Living in a Magical World
Volume One

Listening to the Stones

Beatrice Walditch
Listening to the Stones teaches you to ‘listen’ – with all your senses – to revered places. Beatrice Walditch uses the prehistoric henge and stone circles at Avebury as her main examples, but wants you to explore and ‘listen’ to sacred sites near to where you live.

This is the first book in the Living in a Magical World series. These books will challenge you to recognise the traditional magic still alive in modern society, and empower you with a variety of skills and insights.
Beatrice Walditch’s previous book, *You Don’t Just Drink It! What you need to know – and do – before drinking mead*, was published by Heart of Albion in 2012.
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Heart of Albion
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Have you walked around the Neolithic stone circle and henge at Avebury? Or somewhere similar? How did you feel as your feet clambered up the henge banks, or slithered on the bare chalk when it’s wet with rain? What did you hear? What did you smell?

So often when walking what we see dominates our impressions and we overlook other sensory responses. Yet we are aware of our full range of senses, even if that awareness is more subtle. For example, walking uphill into strong wind-driven rain is a far more challenging experience than skipping along a firm sandy beach in the full sun with just a gentle cooling breeze. While we may walk further along the idyllic beach, we have a greater sense of achievement from having ‘beaten’ the tougher terrain in inclement weather.

Even what we see is subtly affected by the locality, which in turn can affect our mood. Where we look while walking depends on the terrain. Difficult stony outcrops or dense tree roots require all one’s attention to be directed downwards. Slippery or boggy ground requires testing each step, using leg muscles in different ways to when walking on either gravel or smooth tarmac. In contrast, a smooth sward of grass means that – give or take the need to dodge the odd cow pat or sheep poo – most of one’s attention can be devoted to the distant panorama and the clouds in the sky, an experience which is often associated with a greater sense of oneness with the world. Walking on a well-maintained riverside path may require as little attention to one’s feet – but the views will usually be much more constrained by the valley sides and denser vegetation associated with river banks. These more enclosed vistas may give a greater sense of ‘being part of nature’ – especially if aquatic birds such as swans, ducks, herons or even kingfishers put in an appearance.

But while vision dominates our experiences of our environment, our other senses have not been ‘switched off’ – though we may well ignore
the sounds, smells and visceral feelings, at least to the extent we have few memories. When you walked around the Avebury what did you hear? I suspect you have little recollection. Most probably you clearly heard the voices of other visitors, the noise from motor vehicles and maybe from light aircraft. But how did those sounds reflect off the standing stones? How were they muffled by the bigger stones and the henge banks?

What do you smell? Perhaps little at all if you visited around midday. But come again at dawn and after a heavy dew or gentle rain then the ground exudes a complex aroma, especially near hedges and under trees.

We are accustomed to having very little awareness of where we are and how our bodies experience the places where we walk. In a town or city this is understandable – too much noise, too many unpleasant smells, all linked together by the tedium of pounding unyielding pavements. In such situations we take in only as much information as we need to avoid being run over or bumping into other pedestrians. Many people seemingly regard even that level of attention as excessive, as they try to send text messages, select a different album on their music player, use GPS mapping to find out how to get to where

The south inner circle and ‘D’ feature near the centre of the prehistoric henge at Avebury. Windmill Hill forms the skyline in the left half of this photograph.
they want to be – where, when they get there, they are likely to pay as little attention to what’s around them as they did while trying to get there.

The people who built the prehistoric monuments in and around Avebury had none of these distractions. Prehistoric people lived without mobile phones, digitised music, cars, lorries, motorbikes, microlights, helicopters and the other audible annoyances of modern day urban and rural life. They would need to be more attuned to the quieter sounds of the landscape. Then, as now, parents would keep an ear out for the shouts and hollers of children, recognising the howls of their own offspring if they had taken a painful tumble. Dogs would warn of the approach of everyone, with slightly different ways of barking at someone familiar than anyone unfamiliar. Animals, domesticated or wild, might also reveal their presence by characteristic sounds. People would also keep an ear out, especially after dark, for the howls of wolves, which lived throughout Britain until the medieval era.

The prehistoric monuments – whether long barrows or henges – created dramatic acoustics effects. These effects may well have been ‘stage managed’ by the elders of the clan or by a priesthood. In this
book I will share some examples of the special acoustics of the surviving prehistoric monuments – but these are only incidental to my main intentions.

On the basis of traditional societies elsewhere in the world we can be sure that ancient Britons ‘listened’ to their environment far more intently than nearly all modern day people. When, in the late 1970s, the ethnologist Paul Stoller went off to West Africa to become a Songhay sorcerer’s apprentice, his native teachers more than once expressed disappointment at Stoller’s inability to hear what the Songhay heard. He was told he must learn to listen. Much of what he needed to learn was not to merely hear sounds ‘literally’ but to interpret the sounds, to understand their meaning and significance.

Such ways of listening are equivalent to medieval Europeans reading written texts. For them the idea of ‘silent reading’ was still in the future – writing was merely a way of prompting the sounds of the words. More importantly, in medieval times the words on the page extended beyond their seemingly literal meanings into ‘reading between the lines’, by understanding and even elaborating on the implied
meanings. It was a natural for them to do so as it as ‘natural’ for us to strip sentences down to their bare bones, rushing on to the next page without mulling over what was left unsaid but nevertheless implied. And, if we no longer read what is written in such a manner, then little chance that we will engage with what is merely heard to appreciate what might be inferred.

‘Listening’, in the sense I am using, is about what is implied or inferred just as much as about what is apparently conveyed. In the later sections of this book the word ‘listening’ will be used not just to refer to using our ears, but as a convenient contraction for using all our senses, whether visual, auditory, olfactory, kinesthetic – and maybe also those senses which are deemed to fall outside the customary five senses of vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Above all I want to widen your sense to what ‘listening’ might entail for people not accustomed to shutting off the sounds, feels and smells of where they are – and paying far more attention to what they are seeing too.

In this book I hope to help you to fully listen to places. Listening means not simply projecting our preconceptions and hoping to hear an echo, but allowing the places to ‘speak’ to us. This book is mostly written about Avebury for three simple reasons. Firstly, it is a prehistoric landscape which I’ve ‘listened to’ for nigh on thirty-five years. Secondly, within the various monuments and places which make up the World Heritage Site there are examples of everything I want to mention. Thirdly, as Avebury is visited by about 300,000 people every year (second only to Stonehenge among British prehistoric tourist destinations) then plenty of other people know this place too – at least a little. If you haven’t yet been and need some cues as to how the place looks then Google Street View goes ‘off street’ at Avebury if – though sadly gives no clues about how it sounds!

While my hope is that I will help you to ‘listen to the stones’ at Avebury, my greater hope is that you will take my ideas and suggestions back home with you, to wherever you regard as special – whether this is a different British prehistoric site, an indigenous site in a different country, or just somewhere that you have ‘adopted’ as meaningful to you.
Walking like an ancient

Walking around a prehistoric site is more than a metaphoric ‘meeting up’ with the people who built them. It is also – forgive the pun – taking the first steps towards thinking like a prehistoric person might have done. Unlike modern people, who can experience places though videos and photographs, the only way the builders of Neolithic monuments could experience places was by walking around them. At one level this seems blindingly obvious. And yet we need to be reminded, especially if when we visit ‘ancient sites’ our attention is mostly devoted to finding the ‘best place’ to take a photograph!

Photographs – and, before them, paintings – have given us the weird notion that there is a ‘best place’ to view a landscape. There is a less obvious weird notion too. Since we have become used to seeing places either in paintings and photographs – or real places ‘as if’ they were photographs – then we have the implicit sense that places do not change. Try telling that to anyone who has a serious interest in taking landscape photography. The light and shadows change from hour to hour, and more conspicuously from season to season, while the clouds change comparatively swiftly and the colour of the vegetation steadily shifts over the seasons. With the exception of perfect blue skies, frankly it is almost impossible to come back on a different day and take the same photograph twice – even though, ostensibly, ‘nothing has changed’.

Prehistoric people had none of our sense of a ‘timeless’ landscape. On the contrary, they would be fully aware of changes to plants, and how that affected the behaviour of animals, both domesticated and wild. Then, as now, any combination of rain, sun, moonlight, mist, mud, sun-baked earth and so forth changes how a familiar path is experienced.

Visitors to Avebury can never see the stone circle and the henge bank in its entirety. This is not how it was intended, simply a consequence of buildings being constructed inside the henge in recent centuries. But even at the time it was built there were seemingly intentional limits and constraints on who could see what.
While the henge and stone circle could once be seen ‘as one’ without houses or roads, they are only one part of the complex of Neolithic monuments at Avebury. From the henge still stretches part of a double-stone row or ‘avenue’ heading off to the south-east, towards West Kennett. A second double-stone row once straddled the line of the modern High Street and went off to the south-west, towards Beckhampton, where the last ‘pair’ of stones still stand (although archaeologists in the 1990s revealed that one of these stones was originally part of a ‘cove’ of three stones, so strictly only one of the stones is from the double row).

Before the henge and stone circle were constructed, smaller banks and ditches had been dug on the top of Windmill Hill to the north, and these are contemporary with numerous long barrows, of which the best known is the one to the south at West Kennett as most of the rest have been ploughed out.

After the henge and stone circle, and perhaps soon after the subsequent construction of the two double stone rows, the massive man-made mound now known as Silbury Hill was laboriously created. This, like West Kennet long barrow, is to the south of the henge. Yet, despite its size, there are very few places within the henge were it can be seen because, immediately to the south of the henge is a substantial hill which looks rather like a gigantic beached whale, known as Waden Hill.

What this means is that there never was any one place where this whole complex of major monuments can be seen. There are a few favourable vantage points – and the two ‘ends’ of Waden Hill are among the best – but to see everything you must walk around the landscape. That said, the view from the summit of Windmill Hill takes in just about everything. But the henge, despite being a quarter of a mile in diameter, is now hidden among trees. Even the buildings which make up the modern village are mostly hidden by the trees, although the medieval tower of the parish church makes a convenient landmark.

Silbury Hill seems a long way away from the summit of Windmill Hill. Which indeed is the case – it’s almost exactly two miles. Beyond there is West Kennett long barrow. Indeed, as the photograph on the next page shows, the long barrow appears to sit on a ‘ledge’ near the summit of Silbury Hill when viewed from the biggest of the burial mounds on Windmill Hill. This may or may not be coincidence as the burial mounds are Bronze Age, so several hundred years younger than
Silbury Hill, which in turn is about 1,500 years younger than the long barrows. Even the ledge on Silbury Hill may not be original, but perhaps part of the modifications to the summit in the Anglo-Saxon era a ‘mere’ 1,300-or-so years ago.

The arrow points to the entrance to West Kennett chamber tomb. The main part of this barrow appears to extends all the way to a small ‘shelf’ on the slope of Silbury Hill when seen from the Bronze Age burial mounds on the summit of Windmill Hill (in foreground). The perspective is foreshortened in this photograph – Silbury Hill is about two miles away.
Walking the Avenue

There is, however, one part of the monument complex which we can be sure we can see almost as the builders intended. The double stone rows or ‘avenues’ were almost certainly processional routes for approaching the henge. The stones which make up the West Kennett Avenue were, with one exception, re-erected in the 1930s. More recently geophysics has identified many still-buried stones along the route. But the stones which stand today reveal something quite interesting about the route of this Avenue. It follows a dry valley on the north-east side of Waden Hill. Apart from more recent Bronze Age burial mounds, almost no other prehistoric monuments are visible. Not Silbury Hill – even though it is only a few hundred yards away, on the opposite side of Waden Hill. Not even the henge – even though that is the destination of the Avenue – or the largest-known Neolithic stone circle!

Indeed, walking towards the henge from the ‘end’ of the Avenue (at least as it has been reconstructed) still does not reveal the destination. The ground steadily rises up. Only when you’ve walked to within a couple of hundred yards of the henge does it appear. And even at the this point the stone row is not taking you towards the southern entrance. Instead you are walking in the direction of Windmill Hill on the far skyline – presumably an intentional ‘nod of the head’ towards the earliest of the monuments in the vicinity.

Take a look at the pair of stones nearest the henge on the ridge. One is fairly rectangular while the other is bigger and more diamond-shaped. Back in the 1930s the archaeologist who re-erected these stones, Alexander Keiller, suggested that they were chosen to represent males and females. Indeed, most of the stones you have just passed also ‘pair off’ in this way, with ‘male’ and ‘female’ alternating along each row. Modern archaeologists are more cautious, but still accept that there must have been some meaning and significance to the alternation and pairing of the stones.

Carry on walking towards the henge. Modern roads and pedestrian gateways interfere somewhat (not to mention that the original entrance was a few yards to the right of where the road now passes – the bank was dug away on one side and built up on the other around the
Top: Looking along the West Kennett Avenue towards the henge.
Centre: Coming over the rise of ground and finally seeing the henge (the beech trees mark the south entrance; see photograph on page 3).
Bottom: The south entrance stones with the south inner circle beyond (see also photograph on page 2).
eighteenth century). But the way things once were can be visualised. Clearly anyone wanting to process from the Avenue into the henge itself would have to pass through the gap in the henge bank.

