

CELTS

ENGLAND



Stonehenge

They say that the events that happen in your childhood between the ages of six and twelve years old have a lasting impression on one. During my six years after arriving back in England aged eight, being taken to see Stonehenge on several occasions certainly made the famous stones very familiar to me. The reason for these frequent visits had nothing to do with my present fascination of the Celts, but was because we lived only a few miles away and it was a handy place to take visitors for weekend outings! I knew nothing about the history of the stones, because there wasn't a tourist shop and up until 1970 there wasn't even an entrance fee, as there is now. In those days you parked the car on the side of the road, climbed a stile and walked over to the monument.

However, the stones must have left a permanent image in my mind's eye as a child because one of the first things I did when we arrived back in England was to take Margie and the boys to see them and have a *picnic on the altar stone*.

I remember the visit quite clearly as we stopped, carried our meal over and set up camp in the middle of the circle all by ourselves. We were not disturbed by anyone and when we had finished we disappeared behind various stones to take care of nature so we didn't have to stop again before reaching London! We left having experienced the *spirit of the place*, something that is quite impossible nowadays!

Stonehenge has become the most visited site in Britain. Now you have to pay to enter and are then kept behind a rope fence like a flock of sheep, miles away from the stones! We still have the pleasure of looking at the stones as we drive by, although they threatened to take even this away by building a tunnel for £470 million. Hopefully they will bury the plan instead of the road!

From the air you can get a much better sense of the utter perfection of the greatest Celtic megalithic monument in the world. It is quite amazing and hundreds of books have been written attempting to decipher the meaning of it. To me it is an overpowering *tour de force* of structural beauty, and as great an achievement as any Gothic cathedral, and as important as a *centre of worship*.



The Celts' magnificent circle

Stonehenge is a magnificent feat of engineering and to think that some of the stones used in the construction came all the way from the Preseli Mountains in the south-west corner of Wales is simply staggering. Having sat on the *altar* I decided the boys should see the Preseli Mountains where the stones were quarried, so the following holiday we went camping there. We walked the length of the magnificent outcrop of rock that nature has split into perfect standing stones ready for use. The problem of course was how to transport them 150 miles to Salisbury Plain. For most of the journey the Celts used sledges sliding on wooden rails or over rollers, but they also had to float them on rafts across the River Severn, and up the River Avon which conveniently runs from Bristol to quite close to Stonehenge.



I recently saw on TV a re-enactment of how it is thought the giant sarsens were raised. The average weight of these monoliths is 30 tons and fortunately they didn't have to come all the way from Wales. The sarsens are *erratics* and were left 15 miles away on the Marlborough Downs by the retreating ice at the end of the last Ice Age. On its advance down England the glaciers had collected them and conveniently dumping them ready for use when the ice retreated. It is estimated it took a gang of 800 men to pull one sarsen and that it would have taken up to seven years to complete the job of erecting them all. The amount of rope and organisation required was similar to the problem faced by the Easter Islanders erecting the Moai!

In the TV film they had made concrete replicas of the Trilithon similar to the one marked with an ▼ in the photograph. To reduce the number of men needed to pull the sarsens upright the TV producer used an A-frame hoist and a ramp to get the capping stone on to the top. The whole job required a staggering effort by the 100 volunteers who took part in the experiment. If it were not for the fact that the stones are there, one would have thought the task would be impossible. Standing alone in the middle of a field the giant concrete Trilithon looked magnificent.



