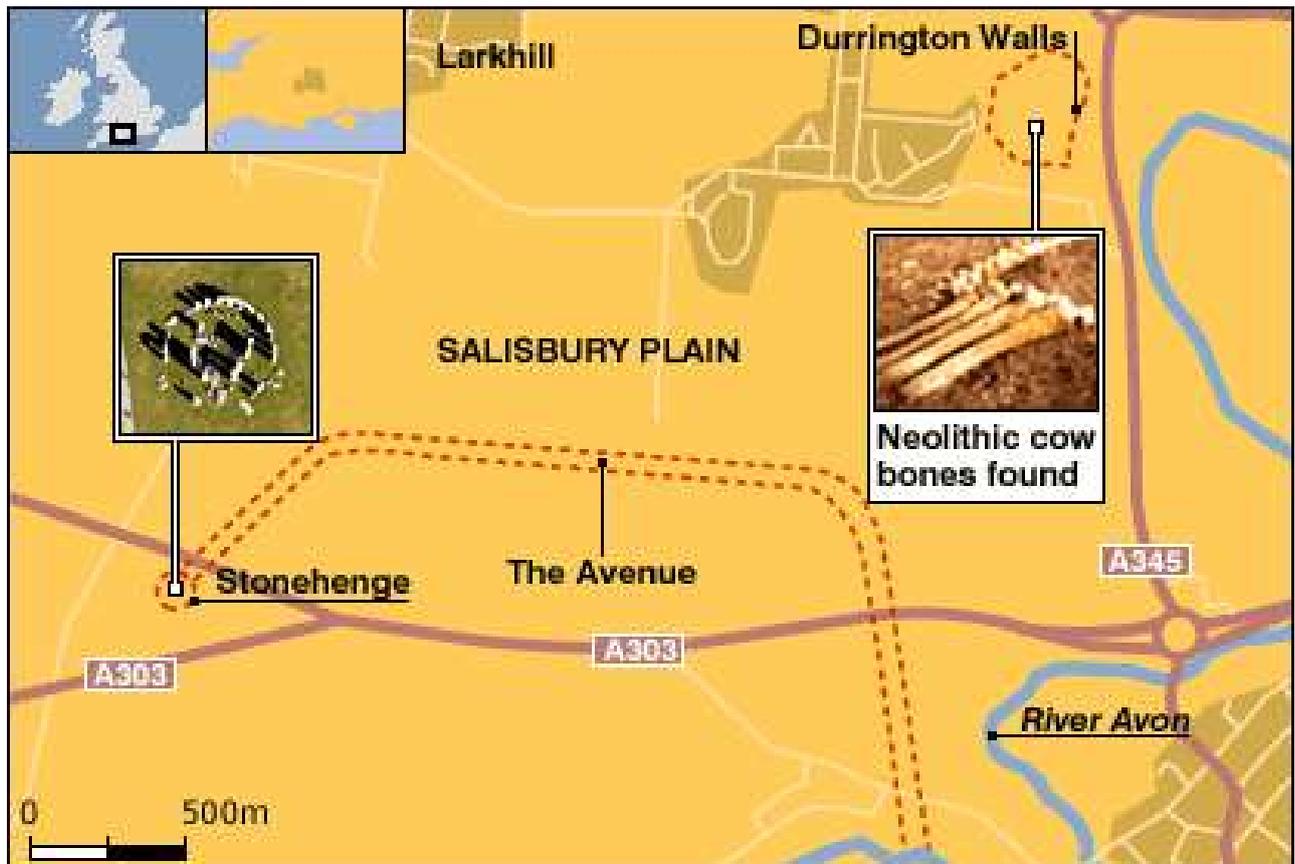


Archaeology Course 4th – 6th June 2010

Dr. Nick Snashall – National Trust Archaeologist at Avebury.
Prehistorian with specific interest in Religion and Ritual & Early tools.



Friday 4th June – 8.00 p.m.

The Stonehenge Landscape – an Introduction

Bibliography

- Josh Pollard's "**Neolithic Britain**" (Shire) – good book to start with.
- Andy Lawson: "**Chalkland an Archaeology of Stonehenge and its Region**" – to follow on. About the only book at the moment that has details of the Stonehenge Riverside Project.