Yet once through that gap two of the biggest megaliths in the stone circle all-but block the way. They certainly prevent a clear view of the inner stone circle. Walk between the two massive megaliths – the ‘chair stone’ will be on your left. Stop to look at the ‘faces’ on the sides of these stones – I’ll come back to these simulacra later in the book. In front of you is an arc of substantial stones. These are the surviving part of a second stone circle, known as the ‘south circle’. Yes, there was a north circle too, but the stones have not been re-erected so only two-and-a-few-bits can now been seen. In the middle of the south circle is a ‘D’-shaped arrangement of smaller, browner-coloured stones. By them there is a large concrete marker. This marks the site of a megalith known as the ‘Obelisk’ as it once stood some at least fifteen feet high. It was broken up for building stone early in the eighteenth century.

In other words, the whole ‘experience’ of the henge is somewhat like Russian dolls – inside one monument is another monument, and inside that another, and so forth. Presumably there were restrictions on who could enter which parts of the monument – those least privileged would have to watch from the henge bank, those with more privileges
passed through the south entrance stones, but only those who were deemed ‘great and good’ set foot inside the south circle, with a further enclosure for the priesthood.

Such ‘nested’ configurations can still be found the world over. For example, the chancels of Russian and Greek Orthodox churches are similarly ‘invisible’ and inaccessible to the laity. Modern day ‘secret societies’ usually have three fundamental grades of initiation – and most such orders have various ‘higher degrees’ too. ‘Nested access’ can be taken to an extreme – the Maoris regard the volcanoes at the heart of the Tongariro National Park as so sacred that no humans can venture there. Similar attitudes once prevailed on the slopes of many Japanese mountains although, sad to say, many of these have become ski slopes or otherwise been profaned.
What did the henge keep in?

Find a place on the south-west sector of the henge bank or in the stone circle where you can look back on the ‘male’ and ‘female’ stones at the end of the reconstructed Avenue. They look very different from this angle. On a misty morning they seem like a trio of hooded ‘mourners’ paying their respects to anyone passing between them.

But was the Avenue ever intended for human processions? Could it be that all the effort to erect the double stone row was to create a route where souls could pass unimpeded? Either the souls of the dead going off ‘north past the north wind’. Or the souls of the yet-to-be-reborn waiting till a body is available. If so, then the function of the stones was to mark where humans should not go, lest they risk acquiring a second soul.

While there is no evidence that Neolithic people believed in souls, still less that the Avenues were constructed to prevent accidental encounters with such souls, some of the oldest civilisations in the world retain such beliefs. Indeed, in China – which has the world’s oldest continuous civilisation – every August there is a major festival to honour the ‘hungry ghosts’. Similar beliefs are also a key part of Tibetan Buddhism. In essence, the Chinese and Tibetans believe that there are far more souls than there are people for the souls to ‘inhabit’. So there are countless numbers of souls waiting for their chance – these are the so-called ‘hungry ghosts’. Woe betide anyone who inadvertently acquires a second soul. While modern Western people may rationalise away this idea of a ‘second soul’ as a folksy way of referring to personality disorders, such ‘explanationism’ was not part of traditional worldviews.

Why do I even think that Neolithic people believed in souls? The main evidence is the banks and ditches which characterise a henge. Because the banks are outside the ditches the intended purpose cannot be defensive. On the contrary they seem designed to keep something in, rather than out. Given that cattle were the most valuable animals in Neolithic culture – and probably had some of the same sense of ‘status symbols’ that, say, cars do nowadays – then henges might have been intended to keep herds of cattle, or other livestock, safely contained.
Assuming that there were ritual sacrifices at one or more of the annual festivals then there could have been something akin to a ritualised bull fight. In which case having a ring of large megaliths to dodge behind when a ton or so of prime beefsteak came towards you, horns lowered, would definitely be an advantage. With any luck the creature would have gone careering on and toppled into the ditch. Bear in mind that, when built, the henge ditches at Avebury were three time deeper with much more vertical sides. A one-way ticket for any hapless cattle.

If this sounds a little far-fetched then bear in mind that either side of the River Kennet, just to the east of the bridge used to access West Kennett long barrow, there were massive enclosures built from thousands of substantial timber posts. Nothing is visible now but when archaeologists did their stuff around 1990, they discovered there were several pieces of pig bone in each post-hole. The shape of these ‘pallisaded enclosures’ included large funnel-shaped entrances. The best guess is that these fence-like arrangements of posts were used for ritual boar hunts, or a similar sacrificial ritual. Before being rounded up, the pigs would have happily roamed semi-wild among the trees which sparsely covered the chalk downland at the time. While the tradition has now been lost, apart from in the New Forest, right through the medieval period woodland provided valuable ‘pannage’ for pigs.

So, while there are eminently pragmatic reasons why henges were built as they are, there is also evidence that stone circles – usually, but not always, enclosed by the banks and ditches of a henge – were ‘places of the dead’. Or, more accurately, places alive with the souls of the deceased. And these souls needed to be kept in their place, lest they go wandering around!

We keep something of that sensibility today. Almost every churchyard and cemetery I can think of has well-defined boundary walls or
hedges. The only exception which comes to mind is bounded on one side by a river instead. The entrances to these ‘mortuary enclosures’ – as archaeologists might term them – is defined by gates, especially elaborate ‘lych gates’. The entrance to the churchyard around St James’ church in Avebury is no exception – with both a fine example of a lych gate and a pair of wrought iron ‘kissing gates’ at the two other entrances. Yes, of course these functioned to keep dogs out and sheep or other grazing animals in. But they also provide much-needed symbolic boundaries for the ‘place of the dead’.

**In the 1980s cattle regularly grazed in Avebury henge, as they may have done when the stones were erected.**

The lych gate at the southern entrance to the churchyard of St James’ church, Avebury.
Where do souls come from?
Where do souls go?

Traditional societies elsewhere in the world sometimes have a ‘three-tier’ mental map of their world. At first glance these can easily be confused with the three realms of the Christian worldview – this world, Heaven and Hell. However the traditional ways of thinking carry none of the ‘baggage’ of Christian ideologies. Instead the three realms are thought of quite straightforwardly as the realms of the living, the dead and the yet-to-be-born. In many of these cultures the stars are thought to be the souls of those about to be born (or reborn, if there is a belief in some sort of reincarnation). Which perhaps makes the annual cycle of meteor showers – which seemingly ‘ejaculate’ from specific constellations – into recurring ‘showers of souls’.

If the realm of the souls is ‘upwards’ then downwards, predictably enough, is the realm of the dead. As I say, somewhat like the Christian ideas of Heaven and Hell. Indeed such traditional worldviews may be the origin of the Biblical ideas, though we’ll never know for sure.

What if the stars fell to earth? What if there was a massive number of ‘stars’ scattered over the landscape? Nowadays we know that meteorites and such like either burn up in the earth’s atmosphere or leave momentous craters. But such scientific understanding has only been achieved within the last two hundred years. Before that it was entirely believable that stars could come to land on the earth.

There seems good reason to think that the sarsen stones used for the construction of the stone circles at Avebury might have been thought of as the ‘resting places’ of souls. Perhaps when someone died their relatives thought their soul went into one of the sarsens to ‘rest’ until it had a chance to be reborn.

The sarsens which make up Avebury once scattered the landscape for several miles in each direction. They are the remains of exceptionally hard sandstone laid down as a continuous layer a few feet in depth on
top of the chalk about five to ten million years ago. Then, as the chalk eroded, the layer of harder rock broke up into the diamond-shapes and rectangles that characterise the stones used for the Neolithic monuments. Even in the eighteenth century it was said that people could hop from one stone to another all the way to Marlborough. By that time the sarsens were being cleared to allow more grazing and provide building material. Only up on Fyfield Down and in a small area to the west of Lockeridge can sarsens still be seen scattered to anything like their original extent.

*Locke Aridge Dene, a few miles east of Avebury. One of the few places where sarsens still lie on the ground to anything like the natural extent. Before partial clearance they would have more-or-less covered the ground.*
Meeting at the souls

So, while I am only speculating, if Neolithic people did believe in souls ‘resting’ in the sarsen stones, then what would they make of a place where such stones covered much of the landscape? A place at the source of one of the major east-flowing rivers – the Kennet, which flows into the Thames at Reading – and within easy access of people who lived in the Solent valley, and those living around the rivers feeding into the Bristol Avon, as well as folk from the upper reaches of the Thames itself in an area we call the Cotswolds.

In other words, was this ‘fields of souls’ the seasonal meeting place of Mesolithic ‘hunter-gathering’ clans who spent most of their lives exploiting the resources of the different river valleys? Modern languages provide the best evidence for understanding how prehistoric people thought about river valleys. Based on the way modern words have evolved from ‘common ancestors’ over at least the last three millennia then clans – or ‘kin groups’ if you prefer – seem to have been closely associated with water courses and with female ‘sovereigns’ of the land. Queen, kin and canal don’t simply sound similar – they really do come from the same ‘root word’. Add in the evidence of the many river names which seem to perpetuate the name of a ‘goddess’ and the evidence seems fairly convincing that each valley, all the way from the springs down to the estuary, would once have been regarded as ‘belonging’ to a female protective deity.

The headlands between the valleys would then be the meeting places for the different ‘clans’ to meet up, presumably during each winter when the valleys were flooded. Early Neolithic causewayed enclosures – such as Windmill Hill at Avebury and Knapp Hill and several others just to the south, overlooking the sources of the Wiltshire/Hampshire Avon flowing into the Solent – are associated with just such watersheds. As too are most henges, with Avebury being exceptional simply because the ground drops away within a few miles into four different river drainage systems. Again words help – Somerset, to the west of Avebury, takes its name from the Anglo-Saxon for ‘summer land’. The flooding in early 2014 gives a good idea why most people would not be there during the winter. But where was the ‘Winterset’?
To be honest I’m not too fussed whether or not you believe my suggestions about souls and stones, or valleys and ‘queens’. What ever prehistoric people did believe is likely to be even more complex and improbable, at least to modern ways of thinking! What we can be certain about is that prehistoric people did not share modern day beliefs, least of all our ideas about religion and the ‘supernatural’, most of which have been shaped up in the five hundred year-or-so since the Reformation.

For example, while we ‘naturally’ think of god – or deities – as being ‘somewhere up there’, this was not the pre-Christan way of thinking. Back then gods – and goddesses and a whole host of ‘supernatural’ beings’ – walked this earth, albeit not often enough to be readily encountered. The idea that Christians can talk directly to God is even more recent, and is only found within Protestant denominations.

Before the fifteenth century people thought that only priests could ‘talk to God’. This goes back into the mists of history as Roman and Greek authors reveal that the laity relied on the priests to do all the liasing with deities. What ordinary people did do is make votive offerings to the protective ‘spirits’ of the home or other locality, who were bribed to ‘have a word with the deities’ on behalf of humans. After the conversion to Christianity people carried on almost the same as before. the only change being that saints took on the same intercessionary role – and, for Catholics, all the way through to the present day.

Knapp Hill. An well-preserved early Neolithic causewayed enclosure built about five thousand years ago, The far side drops down steeply into the Vale of Pewsey.
Looking at stones looking at you

But what if Neolithic people did, in some way, think of stones as being souls, or other-than-human ‘persons’? What would they make of stones which seemed to have faces? Would they preferentially select those stones and stand them up on end?

Well the answer seems to be a resounding ‘Yes!’ The only flaw in the argument is that almost all the stones which were not selected to be stood up have since been destroyed. Did they have faces or not? But looking at sarsens surviving in situ a few miles away from the stone circle at Avebury then there does seem to be an absence of faces.

If you’ve been to Avebury you just might have spotted some of these ‘faces’. A few of them can be seen around the middle of the day, especially when the sun is shining. But most visitors simply don’t pay enough attention.

More importantly, many of the simulacra simply ‘disappear’ during the day. They reveal themselves soon after dawn, especially on the stones in the eastern side of the henge. However in the southern-western sector are there plenty of faces during the daytime. And the faces facing each other on the gigantic portal stones of the southern entrance are visible at all times of day – although around the middle of the day is not the best time. At the other extreme, one dramatic face only appears at dawn for the few days either side of the summer solstice. Other faces appear on the massive ‘Cove Stone’, but only for a few minutes around noon in November and February.

If you’re taken with my idea that Neolithic people might have thought that the stones are the ‘resting places’ for souls then these faces would have a deep resonance. Note that all these faces are naturally-formed as sarsen is too hard to be easily worked, and certainly could not be carved into intricate shapes. Furthermore, because of the hardness the process of erosion is so slow that what we are seeing now is the same – within a few millimetres – as how the stones would have looked when they were stood up a mere five thousand years ago (a very quick blink of the eye in geological timescales).

