

AVEBURY ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL RESEARCH GROUP

Notes of a meeting held at the Study Centre, Avebury
On Friday 5th December 2003

1. Present

Gill Swanton (Chair); Amanda Chadburn; Peter Fowler; Melanie Pomeroy-Kellinger; Ros Cleal; Sian Williams; Brian Edwards; Sue Farr; Dave Field; Andrew David; Jonathan Last; Paul Cripps; Kate Fielden; Mike Pitts; Mick Rawlings (Wessex Archaeology); Martin Papworth.

2. Apologies

Fatchna McAvoy; Sue Davies; Simon Crutchley; Mark Bowden; Sarah Cross; Colin Shell; Julie Scott-Jackson; Damien Grady; Paul Robinson; Mark Corney.

3. Notes of Last Meeting (12th September) & Matters Arising

GS pointed out a typo in Section 5, second paragraph. Should read. Analysis has **not** been done.

In relation to the last paragraph in the AOB section, AC reported that both English Heritage and English Nature had agreed that it was appropriate to graze Silbury Hill with goats in the first instance.

4. Fieldwalking Policy Document-Results of Consultation Exercise

MPK circulated copies of the final version of the document, together with a summary of comments and responses from the consultation exercise. She thanked those members of AAHRG who had commented on this and earlier versions. Around a dozen people had sent written comments. It is unfortunate that no one from the National Trust had sent written comments on the draft. Because of the diversity of view expressed on fieldwalking techniques, the policy document contains two difficult issues where a compromise approach has been suggested. These issues are the collection of material from the ploughsoil, and the collection areas (i.e. total collection in squares or sampling by transect). These issues have been difficult to resolve. It is hoped that this policy will be useful in both the Avebury and Stonehenge part of the WHS. It is hoped that its effectiveness can be reviewed in a couple of years, perhaps at the same time as the Research Agenda.

5. Renewed Archaeological Excavations at Avebury: Project Design

GS suggested that individuals with comments on Mike's excavation proposals should write or email them directly to English Heritage or WCC or via MPK in the WHS office. As AAHRG is a non-statutory group and several members are not present at the meeting, no corporate view will be sought. The minutes of this part of the meeting will be brief and will not record the details of views expressed.

AC explained the position of English Heritage in regard to the pending SMC application. The final decision will be taken by EHAC at one of its meetings early next year. AC will have to write a report and recommendation for EHAC on the proposals.

KF reported that she felt uncomfortable expressing her views on the proposals with the applicant in attendance.

Copies of the project design were circulated by email prior to the meeting. MP explained that little of the detail had changed since it was discussed at the last meeting, except for the sections on the re-erection of the megalith in relation to the Burrha Charter.

AD commented on the tentative nature of the possible timber circle in the northeast quadrant and circulated a copy of the 1989 geophysical survey. Martin Papworth commented that he has recently re-surveyed part of this area and no new features had shown up. AD also commented that it would be unlikely that dating evidence would be retrieved from the coring programme.

MP explained that the prime purpose of the coring programme is to identify the inner earthwork rather than obtaining dating evidence.

MPK enquired about the lack of detail in the project design relating to the excavation trench around stone 78 and the methodology to be employed in the re-erection of the megalith.

KF outlined a number of concerns relating to the controversial proposals to re-erect stone 78. The planned TV programme could be very interesting even without this element. A stone could be erected elsewhere away from the site itself. There could be some damage to the stone hole which will make it difficult to tell how and where the stone originally stood. The notion of getting the village involved is tricky, as we don't know if monument building was about local community involvement originally. Apart from this, a lot of the project design is good and valuable.

MP explained that the original idea of raising a megalith was his, although the TV company see this as an essential part of the project.

BE reported that he does not oppose the proposals in concept but is concerned that it may cut across the National Trust and English Heritage policy of trying to control visitor numbers. He expressed his concern at the need to be very cautious when dealing with the TV company.

SW and PF expressed concern at the experimental nature of the megalith re-erection within the henge. It would be more appropriate to do this outside of the Scheduled area.