Upper Palaeolithic – Old Stone Age

Mesolithic – Middle Stone Age

Earlier Neolithic – Early New Stone Age

Later Neolithic – Later New Stone Age

Mesolithic Britain

Starts at about 10,000 BC and goes on to about 4,000 BC – therefore lasts about 6K years. About half way through (around 6,500 BC) is when Britain is getting a great deal warmer and when it gets cut off from the continent. The land mass was therefore altering shape – parts becoming much higher and parts getting drowned. The Mesolithic Age was immediately after the Ice Age with ice up to a mile thick being present in the north of the British Isles.

During the Mesolithic period people led a hunter gatherer life style – in Britain they were relying a lot on hazelnuts and tubers.

There are visible remains of Mesolithic settlements. Bowman's Farm in Hampshire is an example. Little holes can be seen where flexible posts were originally inserted. Multiple rows indicate that people came back to the same site over many years.

The sorts of weapons they were using are known as microliths - small stone tools - very easy to make from flint blades and tied to sticks.

Rivers and the sea were very important during the Mesolithic period because the people relied heavily on shell fish etc for food. Large middens containing shells have been found to support this.

Neolithic Britain

c 4000 - 2200 BC

Domesticated crops and animals

Pottery

About 4,000 BC people in this country began to adopt **pottery** – gradually over time. However, we were some thousand years after this had happened on the continent. We still used leather bags etc.

There were also no domesticated cattle prior to this period – only extremely large wild animals. When domesticated, these became much smaller. When you domesticate animals they often don't get all the things that they need and therefore become much smaller. Sheep and goats were introduced at this time. Wheat and Barley were brought here for the first time – originally from Iraq and surrounding areas.

Monuments

These also date from the Neolithic period. A *causeway enclosure* is one where there are concentric circles pierced by causeways. They were a marketplace or a gathering centre - people came together for a few months or weeks – bringing pottery, axes, cereals etc to exchange.

Timber monuments also date from this period. Large wooden post holes were discovered in the Stonehenge car park.

There were changes in stone tools at this stage also. Polished stone axe heads were beginning to be produced. They were hafted in a wooden handle. They were evidently ceremonial as well as all areas were polished which wouldn't be necessary for hunting per se. They were polished on blocks of sarsen stone and some of these are extant in the Avebury area.

Some of the earliest ones we know of were found in the West Kennet Long Barrow dating from around 6,300 BC. Also leaf shaped arrow heads were used.

Durrington Walls is the biggest henge monument in the British Isles.

Henges – huge circular monuments constructed in the Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Ages with a ditch running around the inside of the bank. They seem to be ceremonial monuments in large part – not defensive.

The name "henge" was originally from Stonehenge itself and means "hanging". One school of thought is that they reminded people of a gibbet and hanging. Another school says that it refers to the two vertical stones "hanging" off the top horizontal stone.

In fact, Stonehenge is not a henge at all – it is more like a late, small, causewayed enclosure.

Dating from about the same time as the henges are stone circles. Some, like Avebury, lie within henge monuments. They are all Neolithic phenomena reaching into the early Bronze Age.

Within Stonehenge, moving in from the outer sarsen stones, are the much smaller blue stones – from the Preselli area of Wales.

There were sarsen stones on Salisbury plain itself and these could have come from local areas.

Some of the upright stones have little nobbles on the top because they were constructed very much like ball and socket joints.

The Stonehenge stones were modified and shaped – they were aping or echoing woodworking forms. They took lumps of sarsen, possibly swung from A frames, to work the sarsens.

Mayburgh Henge and King Arthur's Round Table are henges in Cumbria – very near each other. You very often get sets of henges together.

In some instances, henges were built around a pre-existing grouping of stones and in others the stones were put into an earlier henge.

At Durrington, prior to July 2004, it was felt the monument was ceremonial only. However the evidence of a vast Neolithic settlement was found during the dig starting then. Tamped floors were found and hearths – this type of house had only previously been found in Scotland (Scara Brae). Middens and pottery remains were found – evidence of huge amounts of feasting. The floor surfaces that were exposed were made from polished chalk and clay slurry forming a plaster-like surface.

Avenues

guided your path from one monument to another. The great Avenue at Stonehenge was a natural phenomenon which, with its alignment to the solstice, must have made the people at the time feel it had great significance – which was why they built Stonehenge where they did and why they extended it.

The Great Cursus is 2½ km long – but there is another smaller one as well. It is thought it is a huge ceremonial monument. The cursus is earlier than Stonehenge – by somewhere between 300 and 600 years.

