctuary can be placed in the middle of the third millennium B.C.

Excavated by M. E. Cunington in 1930, the Sanctuary was initially interpreted as an unroofed timber structure that was later replaced by a stone structure, its surviving stones

having been destroyed in 1724. Various interpretations of the site have been proposed. R. H. Cunnington attempted to place all the post-holes as components of a single roofed building. Piggott regarded the site as a succession of progressively larger roofed timber buildings, the last with a stone circle incorporated in the structure alongside wooden posts. He considered that the outer stone ring was added as a fourth phase. Pollard rejected the more complicated phasing for a single- or at most double-phased (one timber and one stone) monument (Pollard 1992). Limited re-excavation by Mike Pitts in 1999 showed evidence of multiple and



Air photograph of the Sanctuary, its timber and stone settings marked by concrete slabs. On the right is the A4 road, created by turnpiking in 1742; until then traffic between Bristol/Bath and London had mostly passed through Avebury. (Photograph by courtesy of Historic England)

probably rapid episodes of post replacement in some instances, which would be incompatible with interpretations of the timber settings as a roofed structure (Pitts 2001). The process of post replacement could be linked to short ‘ritual cycles’ of construction and dismantling. With deposits of Grooved Ware, animal bone and lithics associated with its timber phase, activities at the Sanctuary were broadly analogous to those undertaken at the settings inside the nearby West Kennet palisade enclosures. The conversion to a stone monument probably occurred in the third quarter of the third millennium B.C., when the monument was connected to the Avebury henge via the south-east terminal of the West Kennet Avenue.

From around 2200 B.C. round-barrow cemeteries came to be constructed around the Neolithic monument complex. They do not cluster in the same tight fashion around the henge as those at Stonehenge, and few burials within them match the richness of the Wessex series in the Stonehenge landscape. Nonetheless, Avebury and other megalithic monuments continued to be respected, and it is telling that later prehistoric fields and settlements were set out at an appropriate distance, sometimes ‘bounded off’ from the earlier monuments by linear ditches. By the Middle Bronze Age extensive field-systems were created on the high ground of the Marlborough Downs, associated with farmstead settlements. They imply a substantial population. By 1000 B.C., long linear banks and ditches were created across these field-systems, seemingly defining territories, and creating a political landscape that helps to explain the emergence of Iron Age hillforts, such as Chisbury (see separate entry). The stability and scale of Iron Age agricultural production undoubtedly attracted Roman interest.

### **Current and future research in the Avebury landscape**

The Avebury monuments have been the focus for academic enquiry since the second half of the seventeenth century. There have been periods of relatively intense scrutiny: during the early eighteenth century, with the work of William Stukeley (Stukeley 1743); the mid nineteenth century through investigations of Avebury, Silbury Hill and various of the region’s barrows by members the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, notably A. C. Smith, and others such as John Thurnam; and during the early-mid twentieth century, first with Harold St. George Gray’s excavations of the henge, Maud Cunnington’s



investigation of the Sanctuary, then the extensive programme of work on Windmill Hill, the West Kennet Avenue and Avebury by Alexander Keiller (Cunnington 1931, Gray 1935, Smith 1965). More recently, the work of John Evans has contributed much to our understanding of the region's Holocene environmental sequence, a proportion of that work taking place within the context of Alasdair Whittle's extensive programme of investigation into the sequence and setting of the Neolithic monuments (Evans *et al.* 1993, Whittle 1993). Since 2000, excavation has taken place at Silbury Hill, prompted by remedial work, and on the Beckhampton Avenue, Longstones enclosure and Avebury Cove through the Longstones Project (Gillings *et al.* 2008).

Investigation, of course, generates new questions as much as it answers others, and there is always a danger with a landscape like that of Avebury that a perception of understanding can outpace real knowledge. There is still much that remains to be understood, even at a basic level, as the new Research Framework for the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site highlights. One area centres on the relationship between monument building during the Neolithic and contemporary settlement and landscape inhabitation more generally. This is the focus of the current 'Living with Monuments Project' – a collaboration between researchers in Southampton, Leicester, Cambridge and Ghent universities, Allen Environmental Archaeology and the National Trust. It aims, among other things, to understand how the demands of monument building impacted on settlement and other activities in the landscape, and also how the process of living could impart history and significance to places that might lead to their subsequent monumentalisation. The Sanctuary on Overton Hill is a case in point, where quite intense settlement may precede the creation of the timber and stone rings – a shift from quotidian to ceremonial activity that hints at progressive sacralisation of this location.



