

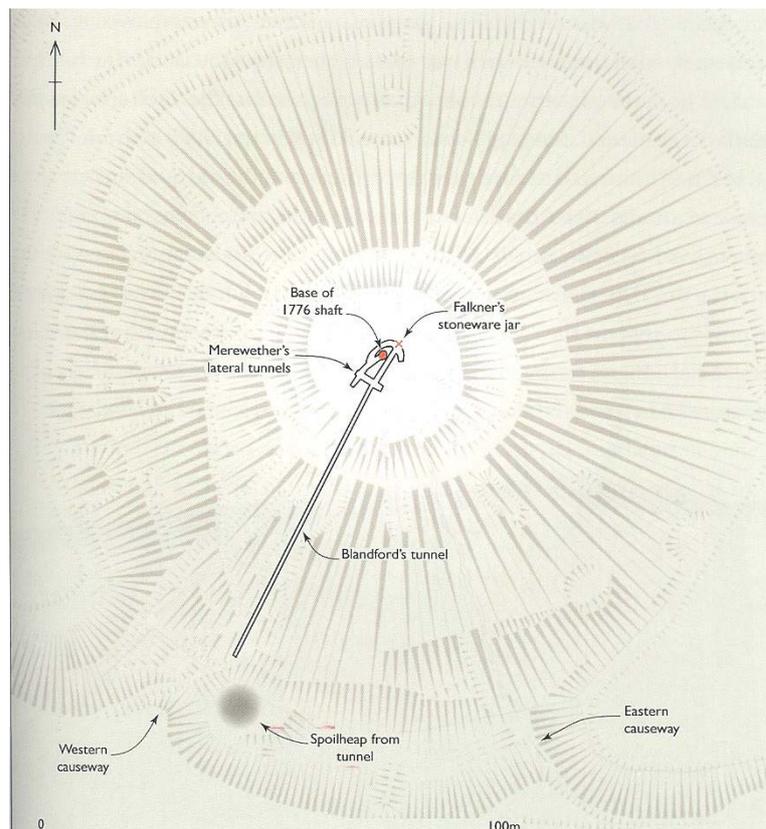
Silbury Hill and West Kennet, Wiltshire (notes for visitors, prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)



Silbury Hill is an artificial earth mound first investigated by paid miners in 1776, who sank a vertical shaft. The next intervention, arranged by the Archaeological Institute in 1849, was

a tunnel driven in horizontally, with side tunnels branching off. The Institute's work began to collapse in 1915 and was eventually sealed off, but not back-filled. It was re-opened in 1967-9 for a television programme, and again not filled in, but it was the 1776 shaft that collapsed in 2000, creating a deep cone and giving the opportunity for modern investigation by English Heritage, directed by Jim Leary (Leary, Field and Campbell (eds) 2013; photograph by Greg O'Beirne, reproduced under Common Licence CC-BY SA3.0, accessed from Wikiemdia).

These different episodes give insights into changing archaeological approaches and beliefs. Even in the seventeenth century speculation had begun and had alerted royal interest, but although the 1776 work reflected aristocratic curiosity its motives seem to have been more scientific than merely to confirm theories about druidical practices. Whether in 1849 the newly-formed Institute was seeking maximum publicity to outdo its rival Association might be examined further, but finding



the burial of a great chieftain, preferably with a great wealth of objects, was probably an unspoken objective, as was that of the television company in the 1960s, which lost interest as its project became more and more expensive and less and less productive of dramatic results. Even English Heritage, although having the restoration work forced upon it rather than pursuing a planned research project, did not fail to gain publicity where it could be had.

These various campaigns proved that the mound is entirely artificial, built up in layers of chalk, clay and large pieces of sarsen stone over setting-out mounds. Whether the mound and its surrounds were begun with an idea of what its ultimate appearance should be, or whether it was added to with no end-product in mind, is debated. Radiocarbon dates suggest that all this work was done in as little as a hundred years or so, around 2400/ 2300 B.C. Each year or each decade a bit more chalk was added, presumably keeping the monument gleaming white, paths were created, chalk lumps were laid against the slope and sarsen stones were carried up to the top – but were they meant to mark completion? Around it there was a



deep ditch, infilled, dug out again, and enlarged. Vestiges of this still provide a watery setting for the monument in times of wet weather (photograph by courtesy of Nicola Turton). The other monuments near-by – to the north, the Avebury complex and beyond that the causewayed enclosure at Windmill Hill, and at least four long barrows - suggest a focus