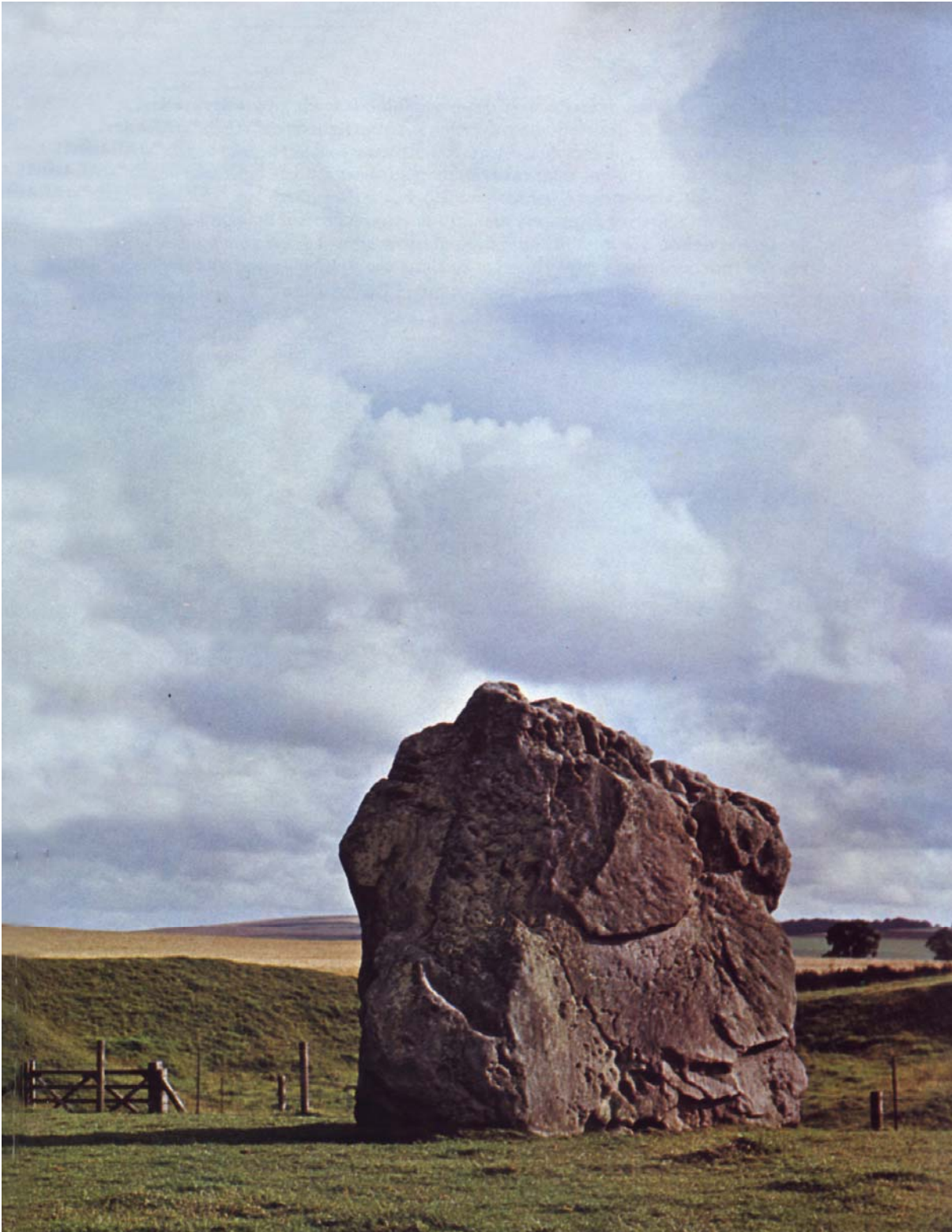
The Stonehenge that we see today was erected around 1,700 BC but the site was probably used for at least 400 years before that date. It is a giant calendar marking the summer and winter solstices, something that was very important to the Celtic farmers, especially the winter solstice.





Avebury

North of Stonehenge is Avebury Circle, also built with *erratics*. It is dated at 2,700 BC, making it 1,000 years older than Stonehenge. It is 450 yards across and the largest stone circle in Europe. Originally there were 100 giant stones, the largest weighing 60 tons, but some of them were broken up in medieval times and used to build the village houses now in the middle of the Circle.



Circle

A mighty 20-foot high ring mound and 10-foot deep ditch surround the stones adding to the splendour of the site. The Marlborough Downs are only a mile away so the job of moving the stones was a bit easier than to Stonehenge, although, because Avebury is nearly 1,000 years older, and the engineering was probably not quite so advanced, it must have been an even bigger task.



Charlotte, William, Lucy and Holly measuring an Avebury megalith

Just south of Avebury is Silbury Hill, the largest man-made earthworks in Europe. It is 130 foot high, 500 foot across and covers an area of five acres. The carbon dating gives it an age of 2,660 BC, making the hill 4,500 years old. It is a quite stupendous sight and equally stunning to think about. The chalk used to build the Hill came from the 20-foot deep excavation that is now full of silt. One has to remember that the Celts were a Stone-Age people, and that the only tools they had for digging through 20 foot of solid chalk were stags antlers for picks and shoulder blades for shovels. It is almost completely surrounded by the quarry that occasionally fills with water in the winter.



Silbury Hill, 130 foot high, from West Kennet Barrow

We took our three boys up the hill in 1970 so they could get the feel of the place and celebrated by eating dried apricots on the top. Tim captured a black beetle, named it 'Frank', and brought it home to release in our garden!

From ancient times the locals have claimed that it was a tumulus and that *King Sil* was buried at its heart on a *golden horse*! In 1663 Charles II was taken to see the Hill and climbed to the top with his brother the Duke of York! In 1776 the Duke of Northumberland ordered a shaft to be sunk from the top to the bottom so the gold treasure could be recovered. The miners didn't find any gold or bones, thus proving Silbury Hill was not a burial tumulus.

In 1849 the Dean of Hereford dug a 264-foot long tunnel in from the side to the centre and also drew a blank. In 1922 Flinders Petrie decided to search for an entrance, but failed to find one. In 1967 the BBC commissioned a TV programme and asked an archaeologist to dig into the middle yet again. After nearly a year of digging they found an iron tube, left there by the Dean, which contained a poster advertising a Bible-Society meeting to be held in Devizes on August 29th 1849.

The 1967 dig was done by scientists and they did record some amazing features at the heart of the monument. In the centre they found a small mound of clay mixed with flints from which several double-stranded grass strings radiated out like the spokes of a wheel. Over the clay was stacked a mound of turf and soil with a diameter of 65 foot, which was ringed with a wattle fence. Four separate layers of chalk and gravel covered the turf mound, each 17 foot high. It was obviously not a fortress or a burial site so must have been a Neolithic religious monument dedicated to the Great Fertility Goddess.