PF commented on the size of the proposed trench around stone 78. Excavating a larger area around the stone may be more useful. DF also suggested that a larger trench would help to target surface features associated with the stone erection.

AC enquired about the sampling strategy in comparison with the work undertaken on the Beckhampton Avenue. MR replied that for the stone 78 pit a 100% sampling policy would be used to maximise artefact retrieval and possible samples for dating. AC suggested that this part of the project design needs to be re-written as this is not the usual sampling approach.

GS commented that the project design does not indicate exactly where the cores will be taken from. Slumping must be taken into account. GS enquired about the planned topographical survey.

MR explained that an EDM based survey will be done but is not sure yet about the resolution. DF commented that there is a good case here for establishing a local benchmark.

DF outlined the importance and likelihood of finding Neolithic animal remains and the need to have an expert on hand.

SF commented that she would like to see more in the project design relating the proposals to the planning policy framework. At the moment it is difficult to reconcile the re-erection of the megalith with the general presumption in favour of preservation in situ.

PF reported that the PD is a marvellous document. However, it does need to say something about the potential change in visitor circulation patterns and the change in environment which may be caused by the re-erection of stone 78.

In reply to a query from MPK, MR confirmed that the project team would find it unacceptable for holes to be dug into the ground to aid the megalith re-erection. Ropes, levers and timbers are likely to be used instead. There is evidence that in the Neolithic they re-enforced the back of the stone pit with timbers.

JL observed the lack of acknowledgement in the project design of the involvement of the TV company. AD agreed that the media are likely to drive the project.

GS summarised the discussion by asking members to write with their individual views on the proposals once the planning application had been submitted.

6. English Heritage Policy on Restoration & Reconstruction of Archaeological Sites

MPK circulated copies of the English Heritage policy as requested at the last meeting. She mentioned that there is an intention to write a specific policy for the Avebury and Stonehenge WHS but it has not yet been drafted. AC commented that there had been a meeting around eighteen months ago to initiate the drafting of such a policy.

BE requested that this issue be on the agenda for the next meeting. GS asked BE to circulate his ideas on this to the group before the next meeting.

7. Other current and forthcoming fieldwork

Headlands Geophysical Survey

AD reported on the recent geophysical survey worked carried out by the CfA on the Headlands Iron Age Enclosure, West Overton. The work involved testing a caesium vapour magnetometer. The results are very good and AD circulated copies of the plots. The results were compared with an earlier survey carried out by Mike Hamilton on the eastern half of the enclosure with a fluxgate machine. The new survey results show more detail. The survey will be written up and published as a CfA report.

Geophysical Survey in the Henge

Martin Papworth reported on the National Trust's recent survey of the 35% of the interior of the Henge which had not previously been comprehensively surveyed. The work started in dry conditions in October but the results were good. The survey picked up all of the buried stones. Most were previously known about (from the work done by AC Smith) but a few new ones have been identified. Some other possible new features can be seen. DF mentioned that Simon Crutchley from the AP section at EH had noticed three new buried stones on the geophysics plots which don't appear to be on the existing APs.

8. Development Control & Utilities

SF reported that a watching brief will be carried out during the ground works to construct a swimming pool at West Kennet Manor. An earlier evaluation had failed to identify features of archaeological importance. A report on the evaluation is still awaited. There were no new applications to report on.

9. Update on Countryside Agency Mapping of Silbury Hill as Downland

BE gave an update on the current position. There has been some success in confirming that Silbury is too small an area of Downland to be included on the public access maps. The appeal is still going ahead and is likely to be in March. It has been downgraded to a hearing in the first instance. BE thanked all who had written letters in support of the appeal.

10. Other Business

MPK mentioned that a meeting was held recently between WCC Highways, English Heritage and the National Trust over measures to be taken to protect West Kennet Avenue from vehicular damage.

MPK reported that the WHS Management Plan for Avebury, published by English Heritage in 1998 was being reviewed and re-published. A draft version will be available for consultation in the spring of 2004.

BE urged members to buy a copy of the recent publication on the first 150 years of WANHS edited by James H. Thomas.

11. Next Meeting

Friday 5th March 10.30 in the Study Centre.