But there is another reason why I mention this faces. Quite independently of what the people who put the stones may have
Top: How much like a human can a stone be? This megalith stands in the south-west sector of Avebury henge. Despite being in one of the most-visited parts, and one of the simulacra most clearly visible during the middle of the day, few visitors see it as other than a stone.

Right: This splendid profile of a human face can be easily seen on a megalith to the right of the one in the above photograph.

thought or believed, there is something more fundamental about them. To see these faces – and even the stones without faces – you need to walk around the monument, and pay attention. Yes I know it might verge on the flaming obvious. Modern day visitors still walk around, of course, although many seem more keen on completing the walk
without stopping. They barely take the trouble to look at the stones, let alone ‘listen’ in the ways I will discuss later.

More importantly, to see all the faces you need to walk around, paying attention, at different times of day – and at different times of year too. Most visitors simply do not have such opportunities, so the simulacra are known to only a few ‘locals’ – and each of them seem to know faces that the others haven’t yet spotted!

Walk around the stones after dark with a big torch. Then you can play with the light angles and, assuming you’ve already got a few ideas where to look, then many of the faces pop out to say ‘Hello’. While modern torchlight bears only a passing resemblance to the orangey-red hues of a ‘proper’ torch made from living flame, by wobbling a modern torch around then these faces come to life in a way that Neolithic people would have been aware of.

Most of the faces are on the side of the stones facing out to the henge bank. This is because the inside faces of the megaliths are much smoother than the outside ones, providing much less scope for simulacra to appear. This smoothness makes them ‘shadow catchers’.

The ‘Dawn Watcher’ stone. One of the few stones of the north inner circle which are still standing. At dawn in spring and autumn a face clearly appears; at other times of day or year this simulacra is barely discernible.
One of the megaliths in the outer circle at Avebury. But is it a stone? Or is it a doorway into an ‘Otherworld’?

After dark, light from within the centre of the henge casts shadows onto these almost smooth stone surfaces. Anyone moving about will see a larger-than-life double mimicking their movements. What if Neolithic people did not simple walk around the henge, but danced around various fires? A more modest speculation than many others in this book.

The ever-shifting shapes of the dancers’ shadows would make it seem that the stone too was animated, that the soul – or souls – residing within were breaking through the veil between the realms.

**Note:** Avebury henge is a Scheduled Ancient Monument so lighting a fire – or even carrying a flaming torch – is a criminal act. So the above remarks are based on the two occasions in the year when pagan celebrations use closely-managed paraffin-fuelled torches. Anything which burns to leave ash or charcoal will confuse future archaeologists as worms doing their job in the soil will take such fragments from the surface down to the archaeological layers.
Shadows or souls?
Echoes are to sounds as shadows are to flames

Sometime during the last forty years we have come to ‘know’ that prehistoric people all played ‘shamanic’ drums. Because they are made from wood and hide there is little or no chance that archaeologists would ever find the remains of one. However there are no sculptures – even from later eras such as the Iron Age – which show such drums. Yet common sense tells us that people quite intuitively tap out tunes on anything which will resonate. So almost certainly there would have been some sort of drum.

The prehistoric galleries in European museums usually include it their displays the large cooking pots of the Neolithic and the even larger cremation urns of the Bronze Age. None of these have matching lids. Yet keeping ash from the fire, and flies and other ‘nasties’ out of the food would have required the prehistoric precursor to cling film. In a few parts of Britain there would be flat, slate-like stone available which could be used for makeshift covers. But mostly there wasn’t.

Yet the people using the pots would have used hide extensively for their shelters, clothing, hunting equipment and who knows what else. A large enough piece of wet hide would provide an excellent pot cover. A length of sinew round the rim would thwart insects trying to crawl in and probably even prevent spillage while being carried about. Once the hide dried out – and we must assume that these pots would be used for storage as well as cooking – then they would not only look rather like Indian tabla and Arabic naqqara drums but sound like them too. Whether anyone left out the food and simply used such skin-covered pots as drums, well your guess is as good as mine.

If you think using cooking pots as drums is a little far fetched, think how Middle Eastern people use perfectly ordinary trays. Sure, they use them for carrying drinks and foodstuff. But when the women start to party then these metal trays quickly become the main percussive instruments for the spontaneous dancing. While walking around the traditional souqs even a few decades ago there seemed to be stacks of ‘shaman’s drums’ at rock-bottom prices. This is not because the Middle East was awash with shamans getting their gear on a limited
budget but because these thin goatskins on a simple circular wooden frame were the cheap-and-cheerful counterpart to the more expensive metal trays. When a friend visited Dubai back in the late 1980s she picked up a pair of these trays for a few US dollars and gave them to me to use as drums. I suspect since then these traditional trays have given way to ubiquitous plastic counterparts. After all, this was very much the ‘Woolworths’ end of the business.

Drums and other membranophones are not the only ways of making rhythmic sounds. There is a much larger family of percussion called idiophones, from simple wooden blocks, cymbals or bells through to jaws harps, thumb pianos, xylophones, marimbas, and any number of modern day derivatives.

Clap sticks must have been ‘invented’ countless times the world over. Two short lengths of hardwood (preferably without the bark) when tapped together give a clear, resonant ‘beat’. If there is a hard surface a
few yards away they will give a clear echo. While drums will also create echoes, they emit a longer, more resonant, ‘blip’ of sound which does not create such a clear echo. Indeed the resonance of the drum may overlap with the echo, making it difficult to hear unless the echo is coming back over a longedistance – in which case the sound is significantly quieter. No such problems with clap sticks.

If you want to hear clap sticks being played by my friend Steve Marshall in the centre of the Ring of Brodgar and Stones of Stennes.stone circles in the Orkneys – and the clear echoes he gets – then visit vimeo.com/100042107. Interestingly, the Ring of Brodgar is about 115 yards across – the same as the two inner circles at Avebury would have been when complete.

Steve was filmed in daylight. Shift the same experience to fire-lit darkness. The small gestures needed to make the clicking noise may well be lost in the gloom. It would take little in the way of ‘conjuring’ skills for someone to disguise how the echoes were being created, should they wish to. Remember my earlier remarks about the shadows of fire-lit dancers being cast onto the sides of standing stones. Echoes are to sounds as shadows are to flames.

Groves of mature trees can also create a more muffled version of the echoes from a stone circle. But, in general, the way sound becomes diffused in woodland is almost the opposite of the way sound reflects
from stone circles. If, as has been suggested, prehistoric people thought that stone circles were the realm of ‘the dead’ then even the sounds would have been quite distinct from the sounds of those places that would have been most alive, such as woodland.

*Ceremonial carved clapsticks.*
Immersive experiences

Before discussing an even more important musical instrument which seemingly was known to Neolithic people I want to explore the ways in which prehistoric people deliberately created ‘immersive experiences’, that is experiences which involved seeing, hearing, moving about, feeling cold or wet and maybe just tired out from the effort of getting there.

Some of the best places to see prehistoric rock art in Scandinavia are difficult to get to – or can only be seen properly from a small boat. The anthropologist Chris Tilley studied these and repeatedly asked himself, ‘What did I have to do to experience the carvings?’ then tested his responses by observing what other visitors did. Tilley observed that these rock art locations are distinctive for a number of reasons.

Elva rock art site, on an island off the northern coast of Norway, is one of the most inaccessible and also provides dramatic sound effects. Vingen, another coastal site much further south in Norway, also has some interesting acoustic effects and is associated with dramatic weather coming in over the sea. This is Tilley’s on-the-spot description of Vingen:

For five months the sun never shines on the rock art. The western orientation of the fjord means that the setting sun dominates light. Reflections in light fjord water change incessantly. Place-name means ‘windy place’. Almost incessant storms (creating temporary waterfalls down the cliff faces). Drizzle or low cloud (although only a few kilometres away there may be sunshine). Access to rock art easy when dry but tricky when wet because of slippery rocks. Narrowness of fjord amplifies all sounds. Small waterfalls produce a loud roar. Sound from outside the fjord carries surprisingly far. During a thunderstorm the place is truly terrifying.

One large panel is above a constantly roaring waterfall and only accessible be a tricky abseil from above – i.e. by the young and fit (an initiatory ritual to carve??)
Archaeologists studying cave paintings have also noted that the most elaborate sets of images are often in the remote parts of caves, with simpler motifs nearer the entrance. The art is often situated in places which have unusual echoes – so that a single hand clap can be reflected multiple times, creating the impression of, say, a horse’s hoof beats.

Caves are an ideal environment for immersive experiences. For a start there is a constant temperature (in Europe usually about 13C) and a uniformly damp atmosphere, which combine to readily give rise to goosebumps. The darkness creates considerable sensory deprivation which heightens awareness of what can be seen and heard. Dramatic geological formations may include stalactites and stalagmites, which are not usually seen above ground. The various rocks may need to be clambered around or over. The voids create all sorts of echoes, and a very real sense that anything could be lurking around the next bend. And, in prehistoric times, that ‘anything’ might include bears or hyenas. No doubt myths inculcated the notion that this was an entrance to an otherworld, most likely a realm of the deities or the dead.

Approaching the rock art site at Vingen by boat. Photographer not known.
Add to all that the strong possibility of intentional fasting or sleep deprivation, the raucous smell of fat-fuelled torches, and the subtler smells of the fats used to bind the pigments, and just perhaps the intentional burning of sweeter-smelling plants as ‘incense’ or intoxicants. Bear in mind that ceramic ‘incense cups’ have been found at various Neolithic sites in Britain, including several such items from near Stonehenge. These could just as easily be used for burning the flowers and resin of hemp plants, otherwise known as cannabis – although native species are a long way removed from ‘skunk’ cultivated in recent decades.

When cave art was encountered there seems every reason to think that people saw the animals and other representations not as images ‘painted on the walls’ but as if they were projections on to an illusory veil between this realm and another inside the stone walls. C.S. Lewis was to use a similar metaphor, except his ‘veil’ was the fur coats hanging in a suburban wardrobe.

This does not mean that either the creators of cave art nor the later Neolithic monument builders were going off on supposed ‘shamanic’ otherworldly journeys. Such suppositions merely reflect the limited understanding which archaeologists of the later twentieth century had about what they thought to be ‘shamanism’ and, perhaps more importantly, woefully limited imaginations about how such art and environments might have been experienced and made meaningful.
Echoes of the past in the present

Interestingly the bluestone horseshoe at Stonehenge would have created similar multiple echoes if sharp percussive sounds were made near the ‘entrance’ to the horseshoe. The trilithons outside the bluestones would also have created echoes, just as Steve Marshall demonstrated at the Orkney circles. But, unlike the Orkney megaliths, the configuration of Stonehenge means that any sound created within the monument would be almost entirely contained within.

Anyone standing outside the trilithon circle would not only see very little, but also hear very little. For those inside the acoustics would be ‘larger than life’ – or at least ‘louder than life’ as few other places in the Neolithic would reflect sounds back so effectively. In an age of amplified music and urban cacophony, we are apt to forget just how quiet rural life was just a hundred or more years ago. Church organs were by far the loudest sound anyone would hear – quite literally terrifyingly loud, the voice of an ‘awe-full’ deity indeed.

The oldest stone-built monuments in Europe – early Neolithic chamber tombs, such as West Kennett long barrow near Avebury – are also among the most cave-like of human-built structures. And cave-like buildings also proliferated in early medieval times. Before the invention of clerestory windows in the fifteenth century then parish churches were much darker inside. Then, as now, they kept a more-or-less constant temperature inside – warmer inside than out in winter, and cooler inside in summer. Interestingly, when I visited the only surviving wooden church in Britain, at Greensted in Essex, during a July heatwave, there was no sense of stepping into the comparative coolness of a stone-built church.

We seemed to have stopped creating cave art at least ten thousand years ago. Building cave-like chamber tombs ceased about five thousand years ago. But, in addition to visiting ‘show caves’ in Somerset, Derbyshire and other places, we can still experience the cave-like interiors of churches. The temperature is almost as constant as caves. The acoustics are different to other structures. In medieval times the walls were painted extensively, while before the Reformation there would have been statues and icons in abundance, lit by candles.
Roman Catholics and ‘high’ Anglicans are often dismissed as the ‘smells and bells’ denominations, because the services still retain all the elements of an immersive experience. Personally I find the discomfort of sitting for any length of time on a traditional pew rather akin to the physical challenges of negotiating a cave which has not been made visitor-friendly. But that’s as maybe. The most immersive of Christian liturgies are those of the Eastern Orthodox churches – and there you stand or stroll around the church during the rituals. If you’ve never been to such a service then, no matter what your personal preferences are regarding religion, make it a priority to do so. You don’t have to go to Greece or parts of Russian as more cosmopolitan British cities have such churches. My own encounter with these glorious liturgies happened ‘by chance’ one Sunday morning in South Kensington.
Infra-sound from wood and string

Clap sticks, drums, whatever. We have no evidence that the builders of stone circles knew of these or used them – although the ubiquity of these percussive instruments in all cultures means it would be perverse to argue that Neolithic people did not make them. They simply did not produce representational art that would depict them, and the materials used – with the exception of ‘cooking pots’ which might have been given secondary uses – simply do not survive.