Stukeley named it “cursus” – thinking it was a Roman racecourse. This is no longer thought to be the case although there is still no consensus of opinion as to why it was actually created.

Round Barrows at the Cursus date from the mid Bronze Age.

Saturday 5th June – 8.00 p.m.

People, Pits and Postholes - Stonehenge: the Early Years

Mesolithic Post Pits in the Stonehenge car park: Radio carbon tests date these to between 8500-7650 cal BC & 7500-6700 cal BC. There are four posts with one not quite in alignment to the others. These were huge pine timbers erected just before we were cut off from the continent about 6500 BC. It would have been a little cooler than it is today. There was much more coniferous woodland; little deciduous. There are only two or three other sites in the whole of Britain where there are wooden monuments (one being Hambledon). The fact that these just happen to be only yards away from where Stonehenge was later constructed is highly suggestive that this site was especially important even before the stone monoliths were erected.

Mesolithic material has been discovered near to the Avon in the Riverside Project only a matter of yards from the end of the Avenue. This is not that common and therefore must have been connected to the Stonehenge site. There are worked flints at that site.

Environment?

Moving into the Neolithic period..... Molluscan analysis (study of snails: some types will only live in shady conditions, others on specific vegetation etc) shows that the area was a natural open space. Therefore people did not have to chop down huge numbers of trees to clear an area for a monument. For the people at the time, most of the country was thick deciduous woodland and they would have lived and worked in this. In consequence, open areas would be natural gathering places.

The environment changed from coniferous to deciduous tree life because of climate change.

From 4000 – 3000 BC (the earliest farming communities) there were long barrows, gatherings at Robin Hood's Ball (causewayed enclosure site) and pottery making. Pottery finds were bowls with round bases used like a wok and very efficient. Much of this has been found, possibly due to the proximity of the River Avon.

This environment was used for grazing – pastureland – for centuries. It was only ploughed in the 20th century particularly to provide food in war time. This usage would have preserved the landscape. There have also been buildings and air strips on this area.

Long barrows generally date from c 3800 - 3400 BC. They were mostly around 3,500 BC.

The Avenue was built in the late Neolithic when it was open land.

Amesbury G42 long barrow

John Thurnam had excavated it in the mid 1860s and found a skull and severed feet of an oxen (head and hooves burial). It was excavated by Julian Richards in 1983 and by Julian Thomas in 2008.

In the Middle Neolithic, the Cursus Monument was built – construction was dated to c.3630-3375 BC via radio carbon from a broken tine of antler pick discovered at the base of a cursus dig.

The end of the Avenue

This goes right down to the Avon. It was discovered that there was originally a henge with a stone circle in it on the banks of the Avon. Evidence of the stone pits has been found – possibly blue stones there which were later removed and taken to Stonehenge.

Right from its inception, Stonehenge had a direct connection with the river.

The Aubrey Holes – The first elements of Stonehenge, with its ditch and bank, are the Aubrey Holes of 3015 – 2935 BC, which are thought to have comprised a simple circle of blue stones. The holes are about 1 metre wide with stones of perhaps 2 metres in height. At some point soon after this, the stones were removed and cremations were put in the holes (2830 – 2870 BC)

Sunday 6th June – 9.30 a.m.

In the Deep Midwinter: Re-thinking the Stonehenge landscape

Durrington Walls – Later Neolithic

Re-looked at in 2004 – huge project involving lots of specialists from many universities. Mike Parker-Pearson was convinced it might have relevance to Stonehenge itself because of the way that the Avenue linked the two. Very early on they discovered huge pits filled with animal bone etc – the remains of enormous feasts. There was also groove wear – associated with henge monuments and stone circles.

Floors of houses were discovered – made of a surface that was very hardy if not exposed to rain – a sort of polished stucco/plaster. Because of its good state of preservation, they knew it had not been exposed to the elements and had to have been covered by a roof. Square houses with one entrance and a central hearth. The size of the house was approximately 19' square. There are very direct parallels with houses discovered in Skara Brae.

Walls were made of a combination of chalk/chalk rubble and a composite of flint. Skara Brae walls were local material – large stones and therefore more preserved – especially as they became covered by sand and only discovered when another storm in the late 19th century blew enough sand away to expose them.

