

Report on Living with Monuments: new work on the West Kennet Palisade enclosures

Lecture given by Professor Josh Pollard, 12th October 2021.

Josh referred to much earlier fieldwork in Wiltshire around the West Kennet area dating from the mid 17th century, and the most recent investigations by the project Living with Monuments involving the Universities of Southampton, Leicester and other institutions. This is an area of chalk geology and the monuments are mainly from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, between 4000 – 1500 BC. The henge of Avebury is one of the largest stone circles in the world, a ceremonial centre linked to stone and timber alignments nearby and to Silbury Hill, with many long barrows in the same area. Previous fieldwork has found very extensive worked flint scatters and pottery sherds in the plough soil, and analysis of the flint shows that despite this being a flint-rich area, much is non-local, for instance from East Anglia. In the 1970s an oil pipeline was cut through which showed evidence of timber post holes with animal bones from pig and cattle, and antlers. In parts of the living area bones from the left sides of animals were found, with the right sides in a different place, as known from other areas. Fieldwork was looking at the relationships between known monuments, at non-monumental archaeology such as agriculture and at a Neolithic settlement near Avebury: an archaeological landscape about 1km square, revealing radial lines, circles and traces of trenches which would have held timber posts.



*Aerial photograph of the 2021 excavations.
University of Southampton.*

The investigations involved soil sampling with augers, aerial photography, geophysical surveying and fieldwalking, which revealed massive palisaded structures in the shadow of Silbury Hill, dating to the late Neolithic (also visible as crop marks). Palisades are known from areas of lowland such as Dorset and the Welsh Borders, but those at West Kennet may be the most extensive in the UK. The site relates to a series of pools and streams as well as springs: water was known to be venerated, for instance Silbury Hill is situated at the source of the river. Excavations in 2019 and 2021 looked at the structural elements, when a series of targeted trenches were dug to establish the form and extent of the structures. The radial lines were found to be contemporary with the main enclosures, indicating that most of the site was constructed at the same time.

A tank or pit 15m x 8m was found containing animal bones, burnt sarsen stone and charcoal which could indicate heating water, probably for feasting purposes; and a circular structure with a central smaller round feature was cut into by modern barns, but had obviously been used for feasting as it contained a lot of animal bone. The smaller inner ring had posts and a ditch which appeared to be an earlier enclosure that became a palisade. This feature was late Neolithic and within the structure, the postholes were around 3m deep and the timbers 10-15m high, perhaps replacing earlier posts which had rotted away. A posthole adjacent to

this feature had a void which appeared during excavation, measuring 1.4m deep. It had been filled up with soil but the lower level had taken longer to fill and had capped the hole. This void also had a ramp to enable either construction, or dismantling of a rotted post, suggesting the structure must have been very large. Small antler picks were found in the post holes, which had been used and thrown into the packing of the post hole. It is hoped a radiocarbon date can be obtained from these (probably late Neolithic).

The structure could have been similar in style to a 'Woodhenge' monument but the form was rectangular with posts 3m apart, and smaller posts set in between on the diagonal. More investigation is needed, but could these have been free-standing timbers with lintels, or possibly a roofed structure? This type of structure mimics domestic architecture and could have been used as a dwelling, but was then monumentalized, possibly in response to a threat of change. A large number of pits were found, dated later than the postholes, precisely dug with straight sides but containing only antlers. They appear to have been backfilled soon afterwards, and the positions of the palisade posts were marked by ditches. *In situ* sarsen boulders were placed around the inner circuit.

Cut into the former postholes was a grave containing a double burial, a man and adolescent with a tanged arrow head, so it is thought that one of them died from an arrow wound - probably Beaker people. The adolescent was found to have had back problems. After burial a large sarsen boulder was placed on the grave as a marker, but the ground was marshy and the boulder would have collapsed into the ground around the post holes. The timber structures were Neolithic, probably similar in scale to the outer circle at Durrington and to Woodhenge, near Amesbury, but rectangular and contemporary with Silbury Hill. These sites may represent an extensive phase of memorial building, leading from a dry valley to the south, possibly to a natural fording point on the river, and on to other local monuments and further afield.

Animals seem to have been driven here over great distances from Wales, Central and South West England, and the grooved ware pottery found here is different from that found around Stonehenge but similar to that made in Rudston, Yorkshire; while the arrow heads are distinctive and thought to have come from Lincolnshire or Bridlington, Yorkshire. Among the postholes evidence of non-local stone was found, fragments of granodiorite originating from the Cheviots in Northumberland – but were they purposely brought to the area or maybe washed down by glaciers? Possibly human hands after the arrival of the Beaker people, from 4,400 BC. These people came to England from western Europe and initially they could have lived in self-contained groups, but they may have brought disease, as local communities were replaced by people with Beaker genes following their arrival.

There are still many questions to answer, so work on the West Kennet Palisades will be continuing in the coming summer 2022.

From notes taken by Mandy Kesby