But one ‘musical instrument’ has survived as it was made in flint. Not that archaeologists call it a musical instrument. They call it by the functional description of ‘plano-convex knife’. Plano-convex because one side is flat (‘plane’) and the other bulges out (‘convex’). And ‘knife’ because the edges have been fettled to effectively cut meat or hide or whatever.

Actually I don’t think these flint objects were anything but knives. If they were intended as musical instruments then there is no way you would want them with sharp edges. But carve a piece of fairly dense wood into the same shape. By splitting off a ‘chord’ from the perimeter of a log about eight to ten inches in diameter most of the shape will
already be about right. Today we more probably need to carve and sand a sawn rectangular-section length. Aim for about three inches wide and six to eight inches long. Too big and it will be tiring to use!

Then attach the shaped wood to a length of twine a couple of yards or so in length. Prehistoric people would have made twine from nettle fibre, flax or even hemp stems as all these can be made into strong but thin twine. The best option nowadays is garden twine. White string and nylon cords are too tightly twisted to work properly.

Hold the wooden end in one hand and twist the twine in one direction several dozen times. The ‘twirl’ the wooden end round and around your head. Be very careful not to hit someone or something while you

When splitting off a ‘chord’ from a log, wood aim for the dotted lines. Which you will have to draw or imagine...

A bull roarer not only rotates about the player’s head but also spins on its own axis.
are doing this! And be careful that you don’t hit yourself as the wooden end slows down.

Once you got the basic knack then speed up the wooden end. You should start getting an almost continuous deep ‘wow-wow’ sound. This gives these instruments their conventional name in English: ‘bullroarers’.

Once you get good enough to keep this going then make sure there’s plenty of twist in the twine before starting the twirling. The aerofoil shape – the ‘plano-convex’ shape if you prefer – makes the wooden end twirl around its own length. This tightens the twine up to the point where there’s so much tension it needs to go the other way to ‘untwine’.

Keep this up for several cycles of tightening and then re-tightening and you will start to hear another frequency alongside the main ‘wow-wow’. This is a very low sound. In fact it is so low frequency that it goes all the way down to ‘zero Hertz’ and back up again, as the wooden end tightens right up then starts to rotate the opposite way.

Traditional bull roarer are often carved or painted with ‘sacred’ symbols.
The importance of bullroarers

By twisting and untwisting as they rotate, simple wood-and-string bullroarers generate ‘infrasound’ which otherwise is only known from electronic sine wave generators and decidedly expensive loudspeakers. What’s so interesting about infra-sound? Ignoring some other dastardly effects which the military have tried exploit – with little effect as the sound simply ‘back fires’ – the most notable property of infra-sound is that at around 12 Hertz (12 cycles per second) the sound creates a sense of presence. This frequency is too low for our ears to hear it as a musical note. But our bodies nevertheless feel it as fast ‘pulsing’.

At this frequency the hairs on the back of the neck bristle and we have a strong sense of there being ‘something behind us’, a presence. A friend has used his bullroarers many times inside West Kennett chamber tomb. He is not the sort of person whose imagination is prone to going off on flights of fancy. But none the less he’s seriously spooked himself when alone inside the chamber and succeeded in sustaining the infra-sound effect (rather tricky in the confined space).

Even without the infra-sound effect then bullroarers provide another acoustic ‘illusion’. They are capable of being played continuously for long periods of time – at least if you’ve got strong wrist and arm muscles. A small group of people taking turns playing two or three bullroarers at a time could readily keep up a continuous ‘drone’ for a whole night.

All structures have a resonant frequency. Which means that all the air inside can resonate at the same note. What that note is depends mostly on the size and shape of the structure. Often the resonant frequencies are too low to be stimulated. But the insides of Neolithic chamber tomb mostly resonate at about low ‘A’ in the male voice range. Strictly, it is the low ‘A’ in an older male voice – few men can sing this low before their late forties. This note is also well within the range of sounds which can be made by bullroarers.

Once there is a continual source of sound at the right frequency – whether chanting men (think perhaps of Tibetan monks ‘growling’
through their *gyur* or sutras) or by a bullroarer or some other instrument capable of generating an unbroken note – then something remarkable happens. The whole interior of the building seems to be ‘singing’ the same note. Indeed, that is exactly what it is happening. Scientists refer to it as a ‘standing wave’. Anyone inside is quite literally immersed in a ‘sound bath’.

Now try listening to someone talking. Even if they are standing reasonably close to you, their voice too seems to be coming from ‘everywhere’ – even though they are not chanting or speaking at the resonant frequency. If that person wanted you to think that an inanimate object was ‘talking’ they would simply have to direct your
attention away from their face and you would fully believe that it was the table or chair or teacup or whatever which was speaking. It’s ventriloquists’ idea of heaven. And, if the interior is dark, then there would be little need to divert attention from the speaker’s face, as standing in the shadows would suffice. A full-face mask would be perfect, as it would also distort the speaker’s voice somewhat.

In other words, bullroarers are a small and easily portable illusionists ‘tool kit’. Little wonder that in all the traditional societies where bullroarers are known to be used, they are part of the men’s initiation rites. Ethnologists report that it is taboo for women to even see them – though they must know of them, as the distinctive sound can carry long distances in otherwise quiet environments.

Strictly, what the ethnologists should be saying is that is was taboo for anyone who was not an initiated male to see them. Which means that pre-adolescent boys would never see them either. When we use the distinction ‘men’ and ‘women’ we usually define on physiological dimorphism. However, in many traditional societies the status of being a ‘man’ is defined by rites of passage. Anyone – whatever their physiology – who has not been initiated in this way is not a man. Ethnological ‘short hand’ is to call these people ‘women’. But, in practice, in many societies the people being referred to are children of both sexes as well as adult females.

Interestingly, the large ‘blocking stones’ in the forecourt of West Kennett chamber tomb – added after the chamber was used as a tomb – prevent anyone using a bullroarer large enough to generate the required note ‘A’. Yes, smaller bullroarers can be wielded inside the chamber. These will give the infra-sound effect but will not create the standing wave.

Coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not. The curve of the forecourt, which can still be recognised, was part of the original structure. It provides an excellent way of amplifying voices. So a ritual taking place where the blocking stones are now would be readily heard by quite a crowd of people. But the curved forecourt also stops certain sounds. More specifically it stops the wind from blowing over the opening to the chamber and causing it to resonate. It has the technical name of Helmholtz resonance, after Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–94). We’ve all tried to do it with an empty bottle and blowing across the top in a similar way to getting a note out of a flute. Nature can do this all by Herself. The forecourt foils Her. Coincidence? Maybe not.
Three days and three nights

So were chamber tombs not merely tombs? After all parish churches have many more burials under the floor than any prehistoric tomb, but we do refer to them as tombs or even funerary chapels. Plenty of other rites apart from funerals take place inside churches.

What if ‘chamber tombs’ were womb-tombs where boys were reborn as men? Were early Neolithic children regaled around the fire at night by myths which told of how they would go into a cave meet the ancestors – even hear their voices? Yes, the bones of the ancestors will speak to you. Then you will die... You’ve heard your grandfathers, your father and uncles tell slight variations of this story so often it’s as familiar to you as any Disney cartoon is to a modern day seven year old.

Then one night, you and the boys of your age group are taken away, perhaps quite suddenly and frighteningly. Almost certainly ‘hoodwinked’ with a leather bag or other blindfold, you are then made to stumble around some circuitous path to you know not where. Eventually you find yourself inside a slightly damp chamber, with the bones of the ancestors on the floor, mostly pushed towards the sides. The small light doesn’t burn for long, which is a relief as it was giving off a rather noxious smell as it burnt. There is a pot of rather foul tasting broth to quench your thirst, but far from relieving hunger pangs it makes the stomach cramp and a little while later your head starts to spin. You lie down.

Despite the cold and damp, and the presence of the ancestor’s bones – which you are almost lying on top of – you manage to sleep fitfully. A little light seeps in from the entrance. You count the days. Slowly, painfully, three days pass. You have been under strict instructions to keep quiet and not talk to each other. Nevertheless there have been whispered wisecracks to ease the tension. But each of you are becoming too tired to alleviate the boredom in this way. Truth to tell, you are struggling to tell the difference between what is real and what is in your imagination.

One of the boys has already sussed it. He whispers ‘We’re going to hear the voices of the ancestors. And then we’re all going to die! Just
like the stories say... ‘You try to fob him off, tell him he’s talking nonsense. But there’s no conviction in your voice. The pot containing foul broth was dropped yesterday, not that that there was a lot left in it. Apart from licking the condensation on the stones inside the chamber there is no way of getting moisture to ease the pain in your throat.

Then the drone starts. You’ve heard something like it, in the distance, a few years back. Your mother and your aunts had looked petrified. ‘Get inside the shelter, the ancestors are coming! That’s the sound of their voices...’ For once, you saw no reason not to obey promptly and had gone to sleep that night before the droning had stopped.

But this was not in the distance. It was close. Very close. No, it was inside the chamber! The ancestors has indeed come to take them with them. You try to hide your fear from the other boys inside the chamber, not let them know you’re shaking from head to foot, with your stomach in an even tighter knot than it had been for most of time since you found yourself in the chamber. An intense cold eats its way out from your stomach into your limbs. So this is what death feels like.

After some time – it seemed like an age but might have been only a few minutes – the bones started speaking. It was the same words as in the story. ‘Now you will die.’ This was repeated over and over. Several of the ancestors were speaking together, as if they were chanting. You know it’s the ancestors because they sound rather like the voices of your father and his brothers, but somewhat muffled. Well they would be, the ancestors are speaking from the realm of the dead.

Then the chanting changes. ‘We have come to tell you the secrets you need to know for the next life’. This is repeated only a few times and then one of the ancestors repeats, over and over, ‘But these secrets cannot be told to anyone, not to anyone, not until you are dead. If you tell anyone you will be killed.’

Who know what those secrets might have been. Eventually, as the dawn light just begins to creep in around the edges of the stones and hides blocking the entrance, the droning stops. The chanting and the secrets have stopped some time before. You are just dozing off into sleep after all the weirdness when there is an almighty crash, a puther of dust through which what seems like a blaze of light enters into the darkness. Though, truth to tell, it is only the rising sun seen after your eyes have become long accustomed to near-total darkness. The stones and hides blocking the entrance have collapsed – seemingly just a few baulks of wood were propping it up.
Outside in the early morning sun your father and uncles are laughing. You have, they enthusiastically tell you, been reborn as men. Forget your boyhood name. From now on you will be called... New clothes and a full set of hunting equipment have been prepared for you. As does warmth from a fire and much needed food and drink.

When the ritual is repeated for the next peer group of boys, you will be one of those helping to frighten them by taking your turn roaring with the sacred bullroarer, while the ancestors do indeed sound like your father and his brothers. They are your father and his brothers, their voices somewhat muffled by the leather masks concealing their faces.

Inside West Kennett chamber tomb, looking towards the entrance.
Not just thud, thud, thud

Yes this initiation ritual is purely from my imagination – although all the component details can be found in the reports which make up the library of a university ethnography department.

And, yes, such rites are ‘pure theatre’ – but exceptionally convincing ‘theatre’ to those being initiated! Two things are certain. Firstly, whatever did go in the chambers of Neolithic ‘tombs’ was probably substantially different to what I have described – although the ‘acoustic illusions’ were there to be exploited. And I’ve not even included echoes, shadows or simulacra in this invented ‘experience’…

Secondly, whatever did go in the chambers of Neolithic ‘tombs’ was a heck of a lot more sophisticated than a group of neo-shamans parking in the layby, walking up to West Kennett chamber tomb and then banging out thud-thud-thud rhythms on flabby skin-covered frame drums, claiming to be going off to the Otherworlds. Such modern day rituals probably have nothing in common with prehistoric rites.

So long as we think shamanic drums were the main prehistoric ritual instruments then we will never understand the acoustics of Neolithic sites. They respond much better to the sharp percussive sounds of clap sticks – and hand clapping – and to the continual drone of bullroarers. And if you must use a frame drum, learn to get sounds from them like Tibetan monks, where the beats ‘decay’ like the sound of a bouncing ball slowly coming to rest. Makes a great backing to their use of human thigh bone trumpets and various types of cymbals – which are ‘rubbed’ together to produce a sustained ringing, not clashed jarringly together.

