The image features a misty, atmospheric landscape. In the foreground on the left, a large, dark, textured stone stands prominently. In the background, the silhouettes of Stonehenge and Avebury stone circles are visible through a thick mist or fog. The sky is a pale, hazy yellow, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall mood is mysterious and ancient.

# Avebury & Stonehenge

the greatest **STONE CIRCLES** in the **WORLD**

---





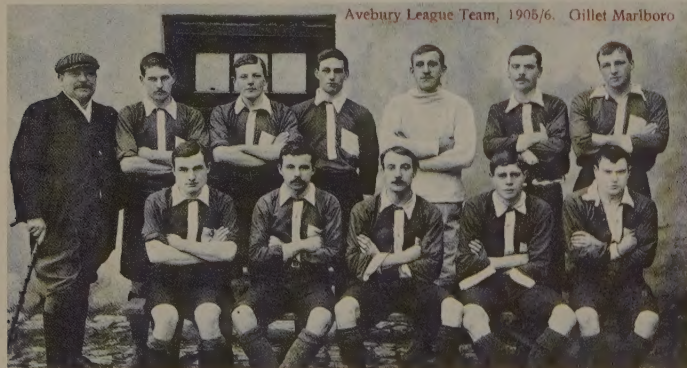
# Stonehenge & Avebury

the greatest STONE CIRCLES in the WORLD

Facts you never knew about Avebury and Stonehenge, with a selection of contemporary poetry and photographs by Michael Pitts

**A**vebury's Great Stone Circle is the best known structure in a landscape of monuments. Their true functions are not known, but are thought to have been religious and political.

The Circle was built 2500 BC, after the surrounding ditch and bank. Perhaps also made at this time were the Cove and Obelisk Circles, inside the Great Circle, and the Beckhampton and West Kennet Avenues, stone rows leading to it. At the end of the Kennet Avenue was the Sanctuary, rings of stone and wood together. Silbury Hill (2400 BC) is a large chalk mound. Two timber enclosures were built nearby at West Kennet (2000 BC).



Ancestors of the megalith builders dug large ditches on Windmill Hill (3500 BC), perhaps to defend a village. They were among the first farmers, rearing pigs, cattle and sheep and growing crops in gardens cleared from the old forest. The West Kennet Long Barrow was their greatest burial place.

The megaliths probably stood until the middle ages, when many were hidden below ground. Under the Barber Stone was found the skeleton of a travelling surgeon, killed when it was pushed over. Other stones were broken up in the eighteenth century with fire and water, and again in the last century with iron wedges. Houses and walls in the village are built from the pieces.





## Stone Circles

**Number** About 700 have been found so far in the United Kingdom.

**Largest diameter** Avebury Great Circle: about 332m.

**Second and third largest** Cove and Obelisk Circles at Avebury: 103.6m.

**Fourth largest** Long Meg, Cumbria: about 101m.

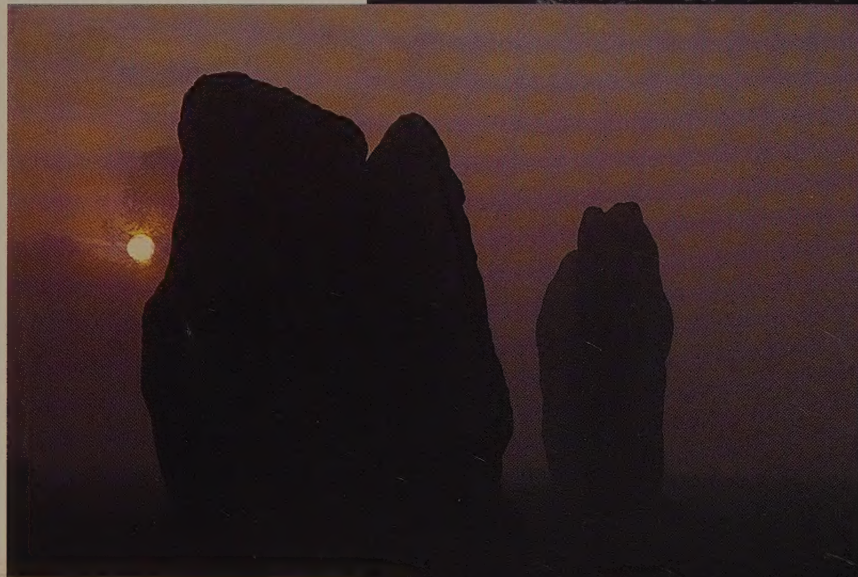
**Smallest** Moor Divock, Cumbria: 2.7m.

