

FOB NEWS

Friends of Berry Castle Newsletter - Spring 2022



Winter Solstice sunset, from Berry Castle

Welcome to our Spring edition.

The recent storms, which have lashed the country, reminded us of a time back in 2015, where the trees in Huntshaw Woods had been blown down. This was the impetus for the formation of FOB. After 7 years, what was once hidden and relatively unknown, is now a popular site for locals as well as visitors from further afield. Thankfully, the Berry Castle doesn't appear to have suffered from this year's storms.

In this edition, you'll find the overview of our AGM and the elected committee. Also, a reflection on how sites, like Berry Castle, if left without maintenance, can quickly be reclaimed by nature.

And as a post-panto season analogy, 'It's Behind You' explores why there is a tendency to associate solar alignments with just the Summer Solstice.

AGM

With the usual crowd gathered, we voted in the committee for the upcoming year.

Secretary – Simon Carroll

Treasurer – Adrian White

Karen Smith

John Eaton

Ann White

Phil White

As we are a small group, it was decided to have a 'collective' Chair, where we all contribute to the role. Many aspects of FOB were discussed, such as the future of the site maintenance, which is becoming a major worry. Further details can be found later in this Newsletter.

Other aspects, such as a possible LIDAR scan of the area to the East of Berry Castle were discussed. As well as future visits and talks.

Michael will be delivering a presentation about the Prehistoric History of the Huntshaw area (proceeds going to the Huntshaw Church Bell fundraising) and will hopefully be offering more talks, this year, along with myself.

Due to the interest in our Woodford Bridge Fort visit, we'll be planning another excursion there, as well as Durpley Castle. Other sites are being looked into and once we have secured permission from the landowners, they'll be advertised.

The Future of the Berry Castle Site

One aspect which was discussed in depth, was the future maintenance of the site. This has been a worry for some time, as no new regular volunteers have come forward. Our 4 volunteers work tirelessly to keep the paths clear and stop the brambles, bracken and saplings from rooting too deeply. However, with all those on the maintenance team being retired (although still very spritely!!), we are in desperate need of new helpers to continue this work in the years to come.



Lockdown clearly demonstrated how the lack of maintenance impacted on the site. Having seen pictures of another Iron Age site, on the edge of Exmoor, which had been cleared of vegetation, then left (see pictures), we have considerable concerns for Berry Castle.

Within 6 months, brambles and bracken will begin to cover the ground and paths through

the site will become overgrown, without strimming.

Within 1 year, saplings will be becoming deeply rooted, destroying the underlying archaeology, along with the brambles and bracken. Tree branches and brambles will begin to cover the access paths to the site, making it more difficult to visit.

Within 2 years, nature will have reclaimed the site and there will be no easy access around it.

As you can appreciate, the amount of time and effort which has gone into maintaining the site for everybody, it would be heart-breaking to see it fall into ruin. We know how many people visit, which is why we keep doing what we do.

Weekly maintenance will continue, but we will be running weekend sessions, once a month, for a couple of hours, with specific jobs in mind. Hopefully, this will attract more volunteers. Even if you are unable to volunteer, you may know somebody who can.



It's Behind You! – A rethinking of the Solstice

As most of you are probably aware, The British Museum has an exhibition, based around Stonehenge and prehistoric Europe. This is a rare opportunity to see a great number of artefacts, brought together from all over Europe, in order to give us a deeper understanding of the prehistoric age.

We are familiar with the gatherings at Stonehenge, at the time of the Summer Solstice. Thousands of people squashed inside the monument, in the vague hope of seeing the first rays of sunshine, which more often than not are dowsed out by the morning mist and rain! However, it's the words of an English Heritage member of staff, during a visit there, which still sticks in my head.

On the way to Sussex, I visited the site, not long after the new centre had opened. I got talking to a member of staff, who was roofing one of the prehistoric huts. He mentioned that they'd had groups arriving for sunrise that morning, as it was the Winter Solstice. I joked that they were either very early, or very late, as surely it should be the sunset. From the top of his ladder, he became very animated and jumped down.

"Yes!" he shouted. "That's exactly right. I even tell those who come for the Summer Solstice, that they are facing the wrong way. It's behind you!"