*The main use of these small cymbals in Tibetan bon po rites is to produce a sustained ringing sound to call the ‘hungry ghosts’ to feed on a ritual offering.*
Sauntering with a purpose

I’ve already alluded to the rather fast pace that many visitors to Avebury tend to adopt. Perhaps there should be signs up instructing them to ‘Walk with awareness’ and ‘Walk slowly’. But perhaps the word ‘walk’ is part of the problem.

There are many other words for getting about on foot, such as amble, stroll, march, trudge and perambulate. Best of all, perhaps is to saunter. ‘Saunter’ is from French, although beyond that the origin of the word is lost in speculation. According to a rather dubious legend ‘saunter’ is a corruption of ‘Saint Terre’, meaning ‘Holy Land’. Allegedly, it derives from the Middle Ages when pilgrimage was all the rage. Everyone was going to the Holy Land. Some people took it up as a profession. They would wander from town to town, from church to church, begging for alms, like sadhus and holy men do in India today. When asked where they were going, they would say, ‘To Saint Terre’ – to the Holy Land.

Whatever the etymology, the way we use the word ‘saunter’ conveys a better sense of how best to experience a sacred site – whether a medieval pilgrimage shrine or a prehistoric stone circle. And, for at least some visitors to Avebury and other prehistoric sites, their visits are more akin to medieval pilgrimages than mere secular tourism. While there is no clear boundaries between the various reasons why we go to visit places, pilgrimage is one of the clearer examples of ‘tourism with inner meanings’.

Modern day pilgrimage includes much more than visiting sacred sites, whether churches and cathedrals or surviving prehistoric sites. People also evoke similar ‘inner meanings’ when visiting Warminster or Rendlesham, with all the associations with 1960s and 70s UFO sightings. The same sense of pilgrimage is shared with people who travel substantial distances to experience crop circles. Other popular destinations include pop musicians’ homes or their places of death, such as John Lennon’s home in Liverpool during the 1950s, or the tree where Mark Bowland died in 1977. Indeed in 1999 no less an authority as English Heritage got in on this act, publishing a guide to these and the 111 other examples under the title of Sites of Rock ‘n’ Roll Importance. A revised edition would, of course, need to add many
more. Other modern day ‘pilgrims’ are drawn to the so-called ‘dark tourism’ of First World War cemeteries, Second World War concentration camps, Hiroshima, Ground Zero in New York, and even the sites of acts of terrorism in Britain – a part of the tourism industry understandably dubbed as ‘milking the macabre’.

Famous cemeteries – Greyfriars Kirkyard in Edinburgh, Highgate Cemetery in London, the catacombs in Paris and Rome come first to my mind – all have their own versions of this ‘dark tourism’, either being visited by people drawn to the special sense of place, or to pay their respects to the more famous ‘inhabitants’, or to take part in a hammed-up ‘Gothick’ guided walk. Even attractive rural churchyards – and Avebury is as good an example as any – when encountered ‘by chance’ on a day out for other reasons can persuade people to saunter around the gravestones, musing on the inscriptions.

Yes, that word ‘saunter’ again. And if we today can, more or less spontaneously, feel the urge to saunter between the stones commemorating ‘lost souls’, why should not people about 150-or-so generations before us not also have felt similar inclinations to saunter the stones which might have had similar associations with souls and the deceased? And remember my earlier remark about henges being primarily about keeping something in, just as churchyards too have clearly defined boundaries.
The many reasons for journeys

Just as modern day pilgrimages – or ‘tourism with inner meanings’ – spans many different reasons, so too other types of journeys can have many different meanings and reasons. Only in the modern world are journeys principally getting from ‘here’ to ‘somewhere else’ – or ‘somewhere else’ to ‘back home’. We can see this attitude in pioneering travel writers such as Celia Fiennes (1662–1741) or James Boswell (1740–95). They omit all the many discomforts of the ‘bits in between’ and simply write about the destinations and principal stopping places. Even satnavs follow this mentality of travel as a series of destinations, making it difficult for anyone who intentionally wants to amble along the little lanes from village to village, rather than use the ‘A’ roads and motorways.

In traditional societies around the world there are long established ‘trade routes’ – perhaps most famously the Silk Roads from western China, through north India and across the Middle East to what is now Istanbul. There are also innumerable pilgrimage routes and other journeys which are primarily devotional.

In addition, pre-modern people are known to have re-enacted primordial creation myths – the Australian Aboriginal ‘dreaming tracks’ (erroneously dubbed ‘song lines’) are perhaps the best-known of such ‘walkabouts’. Much less well-known are initiatory journeys. These may be led by an elder through, almost invariably, rather challenging terrain. Or they may involve the initiate being sent off on a quest – in many cultures these were often ‘dream quests’ or encounters with totemic animals. A variant of these initiations was ritualised hunting.

While seeming risqué to the somewhat Puritanical ways of Western thinking, traditional journeys and pilgrimages also embraced mythologised erotic quests. I will be coming back to these later!

Many of these journeys have quite profound ‘inner meanings’ – retracing creation myths, encountering totem animals, mythologised erotic quests, and so forth all have at least as much meaning and significance as religious pilgrimages. There is a point where these meanings blur into metaphors. Indeed journeys are one of the more prevalent metaphors for life itself. Filmmakers have long found ‘road
movies’ and other journeys a convenient narrative structure for any number of genres – the first three which come to my mind are *The Road to Casablanca* (1942), *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). No doubt you can quickly think of three others.

This is not simply a modern phenomena. When Middle English emerges out of the oral realm and begins to be written down in the second half of the fourteenth century then three of the greatest works are precursors to road movies. One is Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, where the whole framing story is about a pilgrimage. The second is William Langland’s *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, inspired by a journey from Shropshire to London. The third is an alliterative poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written in Cheshire dialect by an author whose name is not known but referred to by scholars as the ‘Pearl Poet’ after the name of one of his other works. He begins by describing a journey made by Sir Gawain from north-west Wales to Cheshire.

After the Reformation, the physical pilgrimages of medieval times mutated into literary fictions – whether the somewhat unsympathetic account in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* or the life-as-a-journey-of-faith which provides the structure of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The process has entirely secular successors. When we watch documentaries about places – and the various series of *Coast* are good examples – we are straddling the complex boundaries between real places, journeys-as-narrative-structures, ‘edifying information’ and various other ways of regarding specific places as iconic, allegorical or (perhaps more rarely) as metaphorical. And, furthermore, all these meanings and significances are slippery and ever-evolving.
Life is a road trip

While prehistoric people had neither TV documentaries nor road movies, they did have sagas and place-related legends. I see no reason why the idea of journeys did not have at least as much meaning and significance then as now. But in pre-modern societies life as a journey was never merely a metaphor. Life is just places in walking distance put end-to-end, as it were. The comedian Steven Wright punned that ‘Anywhere is walking distance, if you’ve got the time.’ Before the invention of bicycles and cars most people would be waiting for the punch line.

Despite modern mental baggage to the contrary, mobility and travel could not have been exceptional in prehistoric societies – they were integral aspects of those societies. Ethnographic studies of nomadic and semi-nomadic cultures confirms that all life ‘happens’ while travelling. Day-to-day subsistence activities are accomplished. Goods are traded. Relatives and friends and enemies and – perhaps only rarely – strangers are met. Children are born. People get ill and sometimes die. And travel fulfils a love of change and exploration – which are not anachronistic modern aspirations.

Archaeologists can show that journeys enabled artefacts to be re-distributed – whether everyday pottery or high-status ones, such as polished hand axes, or amber and jet beads. From Avebury there is a fragment of a polished axe made in the Neolithic from stone only found on the Lizard peninsula in Cornwall, along with fragments of pots also made there. Most polished axes of this era come from a quarry on a steep scree slope near Great Langdale in Cumbria – almost certainly a location chosen for its ‘mythic importance’ as similar rock is available in nearby locations which are much easier to access.

Recent archaeological activities at Durrington Walls near Stonehenge have confirmed what archaeologists had suspected – that people and cattle were travelling from the Orkneys to attend seasonal gatherings on the banks of the Avon in what is now Wiltshire – an eight hundred mile journey almost certainly made in small boats following the North Sea coast and round to the Solent.
Remember what I said earlier about Avebury being at the headwaters of the Kennet, which flows due east into the Thames? While so far there is no physical evidence that people from Orkney came to Avebury, there is no reason whatsoever to think they didn’t. Did the same people travel from the Orkneys to Stonehenge or Avebury – and back again – every year? Was it only the crews of the boats which came regularly, while ‘landlubbers’ only came more rarely – rather like Moslems taking part in the hajj to Mecca? Whichever, for at least some – and perhaps all – these Neolithic people then ‘wayfaring’ was a major part of their way of life.

Counter to modern perceptions, in Neolithic times the Orkneys were not some sort of remote ‘cultural backwater’. On the contrary this was the focus of Neolithic society, where new technologies and ‘fashions’ first appeared – rather in the way London is now thought of as the ‘cultural capital’. Yet the ancestors of the people living in Orkney would, around ten to twelve thousand years ago, have migrated up from the Continent via southern England. Was Wiltshire some sort of mythic ‘ancestral place’ akin to the way Australian Aborigines have retained a distorted recollection of their ‘migration routes’ from the coast to the interior as the songs and stories which make up the ‘dreaming tracks? I think the answer is very plausibly ‘Yes’. The evidence still stands – the largest prehistoric man-made mound in Europe.

*Chippewa woman and girls in a birchbark canoe, Red Lake, Minnesota c. 1898. Neolithic people in Britain lived similar lives so would have had a similar culture.*
From Silbury Hill to Star Trek

The creation myths of traditional societies frequently recall epic journeys into uncharted territory. Think of the Bible: after Genesis comes Exodus. Similarly the settlement of Scandinavia becomes the basis of myths written down in the early thirteenth century. Such myth-making also took place during the nineteenth century as Europeans colonised the ‘wild west’ frontier of America, while the wagon treks of Dutch-speaking colonists in South Africa have similarly become part of the national mythos. When we effectively ran out of physical frontiers then the myth-making was taken up by television scriptwriters. Space became ‘the final frontier’. The working title for the pilot programme was Wagon Trek to the Stars.

The importance of place-related legends to the sense of belonging in a place is typified by the story of a British Columbian tribal chief. He allegedly challenged the British military officer who was the representative of the colonial process which now claimed sovereignty over his lands. ‘If you own this place’, the chief countered, ‘then tell me the stories of these places.’

While this succinct tale may be little more than apocryphal, it neatly summarises countless myths. The Scandinavian sagas and Star Trek may be separated by over seven centuries, but in almost all respects they are close cousins. Could the same sorts of stories have also appealed just as much to people who lived about forty centuries before the sagas were written down? In other words, the people who built Silbury Hill.

Such myths certainly appealed to the authors of the opening books of the Bible and their audiences. As the versions of these tales we know go back about twenty centuries before the sagas (although they describe events which took place a long time before then) then we are half-way back in time.

Most intriguingly the traditional tribes of recent centuries whose lifestyle is most like the Neolithic people are the tribes whose lands straddle the USA-Canadian border. And the most common creation myth among these cultures would neatly ‘explain’ Silbury Hill.
The primordial mound

Jim Leary and David Field, the English Heritage archaeologists responsible for the excavations at Silbury Hill about ten year ago, make exactly the same comparison. They discuss the ‘earth diver’ creation myths of the Hopewellian people of Wisconsin – the same tribes who constructed effigy mounds. Truth be told, the ‘earth diver’ myth is known all round the world – well, at least all around the northern hemisphere. Siberian shamans from the Altai mountains told how the world came into existence when a swan dived down into the primordial ocean and fetched up silt to create land. Almost the same account of creation is found among many indigenous American cultures, not just the Hopewellian society – although other water fowl rather than swans are the usual primordial protagonists.

The musician Laurie Anderson included her version of this legend in the song ‘The Beginning Of Memory’ on her 2010 album Homeland. She tells of

...a time when there was no earth, no land.  
Only air and birds everywhere.  
But the thing was there was no place to land.  
Because there was no land.

Silbury Hill at sunset.  Never visited by Captain Kirk or his crew.  
But perhaps, at least according to legend, built by swans...
So they just circled around and around. Because this was before the world began. And the sound was deafening. Songbirds were everywhere. Billions and billions and billions of birds. [...] They were just constantly flying in circles. Constantly flying in huge circles.

Traditional myths then explain how one of the birds dived into the water and brought up white silt. That bird repeatedly brought up silt until there was a small mound, at which point the other birds join in to help and land finally arises from the water. While slightly fudged in Anderson’s account, note that sound is key to the narrative. Typically the countless number of birds circle around silently until one of them makes a cry which penetrates the silence. It is this primordial sound which instigates the diving down for silt. If you like, ‘In the beginning was the cry…’

Silbury Hill is built of white chalk dug from a large ditch or ‘moat’ with numerous small springs feeding into the ditch (although modern groundwater abstraction means the water table is now below the natural level so all-but-one of those springs are usually dry, and even that one is seasonal). If anyone was looking for a place in Britain where white silt was prevalent then this is a leading contender. Little surprise that several small mounds were constructed, over which Silbury Hill as we know it was superimposed.