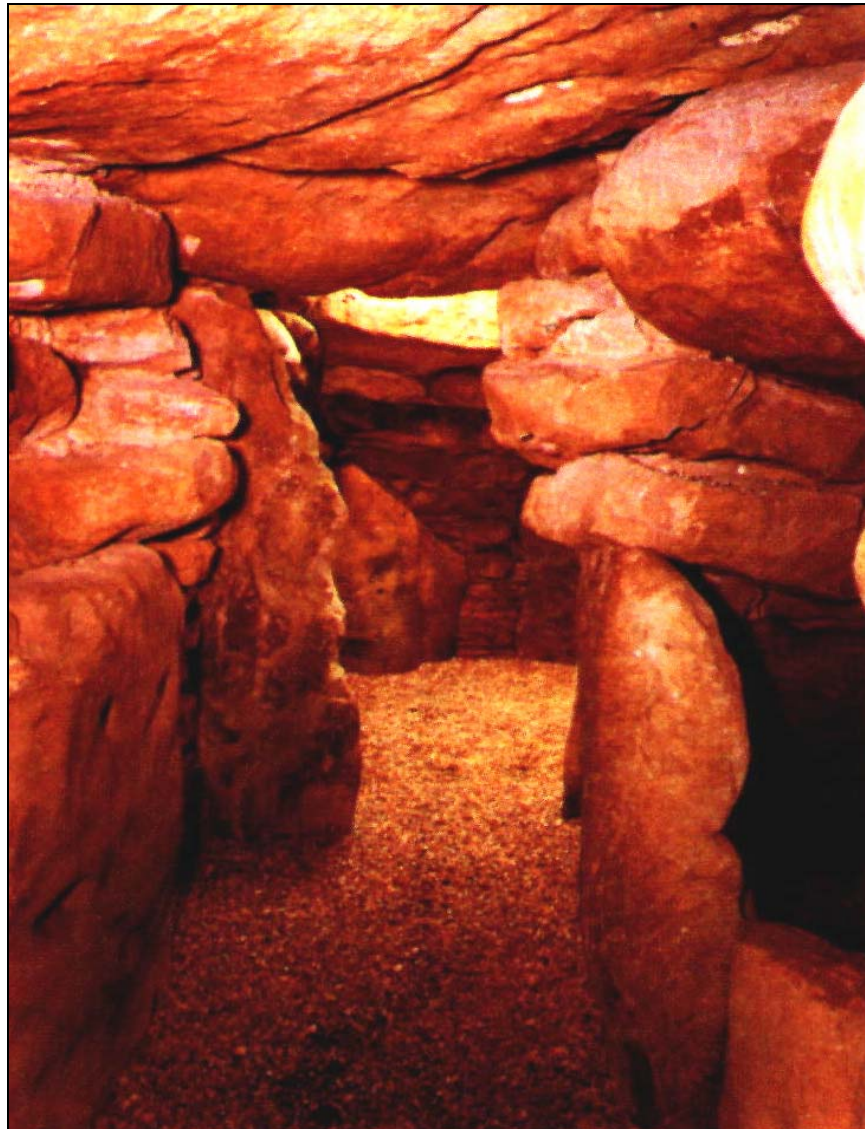


Silbury Hill

In the photograph you can see the road running along the base of the hill and the telegraph poles. Between number two and three poles there is a black car that will give you an idea of the size of this amazing construction. You can also clearly see the quarried lake surrounding the Hill and two causeways that join the hill to the modern road, as well as the path up to the top.

Around 3,000 BC the Celts settled just to the west of Silbury on Windmill Hill and began to farm, growing crops of wheat and barley. They were named the Beaker People after the shape of their pottery and several examples of this earthenware were discovered in 1956 when they excavated the West Kennet Barrow just to the south. The crops ripen for harvesting early August and the first the full moon of that month is called *Lammas*. The word 'Lammas' comes from *Loaf Mass* and marks the harvest festival for Christians, but the same full moon was even more important to the Celtic farmers, as it is exactly halfway between the *summer* and *autumn equinox*.

It is possible that the flat platform of Silbury Hill was planted with a crop and a ceremonial harvest took place in the light of the full moon. From the platform it would have been possible to watch the moon's reflection in the lake as it travelled across the sky. *The full moon is the symbol of fertility. Some writers have suggested that if the Silbury Hill were a sculpture of the pregnant Mother Goddess then the moon, when reflected in the water, could have symbolised the birth of her child.* We descended the Hill, crossed the road and followed the public footpath up to the West Kennet Barrow with the boys.



West Kennet Long Barrow

In Celtic times skulls and long bones were stored in either rectangular or circular barrows. The one at Avebury is a quite remarkable example of the long passage-type barrow, with an entrance flanked by the same massive stones as used in the Avebury Circle. A giant lintel spans the open doorway so you can walk right into the 80-foot long tunnel that runs down the centre of the barrow, with small chambers on either side for storing the bones of the dead.

On my second visit to the barrow I had the most extraordinary experience as when we walked in I found a couple of New-Age hippies wrapped up in blankets asleep in one of the chambers. Candles had been fixed to the stone that supported the roof and although they pretended to be asleep I am sure they weren't, because the candles were burning merrily!

