

TOURS FROM ANTIQUITY

July 31, 2016 Kim Biddulph Bronze Age, Day of Archaeology 2016, Neolithic, Prehistory, Public Archaeology, UK Avebury, Durrington Walls, guided tours, Neolithic, Silbury Hill, Stonehenge, United Kingdom, West Kennet long barrow



Stonehenge from the Heel Stone looking towards the Slaughter Stone (foreground)

I have recently refound my love of giving guided tours through a company that aims to provide archaeologist guides around the most famous Neolithic sites of Wiltshire. Unlike the big tour buses, who herd their charges to the Stonehenge bus armed with an audioguide to explain the construction and purpose of this unique five thousand year old monument, Tours from Antiquity aims to provide a “real-life” archaeologist on small tour groups full of discerning travellers.

The power of TripAdvisor cannot be underestimated. Edward Shepherd, who set up [Tours from Antiquity](#) and has been leading tour groups on his own for the last five years, has needed to take on some help (including me) this year as his business reputation grows on the platform. There is demand from tourists who want in depth, detailed and accurate information about these amazing Stone Age sites. What also helps are the small group sizes (no 60-seater buses where half the group is talking over the tour guide), an early start to avoid the Stonehenge mania and providing more of a context for Stonehenge by taking in more of the World Heritage Site. On my tour on the Day of Archaeology, we got there and got

out well before the queues started to build. It's great that Stonehenge is so popular, but if you don't like crowds, you've got to get there early.

I do love digging and discovery in museum collections, but I adore talking to the wider public about archaeology, when they're interested. My tour group on the Day of Archaeology was made up of people from the US, Canada, Argentina, and India, and I've also had people from Singapore, China, Sweden, Norway, France, Spain, Australia and New Zealand. All this international interest in Stonehenge! I would have liked to have talked to some Brits, but I guess they get to these sites under their own steam for the most part.

The act of talking to people about the archaeology challenges me to find a narrative, a reason for things, that is often missing from the standard literature (with its talk of ritual curation of the landscape into blah, blah, blah). It makes more sense when talking to actual people to have a story, a thread to hold on to in the flood of information. It's no good telling people a load of disconnected facts. It's easy to connect Durrington Walls and Stonehenge by their respective avenues and alignments on the solstices, for instance. Another strand in my story is the development of archaeology from William Cunnington and Richard Colt-Hoare to Maud Cunnington to Mike Parker-Pearson and Nick Snashall. The group loved to hear about the recent ground penetrating radar work by the University of Birmingham that might have located buried stones under the Durrington Walls bank.

It can be dangerous, though, to tell too neat a story as if it's the truth. So I'm careful to point out the various interpretations, and the limitations of what we can do with the evidence, too. I think there was an expectation from most of the members of the tour group that, as an archaeologist, I would also throw out certain theories without hesitation. Some of the visitors came pretty well-informed already, and had adopted a little of the old-fashioned scorn of fringe archaeology that characterised some of the previous generations of archaeologists. I know I don't speak for everyone in archaeology when I keep an open mind about the survival of Neolithic practices into historical times, and look outside the strict boundaries of archaeological literature for ideas (anyone who has listened to my podcast knows I love [Bernard Cornwell's theory of Silbury Hill](#)). Ley-lines and aliens can take a running jump, though. There is a limit. We saw another tour group making a crop circle in a field just north of West Kennet long barrow, and I'm afraid I couldn't control my dismay.



Silbury Hill from West Kennet long barrow

The other thing I felt I needed to be careful about was the chronology. While many of these monuments were being constructed/used at vaguely the same time, there is the danger of presenting the 'story' as if there were two competing tribes trying to outdo each other on a day for day timetable. A lintel goes up at Stonehenge one day, the next day the people up at Avebury raise Silbury Hill by another ten metres. Maybe not.

I have always found that talking out loud about the archaeology helps my brain work. I've had a few ideas for research projects. One guy on my tour on the Day of Archaeology asked me whether there was a time of year for burying the dead under round barrows and whether the body would be buried then and then the mound built later when people had time in the agricultural year. While radiocarbon dating couldn't detect this kind of short time scale, I need to look in the literature for pollen date of the primary burial and the encircling ditch to see if this indicates quick burial and barrow-digging at leisure.

I was able to direct my tour towards [Salisbury Museum](#) to see the Stonehenge and Amesbury Archers having mentioned them earlier in the day, a bit of bluestone potentially from Stonehenge, finds from Durrington Walls. Only one guy took me up on that suggestion, though, most people preferring to see the cathedral and have a rest from the Neolithic in the middle of the day.



The Amesbury Archer in Salisbury Museum, buried with wrist bracers, arrows, early copper and bronze implements, beakers, shale belt ring, boar tusks and more.

Over the course of the day (which starts at 7.30am) I got to bond with my tour group over a mutual interest in prehistory, and the beauty of this tour is ending in the Red Lion pub inside Avebury stone circle and henge, with a pint of Avebury Well Water, the local brew, still chatting about the nature of the past, conservation, oral history and so much more. By the end of the day I'm always sad to see them leave, knowing we won't bump into each other again, apart from perhaps a nice review on TripAdvisor. I just hope I've been a good enough ambassador for these World Heritage Sites.



The Red Lion pub inside Avebury henge and stone circle, one of a kind