Stylised flying swan pendants carved from mammoth ivory. One of several from two locations in the Siberian Angara valley. Circa. 13,000 BCE.
The Silbury Hill swans

We cannot be certain that the builders of Silbury Hill knew the ‘earth diver’ myth. But the numerous springs around its ‘moat’ provide water at a more-or-less constant temperature – 10°C. In summer it is cooler than the water in the moat. In winter it is significantly warmer – the surface of the moat freezes over in the depths of winter. On calm frosty mornings, it is warm enough for a slight mist to rise up from the surface of the water – the sight is quite magical and seemingly inexplicable.

While 10°C might seem chilly to us warm-blooded mammals, it is warm enough for cold-blooded fish to be active. Active fish means water fowl diving down to feed on them – and probably otters too. This hunting activity will disturb the white silts.

The water around Silbury Hill would, at least in the middle of winter, be a haven for wildlife and probably quite exceptional.

To a human observer it would not be obvious that the water birds were diving down to catch small fish – ‘tiddlers’ as they are often known. But as water fowl often eat watersnails and other invertebrates too, they would quite likely disturb the white silt at the bottom of the water. Everything is ‘in place’ to evoke the classic earth diver creation myth.

*Hamsa.*
This myth is known in both the Old and New World, which strongly suggests it was being told so long ago that it travelled over the one-time land bridge from Siberia into the Americas. Further evidence of an early origin comes from Japan, as swans also appear in the creation myths of the Ainu, a tribe who lived on those islands before the now-dominant Mongoloid population. Swans and geese feature in Indian myths too. The deity Hamsa is either a swan or a goose, while the honorific title Paramahamsa, literally ‘supreme swan’, is bestowed on Hindu spiritual teachers who are regarded as having attained enlightenment. The metaphor compares a swan, equally at home on land, water and air, with an enlightened person who is considered to be equally at home in the realms of matter and spirit.

Swans are a key part of funeral beliefs in Russia and Finland, as they are thought to be the souls of the deceased flying to rest at a place ‘north beyond the north wind’. Think also of the British folk euphemism that babies are brought by storks – a species not native to these islands. In the Baltic region this poetic role in procreation is given to swans. Several Siberian tribes say that before birth the souls of children perch like little birds on the branches of the World Tree; a myth which is also known in Africa and Indonesia.
Did prehistoric people in Britain think, as do Russians and Finns today, that swans conveyed the souls of the dead? Did they think like Baltic people and thought that they brought the souls of babies? Did they perhaps think both of these – meaning that swans were associated with what might be thought of as the ‘recycling’ of souls, or reincarnation if you prefer. Swans and geese migrate north around November and come south, through Britain into European breeding grounds around February-March. The ‘moat’ around Silbury Hill is one of the few places in the vicinity where there would be enough water for them to stop to feed – as anyone who has seen a swan taking off will know, they need a substantial area of water to be able to gain speed for takeoff. The River Kennett near here would not suffice, least of all if tree branches were leaning over some or all the watercourse.

Left: Cygnets or souls? Photographer not known.

Right: Be careful what you wish for, Mark…
The Silbury Hill cycle

Primordial creation myths imply a linear concept of time – from a ‘Big Bang’ to a ‘Big Crunch’ as modern astrophysicists might put it, or from *Genesis* to Armageddon as a Christian might. But the reality is that neither secular physicists nor even the most fervent believers have lives which span such massive time scales. They live on a year-by-year basis. Many astronomical phenomena recur on an exactly annual basis (although the moon and the planets do not conform to this solar cycle). Similarly Christian feasts – such as Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, the Annunciation, the Assumption, All Souls, and the great many honouring specific saints – fall according to a complex cycle of solar and lunar criteria. As such, Christians are no different from either Jews or Moslems, whose festivals fall according to an equally perplexing pattern.

Just because Silbury Hill can be thought of as the manifestation of a primordial creation mound – the ‘Big Bump’ of Neolithic cosmological myths, if you like – does not mean it could not also feature prominently in an annual cycle of myths too. Stand at the viewing area near the car park to the immediate west of Silbury Hill at the time of the full moon in August. Assuming there is no cloud then you will see the moon rise over the original causeway which still links the mound to the footpath on the side of the modern road. This is a view which any prehistoric person could have seen too.

In the late 1970s Michael Dames published a complex argument which suggested that Silbury Hill was a ‘pregnant goddess’ who gave birth each August full moon. His books, *The Silbury Hill Treasure* and *The Avebury Cycle* are still readily available so there is no need to attempt to summarise all his reasonings. One of his key points is that the white silt, presumably once characteristic of the surrounding watercourses, bears an uncanny resemblance to milk. But births must be preceded by conceptions – and you don’t have to be called Sigmund to see the associations between chalky fluids and that other key requirement for creation, semen.
Silbury Hill and the August full moon.
Milk, the Milky Way, and the ‘Ghost Road’

When Neolithic people looked around in the middle of the night they would have seen the Milky Way. This ‘misty’ band of countless stars would have been visible on a clear night. However back then it was not an ‘arch’ above their heads, as it appears nowadays, but a ring almost mimicking the horizon. Indeed, in the centuries just before the henge bank was built, the Milky Way would have matched the horizon. Was this a reason why the bank was built – to try to ‘pull’ the Milky Way back?

We have no idea if they would have called these stars the Milky Way, although in many European languages that is the sense of the name. In Oriental cultures the Milky Way is called as the River or Road to the Otherworld. Its whiteness means that it was closely associated with death in these cultures – which, unlike the West, link white rather than black with death. Blackfoot Indians call it the ‘Wolf Trial’, thinking of it as a sacred path taking the spirits of the dead to the afterlife. Most other Amerindian tribes from California to Canada called it the ‘Ghost Road’ or something similar. And in Lithuanian, Estonian and Finnish it is ‘The Birds’ Path’ or ‘Way of the Birds’ – strongly echoing the psychopompic role for swans already mentioned.

All such options are possible for Neolithic society – as too is the corresponding idea that these stars are souls awaiting a new life, a new body – with what we call meteor showers perhaps being thought of as ‘showers of souls’.
Silbury Hill’s posset of milk

Interesting William Stukeley, the eighteen century antiquarian, was told a tale by the locals that Silbury Hill ‘was raised while a posset of milk was seething’. A posset was a drink of hot milk curdled with ale or beer and flavoured with spices, formerly used as a remedy for colds. Is this some badly-distorted descendent of a ritual involving milk which goes back thousands of years?

Such a tale brings to mind Ceridwen’s cauldron of inspiration in the tales of Taliesin. Her cauldron is close kin to gourds and other vessels of primordial creation in Chinese traditional lore – creativity and inspiration being largely inseparable. In the Irish tradition, water deities are linked to the inspiration of poets. Mead is the drink of inspiration – and that needs to be prepared in a vessel akin to a cauldron. Was a posset-like mixture of mead and milk once regarded as a drink of divine inspiration?

Left: A seventeenth or eighteenth century posset pot.
Right: A cauldron of inspiration.
Silbury Hill’s conception

While Michael Dames’ ideas about a pregnant Silbury Hill were undoubtedly alternative, even for the 1970s, in some ways he stopped short of explaining the whole cycle. If the goddess gives birth every August, then she must get pregnant every December. Even the Christian calendar gets such details right – the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary is nine months before Christmas. This feast is formally the start of the Christian year – and the ultimate reason why the financial year still starts in early April, not in January.

While I am not aware of any divine proclamations that earth goddesses have the same gestation period as humans, there are two reasons for thinking that nine months is the ‘natural’ period for Neolithic female deities. Firstly, we tend to create deities in the likeness of ourselves (even though this is contrary to the Biblical proclamation) or, at least, according to how we desire our deities to be. Secondly, humans and cows share almost the same gestation period, and cattle were the most valuable aspect of Neolithic culture. Modern vets and farmers know that cows give birth between 270 to 295 days after insemination, but that is remarkably close to the gestation period for humans, which is conventionally 260 days but can be a little longer depending on age, body condition and nutritional health.

Dames’ cycle stops short of suggesting a ‘love in’ among the Neolithic monuments. But if Avebury was the ‘Winterset’ for prehistoric people who were peripatetic during the summer, then they would be gathered near Silbury Hill at the time of ‘her’ conception. Given the complexities of the myths which can plausibly be linked to the Avebury monuments, presumably such a ‘Big Bonk’ came towards the end of a complex ‘romantic’ prelude.

The Hindus who used to visit the sacred groves around Braj give us some clues. Around the sixteenth century a wealthy landowner created a complex arrangement of woodland groves, many with specially-built stone ‘bathing pools’ at the centre. Pilgrims came from a wide area for a formal twenty-three day perambulation or pilgrimage around these sites. Each of the groves was related to an episode in the Mahabharata which describes in great detail how Radha seduced Krishna. Sadly,
neglect followed by modern urban development has destroyed almost all of these groves and pool.

As well as being the inspiration for Vatsayana’s *Kamasutra*, the whole episode of Radha and Krishna has been described in verse by various poets, who elaborate on Radha’s initial request for Krishna to place flowers in her hair, along with peacock feathers. Krishna agrees, and also playfully places musky spots on Radha’s forehead and bosom and paints her eyes with black kohl and her temples with various hues. Around her neck he places fresh garlands and arranges flower bracelets around her wrists. This foreplay ends by him adorning her with anklets, glass bangles and a waist belt which make melodious music to accompany the divine love-making. And what more of a ‘Big Bang’ can there be than two all-powerful deities expressing their deepest affections for each other?

We are meant to read these verses at numerous spiritual levels, just as similar erotic passages in the biblical *Song of Songs* are held to be metaphors about the nature of divine love, rather than mere expressions of human desires. The thirteenth century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi, usually known as Rumi, similarly transcended different levels of meaning in his ‘love poetry’ – although his status as the best-selling poet in America today is presumably more because of his romantic appeal rather than merely esoteric connotations.

Intriguingly, the Protestant prudery which dominates religion in the USA today, while being comfortable with Rumi, largely ignores *The Song of Songs*. But the reality is the canonical European religious texts share the same scope as Hindu and Sufi sacred literature. Indeed, stepping outside the ethnocentric perspective which makes uptight post-Reformation thinking appear ‘logical’, why would such topics *not* be part of any sacred tradition?
Silbury Hill and female initiation

While we might deem the sixteenth century groves at Braj to be little more than an especially elaborate ‘theme park’, to those taking part they were a manifestation of poetic literature in the landscape, where devotion mingled intimately with the erotic. The experience of walking around this heightened environment for just over three weeks – plus the time taken to get there and get back home – would be a potent ‘immersive experience’. I can think of no parallels in the Western world, where tourism tends to polarise hedonism with piety, and seemingly never aims to bring the two together. Or have some earnest virgin-till-married couples walked El Camino on their honeymoon?

Just as people rarely take part in the same pilgrimage year after year – unless it is a very local one – perhaps too in Neolithic times not everyone took part in the ‘Big Bonk’ rites which made the goddess pregnant in time for the August moon-birthing. Just as I have imagined a ritual for the initiation of men, presumably there was a once-in-a-lifetime rite for adolescent girls. The ethnographic literature provides plenty of evidence for such rites being widespread among traditional societies. However, until recent decades ethnographers were mostly male so excluded from observing the rites or even knowing more than the most cursory details.

In recent years, since women researchers have been able to elicit information about such traditional customs, we can be certain of two things. On the one hand, there was considerable variation in what those rites entailed. On the other, what most have in common is that goes on is, at times, decidedly ‘bawdy’. Modern day ‘hen parties’ are perhaps as near as anyone in the modern world might get to experiencing such derision, mostly of course at the expense of men.
Learning to listen

All these previous chapters are a long-winded introduction to the main theme of this book. What I hope to have done so far is open your mind to just how different prehistoric peoples’ perceptions and experiences might have been. There are, inevitably, a great many other possibilities which I have not considered.

For the best part of the last decade the idea of ‘listening to the stones’ has influenced my way of engaging with prehistoric sacred sites, notably Avebury, and a much wider range of places. Recall my opening remarks about the ethnographer Paul Stoller who became a ‘sorcerer’s apprentice’ with the Songhay. ‘Learning to listen’ was a key initial step for him. What came out of that learning was not, however, just a greatly enhanced attention to sound. This ‘learning to listen’ spilled over into ‘learning to taste and smell’ and learning to see in a manner which is far more attentive than the Western way. You could say – although he didn’t – that he was ‘learning to sense’, in every way.

Plenty of people in the West have read books about ‘body language’ and so-called ‘non-verbal communication’ (which includes both body

Every posture tells a story...
language and the way we talk, rather than the words we actually speak). Some people, from counsellors to sales representatives, are trained to both ‘read’ body language and to put people at ease using appropriate body language themselves. I was taught some of these techniques in the 1980s, although I already knew some and went on to find out more for myself. I have, if you like, ‘learnt to listen’ to body language. Although, as most body language is picked up visually, perhaps this is stretching the listening metaphor unnecessarily far. But the point is that this is not about ‘normal’ seeing – it is about enhanced understanding of what there is to be seen, heard, or whatever.