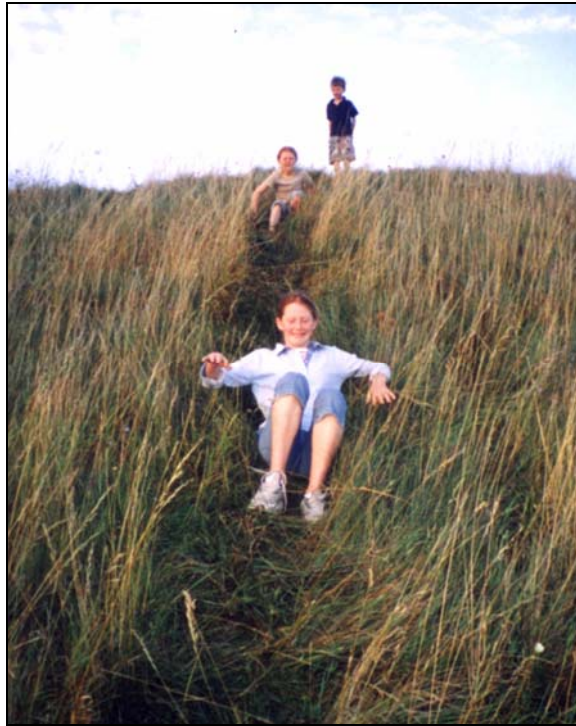
I had always wanted to stand on Silbury Hill and watch the full moon rise on Lammass Eve. In 2004 I was fully determined to do this, but then Tim asked us if we would be able to have Charlotte, Lucy and William to stay that night, making the trip impossible as the moon didn't rise until ten o'clock. Instead Margie suggested taking the grandchildren to the top to see the sunset! We arrived at Avebury Circle on a beautiful afternoon to find that masses of New-Age folk had had the same idea! We showed the children the stones and then walked up to West Kennet Barrow with torches. Inside we found a group New-Age folk humming a Tibetan chant! I don't think we were very popular as we rather disrupted the ceremony with our torches and chatter!

We then climbed up Silbury Hill and sat on the top and ate apricots and drank water as we had done 30 years before with their father Tim and uncles Peter and Mark. William caught a beetle, 'Son of Frank', for his father and then we two boys had a pee over the edge of the hill to honour the setting sun!

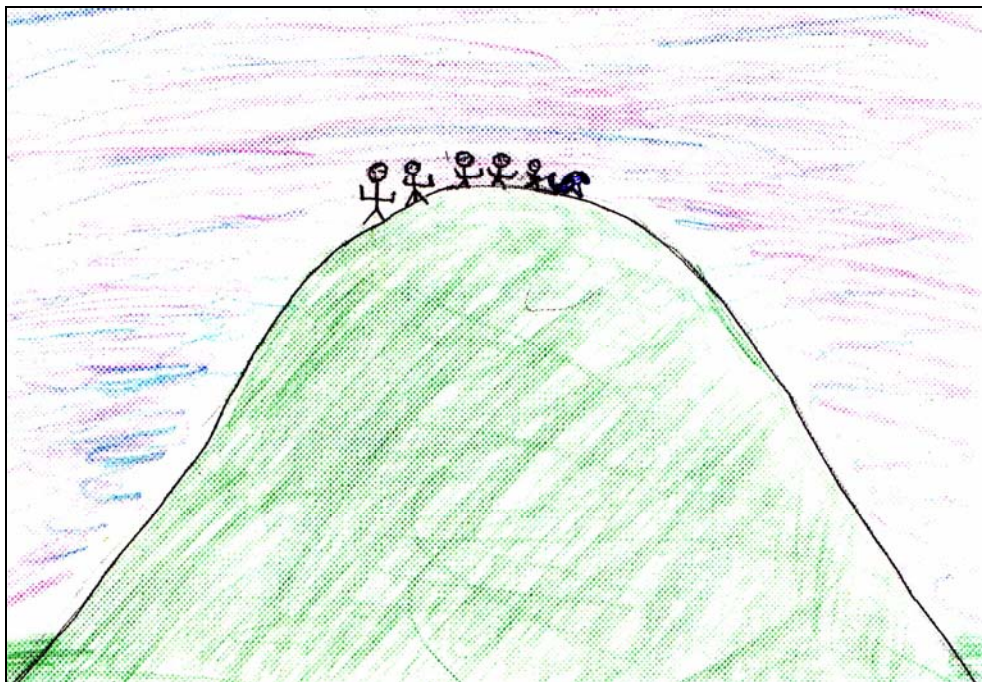


Dried apricots on top of Silbury Hill

Silbury Hill was much harder to climb on our second visit as the owners had locked the gate to the path, presumably to keep the New-Age folk out, so we had to go straight up. However as it is covered with waxy grass that is ideal for sliding down, making the descent very much easier than the ascent!



Silbury Slide



Dear Granny and John,

It was very interesting climbing
up Silbury hill, the tallest hill in Europe! Thank you.

Lots of Love

Lucy

x x x

As we climbed back through the fence we met a young pregnant girl with a toddler daughter struggling up the vertical path so it seems that the Fertility Goddess is still calling her followers to the Holy Place. Margie and I were reminded of the girl suckling her baby in the Sistine Chapel!

