

Avebury: A mysterious present from the past

By Karen Dabrowska

Stonehenge step aside – Avebury is here. Its inner circles are much larger than the circles of stones at Stonehenge. In fact the area occupied by the stone circles at Stonehenge, 32 kms to the south, would fit into the outer stone circle at Avebury around 130 times.



Avebury is the site of a large henge (ditch) and several stone circles surrounding the village of Avebury in the English countryside of Wiltshire. It is one of the finest and largest Neolithic monuments in Europe about 5,000 years old.

Its construction spread over several centuries beginning about 3000BC when the henge and the earliest stage of the sanctuary were built. It was another 600 years before the final form was completed when

avenues were added about 2400BC.

The site consists of a circle of land surrounded by a ditch and bank. The area covered by the circle is about 28.5 acres and the circumference is approximately 0.8 of a mile. Around the outside of the circle once stood 98 large sarsen (natural sandstone) stones some of which weighed as much as 60 tons. Within this large outer ring are the remains of two smaller stone circles one of which originally consisted of 27 stones





and was about 320 feet in diameter (northern circle) and the other, which was about 340 feet in diameter and consisted of 29 stones (southern circle).

There are four entrances to the circle each roughly at the cardinal points of the compass. From the south and west entrances going away from the henge are the remains of two stone avenues: Beckhampton Avenue and West Kennet Avenue.

The obvious source of the stones used in the construction of the Avebury monuments was the Marlborough Downs about two miles to the east of Avebury itself where thousands of naturally occurring stones lay scattered on the landscape. The stones are believed to have formed from sedimentary deposits that accumulated on top of the underlying chalk layer. Many of these downland stones have now been broken up and removed for modern building

material but the National Trust plantation at Lockeridge Dene and the small valley at Piggledene preserve many of the stones and gives some idea of the abundance that was available to the builders of the henge during the neolithic period.

In the early years of the 18th century, the general outline of the Avebury temple was still visible. Dr. William Stukeley, an antiquarian who frequently visited the site in the 1720's, watched in dismay as the local

farmers, unaware of the cultural and archaeological value of the ancient temple, continued with its destruction. For over thirty years Stukeley made careful measurements and numerous drawings of the site, drawings that are today our only record of both the immense size and complexity of the ancient temple. Stukeley was the first observer in historical times to clearly recognize that the original ground plan of Avebury was a representation of the body of a serpent passing through a circle and thus forming a traditional





alchemical symbol. The head and tail of the enormous snake were delineated by 50-foot wide avenues of standing stones, each extending 1 and 1/2 miles into the countryside. One of the avenues terminated at another stone ring known as the 'sanctuary'. Continuing his explorations and mapping of the countryside surrounding the stone serpent, Stukeley gathered evidence that the sacred complex of Avebury included many other massive earth and stone monuments.

About a mile to the south of Avebury circle lies the biggest man-mound in Europe – Silbury Hill. It is a 130 feet high wonder of prehistoric engineering whose *raison d'etre*, like that of Stonehenge and the stone circles at Avebury, remains a mystery.

A large part of the village of Avebury is enclosed within the monument. There are First Great Western railway stations at Pewsey (7 miles away) and Swindon (ten miles away) at stagecoach runs local bus

services. Two local roads intersect with the monument and visitors can walk on the earthworks. The two stone avenues (Kennet and Beckhampton) that meet at Avebury define the two sides of a triangle that is designated a World Heritage Site which includes The Sanctuary, Windmill Hill, Silbury Hill and the West Kennet Long Barrow.

A gift and souvenir shop, simply called the shop, has a fascinating collection of books, stones, post cards and

information about Britain's ancient religious and spiritual practices.

Avebury is seen as a spiritual centre by many spiritual groups, especially the Druids and for some it is regarded more highly than Stonehenge. Their festivals, especially the summer solstice, draw large crowds. The village stands on the St Michael ley line (a hypothetical alignments of a number of places of geographical interest, such as ancient monuments) that crosses England from Cornwall to East Anglia.

