Stonehenge

Over five thousand years ago the Neolithic people of Britain began to erect a monumental stone structure known as “Stonehenge” on the Salisbury Plain. The name likely means “hanging” or “suspended” stones. The structure underwent several changes over the years of its construction, reaching its final form around 2000 BCE.

The stones are of two kinds. The largest are the sarsens, which have their origin in the hills about 40 km north of Stonehenge. The word “sarsen,” first used at the time of the Crusades, comes from “Saracen” and essentially means “pagan.”

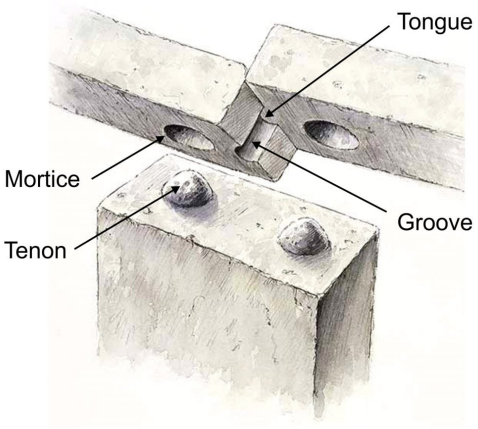
The smaller bluestones come from the Preseli Mountains in Southwest Wales 240 km away. Most archaeologists currently believe that these were transported across the Bristol Channel and then overland to Stonehenge. The bluestones may have been used in several ways during the different periods of construction. In the final form of the monument they are arranged within the outer circle of sarsens and within the inner horseshoe of larger sarsens.

The monument has long been a symbol of ancient Britain. Over the years, however, our understanding of it has changed radically. This posting considers how Stonehenge has interacted with the British imagination. Because of its striking appearance, images are given as much space as words.

Past and Present Structure

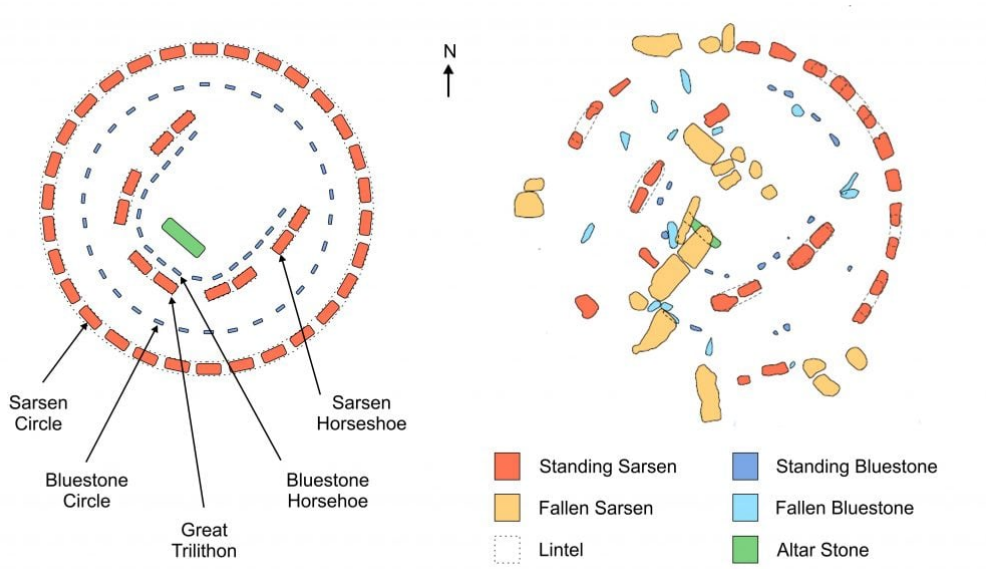
The following figure shows a photograph of the monument taken from the Southwest by Diego Delso in 2014. A larger version of the photograph is available from Wikipedia.

In the center of the figure is a large standing stone – the only stone still upright from the great trilithon (“three stones” – two erect stones with a superimposed lintel). At its top is a small peak representing the tenon of a mortice-and-tenon joint that served to maintain the lintel on top of the two uprights.



Behind and to the right of this central stone can be seen the surviving arches of the outer sarsen circle. The lintels on this circle are held in position using tongue-in-groove as well as mortice-and-tenon joints. These techniques are similar to those used in woodworking (Chippindale, 2012, p 12; Johnson, 2008, pp 142-148). The figure on the right (modified from the English Heritage site) illustrates these procedures.