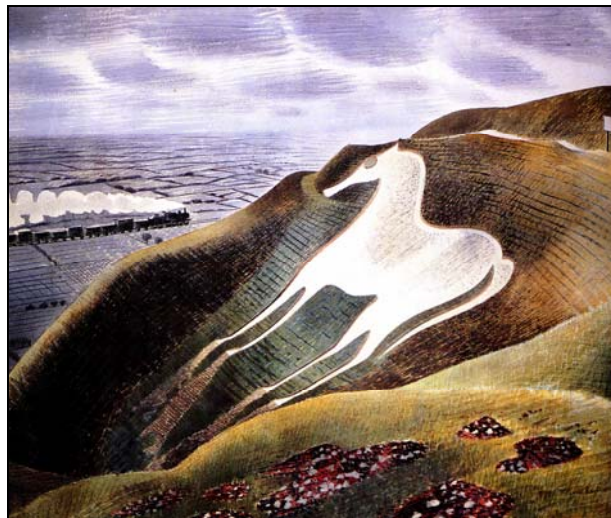
We stopped at a Little Chef on the way home for a well-earned meal and by the time we had finished, the full moon was there to greet us as we stepped back into the night. What a wonderful day to share with grandchildren.

In Britain among my favourite works of Celtic art are the chalk horses. Exactly why the horse was so special is unknown, but whatever the reason, the Celts carved these glorious animals into the Downs by digging away the turf and exposing the chalk, choosing places that could be seen for miles.



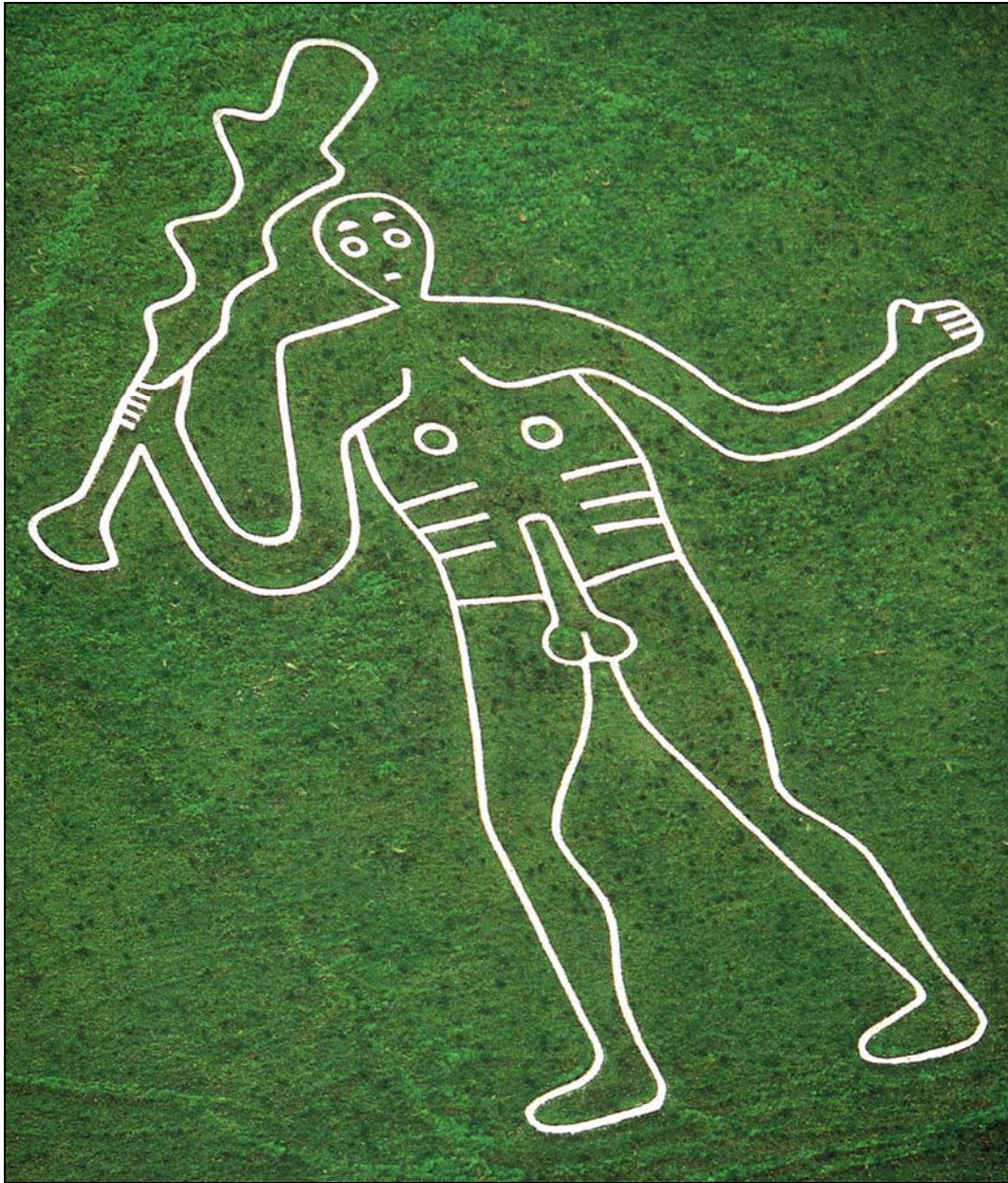
Uffington Horse

The oldest, most famous and beautiful of these is the Uffington Horse as it is quite the grandest artistic image you could imagine. To get the full beauty of this creature you have to see it from the air, but for many centuries only birds had that privilege. It amazes me to think that the artist who designed and cut this breathtaking image created it at ground level. We often pass the younger Westbury Horse on the way to London in the train.



