



Thin Places, Sacred Spaces, Historical Traces

St Helen's' Tour of Mystic Britain A Visitors' Guide

Chapter 1, Our First Stop – Salisbury Plain, Stonehenge, Avebury: June 2023

What better place to start than the area of Stonehenge – what could be more mysterious or mystical than rocks moved as much as 200 km at a time when wheels or pulleys had yet to be invented? Than complex designs whose purposes remain unclear? Than such massive amounts of human energy expended on work which did not contribute to sustaining life when life was surely difficult? Whether these constructions were built for “religious” purposes is unclear, but there was, and is, clearly spiritual significance, a testament to humankind’s innate desire, even need, to connect with that which is not seen.

There are several features of this area contributing to its allure. The plain itself is unusual and unique; as we walk it, Stonehenge dominates the landscape but this is only one of many archeological sites in the area. Avebury is home to the largest prehistoric stone circle in Britain. Salisbury itself with its famous cathedral, speaks of more modern links with the spiritual. With help from Helen, Val and John Collier, let’s take a look at each.

Salisbury Plain is a large open chalk plateau covering over 300 sq miles. It has been used as a military training area since 1898 (In 1914, 30,000 Canadian troops spent a miserable wet winter camping in the mud as they trained for deployment to the battlefields of France. Operation Overlord training was conducted here), today half of it being used for artillery, helicopter training and classified labs. Consequently there is little new settlement in the area and it is easy to visualize how the landscape may have looked when the builders of Stonehenge settled there. With limited public access, the Plain is one of the largest naturally grass covered areas left in Europe, a wildlife haven and home to many rare and scarce species.



Canadian troops march past Stonehenge near their WW1 training base on Salisbury Plain – Photo in Toronto Star by T.F. Fuller



Stonehenge at the Solstice: bilimvespiritualizm.blogspot.com

The village of Imber was evacuated in 1943 and remains uninhabited, though public access is allowed for an annual service in the church.

Stonehenge first appears in the literature in 1136 when Welsh historian and cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth described it and conjectured that Merlin magically transported the stones there for King Arthur; this legend persisted for many centuries. Today we know that it was constructed between 3100-1100BC but how and why still remains a mystery. Recent geophysical and new mapping techniques that can map underground

disturbances without digging have revealed an area of settlement and other circles that extend for many miles around the visible circle.

What we do know is that the area was the site of burials from Neolithic times (pre ~5000 BC). Later, Roman roads co-existed with Bronze and Iron Age settlements.

To put the timeframe in context, this and Britain's other megalithic structures predate Egyptian, Greek and Mycaenian cultures.

The builders of Stonehenge used sophisticated mathematical skills to align the stones with the summer and winter solstices. They were superior engineers, moving stones weighing as much as 4 tons from a quarry over 200 miles away in Wales and erecting 18 foot tall local stones in the circle.

The fact that construction took place over 2000 years points to the importance of the site. Five thousand years ago annual gatherings there drew people from far and wide and today it is a major tourist draw. As you stand beside the stones tuning out the traffic sounds of a nearby highway, there is still a sense of awe, a feeling of the sacredness of the place and amazement that humans built it for no other purpose than to worship and in acknowledgement of something greater than themselves.

Avebury: This quaint, peaceful Wiltshire village is the most popular megalithic site after Stonehenge and has been designated a World Heritage Site. Avebury henge is surrounded by a bank and ditch circle. Uniquely, the circle also encloses much of the village and two roads cross at its centre. The ditch and stone circles of Avebury were constructed between 2600 and 2400 BC. The stones remained intact but unused throughout the later prehistoric periods. It is not known why the site was abandoned, but archaeological finds show that the site may have been visited by the Romans as a curiosity.



Avebury Parish Church (credit tripadvisor.co.uk)

By about 600 AD (early Saxon period), a settlement had been built both inside and just outside the henge. The site was probably seen as a convenient, semi-fortified site for a settlement. In 1114 AD, a small Benedictine priory and church were built on the site. The parish church was enlarged in the late 12th century, around the same time as a

church revival that finally suppressed the lingering pagan beliefs that had survived until then. The more prominent Avebury stones and nearby barrows were given names related to the devil (the Devil's Chair, the Devil's Brandirons, and the Devil's Den) and many of the stones were toppled and buried.

Avebury was first rediscovered by antiquarian John Aubrey in



Avebury village & church in the Stone Circle (Photo credit snipview.com)

1649. He was fox hunting when he stumbled upon the site and declared that the Avebury henge "does as much exceed in greatness the so renowned Stonehenge, as a cathedral doeth a parish Church." During the early 1700's, Avebury village grew rapidly and many of the stones were split apart to be used for building

purposes. This was the period when William Stukeley began his study of the stone circles. His interpretations were fanciful, romantic and centered on Druids and classical gods (he regarded himself as a Druid). He also altered the measurements to fit his own ideas. Systematic excavation of Avebury didn't begin until 1908 when Harold St George Gray dug in the great ditch and finding tools and pottery, identified the site as Neolithic. But the most important and thorough excavations didn't take place until Alexander Keiller began purchasing the site of Avebury (thanks to his family's marmalade fortune) in the 1930s. He not only excavated the site, he extensively restored it by putting buried and fallen stones back into their original upright positions. Much of the lovely site we see today is thanks to Keiller.

credit: sacred-destinations.com



Avebury Stone Circle and Great Ditch (photo credit sacredsites.com)



Salisbury Cathedral (www.archello.com)

Salisbury Cathedral, in the centre of Salisbury, the county City of Wiltshire, sits on low ground by the river Avon. Formally known as the Cathedral Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, an Anglican cathedral, it is one of the leading examples of Early English architecture. The main body of the cathedral was completed in only 38 years, from 1220 to 1258. It contains the world's oldest working clock (from AD 1386)

and has the best surviving of the four original copies of *Magna Carta*. At 365 feet when built (restoration work 40 years ago increased its height to 404'), the spire dominates the view from every direction. In case numbers matter to you, there are 12 doors and 52 windows. About 60 years ago John sat on a bench on the grounds and proposed marriage to Stella. Wow. *(with quotes from wikipedia.org/wiki/Salisbury_Cathedral)*

What a start to our tour! We've encountered hints of the enigmatic and unknowable and felt the unseen which draws us, all while touching hard, cold stone. As we've walked, ethereal visions of ancient people with ancient but transcendental thoughts have penetrated our own almost subconscious thoughts. One wonders where this is taking us, but there's more to come!

Your Mystic Britain travel guides

We recommend: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_tenrPqcsk for a BBC travelogue of the area, the novels "Sarum" by Edward Rutherford, and "The Spire" by William Golding

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