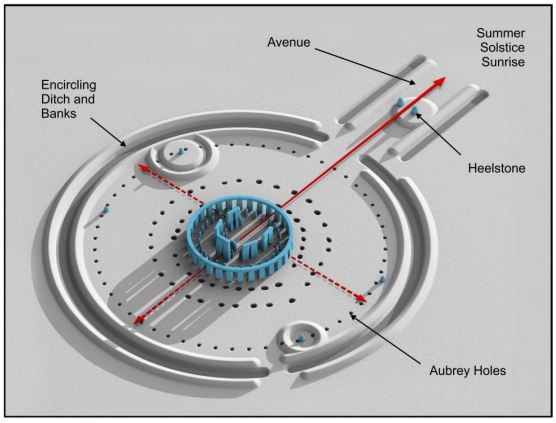
Many of the original stones have collapsed. Some fallen stones were probably long ago broken up and used for other buildings. Others lie on the ground; others are buried. Most of the sarsens on the south and west of the outer circle fell and vanished long ago. The following figure shows on the left a diagram of how the monument might have been in 2000 BCE (based on Johnson, 2008, p. 166). and on the right a plan of the present site (modified from the English Heritage Webpage).



The outer ring of sarsens with the superimposed lintels rose almost 5 m above the ground. The trilithons of the inner sarsen horseshoe varied in height: those at the open end of the horseshoe were about 6 m high, the adjacent trilithons a little higher and the great trilithon at the center of the horseshoe almost 7.5 m. The bluestones are much smaller and quite variable in size and shape. The illustration below shows a digital model by Hypnagogia of how the completed monument might have appeared as viewed from the Northeast at sunrise.

The great

trilithon collapsed long ago. The eastern upright broke in two over the altar stone. The western upright fell only halfway and was for many years held up at an angle by the inner bluestone. It was re-erected and stabilized in 1901. The first set of stones whose fall is historically recorded is the southwestern trilithon which collapsed in 1797. It was re-erected in 1958.

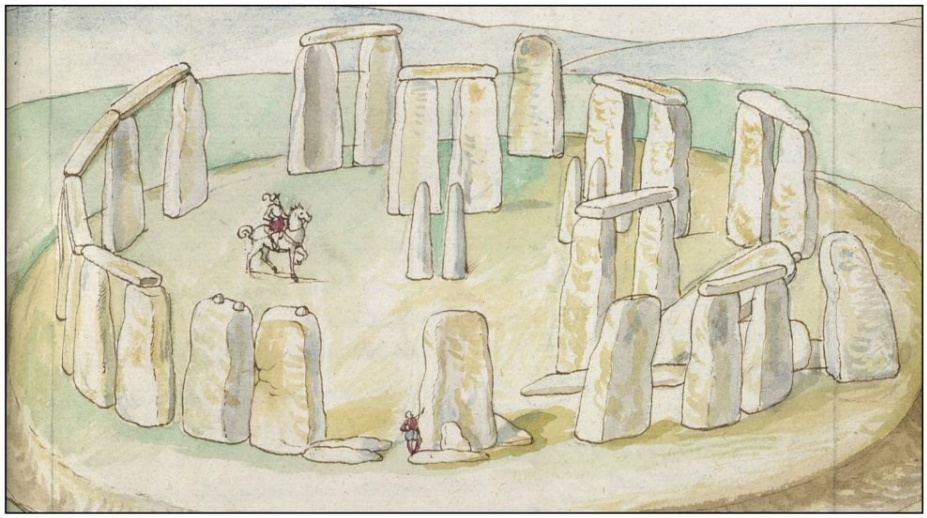


As shown on the right, the standing stones are at the center of a larger circle marked by a ditch and by the Aubrey Holes. These are the oldest part of the monument, predating the sarsens by several hundred years. Parker Pearson (2012, pp 181-186) has suggested that the Aubrey Holes may have been the original location of the bluestones, which were later removed and placed within the sarsen monument.