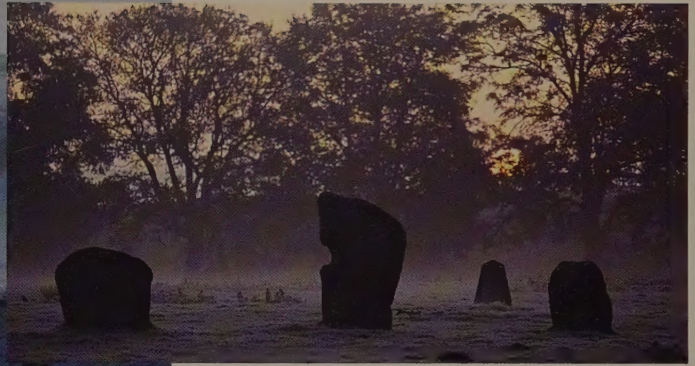
**Commonest number of stones in circle** 12 (over 30 rings).

**Largest number of stones** Avebury Great Circle: estimated 98.

**Tallest megalith** Rudston, Humberside: over 7.9m (it's missing a bit from the top).

**Number of stone circles with carvings** 14.





Ruched in new green a line of hawthorns  
fended the wind from us until, climbing  
the earthwork's slope, we broke  
into bareness, a wide stage, closeturfed,  
spattered with April daisies, no bush or tree  
standing against the wind, no boundary  
but the edge, the drop to encircling farmland –  
variegated, functional, the forest's  
tamed successor. Now this height is the wilder;  
unploughed ages lie deep over the scars  
of hearths where the first ironmasters  
made tools to ease their living and, in fear,  
death's sharp instruments. In the Easter sunshine  
we walked slowly, at ease, as if the Earth were safe.

Pamela Gillilan from

**Iron Age (On Solsbury Hill).**



## Archaeologists at Avebury

Unlike at Stonehenge, where the ground has more holes than a bath sponge, archaeologists have been reluctant to dig up Avebury. Perhaps it's just too big.

**John Aubrey** Writer and antiquarian, discovered Avebury on horseback 1649. Guided Charles II up Silbury Hill.

**William Stukeley** Made detailed drawings and notes when many stones were being broken up, 1719–24. Left only record of Beckhampton Avenue, drawn “from top of an haystack”. Thought Sanctuary (his name) temple to earth goddess and Avebury centre of Druidism and monument to our ancestors' piety. Also did good work at Stonehenge.