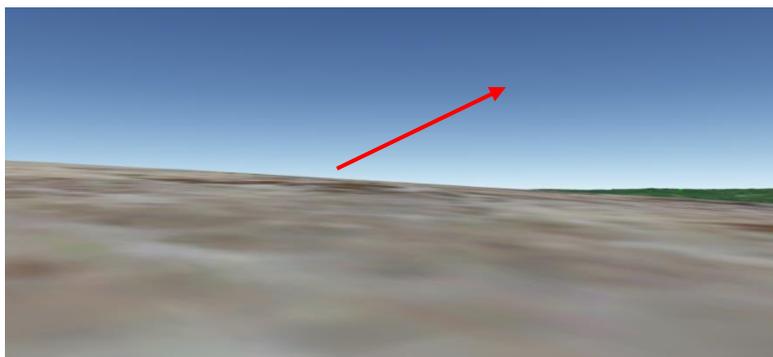
The next day, during the return journey, I stopped off to see the sunset, from the Avenue and wasn't disappointed.



This made me question why, in the general media, is the Summer Solstice given more coverage than the Winter Solstice? Many more sites appear to align to the Winter, rather than the Summer. Newgrange in Ireland, Bryn Celli Ddu on Anglesey and Maes Howe in Orkney, to name a couple. That's not to say that the Summer Solstice

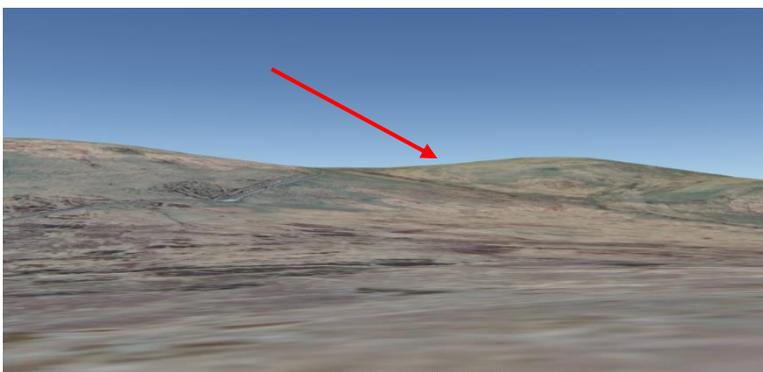
wouldn't have been observed. The position of the Heel Stone would mean that the rising Sun would be viewed above it, therefore out of the low-lying mists of Salisbury Plain.

Last year's TV programme about the original bluestone circle at Waun Mawn in Wales, put forward the idea of the entrance being aligned to the Summer Solstice.



Looking towards Summer Solstice sunrise, from within the circle.

However, if you turn 180 degrees around, it seems more obvious which way the circle was to be viewed from. The setting Sun nestles into the side of the hills.



View of the Winter Solstice sunset, from the approach to the circle.

If we reflect back on Stonehenge, the most dramatic visual experience, is from the Avenue, as the Sun descends behind the tallest trilithons. If this were a church, synagogue or mosque, would the average worshipper have free run over their place of worship, or would they be allocated a certain place to sit or stand? The person leading the congregation would have their own area, whilst the worshippers would have theirs. So, bearing this in mind, wouldn't the best seats in the house, at Stonehenge, be on the Avenue, rather than inside the stones? That's not to say that worshippers were not allowed within the circle, but the visual impact would be from the outside looking in.

Lets take another example – Avebury. Originally, between the banks and ditches surrounding the stones, sat a flat 'walkway'. Enough room for people to stand. Some theories suggest that this was for onlookers to observe the ceremonies within the banks. Does this hint that only 'special' people were allowed inside the sacred area and the general riff-raff were kept beyond the ditches, but still inside the banks, where sound would have reflected off? The same has been found at Stanton Drew and Thornborough Henges. This maybe a complete coincidence, but would religious segregation be that different to today?

Looking back to Stonehenge, the Master of Ceremonies would surely want the followers to be 'contained' in a particular place, in order to experience the solar and lunar visual extravaganza.