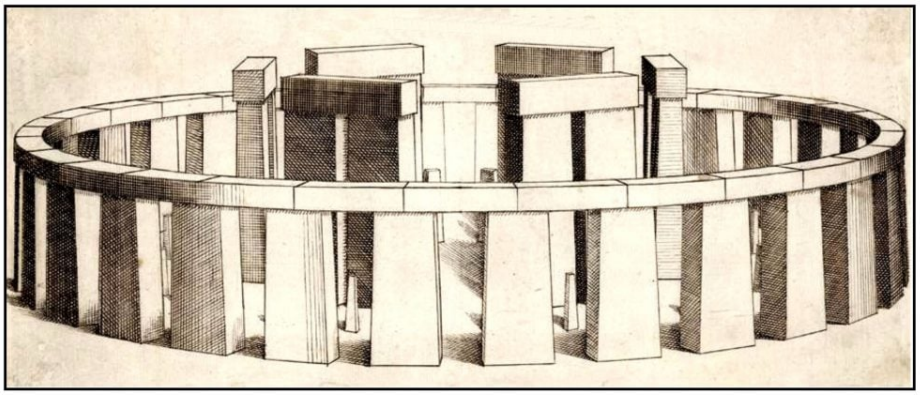
Early Views of Stonehenge

One of the earliest accounts of Stonehenge occurs in Geoffrey of Monmouths's *History of the Kings of Britain* (1136). Chapters 10 to 12 of Book 8 provide a fanciful tale of the stones being erected by giants under the supervision of Merlin, the sage of the Arthurian legends. The Egerton 3028 manuscript in the British Library contains an illustration of this story.

The first "realistic" depiction of Stonehenge was a 1575 watercolour by Lucas De Heere, a Flemish refugee in England. The painting shows the general size and arrangement of the stones as viewed from the Northwest but is woefully incorrect in its detail (Chippindale, 2012, pp 33-35). The most glaring error is that the monolith of the great trilithon is depicted as leaning outwards rather than inwards.



The great English architect Inigo Jones studied the monument in the 17th Century. John Webb collected Jones' notes and published them posthumously in 1655 in a book entitled *The Most Notable Antiquity of Great Britain, Vulgarly called Stone-Heng on Salisbury Plain*. Jones thought that the stones were erected as a temple by the Romans during their occupation of Britain. He considered the ancient Britons too savage to have built a monument of such perfectly classical proportions.



This idea was disputed by John Aubrey, the author of the famous *Brief Lives*, who published his *Monumenta Britannica* in 1665. He made a careful study of the Stonehenge site and noted the circle of chalk pits around the stone monument, which are still called Aubrey Holes (Johnson, 2008, p. 57). He pointed out that the Britain and Ireland contained multiple Neolithic monuments and stone circles, and that many of these were in areas where the Romans had never penetrated. He therefore suggested that they were erected by the Britons as "Temples of the Druids" (Hill,

2008, p 33).

Aubrey's proposal was promoted by William Stukeley, a friend of Isaac Newton. He published *Stonehenge, A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids* in 1740. Initially he had made some accurate observations of Stonehenge: he was the first to notice the "avenue" leading to Stonehenge from the Northeast (Chapter 8), and he noted that the monument and the avenue were oriented along a line pointing to the sunrise at the summer solstice (Chippindale, 2012, p. 75).

Imaginative Interpretations of Stonehenge

However, Stukeley soon let his imagination take over, and he concocted a narrative of how the Jewish patriarchs had visited England in ancient times with the Phoenicians (Chippindale, 2012, Chapter 8; Lewis Williams & Pearce, 2005, pp 169-172; Hill, 2008, pp. 39-49). This was all part of a grand universal history of humanity, with the pure original religion being initially subverted by idolatry and then restored by Jesus. He considered Stonehenge as a temple of this primordial religion, where divine observances were conducted by the Celtic Druids. Stukeley was so enthusiastic about these ideas that he took to calling himself Chyndonax, Prince of the Druids. His work has exerted a tremendous influence on the popular views of Stonehenge. Modern dating methods have shown that Stonehenge was built by Neolithic Britons more than a thousand years before the Iron-Age Celts (who only became evident in Britain by after 1000 BCE). Nevertheless, to this day druids still conduct services at Stonehenge on the days of the summer solstice.

Some of Stukeley's ideas are present in William Blake's poem *Jerusalem*:

> And did those feet in ancient time,
> Walk upon England's mountains green:
> And was the holy Lamb of God,

On England’s pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England’s green & pleasant Land

Hubert Parry’s 1916 musical setting of this poem has become an extremely popular anthem, traditionally sung with great fervor and flag-waving on the last night of the Proms.

Blake’s poem is contained in the preface to his illuminated book *Milton a Poem* (1811). The poem deals with the need for the creative imagination to liberate mankind from slavery to established morality. Some illustrations of megaliths (e. g. part of page 4 shown on the right) are included in this long poem, and at times Blake seems to suggest these as evidence of religion’s Satanic power over the people. Some interpreters have even considered the “Satanic Mills” of the second verse of the prefatory poem mean the established churches rather than the cotton mills of the industrial revolution.