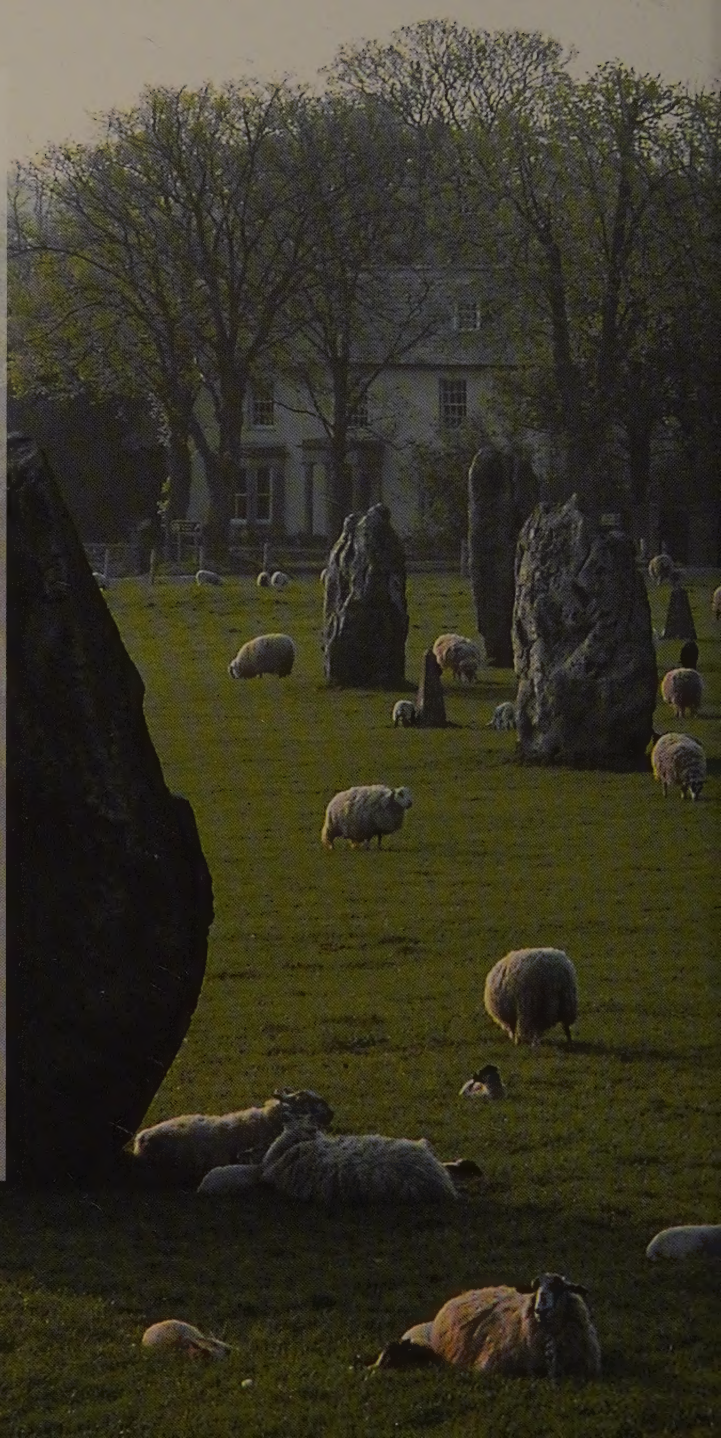
**Harold St George Gray** Directed first large excavations, 1908–22, digging into great ditch silts. Found bottom 9m below ground level, established rough date of site and uncovered only full human skeleton in circles (his “absence at breakfast was unfortunate, for the skull had been trampled upon before any part of it was actually recognised by the workmen”). Excellent survey.

**Alexander Keiller** As in marmalade. Bought Windmill Hill, excavations there 1925–29. Bought stone circles, more farmland and manor house. Restored half of Great Circle, removed trees and buildings and discovered buried megaliths, 1934–39. Locally famous for fast cars, strange happenings at manor and providing work when little was available. And why did he knock down all those houses?

**Maud Cunnington** Local archaeologist who found the Sanctuary with Stukeley's drawings, and dug most of it like potatoes, 1930. Finds records good, but survey hangs on precision of umbrella length.

**Stuart Piggott** Assistant to Keiller, later Professor of Archaeology at Edinburgh. Excavated West Kennet Long Barrow with Richard Atkinson 1955–56. Stukeley's biographer.

**Cardiff University** John Evans and Alasdair Whittle, assisted by colleagues and students, looking at ancient landscape and activities 1967 – present. Recent work includes major discoveries at West Kennet.







[3]

and can the stone know  
me I wonder  
does the stone  
wonder

even here among absences  
and wreckage

if any place

[19]

bloody stone  
blood I am  
grained  
with breath  
death of ancestors  
of my blood  
stone I am

