

The Marvellous Marden Henge

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Probably one of Britain's least known henges - which is surprising, given its location between Avebury and Stonehenge.



It is actually the largest henge in Britain!

Few stop to look at it because there is no stone circle there. This is true, not just of the public but also of archaeologists in fact!

Marden Henge is in the Vale of Pewsey between the higher chalk areas of the Pewsey and Marlborough Downs in an area of greensand.

This is a difficult soil for archaeologists to work on – you cannot quite work out feature edges, whereas they are easy to see on chalk. On greensand you have to really work at it:

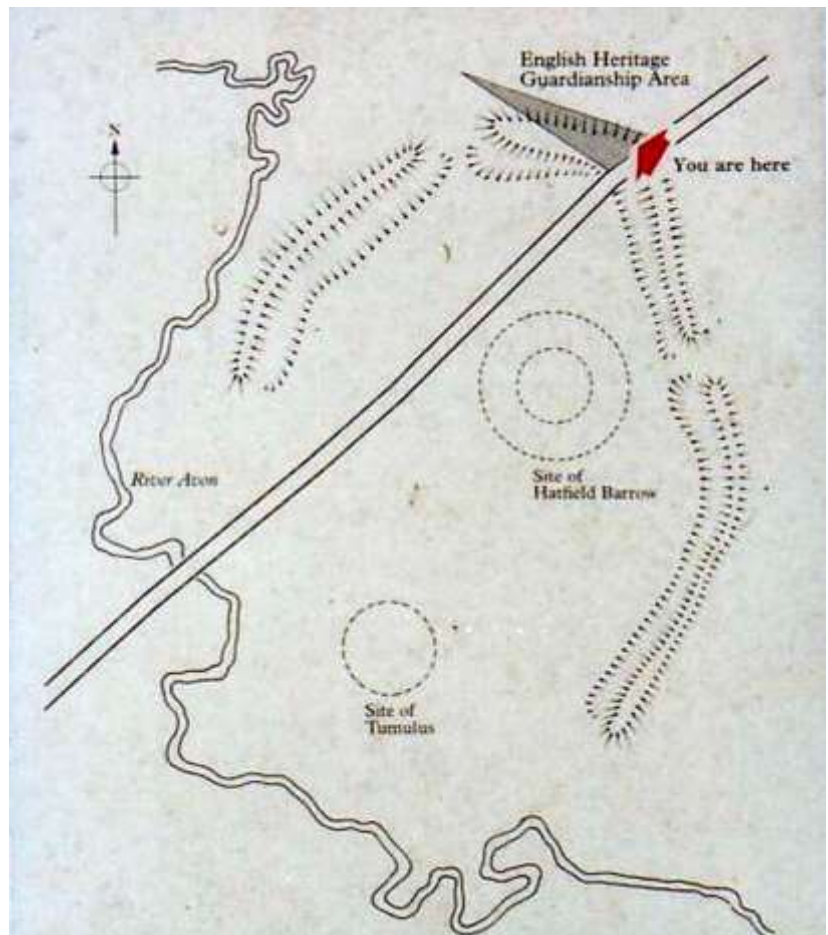
“Greensand, Dear Boy, is a pig!” Geoff Wainwright said to Jim Leary.

Greensand is not very responsive to aerial photographs either. It is not good re magnetometer surveys or geophysics. Stuart Piggott described the Vale of Pewsey as a backwater.

That is not to say that no-one looked at it: In 1806, a plan of Marden Henge appeared in Gough's edition of Camden's Britannica.

Richard Colt Hoare also decided to look at the area in 1806 and assembled a team that included Philip Crocker and William Cunnington. They produced a plan showing both Marden Henge and Hatfield Barrow, as a significant mound, within it. There was also the “Southern Circle”- a feature also within the henge but that has no official name. It is marked on the map to the right as “Site of Tumulus”.

Cunnington described Hatfield Barrow as half the size of Silbury Hill at 15 metres high. Though Colt Hoare described it, perhaps more realistically, as 9 metres high!



In 1806 Cunnington and Colt Hoare found some old bone and pottery a few metres down. They returned in 1809, sinking a shaft on that occasion.

As the two men dug down, it became clear that they couldn't maintain the straight edges of a square because of the loose greensand. They therefore dug a hole in the shape of an inverted cone but they couldn't see a burial.

At that stage the two labourers were fortuitously called to go and look at something else. The reason that this is described as fortuitous is because part of the trench collapsed in almost as soon as they had vacated it!

Cunnington and Colt Hoare also investigated the Southern Circle and found British pottery and old bones – a report was published:

1821: in Colt Hoare's "Ancient Britain".

He popped back to Marden just before publication and was mortified to find that a local farmer had completely levelled the site and the mound had gone!

1845: In a map of this date only a slight irregularity is shown – no mound at all.

1887: The first accurate survey of the area was carried out – the interesting thing about the survey is that the Southern Circle is depicted with the words "Earthwork – site of". Putting a cross (x) there has led to researchers ignoring the Southern Circle.