However, Blake’s view of Stonehenge was ambiguous. The last page of a later illuminated book *Jerusalem: The emanation of*

the giant Albion. (1821) contains a striking image:

The central male figure is Los, the personification of imaginative energy, with the hammer and tongs he uses to create. On the left is his spectre carrying the sun. On the right is his emanation, Enitharmon, the female personification of spiritual beauty. She holds what appears to be a spindle, from which descend the threads of life. Below them is a serpentine line of trilithons with a central circle similar to the Stonehenge. The meaning of this final image is not clear. In his notes to the facsimile edition of the book, Paley suggests that these structures may represent the creation of Jerusalem in England. However, the words of a prophet can be difficult to understand.

Romanticism

J. M. W. Turner visited Stonehenge in 1799. He made several drawings of the ruins. The following small sketch represents a view from the West.

In 1827 he created a watercolor based on his earlier sketches. The final painting depicts Stonehenge during a storm. Lightning strikes the ground in the middle of the ruin, killing many sheep and the shepherd who lies in the right foreground. The shepherd’s dog howls disconsolately. An 1829 engraving of this image became very popular, appealing to the public’s new romantic fascination with the unrestrained power of nature:

John Constable’s 1835 watercolor of Stonehenge also sets the monument in a scene of great natural power. The view is from the South. In the North are dark storm clouds, onto which the sun has cast a double rainbow. At the time of this painting, Constable was grieving for his recently deceased wife. The

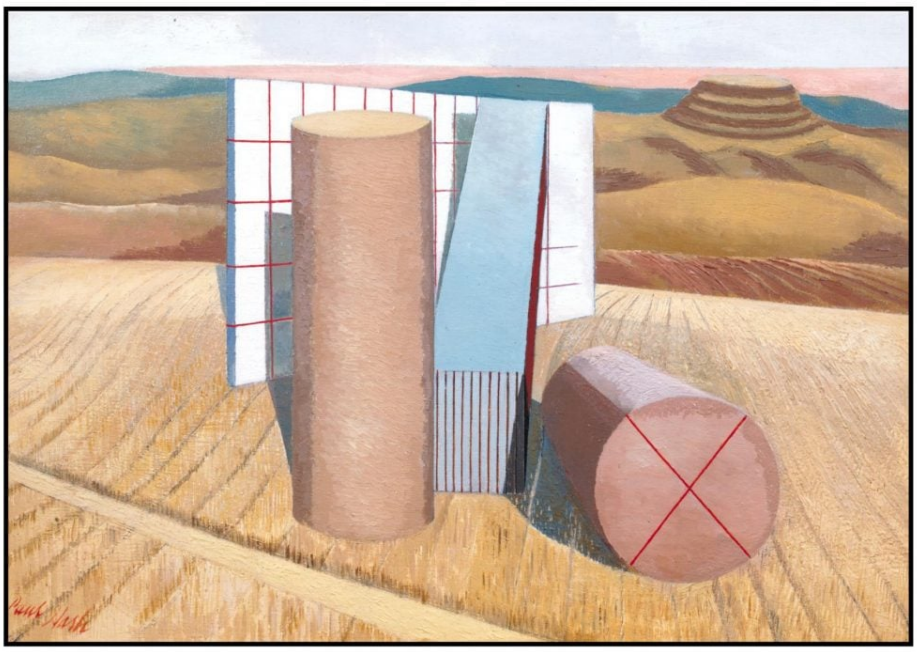
painting is imbued with sadness; the rainbows are drained of color.

Constable (quoted in Chippindale, 2012, p 105) provided a caption when his painting was first exhibited:

> The mysterious monument of Stonehenge, standing remote on a bare and boundless heath, as much unconnected with the events of past ages as it is with the uses of the present, carries you back beyond all historical recall into the obscurity of a totally unknown period.

Modernism and Stonehenge

The Romantic approach to Stonehenge does not do justice to its austere beauty. However, Modernism also fails to capture the essence of the site. The following is a 1935 painting by Paul Nash entitled *Equivalents for the Megaliths*. Large geometric shapes are set down in a stylized English landscape. The painting does not convey the power of Stonehenge or the other megalithic monuments, though it does suggest their incomprehensibility.