'Westbury White Horse', by Ravilious

We are fortunate to live very close to the 180-foot tall Cerne Abbas Giant. He could be very old, in which case his Celtic name was *Helith* and connected to the springtime fertility rights, or he could be Roman and *Hercules*, which would make him much younger than the Uffington Horse. The locals say that if a maiden was having trouble becoming pregnant she would spend the night sitting on the Giant! I love the look on his face and as with the Horse, I am sure the artist must have shown the local chief a sketch before starting to dig!



Cerne Abbas Giant

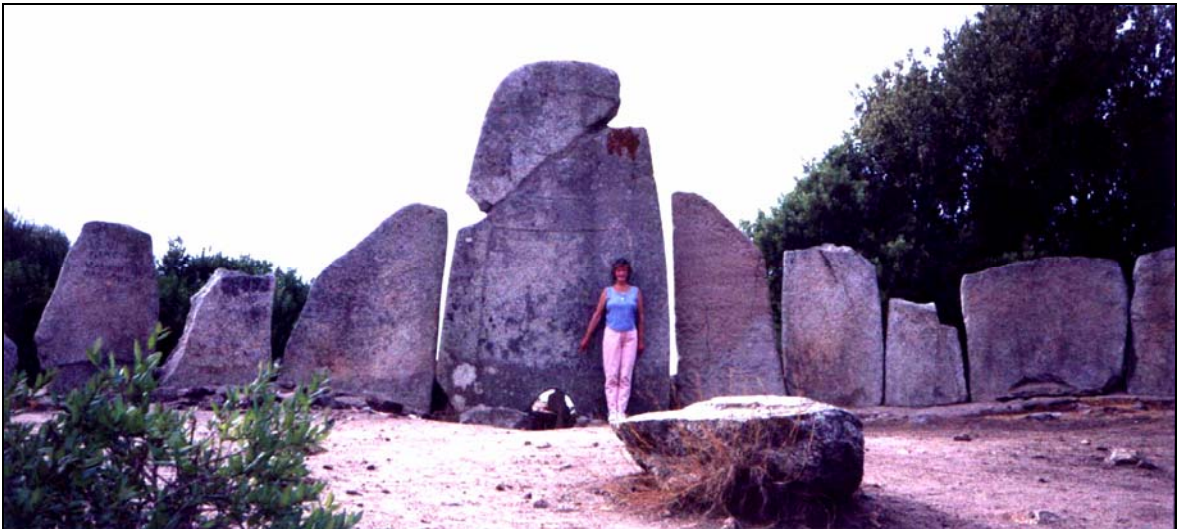
On our car journeys to the foundry in Italy we have been able to visit many Celtic sites and explored the monuments that they left behind. As I find these places absolutely fascinating I thought I would include a few of the most intriguing in this story. The sites often incorporate avenues of standing stones, and mainly seemed to have a connection to death and burial.

SARDINIA and CORSICA



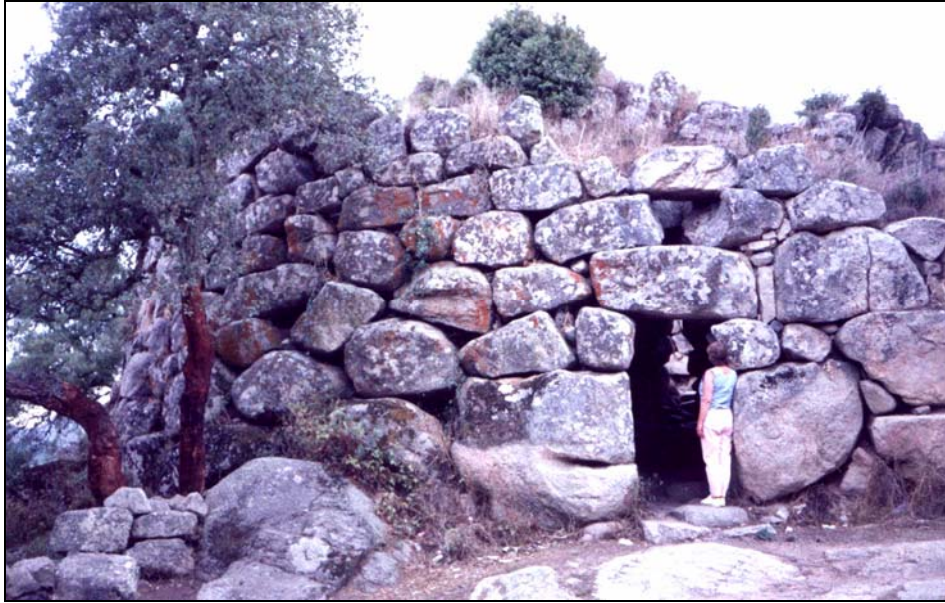
The entrance to a Sardinian barrow

The central stone of this long barrow in Sardinia looks to be barely credible and one really does wonder how the Celts were able to achieve such a feat, that is until you walk up to it and find that the doorway is only two foot high! The second such site was also spectacular, but Margie would have had trouble getting through the doorway unless she had drunk from Alice in Wonderland's bottle of shrinking potion!