wizened

enduring

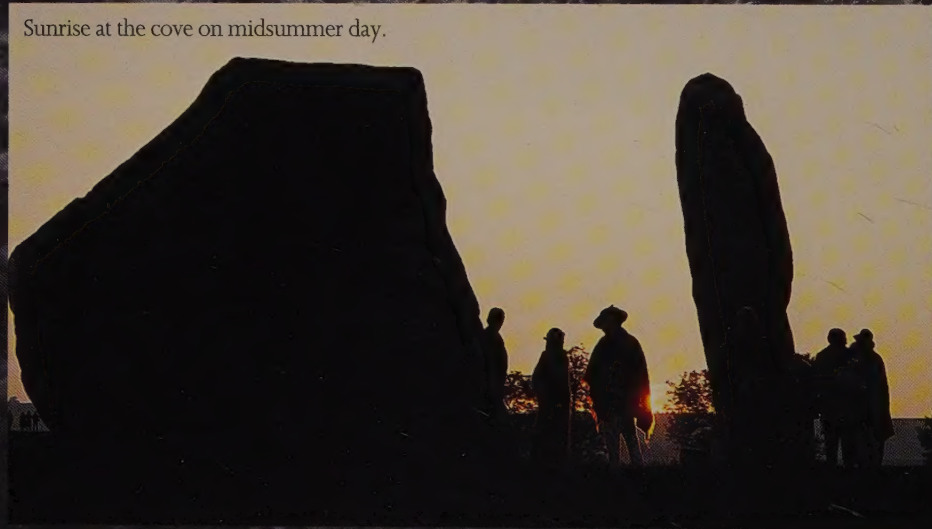
the sun's hammer  
the frost's nails  
the wind's arsenal

Richard Burns from **Avebury.**





Sunrise at the cove on midsummer day.



1. Three sere old 'moor' men – brooding; silent mock:  
they sit wreathed fast in swaythed 'clothed' crop  
of bell 'beauty's, mossing velvet' smock.  
Grown wind' worn, storm' torn, jag' gnawn –  
time's teeth paring stone. (Air' cup hone'  
heath' hollow, rack' rock winter moan).
2. A fragment 'fraught these sarsons': aught  
men's hope of number's scope, be saught  
where sun' fleet feeds earth's wombing' wrought ...  
in pain, she lain ...

Her bain

bore hoar' age granite's heaving rod

(his God)

once raised, not now an even' memory's' sod

3. Though still stern' standing to an ancient grace:  
forever frowning; wisdom's face?  
If thought could only delve that secret: ... find ... the nature  
of their passing mind ...

But men are blind!

Graham Ovenden **The Old Stones.**

## Life inside the rings

(at time of first printing)

Inhabitants 27 people, 9 dogs, 5  
cats and 1 pony (the sheep are  
only visiting).

Tallest person 1.84m (6' 1/2").

Tallest person in 1910 2.54m (8' 4").

Fred Kempster weighed 170kg  
(27 stone or 380 lbs).

Telephones 29. Bibles 38.



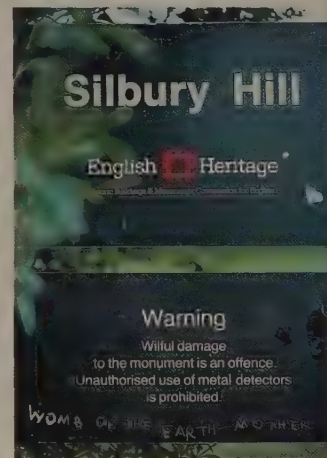
## Stones at Avebury

Tallest Two contenders, both of  
which fell and broke in the 18th  
century. 1. The Obelisk: about  
6.5m long 2. A stone at the north  
entrance to the Great Circle: about  
6.7m long.

Tallest standing At the north and south  
entrances: about 4.25m above the  
ground (one of these is known to  
be 5.6m long).

Smallest Near the Obelisk: 2m above  
ground level (full length 3m).

Carvings There aren't any. One stone  
in the West Kennet Avenue has  
hollows made by grinding stone  
axeheads. Otherwise the stones are  
completely unaltered natural slabs.