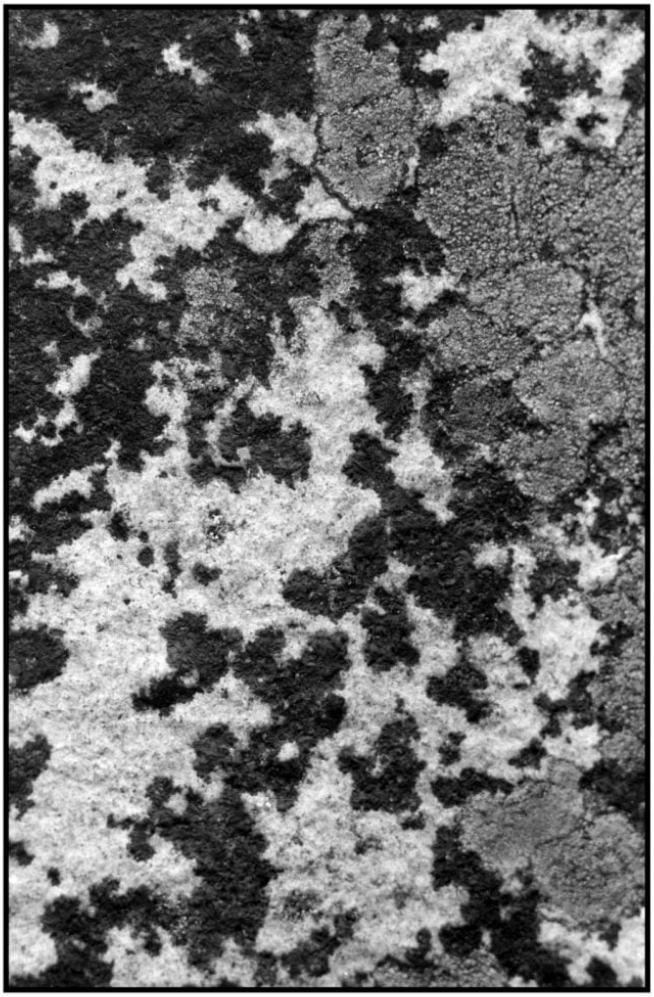


John Piper’s ink-and-wash painting from 1981 is more successful. This considers Stonehenge form the point of view of a Romantic Modernist.

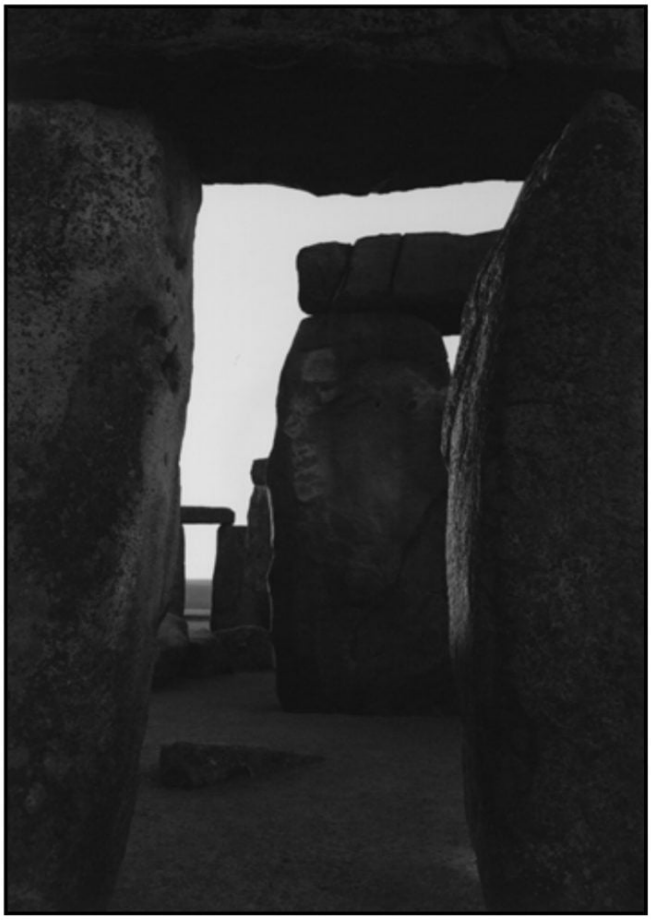
Photographs of Stonehenge

Photographs provide a realistic view of Stonehenge. The following is the first known photograph, a calotype by William Russell Sedgfield in 1853 (copied from Chippindale, p.149). The view is from the west. A carriage stands by the leaning upright of the great trilithon.