However, to the amazement of Jim Leary and his colleagues, they discovered that the Southern Circle is still there.

1969: Geoffrey Wainwright did some investigations of the area linked with his work at Durrington Walls.

He and his team marked the location of the Hatfield Barrow accurately but did not put on the Southern Earthworks. Indeed when Geoff Wainwright visited the dig in 2010, he was unaware that the Southern Circle had been preserved!

(Wainwright conclusively proved that Marden was a Late Neolithic henge but he did not see the earthwork to the south).

In the 1950s houses were built, encroaching into the henge.

A LIDAR survey undertaken recently shows the Southern Circle and also the site of Hatfield Barrow. The northern entrance, where Wainwright excavated, is shown. The most preserved area is now tree covered – to the west.

Jim Leary was the Field Work Director with Dave Field and produced a very accurate survey. There is a well-preserved set of earthworks to the north-west, with at least three phases of constructional activity being shown there.

An interesting thing about Dave's survey is that it shows clearly that the site was not constructed in one go but had been added to over time (as many other similar sites).

The circle to the south was shown as very dramatic and impressive.

An RAF photo of 1946, (before the houses went in) shows that there never was a henge bank where the dwellings were constructed: the area always was open, and looked out onto the River Avon.



1976: A photograph showed both barrows clearly.

Helen Winton has analysed both the 1976 aerial photograph and one taken more recently and it is clear that the whole Vale of Pewsey is NOT devoid of prehistoric remains as once was thought.

There are in fact many features there. However, it is not easy to identify more than a few and there is much work still to be done.

The River Avon cuts into many of them.

The geophysics for the henge (Louise Martin) shows the ditch for the Hatfield Barrow very clearly – there are “wobbles”, or an entrance, which have not been investigated as yet.

The Southern Circle also shows up clearly but the best thing was the South Eastern Entrance which showed up extremely clearly. This south eastern entrance accords well with other henge monuments

Jim Leary wanted to know how deep the ditches were and sunk cores down 5 metres around the Hatfield Henge which had a very substantial ditch. There were 3 interesting areas that had to be investigated with trenches.

1. The South East “Entrance” – is it really such? Could we improve our knowledge?

The dating had not been exact. There was thick, dark, stinky, organic material here – an archaeologist’s dream! There were lots of finds within this: antler and bone as well as pottery.

Some really good dating evidence came out of it. The trench didn’t just stop at the end of the ditch – it was made sufficiently long so that they could look at the entrance itself.

A thick deposit of gravel was found – which must have been brought in deliberately from elsewhere. It was a deliberately laid and compacted avenue within the henge. The archaeologists cored outside the henge and the gravel was found there, too, - continuing over towards the River Avon. It accorded with the avenue found by Mike Parker Pearson at Durrington Walls. The gravel had actually been laid down in three separate phases. It was such a tiny section that more work is required.

2. The Hatfield Barrow also had to be a target. To their surprise there was 15 cm left that the farmer had not demolished! From this was produced some animal bone which could be carbon-dated. The assumption is that it must be contemporary with the monument but we do not know that. Dates are being processed at the moment. Right in the centre of the mound, a post hole was found! This was probably only a half metre in diameter but had marked the centre – similar in many ways to what is at Silbury Hill. The post wasn’t the first feature to go in and again showed that the mound was created in phases.

From the fill of the post hole another piece of animal bone was extracted.

They also found features within the mound itself – possible tree hollows. Probably a few trees were removed just before the mound was constructed. This pre-mound activity involved people sitting down at a bonfire in the hollow. There were burning patches and some pottery where they’d been.

3. The Southern Circle had to be excavated for the first time. They had no idea of the date and for just a moment even feared it might even be a modern dew pond! They decided to put trenches in on high and low areas. It became patently clear what they were looking at – a bank with a ditch on the inside. Thus they were looking at another henge within the larger Marden Henge. They were faced with the option of either massively increasing the size of the ditch or closing it down. Jim Leary decided to close it and focus attention on the bank instead and this proved to have been a very good plan indeed. They started to find a patch of chalk – they weren’t on chalk so why was it there? Perhaps it had been brought in in modern times to dry a mushy area or for horses etc? However they kept an open mind. Josh Pollard was down visiting and he said that if they were digging at Durrington Walls, they would call the chalk a floor surface! Could he be right? They cleaned more of the chalk and discovered straight edges and Neolithic flints and pottery came off the surface of the chalk. They were definitely looking at a Neolithic Building! It seemed an odd place to put a house but they started to define what they had come now to acknowledge as a building. They dug and got excited and it was clear they were looking at a proper floor plan. It was confusing – there was a square in the middle that didn’t have any chalk on it – seemingly unfinished. Also there seemed to be no hearth in the middle as was the case at Durrington Walls. Within the final week of the dig, they started to realise that the area in the centre had no chalk in it because it was sunken into the ground – the chalk was lower down!