Some Western people ‘learn to sense’ in a different way. They learn to dowse. These days this is usually for ‘leylines’, ‘geopathic energies’ and such like. But the techniques have their origins in finding natural underground water courses, buried pipes and cables, lost belongings, hidden archaeological features and other more physical objects which are invisible to the dowser (at least until discovered by subsequent digging). Dowsers have ‘learnt to listen’ to subtle responses in their bodies, ones which seemingly do not fit neatly into our normal sensory responses.

If some fish – even the humble dog fish – are sensitive enough to subtle variations in electric fields to be able to ‘dowse’ out their prey in dark water (or even under sand) then I do not find it impossible to believe that we have similar sensitivities and can pick up changes in the the geomagnetic field. The main suspects for the relevant sensory organs are some magnetised bony tissues in the nose, or the outer ‘shell’ of the pineal gland. While the pineal gland is surrounded by the brain, it has no direct contact with our ‘grey matter’. Indeed, our toes – which do have nerves connected to the brain – are more a part of the brain than this gland, which can only ‘communicate’ by releasing the endocrine melatonin. But think how quickly a blast of adrenaline (from glands on top of the kidneys) kicks in – that’s exactly how quick the body can communicate with chemicals.

Some people are born with ‘second sight’ or ‘sixth sense’ or some other euphemism. Let’s call them ‘psychic’ – although that term covers a very broad range of natural and learnt abilities. Some people are born psychic, others use Tarot cards or other divinatory tools as ‘props’. And I use props in both senses – as something to aid them, and as something that paying punters expect to see as part of the showmanship of paying for a reading. Props or no props, psychics have ‘learnt to listen’ to information which does not seem to
correspond to any sensory inputs. For some psychics ideas and ‘knowledge’ arrives seemingly from nowhere inside their minds – one step or more on from dowsing, where there at least seems to be a pendulum or set of dowsing rods acting as a ‘sensor’.

Whether ‘listening’ to body language, dowsing rods or seemingly-direct ‘psychic’ information we are on the first steps to the whole ‘learning to sense’ lessons which Paul Stoller initially found so hard when he was with the Songhay sorcerers.
Learning to dream

Western people tentatively ‘learn to dream’. Some people claim never to dream – although this simply means they do not normally wake from the sleep patterns when dreaming occurs. Others become obsessed with understanding the ‘symbolism’ of dreams, as if there was a hardwired ‘code’ for the meanings – some sort of Rosetta Stone for linking the waking and sleeping mind. Such obsessions are usually based on C.G. Jung’s untheoretical ramblings. A surprising number of people are seduced by the quantity of his writing, while failing to recognise that all his underlying assumptions about the nature of consciousness have no reality outside Jung’s imagination.

Most people fall somewhere in between, finding disturbing dreams, well, disturbing (spot the circularity of reasoning) but, by and large, regarding dreams as the brain in ‘free fall’ mode. Such ideas would be quite alien to many traditional New World societies. For example, the Ojibwa people, whose traditional lands straddle the USA/Canadian border, ‘listen’ to their personal dreams. Only if they have experienced something in a dream is it ‘really real’ – quite the opposite to Western ways of constructing reality. So when a flesh-and-feather bird is seen, it is regarded as only a manifestation of the ‘real’ dream-bird and could not exist without the dream-bird giving shape to the flesh and feathers. Actually this is not so far from medieval European ways of thinking when, for example, dragons were the ‘shape of fear’. Nowadays we think of fear as formless and ‘merely’ psychological – such an abstraction was not possible for medieval people. And spot the

Modern graffito depicting an Ojibwa thunder bird.
parallels to Platonic ideals or essences, which were a core part of medieval Christian worldviews.

Another First Nation people of the Americas, the Gwich’in of Alaska, were converted to Christianity in the late nineteenth century. When, in 1898, the entire Bible had been translated into their native language many Gwich’in people began to experience dreams and visions in which the pages of the Bible talked to them, issuing instructions and revealing prophecies. The pages spoke with the voices of the elders.

\textit{St Matthew from an early Anglo-Saxon manuscript.}
Think about it. These people were part of an orally-transmitted culture. Everything they knew had been learnt from discussions with the elders and was the basis for discussion. They had no concept of texts – whether religious or land treaties – being ‘set in stone’ rather than as the basis for ongoing discussions.

The Anglican missionary, steeped in the post-Reformation view of the Bible as a literal truth which is not open to negotiation, was less than comfortable with the Bible being ‘negotiated’ in dreams. In contrast, the Catholic priests were fairly relaxed about the Gwinch’in’s visionary responses.

Indeed, when we look at how medieval clergy read the Bible, they were less interested in what the words actually said than in finding a commentary appropriate for their own times. They were, if you like, reading between the lines. Only in recent centuries have we only looked at the lines on the page. The same is true of paintings and icons – we find it hard to read all the nuances of an Anglo-Saxon illuminated manuscript, and even harder to get our head around the idea that Orthodox icons are not painted merely to be glanced at, but – in the words of the artists themselves – ‘written’ so that they can be ‘read’.
Dream incubation temples

We know that around two thousand years ago people took dreaming seriously. We have the remains of their ‘dream incubation temples’ to prove it. In Greece and the Aegean the remains of several such major temples survive at Epidauros, Messene, Pergammon and Kos. Evidence for dream incubation is also known for Delphi, Didyma, Dodona, Eleusis, Ephesus, Lesbos, Loutra, Melitus, Mount Athos, Mount Olympos, Mount Pangaion and Palaeoplois. Collectively they are known as ‘Asklepieions’, as the temples are primarily dedicated to the god Asklepios.

In Britain we have evidence for two such dream incubation temples. At Lydney, in the Forest of Dean overlooking the Severn estuary, the characteristic shape of the ‘dormitories’ was revealed by archaeologists. At Thistleton, on the Leicestershire-Rutland border there was a Roman small town with a nearby temple. Although not excavated, crop marks show exactly the same sort of temple buildings as at Lydney.

You went to such places if you were ill. After appropriate preliminary rituals you slept in the special rooms devoted to ‘dream incubation’. In the morning you recounted your dreams to the therapeutics – yes, the origin of our word ‘therapist’ – who interpreted the dream with either a prognosis or a recommendation for a cure. The belief was that during sleep Asklepios – or another deity devoted to healing – had revealed the appropriate treatment.

One suspects that the preliminary ritual included a ritual drink, probably a little more potent than Horlicks. If it contained an opium-derivative then there would be both pain relief and vivid, usually disturbing, dreams. Morphine is named after Morpheus, the god of sleep, whose name means ‘form’ – he was the one who ‘formed’ dreams.

Seemingly this tradition was still known in later Anglo-Saxon England as a carving in Breedon on the Hill church, Leicestershire, shows an angel making a gesture of blessing – while at his feet are two opium
poppies. This was carved around AD 1000 and seems to be an angel of healing. The present church is the successor to an early Anglo-Saxon minster and is set within an Iron Age hillfort on the top of a very prominent hill.

No evidence for dream incubation ‘dormitories’ have been found at Breedon. But there wouldn’t be – by around 1000 the sick would have been accommodated in the nave of the church, with a good view of the chancel. This is the arrangement of so-called ‘hospitals’ in the later medieval Europe – they are in essence small churches. No doubt the sick were looked after, but the principal ‘healing’ was simply proximity to the altar and its relics. By then formal dream incubation had passed into the mists of history – although spontaneous ‘visions’ by any of the infirm would have been ‘interpreted’ by the priest.
Between sleep and waking

Traditional societies seemingly regard dreaming and visions as a fairly uniform type of experience. Frankly, I suspect this is often an illusion created by ethnographers failing to distinguish between different ‘mind states’ with which they had little or no personal experience. Modern science has recognised that as well as ‘proper’ dreams (when there is rapid eyeball moment) there is also a threshold between sleep and wakefulness which can include lucid dreaming, hallucinations and sleep paralysis. This threshold has been termed ‘hypnagoia’, a collective term for both hypnogogic (‘toward sleep’) or hypnapompic (‘from sleep’) phases.

Scientists who research sleep insist that hypnagoia differ from waking dreams and day dreams. Indeed, I’m sure that according to their criteria there are important differences. But to the rest of us – whether members of ‘traditional tribes’ or modern society – dreams of various kinds form an ‘alternative reality’ which, far more often than not, we find comfortable or even comforting. Which is not to say that we tend to remember the discomforting ones better!

Waking dreams and ‘day dreams’ tend to be regarded as distinct from ‘guided visualisations’ and a whole host of meditation-based exercises in focusing attention. Those who devote time and effort to such visualisations generally give considerable importance to the ‘events’ and ‘encounters’ made on these ‘inner planes’ or ‘journeys to the Otherworld’. Some go the whole hog and channel personas from the past – invariably someone important rather than a mere ‘pleb’. To be honest I’m not sure that such channelling is really that much different from what a great many authors do when they ‘get into character’ while writing fiction, or adopt specific personas to help them write in a specific idiom (especially if such personas have a different pseudonym).

While, again, scientists with access to equipment which measures brain activity may beg to differ, do we really perceive much difference between hypnagoia and guided visualisations? More importantly, is there much difference between how we value what we experience and...
‘learn’ in such states of mind? That question is equally true for people who are dismissive of the value of such ‘altered states’ as it is for those who might be considered to over-value such experiences.

The same spectrum of values also applies to ideas and information acquired during an even more prevalent ‘altered state’ – watching television or going to the cinema. The design of cinemas is intended to be an immersive experience, and one which many people attempt to emulate when watching DVDs or streamed movies at home. While we are watching a film – and often in our dreams the night or two following – we respond as if what is on the screen is ‘really real’. We are literally entranced.

While watching television is usually a less immersive experience, nevertheless it induces a light trance. Whether we are watching dramas or documentaries, the action on the screen temporarily ‘is’ our reality. Much of what we know about the world is gained from new programmes, interviews and documentaries. Indeed, historical dramas may have fictional dialogue or plots but nevertheless the locations, props and costumes are often fairly accurate evocations of the period.

This means that much of what we know about the world is gained while in a light trance – from programmes which are highly ‘manipulated’ in terms of who gets to say what and with what conviction. So, are the Ojibwa people weird to ‘listen’ to their personal dreams and, only after they have experienced something in a dream, consider is it ‘really real’? Or are we even weirder to go into a light trance to engage with a ‘reality’ which is to all intents and purposes constructed by a small clique of media moguls?

The evidence is persuasive: ‘living the American dream’ is a long-standing ambition for many (and achievement for at least some) which could also be expressed as ‘living the Hollywood-created dream’. In recent decades the concept of celebrities – essentially people who are ‘famous for being famous’ – has dominated all the media. Large numbers of young people drift through life with no better ambitions than to ‘become a celebrity’, without any idea how such a dream might be brought about.

Once upon a time fairy tales were among the main ways a society subtly ‘indoctrinated’ people into the right way of doing things – albeit, often by the topsy-turvy tactic of inventing characters who failed to go by the implicit rules. At some point fairy tales ceased to be aimed at adults and were written with children as the intended audience.
While we in the West have fairy tales, other cultures have myths. Fairy tales and myths serve to construct the shared social reality of a society. Nowadays the role of fairy tales has been usurped by Disney animations, Sesame Street, and a whole host of ideologically-loaded pedagogic offerings from major media conglomerations. Numerous feminist writers have analysed how such programmes portray a passive role for women to children at their most formative age. For adults the rest of the output of Hollywood and television studios continues the same process, promoting conservative ‘family values’ over alterity.

Stepping back from such social criticism. What are fairy tales – and, indeed, myths – if not dreams with sharper narratives? The ‘impossible’ happens as readily in fairy tales as it does in our dreams. Indeed, the term ‘fairy tales’ refers not so much to tales about fairies, as to ‘wonder tales’. Something marvellous is key to the plot. The stories pivot around a revolt against reality.

Over the last two hundred we have ‘banished’ fairy tales to the nursery, and our dreams into something neither marvellous nor topsy-turvey. We have forgotten how to dream – or, at least, forgotten how to listen to our dreams and to bring the narratives into focus. In other words, we have forgotten how to write ‘wonder tales’.
Learning to listen to your ‘dreams’

While modern languages provide any number of words for different types of dreams and guided visualisations, we less commonly differentiate the various trance states which are part of normal life. Mention ‘trance state’ to most Westerners and they are most likely to allude to a shaman ‘out there’ on some psychedelic substance, thudding away on a drum. They are much less likely to mention watching television, and still less likely to describe driving as a light trance. Although it is – much of what we do to stay on the road, avoid other users, and navigate to our destination is done ‘subconsciously’.