Photographs also provide a record of the reconstruction. The following photograph by John Piper shows the upright resurrected. This photograph was taken before the 1958 reconstruction of the southwestern trilithon (which can be seen in the 2014 photograph at the beginning of this posting).



John Piper in another undated photograph in the Tate Britain collection focuses on the surface of one of the stones. In so doing he captures their very tactile impression. Unlike other megaliths, the stones at Stonehenge were dressed using stone axes so that their inner surfaces were smooth. Over the years lichen have painted upon them in an abstract expressionist style.

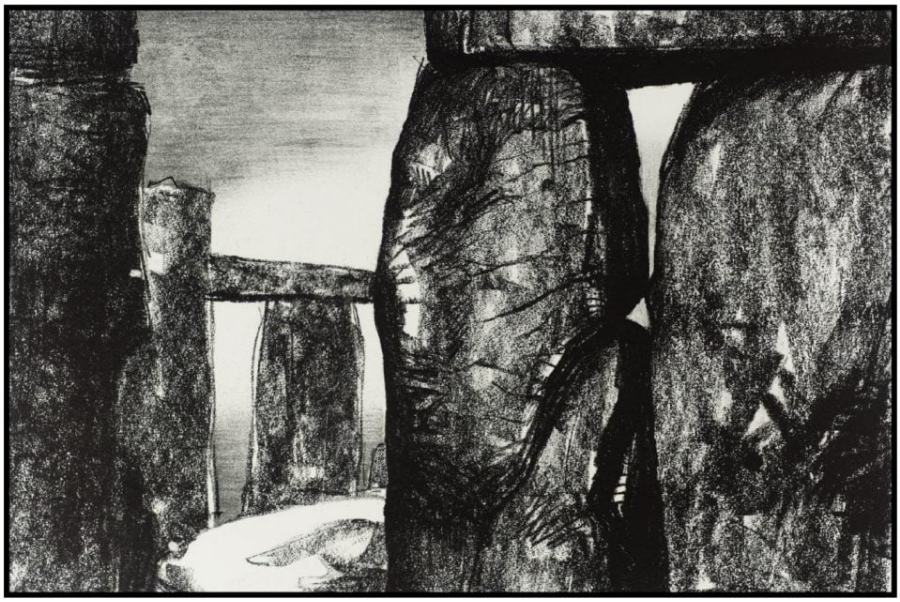


Photographs can give a sense of the place as well as providing a simple record. The photograph to the left by Paul Caponigro is entitled *Inner Trilithon through Circle Stones, Stonehenge* (1970). Caponigro published a large book of photographs of the Neolithic monuments in Britain, Ireland and France in 1986. The outer reaches of Europe contain numerous stone structures dating back to several thousand years BCE (Mohen, 1999)

Prints of the Stones

Print-makers have been very successful in capturing the form and feeling of Stonehenge. Perhaps they are more comfortable with stones, since they work closely with them in lithography. Their prints concentrate on how the light plays on the monument. They tend to consider the monument in part rather than in whole. On the right is a 1961 aquatint print by Julian Trevelyan.

Henry Moore made a series of lithographs of Stonehenge in 1973. All are available at the Tate Britain website. Below is *Stonehenge IV*:



On the right is a 1974 intaglio by Norman Stevens. Stonehenge at night has a brooding majesty.

Nature of Stonehenge

What purpose did Stonehenge serve? Many fanciful explanations have been proposed with little support other than the imagination (Hutton, 2013). Any ideas that the site served as a place for living are completely dispelled by the lack of any archeological evidence for everyday life. The people who built Stonehenge lived nearby but not at the site of the monument. They stayed close to the River Avon in a place called Durrington Walls, where archeologists have found signs of ancient wooden buildings, and the refuse of everyday life (Parker Pearson, 2012). Some of the wooden buildings, such as Woodhenge, were circular. The people then used the techniques of the wooden buildings when constructing Stonehenge.