They started to excavate a quarter of the sunken area and there was the hearth and a fantastically well-preserved floor within it! It is the best preserved Neolithic building in England.

It is superior to Mike Parker Pearson’s Durrington Wall’s buildings!



Just along side the building, were two patches of cultural debris: rubbish or middens – absolutely rammed full of animal bone and very highly decorated pottery. There is also probably rake-out from the hearth.

It is felt to be feasting debris – predominantly pig and also deer. The pig bone had been deposited in a single go. There are leg joints, shoulder and vertebrates all intermingled together.

Out of the middens, also came two beautifully preserved arrow heads – definitely some of the finest in the country. There was also a long slender piece of flint that had been finely worked and probably joined on to another to be a long tail of another arrowhead. It is being called the “Long-tailed Oblique” – someone who really knew how to knap had produced it – absolutely wafer-thin with the light going through.



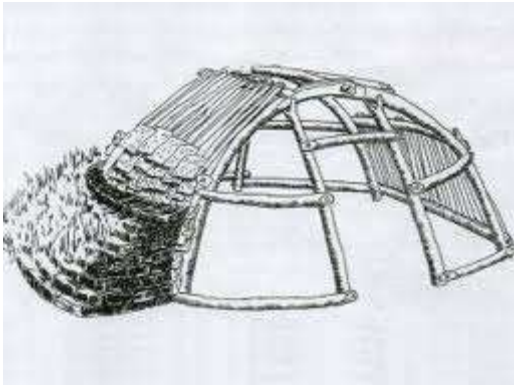
The ripple-flaked oblique arrowheads, both with tips and barbs missing, but with the barb fragment (which is clearly from a third arrowhead) “fitted” onto the lower example.

These are not hunting arrow heads but ultimate show off items.

The pottery was very highly decorated – in some instances on both the outside and the inside. This is not usual domestic pottery – there were also bone pins and needles – some sort of awl made from a sheep bone. They are very nicely made, possibly to hold a cloak together or a dress pin of some sort - or it may have gone through the nose or ear.

Therefore there was something unusual about the building. All that could be looked at was the floor surface – the building itself had been demolished. It looked as though it had all been sealed over quickly and the feasting remains were the end of that building’s life. There was some sort of closure ceremony to do with the building.

There are various possible interpretations of what the building could have looked like when it had a wooden framework over the chalk floor looking over onto the Avon. Probably it was a temporary building, thrown up and used for a couple of seasons and then sealed up – possibly like a Sami house.



The hearth dominated the floorplan – nothing could be fitted in really around the hearth. Certainly you could not sleep in it.

It didn’t appear to be a domestic building – perhaps it was a Sweat Lodge of some sort. These feature in many ethnographic accounts as part of a purification before some large ritual inside the henge. A lot of people were involved as shown by the number of pig bones that were found in the middens.

There may well have been other buildings yet to be discovered - in a circle, all looking inwards towards the henge.

At Durrington there were also middens containing many pig bones and Mike Parker Pearson suggested that there might have been ritualised hunting of the pigs – all part of the ceremony.

Some of the pig bones found at Durrington still have flint arrow tips embedded in them.

The Henge is situated broadly at the head of the River Avon which runs out to the English Channel. It is not an uncommon location for henge monuments which are usually next to rivers. The ditch around Marden would have got waterlogged.

Silbury Hill sits at the head of the River Kennet. The Kennet/Thames which goes out across the sea to Europe has the largest henge monument in Europe at its head.

These henges mark perhaps the head or the end of pilgrimages of people.

At Durrington Walls, it is possible to see their gravel avenue leading out south east to the river and Stone henge has the avenue also leading to the river. The rivers are the key to understanding the henge monuments.

The pig bones at Durrington Walls suggest some sort of seasonality – the young pigs being brought in during the winter season or winter solstice. There is no evidence yet that this is the same at Marden but investigation into the bones is ongoing and this may yet prove to be the case.

It is not yet known how thick the chalk floor is as it hasn't been excavated down to its base as yet. At Durrington Walls, there is evidence of up to 5 refloorings. It is not known where the chalk was brought in from. Marden is broadly in the centre of the plain but slightly closer to the Salisbury Plain chalk deposits. It may never be possible to be certain where it came from.

There is no evidence that they had the wheel then although JL is sure they must have done. Materials and people could have been brought in via the rivers.

It is not known as yet where the gravel came from but it is not river gravel. It would have had to have been brought in from a distance. Further work needs to focus on the gravel area and to identify where it might have come from.

Jim Leary thinks that Marden probably did have its own stone circle originally as sizeable flakes of sarsen have been found nearby so there is evidence of working.

The Marden Church foundations are made from sarsen stone.

What happens next depends on funding – there is at least another season of work there.

Currently different means of raising funds are being explored.

Many villagers have found artefacts in their gardens – including a polished axe.



This lecture was particularly excellent.