

## **Avebury's Standing Stones Align with Time**

By Darby Patterson

I hadn't planned to visit Avebury on the most auspicious day of its year but there I was, on a sun drenched dawn of the Summer Solstice. This very ancient World Heritage site is older than the more well known Stonehenge and, I might add, more accessible.

Across the great swath of verdant green and along packed dirt pathways, people wandered freely. They sat in the grass, leaning against Neolithic standing stones as sheep grazed, undisturbed by human company. Many of the guests had spent the night at Avebury, awaiting the rising sun and the spark of imagination that might transport them far back in time. Waiting for the moment when the sun would strike the standing stones of Avebury and cast shadows as they have for more than 4500 years. Imagining they were the ancient people worshipping the forces of nature that framed the sky so perfectly at just this time of year.

As an American, the mostly young people looked quite familiar to me. Dressed in tie die cotton shirts and dresses, with flowers in their hair and sandals on their feet these New Age believers would have been found in Haight Ashbury a few decades ago. The beauty of their youth was a fitting ode to the sacred place they'd come to experience.

At the same time I was struck by the contrast of this experience. In America our monuments are fenced off, paths restricted, treasures guarded by the sharp eyes of security personnel. Here in Avebury a gentleman who was himself somewhat ancient wore a blue blazer and talked modestly about his role as security detail – a job he did as he tended to other duties in the village. People strolled unimpeded by barriers throughout the ancient site, touching, some kissing, the magnificent standing stones. For such behavior in the U.S. we would be unceremoniously removed from the site.

### **A Human Triumph of Time**

Avebury is in the southern part of England, off the beaten path and near quiet villages that live peacefully amid the ghosts of Neolithic man and woman. Because these early human groups worshiped the many forces of nature, it continues to draw the attention of people dabbling in the mystical, spiritual and alternative beliefs. But there is no need to delve in Druidism or Paganism to appreciate the singular experience of roaming this unique World Heritage site.

Picture a large circle of 98 stones - about a mile in circumference, erected on a mound with a deep ditch along its inner rim. Today, only 27 stones remain. There are four openings to the circle at the primary compass points. Inside the circle are two more circles, each had about 30 standing stones and just a handful remain. The stones were destroyed over time as Christians in about 1100 sought to demolish Pagan worship, and as nearby 17<sup>th</sup> century villages looked for a convenient source of building material.

In 2003, a geophysical survey by the National Trust made a remarkable discovery. Near stones that were missing entirely, they found buried megaliths. At least 15 of the great stones lay under mounds of earth inside the circle. Using computer imagery, researchers hope to reconstruct just where each stone once stood before it was toppled and left to time.

The construction of Avebury required centuries of labor. With the lifespan of Neolithic peoples estimated at 40 years, the baton of responsibility for the enormous project was passed through many generations. Over the span of 600 years or so, the vision and passion persevered until one day, Avebury was Britain's greatest monument – some people believe it to be the foremost Neolithic site in all of Europe.

In its present form, Avebury remains breathtaking and mind-bending. Many of the standing stones were moved to the site from more than two miles away. Each weighing 40 tons and more, it remains a mystery how the early architects, and their minions, minus the invention of the wheel, moved the stones to the sacred site. The sarsen stones are estimated to range from nine to twenty feet tall. Somehow, over the centuries, early Britons quarried, chipped, moved and erected some 200,000 tons of rock. Although there are several theories about the mechanics of this phenomenal accomplishment, standing in the spell of Avebury, such academic quandaries seem irrelevant. It is simply a tribute to the ingenuity of humankind.

### **Avebury's Real Magic**

Although much of what was once a central point of worship for England's earliest inhabitants has been destroyed, enough remains at Avebury to spark the imagination and stir the soul. That was certainly apparent on Summer Solstice as I watched dreamy eyed youngsters roam the wide open site. Occasionally, someone played a tune on a flute and filled the soft air with music. On the top of a knoll, framed by the bright azure sky a man and woman, both in business attire, embraced. The sheep turned their backs on them.

How the builders and visionaries of Avebury used the site continues to be debated. There is a belief (and evidence) of astronomical alignment, although it is not as clear as the alignment of Stonehenge with the sun, moon and stars. A small part of the great pleasure of spending a few hours at Avebury is pondering such questions and just letting the mind wander where it will.

Avebury is just 90 from London, yet scenically and spiritually a world away. There are tours available to this Wiltshire County site but I'd suggest that Avebury is best enjoyed quietly, perhaps during the off-season or on weekdays. Time shifts at Avebury and once on that sacred ground there is much to see, to ponder and experience.