(Where large communal houses dating from the Neolithic era have been discovered they are all, without exception, a large rectangle. Therefore it was relatively understandable that small family houses would be square. Later people moved towards round houses and were still living in these when the Romans arrived. There is a change which is reflected in their people's ideologies and belief systems that affects their whole concept of house building).

No remnants of houses such as these have been discovered between the Orkneys and Durrington Walls – however this does not mean that the two sites were unique and occasional sites have come to light down in Dorset etc so therefore they were probably typical of housing throughout Britain at the time.

The pits containing feast debris are generally around the houses but a few are in the floors of the houses themselves. In the latter cases many of these date to when the occupancy period ended – almost like a closing down feast – or indicating closure on the occupancy of the site.

On the site, 2 houses of the 12 or so excavated were larger than the others. Almost certainly there must have been a hierarchy amongst the village occupants.

Stonehenge seems to have started as a cemetery site. Largely male, a few women and many children. It suggests different levels within society. In the same way, the Durrington Walls settlement which existed to provide habitation for the Stonehenge workers and their families, would also have had a hierarchy as regards the inhabitants. Generally such settlements are of a single house or of a group of three or four. Here, there were over 200 and it is thought to have existed to provide workers' accommodation for those building Stonehenge. (Iron Age hill forts were home to 100 – 200 houses)

The henge at Durrington was later than the settlement – this is evident from studies of the stratigraphy where walls have been cut through to provide the holes for posts.

Wainwright originally excavated the Durrington Walls area when the road was cut through. Julian Thomas and others re-excavated during the decade after the millennium and that is when they discovered the houses etc. The Southern Circle (wooden) was reconstructed by archaeologists with help from the army and JCBs during the last eight years or so. It is possible that the wooden circles were constructed to hark back to a time when there were vastly more trees – or that they were linking to the earth and the people of the time looked to what was inside the earth, rather than up above it, for their religious focus. There could have been roots on the top of the inverted wooden poles. We don't know. Some wooden posts were later replaced by stone posts.

It was an aerial photo taken on 30th June 1926 by Squadron Leader Gilbert Insall VC that first showed the impression of Woodhenge South. In 2006 there was a comprehensive dig which Nick was involved in – where they stood in the post holes.

There was evidence in the top of the fill of the post-holes, of the placement of the remains of a cow. Various items were found in the fill of the postholes when they closed down the site.

All the houses were orientated so that the doorways to them looked down towards the river Avon.

A stone dressing floor was found where sarsen hammerstones were amongst all the other stones. These were used to peck the sarsens to make the shape perfect and also to make the tenon and mortise joints on the sarsen stones. Freshly dug sarsen is a little softer than exposed stone as it has some moisture content.

Solar orientations are very important at this site. The Southern Circle to the Avenue faces midwinter sunrise. The Avenue to Stonehenge faces midwinter sunset.

Stone to wood upstream – fertility from the ancestors.

Stonehenge to the Avenue faces midsummer sunrise

Avenue to Southern Circle faces midsummer sunset.

Mike Parker Pearson believes that Stonehenge was an area of the dead and Durrington an area of the living – this is probably too simplistic.

Water is always found near henges but not necessarily near stone circles.

Sunday 6th June – 11.00 a.m.
Stonehenge: a landscape revealed

The first development at Stonehenge was a bank and ditch circle dating from about 3000 BC. This closely resembled other such structures of the time. They were partly ceremonial and part practical. As time went on people were coming back to place items in the ditches etc and therefore the function slipped towards becoming primarily and then solely ceremonial.

The circle at Stonehenge was much more accurate than those such as at Windmill Hill etc. This may have been to do with the whole solar aspect that centres on Stonehenge. Ancient peoples, however, were not as preoccupied with symmetry as we tend to be.

When they started building Stonehenge, there was no blank canvas landscape – there were already monuments around. The Amesbury G42 long barrow (located at the east end of the Cursus) was built in the mid 4th millennium BC. Reconstituted c. 3300 BC.

The Stonehenge Cursus dates from around 3630-3375 BC as defined by radio carbon dating of a broken tine of antler pick found in the bottom of a trench during an exploratory dig. This was at the same time as the Amesbury G42 long barrow was being reconstituted and before the first bank and ditch at Stonehenge.

The Aubrey Holes at Stonehenge had bones and stones and dated to 3015-2935 BC and then there were cremation burials in them 2930-2870 BC. (John Aubrey was an antiquary and the same person who wrote “Brief Lives” – he was a Wiltshire man. He was the first person to recognise that they existed.)