## Buried People

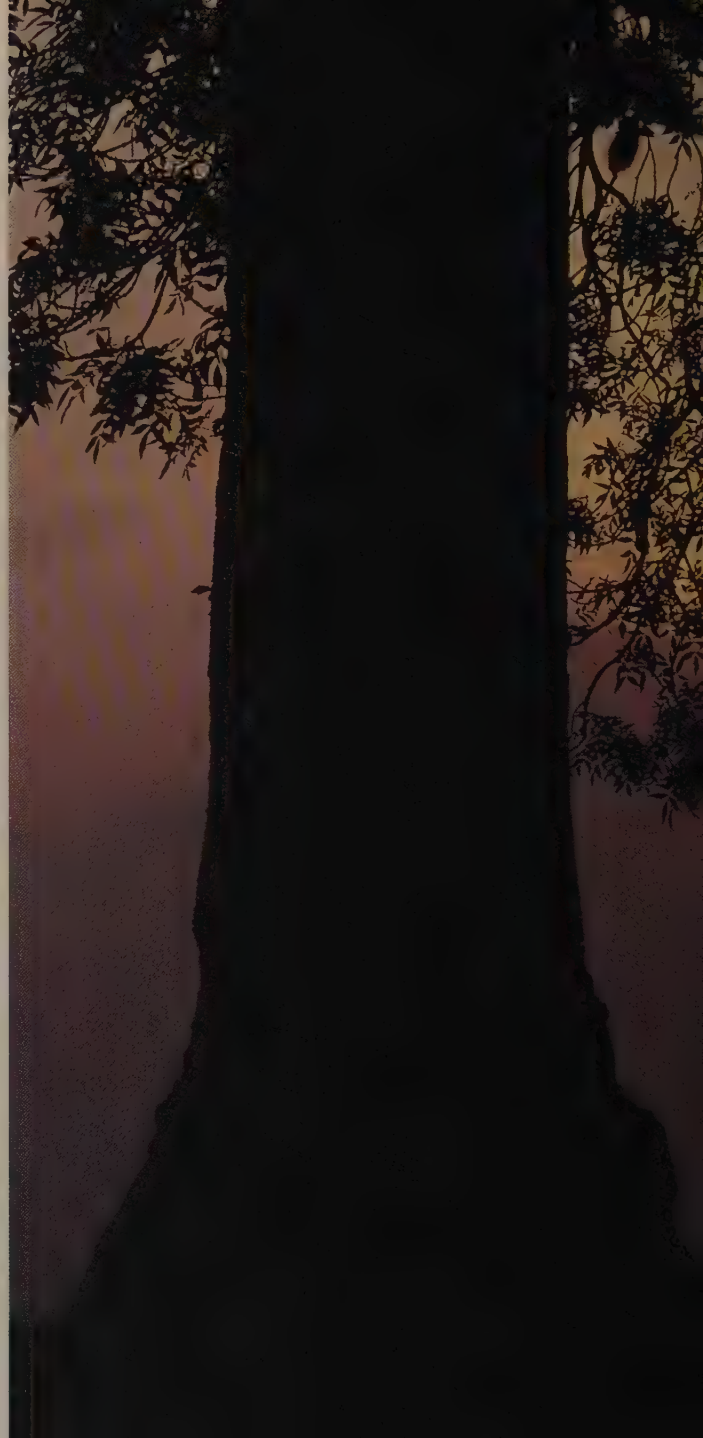
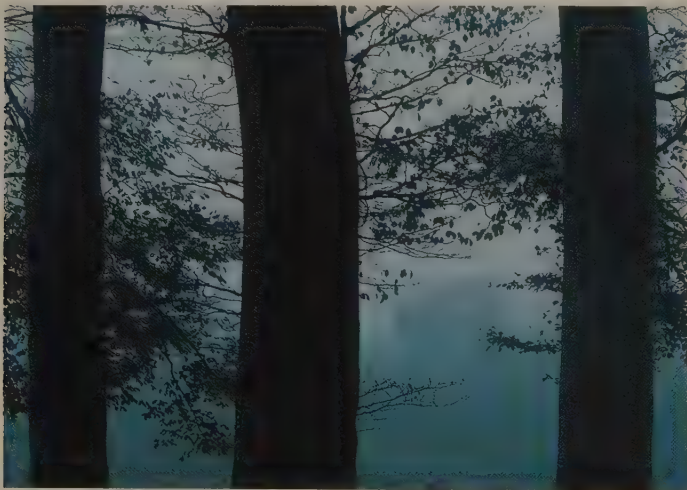
The skeleton of a small adult (thought to be female) was found in the great ditch silts at Avebury in 1914. This burial has recently been dated to around 4100 years ago, some three centuries after the erection of the Great Stone Circle.


At about the same time as the Avebury woman died, the body of a 25–30 year old man was buried in the ditch at Stonehenge. The tips of two flint arrowheads were found in his bones: he had died violently.