One of the still-standing stones in the Beckhampton Avenue, nicknamed 'Eve'. (Photograph by Jim Bradbury through CCA-SA3.0, accessed from Wikimedia)

To date, Neolithic settlement sites have been investigated to the east of Avebury and on the line of the West Kennet Avenue (Pollard *et al.* 2012, Gillings *et al.* 2015). At the latter, a dense *in situ* scatter of largely Middle Neolithic lithics and ceramics was investigated between 2013-5. This revealed one of the densest concentrations of worked flint in the region. It is a rare instance of well-preserved Neolithic settlement traces on the southern English chalklands. Not all the material was local, and this may hint at the periodic presence of people coming into the region, especially because the later fourth-millennium B.C. horizon

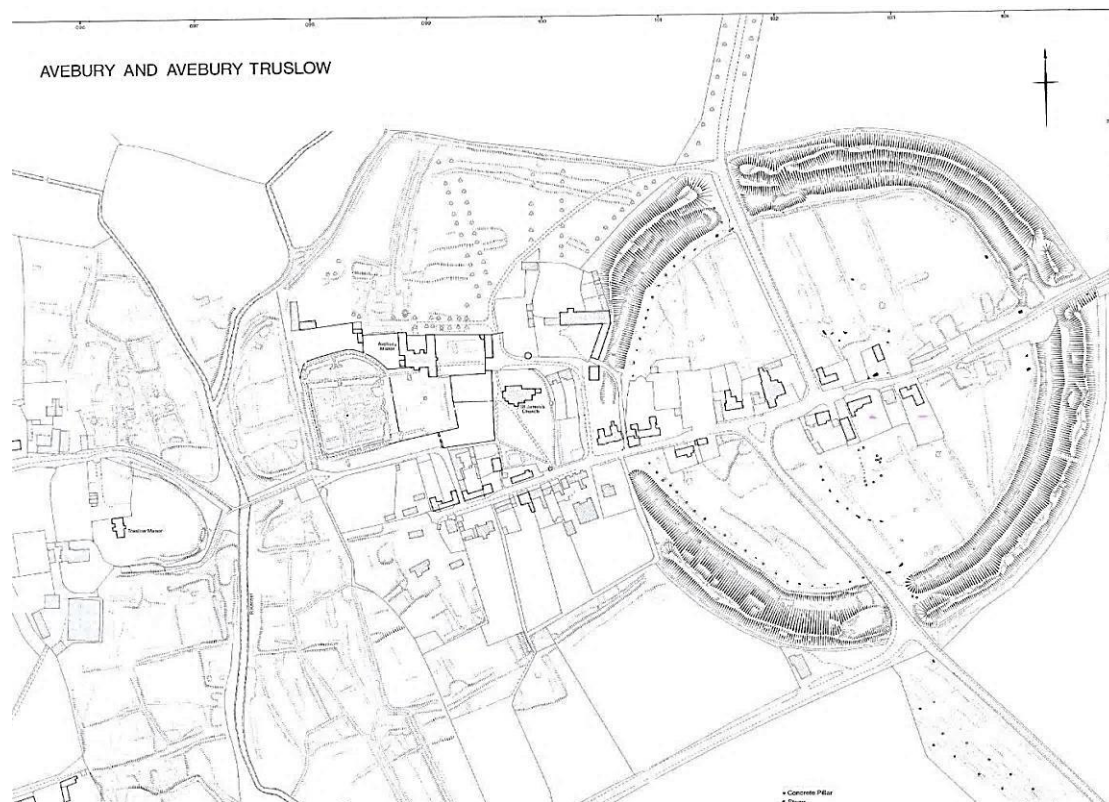
to which it belongs now looks to be a period of increased mobility based around pastoralism as a key economic practice. There was also limited evidence of a very early Neolithic presence here; of the extraction of sarsen stones to create the West Kennet Avenue around 2500-2400 B.C.; and of Early Bronze Age activity connected to a burial against one of the Avenue stones.