Why then did they build their great megalithic monument? Was it a place for meetings or a site for religious observances? One would have thought that the objects used in such meetings or rites might have remained, but the site is largely empty of anything unrelated to the stones or to the burials. Was Stonehenge a shrine where the sick went for healing under the benign influence of the stones? The human remains do not show evidence of obvious illness. Was Stonehenge a celestial observatory to help predict the seasons and eclipses (Hawkins & White, 1965)? When one stands at the base of the great trilithon at the summer solstice, one can see the sun rise over the Heel Stone. Although the monument is laid out along the line of the solstices, most archeologists now feel that this was more of gesture to the heavens rather than a way to measure them (Brown, 1976; Ruggles & Hoskin, 1999; Hutton, 2013)

Because of the cremated human remains found in the Aubrey Holes, Parker Pearson (2012) has suggested that the site was built as a monument to the dead, perhaps as a place to honor noble ancestors. He tells an intriguing story of how he was told by Ramilisonina, an archeologist from Madagascar, that people in his country spent their lives in wood structures, but gave their dead stone houses to last them for eternity. Other great stone monuments such as the Egyptian pyramids were certainly built as places for the dead, as were the British barrows and dolmens that predated Stonehenge.

Words

Thomas Hardy set the penultimate scene of his 1891 novel *Tess of the d'Urbevilles* at Stonehenge. Tess has killed Alec, her seducer and tormentor. Tess and Angel Clare are now fleeing at night across the Salisbury Plain. When they reach Stonehenge, Tess is too tired to go on, and she lies down on one of the recumbent stones. She asks Angel if he believes that they might meet again after they are dead.

> Like a greater than himself, to the critical question at the critical time he did not answer; and they were again silent. In a minute or two her breathing became more regular, her clasp of his hand relaxed, and she fell asleep. The band of silver paleness along the east horizon made even the distant parts of the Great Plain appear dark and near; and the whole enormous landscape bore that impress of reserve, taciturnity, and hesitation which is usual just before day. The eastward pillars and their architraves stood up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped Sun-stone beyond them; and the Stone of Sacrifice midway. Presently the night wind died out, and the quivering little pools in the cup-like hollows of the stones lay still.

The great stones are silent about what happens after death. They persist through the centuries. They evoke memories of those who built them so that they might, themselves, remember

and honor their ancestors. Yet the world has moved on and all those ancient people are no more.

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Remembrance

The onset of World War I brought into question the very idea of European civilization. Mankind's ongoing progress to a better world appeared no longer pre-ordained. Promises of future peace and plenty were forever broken. Henry James wrote in a letter to Howard Sturgis on August 5, the day after Britain declared war of Germany.

> The plunge of civilization into the abyss of blood and darkness by the wanton fiat of those two infamous autocrats is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we had supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and *meaning* is too tragic for my words. (James, 1920, p 398)

(The "autocrats" were Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Franz Josef I of Austria.) The complex sentence is typical of James, the master of convoluted qualification. Rudyard Kipling later said the same in fewer words in his *Common Form* for the *Epitaphs of the War*:

> If any question why we died,
> Tell them, because our fathers lied.

However, at the beginning of the war, the general population had no such reservations. People rallied to support their King and Empire. Young men thronged enthusiastically to the

recruiting centres.

On looking at photographs of these happy volunteers, Philip Larkin wrote in 1960 a poem called *MCMXIV*

> Those long uneven lines
> Standing as patiently
> As if they were stretched outside
> The Oval or Villa Park,
> The crowns of hats, the sun
> On moustached archaic faces
> Grinning as if it were all
> An August Bank Holiday lark;
>
> And the shut shops, the bleached
> Established names on the sunblinds,
> The farthings and sovereigns,
> And dark-clothed children at play
> Called after kings and queens,
> The tin advertisements
> For cocoa and twist, and the pubs
> Wide open all day;
>
> And the countryside not caring:
> The place-names all hazed over
> With flowering grasses, and fields

Shadowing Domesday lines
Under wheat’s restless silence;
The differently-dressed servants
With tiny rooms in huge houses,
The dust behind limousines;

Never such innocence,
Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word – the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Larkin-MCMXIV.mp3

The title gives “1914” in Roman numerals, the way dates are written on the war memorials. The crowds lined up as if for a sporting event – cricket at the Oval or soccer at Villa Park. The innocence of England went back to medieval times when the country was surveyed for the Domesday Book of 1086. It was a land of simple pleasures, of hot cocoa steaming in a mug and pipe-tobacco sold in a “twist.” It was a society, where everyone from lord to maid knew their place.

Over the next four years, everything changed. The pubs that had once been open all day became restricted in their hours so that workers did not become too inebriated to produce munitions. Servants fought alongside their betters and began to wonder about why they were different. In the years that followed the war, the British Empire began slowly to unravel. The war etched itself into modern memory through poetry, photographs, painting and music (Silkin, 1972; Fusell, 1975; Malvern, 2004).