These two are the only complete corpses found: but there is evidence for several other burials at both stone circles. At Avebury, where there has been very little excavation, fragments of human bone have been found near the foot of two megaliths, and in fourteen different places in the ditch silts.

At Stonehenge there has been more excavation, but most of it poorly recorded. Two apparent grave pits in the chalk have been found, one near the centre of the circles, the other outside the stones to the south east; the dates of these burials are not known. At least 25 of the Aubrey Holes (*see page 14*) had cremations put in them some time after they were first dug, and a further 30 cremations have been uncovered from the ditch and bank. Human bone fragments have also been found in the ditch.

More recent burials include the barber-surgeon at Avebury (apparently felled by a stone about AD 1320) and a skeleton in the top of the ditch at Stonehenge, thought by his excavator to be the hastily buried leftovers of an executed criminal. No-one seems to know how many modern Druid cremations have been secreted at Stonehenge.





We are the ones who once walked the paths you walked.  
Set this down lest you forget.  
We who once inhabited your planet.

In shoes of roots and leaf of web  
We were one with nature's flow and ebb  
and grass was then a gift of green abundance.

In shoes of twigs and shard of clay  
We made our steps in the caterpillar's tracks  
and followed the hedgehog's footprint of wonder.

See, we have left you  
our shoes in enchanting circles.

John Agard **Earthwalk.**





They lie on short grass,  
in a place where whiteness  
builds hedges to filter the blue,  
nowhere more than a dozen yards away.

Time eludes them.  
Passing clouds have stained their backs  
with unfelt shadow,  
but otherwise nothing has moved.

Their small enclosure is the perfect frame  
for all that a lengthy posture can express  
of love or of strangeness,  
two hands of cards disposed by careful hands  
face down upon the turf,  
as if in the expectation of return.

Peter Didsbury **The Sleepers.**



**S**tonehenge, with its horizontal ring supported by shaped megaliths, is unique. But what you see now is only the last stage in the story.

The first few stones, including the *Heel Stone*, were erected 3100BC. Inside a bank circle were the *Aubrey Holes*, 56 pits now marked by white discs. Then light woodland grew when the site was abandoned for several centuries.

The new Stonehenge (2100BC) was aligned on midsummer sunrise. A chalk *Avenue* ran from the old bank ring, and inside was erected a succession of stone monuments. Near the bank are the *Station Stones*. The massive *Sarsen Circle*, and smaller *Bluestone Circle* surround the *Sarsen Horseshoe* of five *Trilithons* (two



stones standing, one on top), the *Bluestone Horseshoe* and the single *Altar Stone*. Six centuries later, two rings of large pits (the *Y and Z holes*) were dug around the stones, and later still the *Avenue* was extended.

Around Stonehenge are sites with related religious and political meaning. The *Cursus*, a pair of long banks and ditches, was made at the time of the first Stonehenge. During the abandonment, a large “henge” was built at *Durrington Walls*, where a bank and internal ditch surrounded circular wooden constructions. Nearby was *Woodhenge*, six rings of posts with a grave in the middle, and at *Coneybury*, another small “henge”. *Round barrows* surrounded the second Stonehenge, many of them covering graves containing valuable craft objects.