Over the next five years (2016-20) the Project will investigate other promising locations in the environs of the henge, including a lithic scatter that has produced an unusual number of axes and axe production debris on the Foot of Avebury Down, and a mixed late Mesolithic and early Neolithic site to the west of the henge. Extensive geophysical survey using new techniques for mapping deposits is already underway, and will be followed by targeted surface collection, augering, and test excavation within river and dry valley locations. Our understanding is that well preserved traces of settlement and other relatively ephemeral activity are more extensive here than often assumed. Overall, we aim to produce a more detailed and robust account of the relationship between the formation of ceremonial landscapes and their inhabitation than currently exists, and one that can serve as a model for other Neolithic complexes.

\*

### Avebury church and village

Avebury village has attracted attention partly because of interest in how medieval people viewed the standing stones and partly because it has a long post-Roman sequence, starting with Anglo-Saxon occupation under the present car-park. The *-bury* element in the place-name may mean either ‘manor’ or ‘fort’, and an elliptical plan has been postulated (compare Ramsbury on-line entry), focusing on a crossing of the stream rather than on the ditch of the

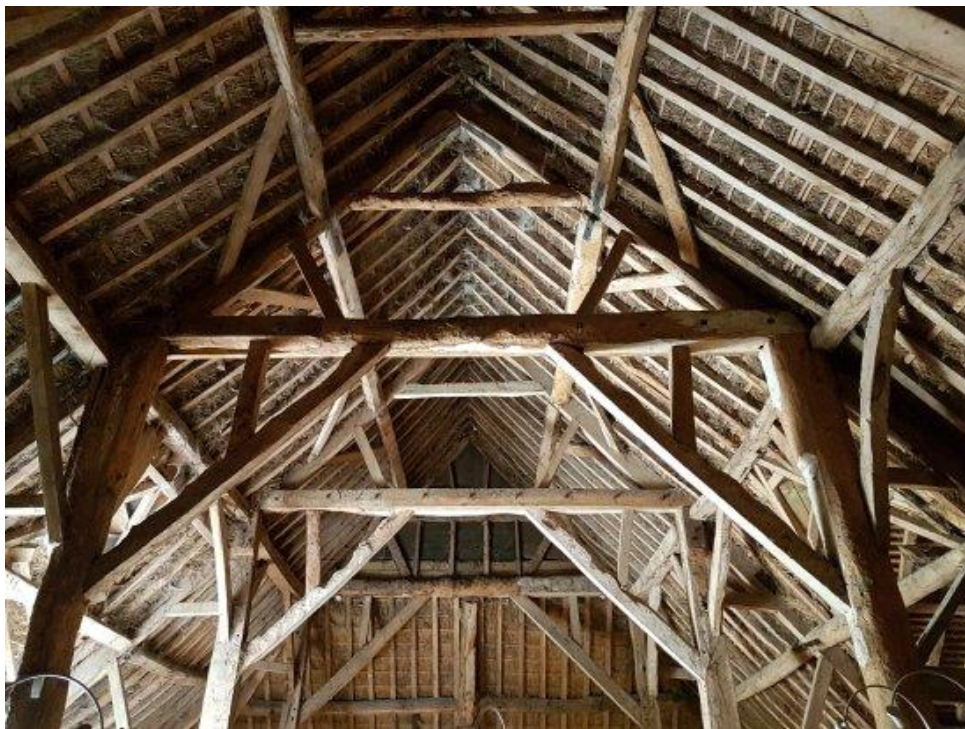


henge, which seems not to have affected people much except for the documented *herepath*

running through it. It is argued that in the late Saxon period the settlement was replanned as a rectangular grid, particularly visible in the regular tenements on the south side of the main street, and with a defensive ditch, found in an excavation by Andrew Reynolds (2005; plan by Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, reproduced by courtesy of Historic England). This may all result from later medieval replanning associated with open-field agricultural systems, however, the ditches being no more than for drainage and boundary purposes.

Avebury church has two unusual round late Saxon windows in the nave walls, which show that the early building was quite high as well as long; remains of a doorway are at the west end of the south wall, as well as traces of other Anglo-Saxon features. Built into the nave is a fragment of Anglo-Saxon sculpture with a figure and hands, too incomplete for certain identification, and there are other Anglo-Saxon fragments as well (Cramp 2006, 200-1); there is also a fine Norman font and a rare fifteenth-century wooden rood screen.