A second long-barrow entrance with an even smaller entrance

The Sardinian Celts might have skimmed with the doorways to their long barrows, but they certainly knew how to move heavy stones when it came to building their strongholds. As these forts are always on the tops of very steep hills getting the stones to the building site must have involved many years of strenuous effort.

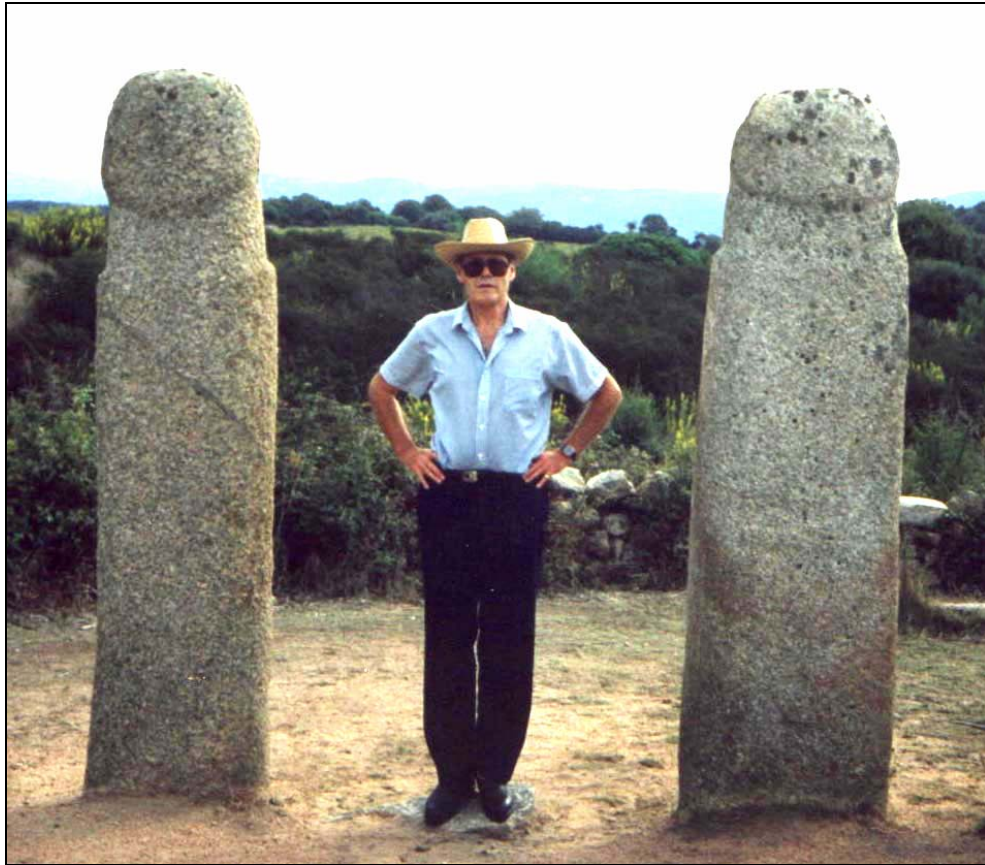


Sardinia stronghold with peep hole...



...unbelievably thick walls

Across the water in Corsica we found some superb standing-stone avenues that really were impressive, but didn't seem to have any purpose. There is a theory that each stone represents a famous chief, as the tops could possibly be faces.



Standing in for the missing chief...

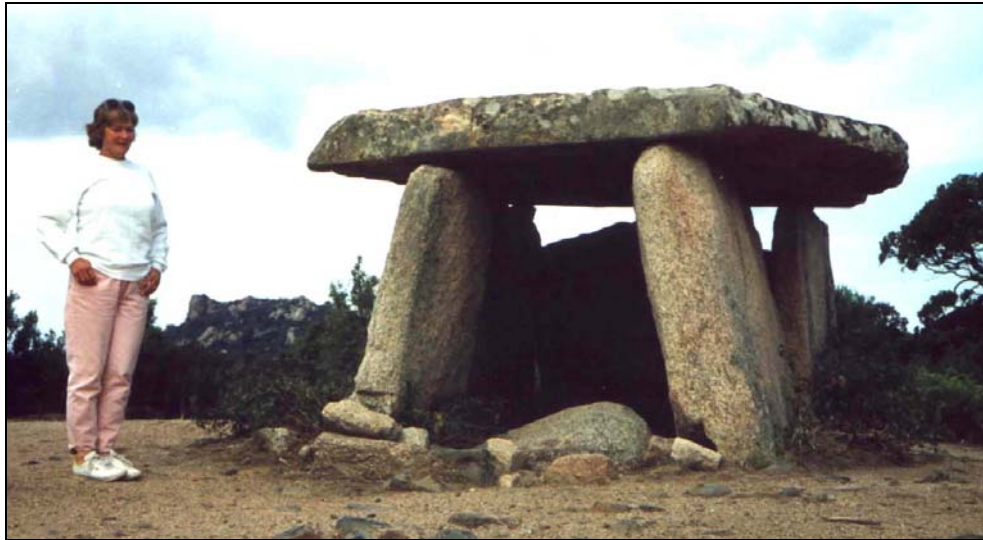


...Margie choosing her favourite!