On the one hand, be alert to the whole spectrum of dreaming and trance states which arise ‘quite naturally’ in Western ways of life. On the other hand, do not be any sort of hurry to distinguish between them. So, for example, accept what you learn from television with the same mix of certainty and incredulity you might afford a dreamtime experience. And, perhaps more importantly, vice versa. This is the first step on the journey toward learning to listen.

My ‘morning ritual’ is to get up, wash and dress, have a little breakfast and a mug of coffee. Immediately after that I wash up the previous day’s pots and pans. Not because I didn’t have time to do so the evening before, and only partially because it would be difficult to make room for a dishwasher in the cottage’s tiny kitchen. The real reason is that I haven’t really woken up at that time of day. Like most people of my age, washing up crockery is not something I need to pay much conscious attention to – by and large my hands and arms know what is required of them – so my mind is only partially occupied by what I’m physically doing. This leaves the rest of my mind to ‘saunter’. Sometimes it wanders into places that are not especially interesting. But, because I am a writer, more often I find myself imagining conversations with friends and acquaintances trying to explain what it is I’m currently writing about. Surprisingly often, by the time the washing up is dried and put away, I’ve got the next section of the book ‘mapped out’ – and probably some excellent short phrases too.

Several sections of this book came about in this way. The rest was, as you would expect, drafted onto the keyboard. But the risk then is that
What do the ‘hooded mouners’ at the henge end of the West Kennett Avenue have to tell us?

the idiom is less conversational, less alive – at least until edited later. The sections which were imagined first during this liminal phase before being fully awake were more ‘alive’ when first drafted.

In future books in the Living in a Magical World series I will have more to say about ‘managing’ states of mind and learning to value what is going on when the more conscious parts of your brain are otherwise engaged. In the meantime, enjoy learning to ‘listen’ to your dreams and similar less-than-fully-conscious ways of thinking.
You don’t just talk to the stones

If you’re with me so far, at least in principle if not yet in practice, then you’ll have a reasonably good idea of why anyone coming to a place like Avebury would want to listen to the stones. So why do most people come here and make no effort to listen? Safe to say that the majority of tourists have no such inclinations and, if the idea was put to them, they would regard it as decidedly flakey, or worse. Fair enough. What about the people who already are empathetic to experiencing sacred sites?

By and large they don’t listen at all. Many put their hands on the stones or even hug them, as if trying to discern their energies. What do they expect to happen? Bolts of energy to come tingling through their hands? A pleasant warm sensation? Or what? Others pop out dowsing rods or pendulums seeking ‘energy lines’.

Whatever their intentions are, it is as far from listening to the stones as is possible. All they are doing is turning up with their preconceived ideas and projecting them onto the stones. It’s the same as a cult follower accosting you in the street or on your doorstep trying to sell you their way of seeing the world. At least such people don’t reach out to touch you or hug you or dowses you before they’ve got to know you!

We simply make no effort to listen. We merely talk to – even silently shout at – the stones, expecting them to conform to some shallow and superficial notions of what standing stones ‘should’ be about. Interestingly most of those assumptions can be traced back to a book by Tom Graves in 1978, although his ideas have since been rehashed by a great many writers since then.

As any one who has a reasonable amount of experience at dowsing will recognise, if you expect to find something, the dowsing instrument will quickly confirm your assumptions. It is quite a different matter to dowses with an open mind and subject every observation to rigorous checks and evaluations.

This book is about listening to the stones, not about talking to the stones.
More ‘Reach out and touch faith’ than learning to listen.
When to listen

Most people who visit Avebury don’t find the stones very chatty. Well they wouldn’t. They arrive sometime after about eleven in the morning and are mostly gone by about five or six in the afternoon. In the bright light of day – and even the dull light of a rainy day – the stones are just ‘there’. Stay for dusk and they’re starting to wake up. Dawn is when they’re fully alive. If you’ve never walked around Avebury at dawn then you simply don’t know the place. A clear sunrise, especially in spring or autumn, makes the stones quite magical. As this is the time when many of the simulacra are clearly visible, then there is a very real sense of ‘presence’ too.

Night time in the henge is something else and offers everything that the daytime experience lacks. A more-or-less full moon provides more than enough light to walk about without torches. The ‘dark half’ of the lunar cycle may allow a multitude of stars to be seen. Away from modern lights then our eyes adjust fully so that even the Milky Way may be discernible. But make your acquaintance with the spirits of place and all the stones fully before you take a midnight stroll. This is not the time to start bringing out preconceived ideas about what the stones are or are not. You are here to listen, not to harangue.

Personally, dusk and dawn are my preferred times for ‘chatting’. Think about what I’ve said about hypnagoia, the types of dreams associated with drifting off to sleep or just before awakening. They are, if you like, ‘liminal times’. We think of various places, such as boundaries, as liminal. Whether the boundary between land and sea, woodland and fields, the walls around churchyards or the banks around henges, there is a sense of ‘crossing a threshold’. Indeed, limen is Latin for ‘threshold’. Crossroads have also acquired the same sense of liminality, although strictly only crossroads at parish boundaries and the like are truly liminal.

There are also times of year which traditionally are thought of as liminal, such as New Year, Hallowe’en and Midsummer Night’s Eve. In addition there are times of day – ‘the midnight hour’, ‘the witching hour’, ‘on the stroke of noon’, as well as dawn and dusk. Rituals too aim to create their own liminal time and place.
The same traditional lore holds that the ‘veils between the realms’ are thinnest, most easily crossed, at liminal times and places. Sometimes the admonition is to avoid certain places at certain times, sometimes the legends revolve around the transgression of such advice. Work out for yourself places which are liminal to your locality and explore them, initially at non-liminal times, and then at times when you will be most amenable to the right sort of listening and the places will be most ‘chatty’,

Explore the liminal zones between being awake and asleep.
A life-long lesson

Learning to listen with all your sense in the ways I have been suggesting is not something you will ever get to the end of. Unlike some New Age weekend course where, for a suitably large fee, you are fobbed into believing you have become an expert – complete, in some cases with a certificate or initiation – this type of learning is an ongoing process which will simply grow with you, but never be completed.

Think of learning to listen as process akin to a journey – one of those journeys where ‘life is a road trip’ and everything in your life will take place along the way. Or turn that metaphor inside out and see yourself as part of an ever-emergent process as big as the universe. Neither a candle flame nor a whirlpool can be kept in a museum as they are both ‘processes’ rather than ‘things’. So too knowledge, life and creativity are all processes which cannot be kept in cabinets.

If you are able to visit Avebury regularly then get to know the henge and all the other prehistoric places which make up the entire World Heritage Site for a mile or more in each direction. If not, then explore and get to know special places in your own area. They may not be prehistoric henges, but England has plenty of places which were revered well into the Anglo-Saxon era. And outside England, or even the British Isles, the possibilities become even greater.

This book is about listening and learning to use all your senses – however many you may want to count. It is not about any sorts of deeper ‘engagement’ with the places or the wide spectrum of ‘other-than-human persons’ – souls, ancestors, guardians and what-have-you – who may reside there. Yes, these places and their ‘residents’ have all sorts of possibilities for rituals, divination, enchantments and what have you. But before considering those activities you first need to understand how the sites are protected – and, more importantly, how to protect yourself. All those matters must wait for future books in the Living in the Magical World series.

Happy learning! Happy listening!
Acknowledgements

My ideas were inspired by a great many authors – who may be dismayed to see their ideas paraphrased without any reference to their own names. However in such a brief book then such ‘niceties’ must, regrettably, often be omitted. Nevertheless, the relevant works are cited in the list of sources. The published works of Tim Ingold and Chris Tilley have been especially important, while Graham Harvey’s books, lectures and conversations have influenced many of the topics. Penny Billington suggested that annual meteor showers were thought of as rebirth. Corwen Broch kindly gave permission to use the photograph on page 26. Maria Shepherdson shared some of her knowledge of Russian icon painting. An all-too brief encounter with R.J. Stewart provided some sharply-focused thoughts about fairies.

My greatest debt is to the musician and archaeologist Steve Marshall, who has ‘listened to the stones’ at Avebury and other prehistoric sites in so many ways. The thoughts on how bullroarers might have been used in an initiation are not Steve’s, but would not have come about without his practical experiments using such devices inside the West Kennett chamber.

These acknowledgements would not be complete without acknowledging the inspiration and guidance of ‘Our Ladies of Kennet’ and the land wights and ancestors of Avebury and north Leicestershire.

For details of future titles in Beatrice Walditch’s Living in a Magical World series please send an email to albion@indigogroup.co.uk

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Mead is the oldest-known alcoholic drink and familiar to a great many traditional societies throughout the world. For Druids it is the appropriate ritual offering to the ancestors. In medieval legends it is the source of poetic inspiration. In the British Isles mead-making may go back as far as five thousand years ago, to the time of the prehistoric henges.

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ISBN 978-1-905646-22-7. 2012. Royal 8vo (213 x 138 mm), 146 + xiii pages, 75 b&w photos, 4 line drawings, 6 maps, paperback. £9.95
Singing Up the Country
The songlines of Avebury and beyond
Bob Trubshaw

Singing Up the Country reveals that Bob Trubshaw has been researching a surprising variety of different topics since his last book six years ago. From Anglo-Saxon place-names to early Greek philosophy – and much in between – he creates an interwoven approach to the prehistoric landscape, creating a ‘mindscape’ that someone in Neolithic Britain might just recognise. This is a mindscape where sound, swans and rivers help us to understand the megalithic monuments.

Continuing from where scholarship usually stops and using instead the approaches of storytelling, the final chapter weaves this wide variety of ideas together as a ‘songline’ for the Avebury landscape. This re-mythologising of the land follows two ‘dreamtime’ ancestors along the Kennet valley to the precursors of Avebury henge and Silbury Hill.

Few writers have Bob Trubshaw’s breadth of knowledge combined with a mythopoetic ability to construct a modern day story that re-enchants the landscape. Singing Up the Country will be an inspiration to all those interested in prehistory, mythology or the Neolithic monuments of the World Heritage Site at Avebury.

‘Trubshaw writes with practised and confident ease. His entertaining and sometimes jocular style makes for very easy reading; the experience is rather like sitting in a comfortable pub with a pint, listening to a seasoned storyteller.’
Steve Marshall Fortean Times

ISBN 978-1-905646-21-0 2011. 245 x 175 mm, 189 + xiv pages, 64 b&w photos, 29 line drawings, paperback. £14.95
Sacred Places
Prehistory and popular imagination
Bob Trubshaw

Sacred Places asks why certain types of prehistoric places are thought of as sacred, and explores how the physical presence of such sacred sites is less important than what these places signify. So this is not another guide book to sacred places but instead provides a unique and thought-provoking guide to the mental worlds – the mindscapes – in which we have created the idea of prehistoric sacred places.

Recurring throughout this book is the idea that we continually create and re-create our ideas about the past, about landscapes, and the places within those landscapes that we regard as sacred. For example, although such concepts as ‘nature’, ‘landscape’, ‘countryside’, ‘rural’ and the contrast between profane and sacred are all part of our everyday thinking, in this book Bob Trubshaw shows they are all modern cultural constructions which act as the ‘unseen’ foundations on which we construct more complex myths about places.

Key chapters look at how earth mysteries, modern paganism and other alternative approaches to sacred places developed in recent decades, and also outline the recent dramatic changes within academic archaeology. Is there now a ‘middle way’ between academic and alternative approaches which recognises that what we know about the past is far less significant than what we believe about the past?

‘Sacred Places... is a very valuable addition to the small body of thoughtful work on the spiritual landscapes of Great Britain and therefore recommended reading.’
Nigel Pennick Silver Wheel

‘One of the best books in the field I have ever read.’
D J Tyrer Monomyth Supplement

ISBN 1 872883 67 2. 2005. 245 x 175 mm, 203 + xiv pages, 43 b&w illustrations and 7 line drawings, paperback. £14.95
The Myths of Reality
Simon Danser

‘This liberal author’s knowledge of contemporary society is amazingly broad. He expositsthe mythic depths (and appearances) of everything from ‘the myth of science’ to superhero attitudes of contemporary American nationalism.

‘Along the way he challenges many superficial trivialities about myths functioning in culture. He regards the mythic as a primary, highly effective agent of social ideology...

‘This is the best book I know in terms of disclosing the pragmatic functioning of myth in society.’

William Doty (Professor Emeritus, The University of Alabama and author of Mythography: The study of myths and rituals.)

Simon Danser asks us to think of myths as like the lenses in spectacles – we see the world through them, but rarely see them in their own right. He then systematically focuses on the myths at the core of the belief systems which create every aspect of what we take to be reality: religion, politics, commerce, science, knowledge, consciousness, self-identity, and much else that we take as ’given’.

This book reveals how reality is culturally constructed in an ever-continuing process from mythic fragments transmitted by the mass media and adapted through face-to-face and Internet conversations.

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