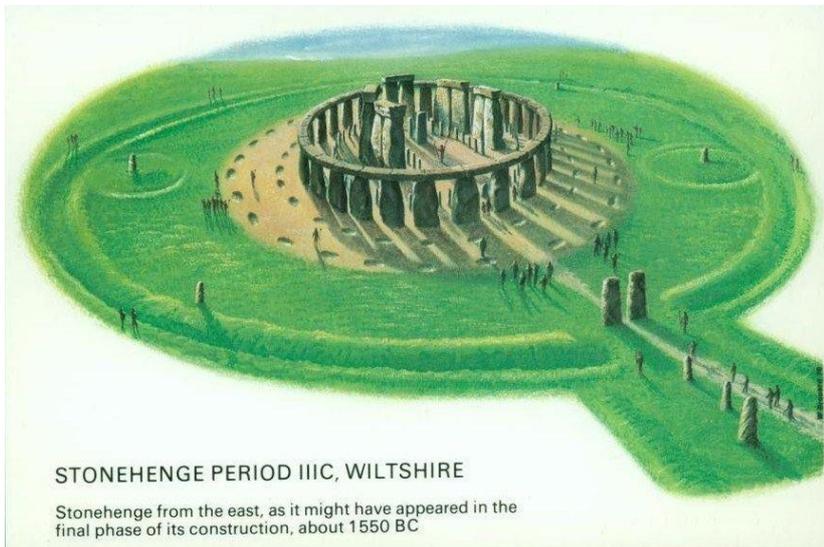
We know from excavations at Durrington Walls, that feasting took place there, during the Midwinter. Gatherings of possibly hundreds of people, assembling from all over the country and even Europe. The site entrance points to the SE (Solstice sunrise) and gives access to the River Avon. It's thought that the 'pilgrims' would have followed the course of the river, bringing them to the start of the Avenue, leading to Stonehenge.

Lets take a moment to think about how the day may have progressed. There were 3 times of day in which our ancestors would have calculated accurately - sunrise, sunset and midday. Maybe a horn or a drum was beaten to mark midday, when the beginning of the ceremony would take place. It's believed that the people would have followed the River Avon, meeting the Avenue, which then guide them to Stonehenge. This work out at roughly 6 miles in length. If we imagine that the average walking speed would be 2mph, it would take them 3 hours to travel that distance. This would mean that everyone would arrive at the circle between 3 - 4pm, when the sun sets over the stones.

In my teaching years, I took my class of 10-11 year olds to Stonehenge, as part of their Prehistory topic. This gave them the opportunity to experience the landscape. Looking at a plan or a map, doesn't give you the real sense of how the avenue moves you around. You need to experience it, to appreciate how you are guided along the Avenue. Stonehenge disappears from view, as the Avenue sinks, only to turn towards the stones and bring them back into view – but with great visual effect. Walking up the final leg, the stones seem to grow out of the ground. Something that my class were amazed at. Considering they are the generation who live on electronic devices,

I've never seen them so excited about walking up a field! Many ran back down to try again, whilst others filmed it on their phones. If this is the reaction from a group of modern-day children, imagine what it must have been like for those approaching their spiritual centre, thousands of years ago.

Thinking back to our ancestors, the theatrics were building. They see the stones grow from the Earth. Then, the setting Sun moves behind the circle, casting a thin sliver of light between the tallest sarsen trilithons at the back of the horseshoe. The Slaughter