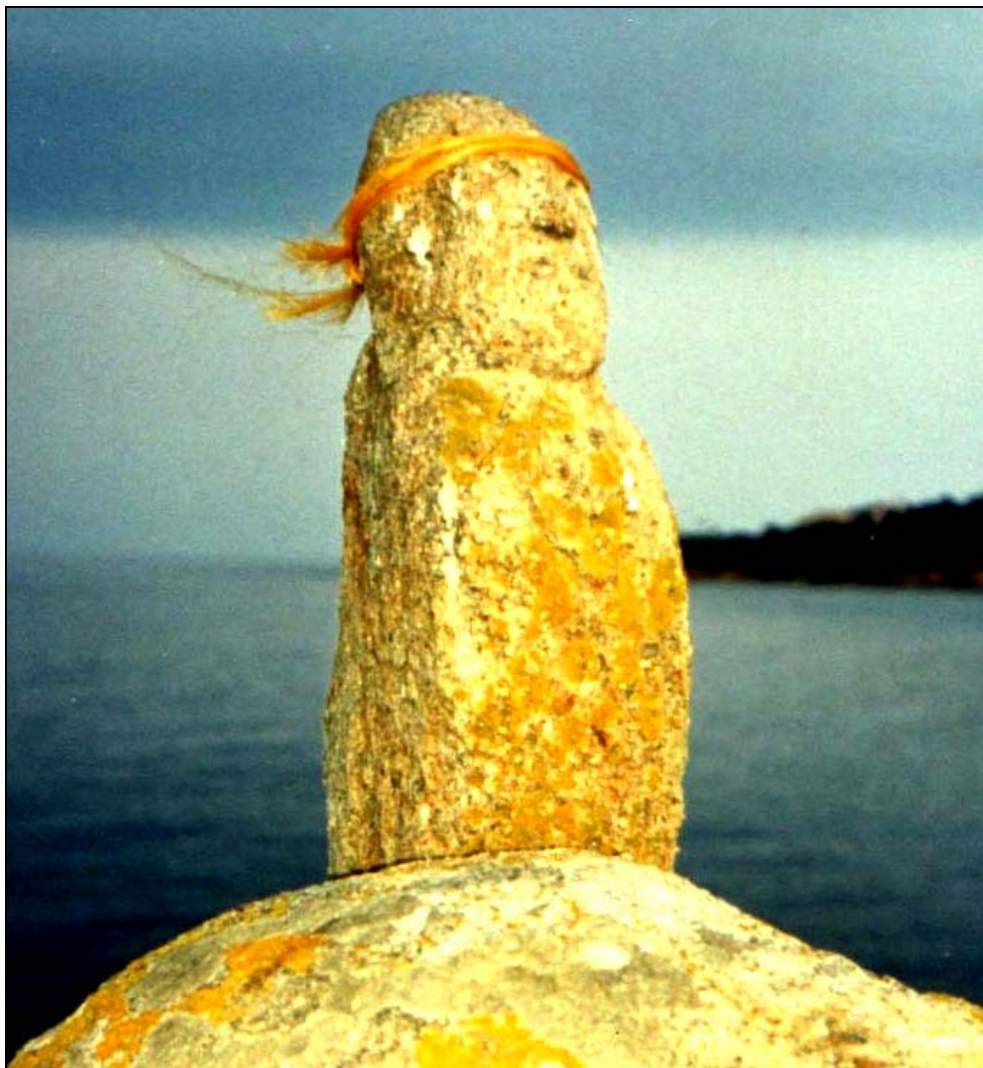


Avenues of chieftains...





The remains of a burial earth-mound tomb on Corsica



Orange bandanas are all the fashion!

FRANCE

The most extensive of all the standing stone monuments erected by the Celts are at Carnac in Brittany and the labour involved was massive, equalling the amount expended on Stonehenge. There are rows and rows of standing stones and at Le Méneac 1,169 of them still exist. They are a staggering sight! The width between the lines varies between 20 to 30 foot and some are 3,500 foot long. In the whole of Brittany there are over 4,000 stones still standing!



▲
Le Méneac's 1,169 standing stones

Note the car and the people

The largest stone still standing at Carnac is over 30 foot high and named *Kerloas*. It weighs an incredible 150 tons, and was moved one and a half miles up a slope some 300 foot high.



'Kerloas' at Plouarzel in Brittany

This was a big job, but imagine what it must have taken to erect the giant standing stone of *Locmariaquer*, which unfortunately has now fallen and lies in four pieces. It was once more than 65 foot high and weighed 350 tons!



'Le Grand Menhir', burial chamber and people ▲

The stones were first raised in Carnac about 6,000 years ago and continued for over a 2,000-year building period, a quite extraordinary length of a people's continual history. We have only clocked up 1,000 years since William the Conqueror and look what has happened over that period of time! The Celts really are an amazing part of our heritage and their monuments are a memorial to a Great People and a Lost Civilisation.

CHANNEL ISLANDS

If you cross to the Channel Islands, in Jersey you will find one of the most remarkable tombs in Europe, *La Hougue Bie*. Today a medieval chapel tops the colossal 60-foot high mound that covers the Celtic long barrow.



La Hougue Bie

In the heart of this colossal mound is an amazing 60-foot passage. The date of construction is placed between 4,000 and 3,250 BC.