Bluestones were then put in the Aubrey holes. The bluestones were moved around the site.

The houses at Durrington Walls date to the sarsen construction period of Stonehenge. There was unprecedented preservation there that has aided the archaeology.

Woodhenge: Wood to Stone – Josh Pollard’s excavation in 2006. Once the timber posts were gone, they dug holes for stone and then took those stones away also.

As part of the Riverside Project, the area around the Cuckoo Stone was excavated and it was discovered that a sarsen stone was taken and placed upright where it had been lying. Sarsen stones are somewhat rare at Salisbury Plain – as opposed to Avebury – therefore they were seen as something special.

The area where Nick has a photo of people in post holes is where a mortuary platform was constructed. People were laid out on the platform before their bones were relocated. Something to do with the release of the soul and going from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Not everyone was treated in this way. Some were cremated and put in the Stonehenge great monument area.

Sequence:

First the houses (and the mortuary platform) along with the sarsen stage of Stonehenge. People are here during Midwinter as determined from an analysis of the pig bones at the age of slaughter – age determined from farrowing in spring. There are others slaughtered at Midsummer. This came as a revelation to the archaeologists who had always focused on Midsummer as being when great gatherings took place and the function of Stonehenge. The setting sun and the function of Stonehenge as a focus for the midwinter solstice as well as the midsummer is now acknowledged as being important. This entirely changed the view of what was going on at Durrington.

...then the henge

The Grooveware found at Durrington Walls was large and flat bottomed, rather than the round bottomed nature of earlier pots. This was because it would sit on the timber dressers that probably emulated the stone ones at Skara Brae. Once there are flat surfaces to store things on, flat bottoms are needed on pots.

The Grooveware patterns:

In the 1960s, an extension was being made to a bungalow in the Durrington Walls area called “Woodlands. Much Grooveware pottery was discovered whilst this was being done and an excavation ensued. This pottery was then termed “Woodlands Pottery”. There are spirals and lines – probably solar connections.

The Amesbury Archer Burials (Full report due around December 2010)

About 3 miles away from Woodhenge and Durrington, in about 2001-2, there was an excavation on a military base, ahead of a pipeline going in. That was when the richest early Bronze Age burials that we know of were discovered at a period when there is only a small amount of metal work going on. The first examples of gold work that we know of were found with him. He also had a large quantity of beaker pots buried with him. These had thin walls and were a buff colour – both attributes show good control over temperature. Nearby was another, lesser known, burial.

The Amesbury Archer was himself a metal worker – the artefacts buried with him were not only metal objects but also the means whereby they would be worked. He had one gammy knee but he had come quite a distance because the isotope analysis showed that he came from somewhere near the Alps. He was buried with some ceremony and presumably his skills were greatly valued.

The other burial was of a man with a deformed ankle. There was probably a direct genealogical link between them because of the deformity. The younger one buried on the right was either the son or the nephew of the older man. He had been born on the chalkland but moved to Scotland and then back again. During the early Bronze Age there were therefore people in the Stonehenge landscape who had connections far afield and this suggests that it had a great significance near and far. (In recent times people didn’t move nearly as much but early on it seems they did.) Metal workers would have needed to get to the sources of the ores. Very early on, people would have travelled therefore. Wessex was at the cusp of where things came together.

Beaker Pottery from Stonehenge

Ceremonial deposits were put in ditches.

The Normanton Barrows, behind Stonehenge – bush barrows dating from the earlier parts of the Middle Bronze Age – were incredibly rich burials. Cunnington and Colt Hoare discovered these. A gold belt hook was discovered and a largish gold diamond-shaped item with a mini copy also. The larger one is thought to have been an ornamental breast plate or something similar, sewn onto a garment, to show prestige. It was incredibly thin, however, which shows great craftsmanship.

There is a great concentration of barrows around Stonehenge, but not around Avebury.

Later History of the Stones:

In Roman times, some of the blue stones were damaged by souvenir hunters or for healing properties. They sacrificed chickens so they seem to have revered the stones at that time but afterwards they seem to have just been ignored.

2008 Excavations of Tim Darville & Geoff Wainwright

inside Stonehenge. These take our knowledge on yet further.

Why are the stones there?

It is because of the natural Avenue and the Solar Alignment.