The church was probably a late Saxon 'minster', but by Domesday Book Avebury was already divided between two separate manors, complicating the settlement sequence. The present manor-house is sixteenth-century in origin, and may be on the site of one of the earlier centres. It has manorial outbuildings such as a dovecote, and a barn and stable now used for exhibition space and the museum. The barn has been rebuilt; inside are aisle-posts and two base-crucks, one at each end but almost certainly not in their original positions, as they would have been used to span the width of a building (see e.g. Salisbury Deanery and Bradford-on-Avon barn, on-line entries); they are dated by dendrochronology to 1279x1301 (photograph by courtesy of the National Trust, showing the upper parts of three pairs of aisle-posts, with a cruck in the centre background).





In the 1980s the manor complex was bought by an entrepreneur who aimed to have a theme park much like the one then at Littlecote (see on-line entry), but the venture, which raised mixed feelings locally, failed and the property is now owned by the National Trust.

A sarsen stone in the church's foundation could indicate 'Christianization' of such stones, but most of those in the henge and along the avenues were left standing; excavation of one of those in the Beckhampton Avenue recently found that it had been buried so that a much eroded face was invisible, perhaps because it was thought to have been carved by ancient pagans; a cow bone had been pushed into a natural hole in it. The henge was known in the thirteenth century as the *waledich*, 'ditch of the Britons' – or simply 'ditch and bank'. 'Waden Hill' is probably *weoh* (= (?) heathen shrine) + *dun* (=hill). Also problematic is the burial of a man with iron scissors and a (?) probe, possibly a tailor or a 'barber-surgeon', or just a shepherd; a coin found with him is early fourteenth-century, and over his body one of the standing stones had been lowered. The original suggestion that he had been trapped under it when it fell seems less likely than that he was a murder victim being concealed to avoid a fine that would otherwise have been levied on the whole community.

#### *References and further reading*

- CRAMP, R. 2006. *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture Volume VII. South-West England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- CUNNINGTON, M.E. 1931. The 'Sanctuary' on Overton Hill, near Avebury, *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 45, 300–35
- EVANS, J.G., LIMBREY, S., MÁTÉ, I. AND MOUNT, R. 1993. An environmental history of the upper Kennet valley, Wiltshire, for the last 10,000 years, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 59, 139–95
- FWLER, P. J. 2000. *Landscape Plotted and Pieced*, London: Society of Antiquaries of London
- GILLINGS, M., ALLEN, M., FRENCH, C., CLEAL, R., SNASHALL, N., PIKE, A. AND POLLARD, J. 2015. Living on the Avenue: investigating settlement histories and other events at West Kennet, near Avebury, *PAST*, 81, 6–9
- GILLINGS, M., POLLARD, J., WHEATLEY, D. AND PETERSON, R. 2008. *Landscape of the Megaliths: Excavation and Fieldwork on the Avebury Monuments, 1997–2003*, Oxford: Oxbow Books
- GRAY, H. St G. 1935. The Avebury excavations, 1908–1922. *Archaeologia*, 84, 99–162
- LEIVERS, M. AND POWELL, A. B. 2016. *A Research Framework for the Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites World Heritage Site. Avebury Resource Assessment*, Salisbury: Wessex Archaeology Monograph 38
- PITTS, M. 2001. Excavating the Sanctuary: new investigations on Overton Hill, Avebury, *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society Magazine*, 94, 1–23
- POLLARD, J. 1992. The Sanctuary, Overton Hill, Wiltshire: a re-examination, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 58, 213–26
- POLLARD, J., ALLEN, M., CLEAL, R., SNASHALL, N., GUNTER, J., ROBERTS, V. AND ROBINSON, D. 2012. East of Avebury: tracing prehistoric activity and environmental change in the environs of Avebury henge (excavations at Rough Leaze 2007), *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society Magazine*, 105, 1–20
- REYNOLDS, A. 2005. From pagus to parish: territory and settlement in the Avebury region from the late Roman period to the Domesday survey, in G. Brown, D. Field and D. McOmish (eds), *The Avebury Landscape: Aspects of the Field Archaeology of the Marlborough Downs*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 164–80
- SMITH, I.F. 1965. *Windmill Hill and Avebury: Excavations by Alexander Keiller, 1925–1939*, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- STUKELEY, W. 1743. *Abury a Temple of the British Druids, with Some Others Described*, London, Innys & Manby

WHITTLE, A. 1993. The Neolithic of the Avebury area: sequence, environment, settlement and monuments, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 12, 29-53

These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute held in July 2016; see [www.royalarchinst.org](http://www.royalarchinst.org) for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The RAI is grateful to Joshua Pollard for his contribution on prehistoric Avebury; the section on the village was prepared by David A. Hinton. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-page.