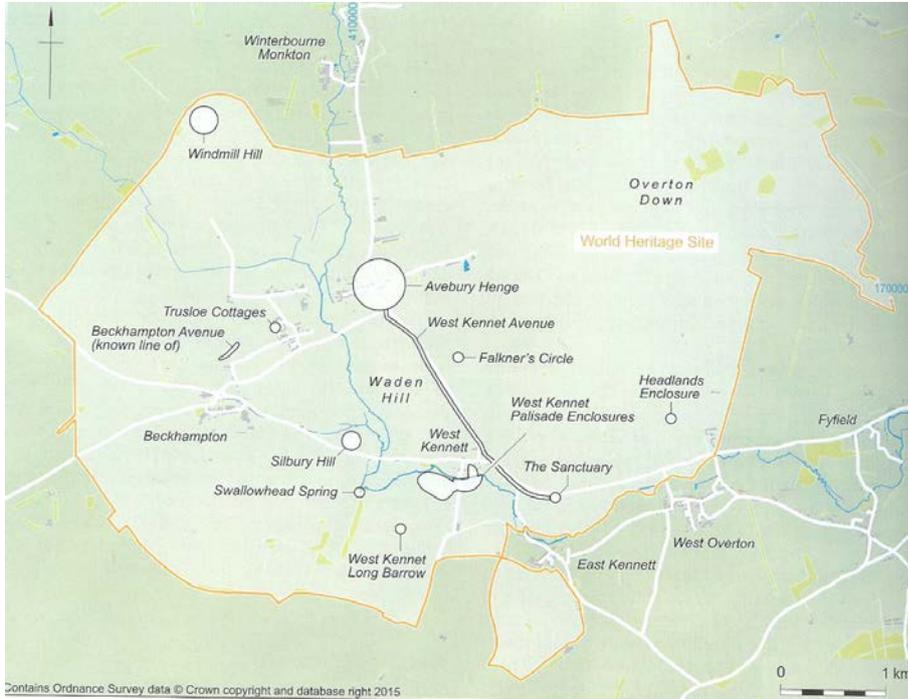
with surely more than local significance, like the Stonehenge monuments that arguably came to gradually supersede the Avebury complex (see Avebury on-line entry).

The top of the mound may have been truncated as recently as a thousand years ago, when it seems to have been used as an undocumented look-out point, or even a fort, against Vikings using the Roman road. A stone lamp, a coin and other finds date to around A.D. 1000.

Before the Anglo-Saxon period, however, there had been a phase of activity around the base of the mound, with a large Romano-British settlement on the south side of the Bath-Silchester Roman road, now overlain by the A4, which deviates away to the north after passing Silbury. The existence of the Roman settlement has been known since



the nineteenth century when a well was excavated, but more recently its extent has been indicated, mainly by geophysics as nothing is visible from the ground. Its dating is uncertain, but seems to have run from the first century A.D. to beyond the end of the fourth. Its status remains debatable (plan from Leary et al. 2013, by courtesy of Historic England).



In addition to the monuments north of the road, including ‘The Sanctuary’ circle (see Avebury on-line entry), there is ‘The Sanctuary’, to the south is the Neolithic chambered West Kennet long barrow, reconstructed, but allowing entry through the great stone portals into the drystone-lined

interior. Radiocarbon dating has produced an unexpectedly early start-date for this monument, around 3655-3635 B.C., quite possibly no more than twenty years after the causewayed camp at Windmill Hill, the first prehistoric site in the area, was begun, and more than a thousand before Silbury Hill. It contained the remains of about 35 men, women and children, spanning a generation or two. Other Wiltshire chamber tombs were of timber, but stone was used to the north and west, in the Cotswold-Severn area, by which West Kennet may have been influenced.

Unfortunately no suitable material for dating is available from some other sites, such as The Sanctuary, but understanding of the prehistoric landscape’s development over two thousand years has been greatly advanced by recent scientific work (Healy 2016; plan from Leivers and Powell 2016, 4, by permission



of Wessex Archaeology; photograph by Chris Talbot, reproduced under common licence CC BY-SA 2.0. accessed from Wikimedia).

References and further reading:

HEALY, F. 2016. Scientific dating, 40-50 in Leivers and Powell

LEARY, J., FIELD, D. AND CAMPBELL, G. (eds) 2013. *Silbury Hill. The Largest Prehistoric Mound in Europe*, Swindon: English Heritage

LEIVERS, M. AND POWELL, A. B. 2016. *A Research Framework for the Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites World Heritage Site*, Salisbury: Wessex Archaeology Monograph 38

These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute held in July 2016; see www.royalarchinst.org for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The notes on Silbury Hill and West Kennet were prepared by David A. Hinton. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.