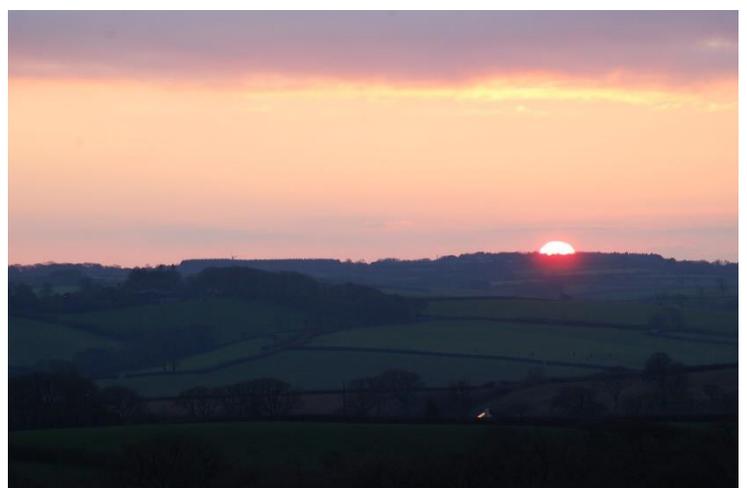


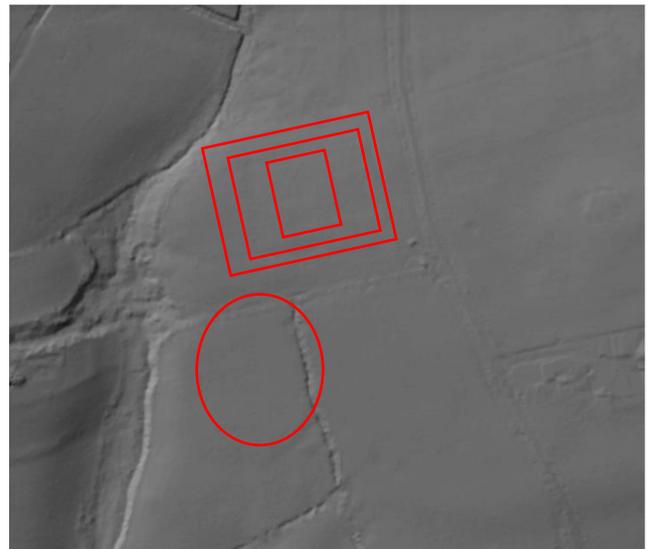
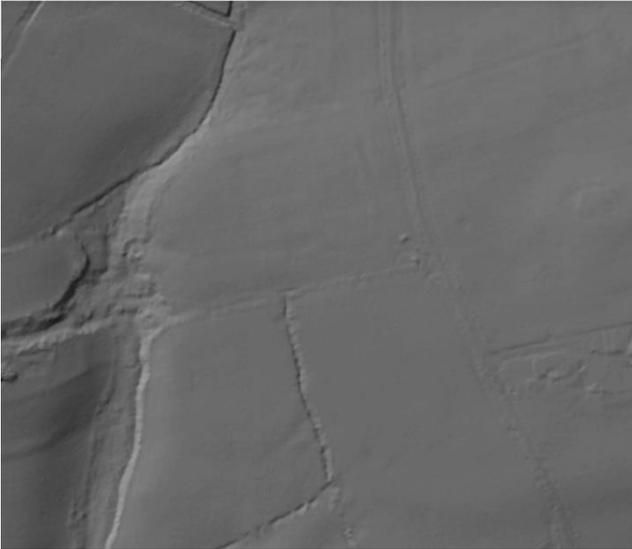
Stone pairing and the Heel Stone, would have narrowed the fan of light which spread from the trilithons, keeping it within the Avenue boundary. As the Sun lowered, the shadows from the stones would have lengthened and stretched down the Avenue, flanking the last rays of Sun. Maybe the experience of being bathed in light, before becoming engulfed by the

shadows was symbolic.

As with many other cultures' beliefs, drawing parallels between what is observed around them and human cycles may have been a factor. 9 months on from Midwinter is harvest. There are some theories which suggest that the Sun and Earth in union at Midwinter reflected human conception; resulting in the harvest, later on that year. Other ideas focus on it being the darkest time of year and that the Sun would be growing stronger, from then on. We see these sentiments reflected across the World, where cultures who would never have met, share similar beliefs and mark certain times of the year. However, we will never know for certain, what people did at the monument.

Closer to home we see sites which appear to observe the Winter Solstice. The LIDAR shows a distinctive series of squares, measuring 130m across. Below it, is a circular feature. From this location, the Midwinter sunset is quite the spectacle, as it disappears into a hill to the SW. Next to it, lies a probable hilltop enclosure, where the Southern stadstill Moonset occurs. There are no records of any structure, at this site, especially one of this proportion.





What may give us a clue, is a site of similar size and shape, uncovered in Yorkshire. This, after excavation, turned out to be an Iron Age shrine, with a Bronze Age circular enclosure directly to the South.

The shrine consisted of a square enclosure surrounded by a deep ditch, with a central area hidden from view by a palisade. In the centre was the remains of a child. It is not known in what period the child was buried there.

But what excited archaeologists the most, were the animal remains which were placed in the earth after the palisade was taken out. The butchered remains of cattle, as well as sheep and pork, were found at the nearby fort.

However, a deliberate decision was made only to deposit cow skulls and bones and the antlers of deer, a wild, hunted animal, at the shrine.

In the SW corner, archaeologists found forelegs, then three cow skulls, then another skull and a deer antler. In other areas skulls were placed in pairs.

The fact that the bones were deposited in a specific area, where the Midwinter sun sets, shows that there may be a link. Could this site, in Devon, be another example of a shrine?



We also find many churches, where the sunrise and sunset at the Winter Solstice can be observed. As the photo shows in this example, the sun rises from a notch created by overlapping hills and rolls up the flank of Dartmoor. With the churchyard being slightly raised up, moving away from it, loses the

effect, as Dartmoor disappears from view.

As I mentioned previously, we'll never really know precisely how our ancestors would have used or observed the Sun, Moon and Stars, but next time you see the mass gatherings at Stonehenge, for the Summer Solstice sunrise, remember the words of the English Heritage thatcher – "It's behind you!".