The bravado of the war’s first months soon ceded to harsh

reality. Young men in their thousands marched to their deaths; trenches were dug like graves in the once-fertile land; the instruments and engines of war grew more efficient and terrible; form and sound became incomprehensible in the exploding shells; death came even in the air that soldiers breathed.

Siegfried Sassoon described trench warfare in his 1917 poem *Attack:*

> At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
> In the wild purple of the glow’ring sun,
> Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
> The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
> Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
> The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
> With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
> Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
> Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
> They leave their trenches, going over the top,
> While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
> And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
> Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Sassoon-Attack.mp3

Broodseinde, 1917

Sassoon was awarded the Military Cross for his bravery. He often went out on his own to engage the German lines, and was called “Mad Jack” for these near-suicidal exploits. Deeply disillusioned by the conduct of the war and the waste of life, in 1917 he wrote to his commanding officer a letter entitled *Finished with the War: A Soldier’s Declaration*, and forwarded a copy of this to the press. Rather than prosecuting him for treason, the military authorities sent him to Craiglockhart Hospital to be treated for neurasthenia or “shell shock.” At the hospital, Sassoon met and encouraged another soldier-poet, Wilfred Owen.

The Great War altered forever the way that we see the world. More than in any previous war, the public was able to see what actually happened from photographs of soldiers in action. These were strictly censored. Nevertheless, the published photographs showed clearly both the isolation of the soldiers and the desolation of the land.

Ypres, 1917

Paintings no longer portrayed romance and courage but horror and fear. Paul Nash was a war-artist who served with the British Army at Ypres in 1917. He wrote to his wife

> Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man, only the black rain out of the bruised and swollen clouds all though the bitter black night is fit atmosphere in such a land. The rain drives on, the stinking mud becomes more evilly yellow, the shell holes fill up with green-white water, the roads and tracks are covered in inches of slime, the black dying trees ooze and sweat and the shells never cease. They alone plunge overhead, tearing away the rotting tree stumps, breaking the plank roads, striking down horses and mules, annihilating, maiming, maddening, they plunge into the grave which is this land; one huge grave, and cast up on it the poor dead. It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless. I am no longer an artist interested and curious, I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are

> fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate, will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls. (quoted by Haycock, 2009, p. 278)

His impressions formed the basis for his painting *The Menin Road:*

After the Allies broke through their defences in 2018, Germany sued for peace. Negotiations began in October and the war was finally ended by an armistice between the Allies and Germany signed on November 11 at 5 am in a railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne. Hostilities were to cease at 11 am that day “the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.” At that time each year since then, we have paused to remember those who died in battle.

Wilfred Owen was killed in action at the crossing of the Sambre-Oise canal on November 4, a brief week before the war ended. One of his last poems imagined what might happen when he died. The slant rhymes underline the uneasiness of his *Strange Meeting*.

> It seemed that out of battle I escaped
> Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
> Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, —
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.
With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.'
'None,' said that other, 'save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.
'I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

> I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
> Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
> I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
> Let us sleep now . . .’

The dead soldier’s description of the life that might have been, the laughter and the tears cut short, portrays “the pity war distilled.” *Strange Meeting* was one of several poems by Owen that were set to music by Benjamin Britten in the *War Requiem,* composed for the 1962 consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral. The old cathedral had been destroyed by bombing in World War II, which began only twenty-one years after the end of the “war to end all wars.”

Britten used as an epigraph to the score a quotation from the draft preface that Owen had written to a planned book of his poems on the war:

> My subject is War, and the pity of War.
> The Poetry is in the pity …
> All a poet can do today is warn.

Owen’s words and Britten’s music provide context for today’s Remembrance. The following clip provides the ending to the *War Requiem*. The final lines of Owen’s poem, beginning with “I am the enemy you killed,” lead into the final section of the mass, initially sung by the two male soloists and a boys’ choir, before ending with the full chorus.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Britten-War-Requiem-VI-ending.mp3

> *In paradisum deducant te angeli*
> *In tu adventu suscipiant te martyres*
> *et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Jerusalem.*
> *Chorus angelorum te suscipiat et cum Lazaro*
> *quondam pauper aeternam habeas requiem.*
> *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine:*
> *et lux perpetua luceat eis.*

Requiescant in pace.

(May the angels lead you into paradise and at your arrival may the martyrs receive you and bring you into the holy city of Jerusalem. May the choir of angels receive you and may you have eternal rest together with Lazarus who once was poor. Lord, grant them eternal rest and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace.)

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