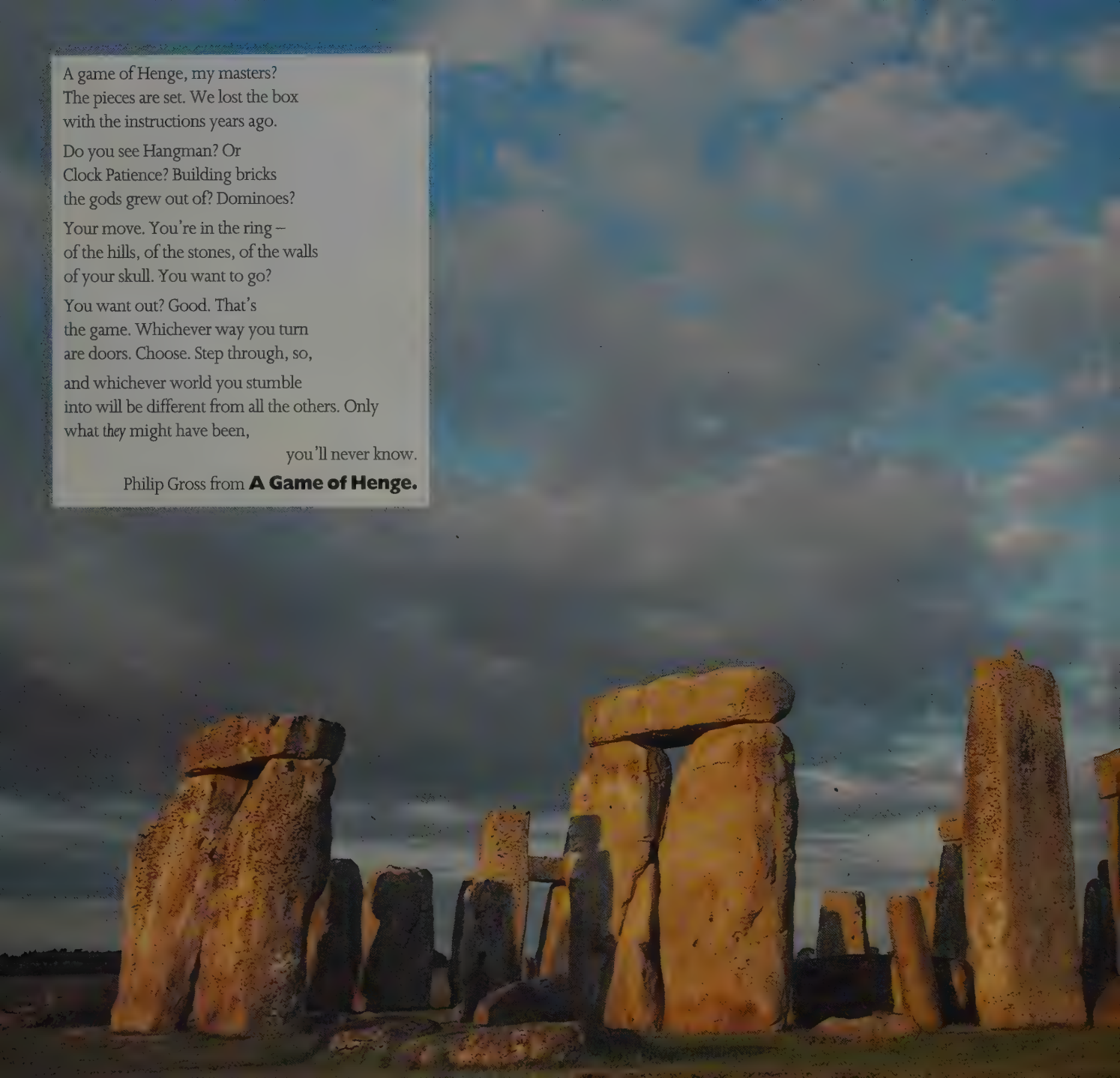
A game of Henge, my masters?  
The pieces are set. We lost the box  
with the instructions years ago.

Do you see Hangman? Or  
Clock Patience? Building bricks  
the gods grew out of? Dominoes?  
Your move. You're in the ring –  
of the hills, of the stones, of the walls  
of your skull. You want to go?

You want out? Good. That's  
the game. Whichever way you turn  
are doors. Choose. Step through, so,  
and whichever world you stumble  
into will be different from all the others. Only  
what they might have been,

you'll never know.

Philip Gross from **A Game of Henge.**





### **Stonehenge Theories**

**Oldest** Geoffrey of Monmouth, 1136: erected by Merlin to celebrate the British king Aurelius Ambrosius' victory over Saxon usurper Hengist. Problem: if Merlin put it up, how come it fell down?

**Most misleading** John Aubrey, 1649: a Druid temple. Problem: ancient Druids did not build stone temples or stone circles, and anyway Stonehenge was already at least 1000 years old before the first Druid could have seen it (no-one realised this in 1649).

**Most successful** Gerald Hawkins, 1965: an astronomical computer. Problem: impossible to prove – you could do the same calculations with dart boards or a map of the M25.

**Most bizarre** Difficult choice. Alexander Weaver Ebin scores high: the setting for a masonic mystery play, not yet finished since it began in 3373BC. Problem: Stonehenge was not there in 3373BC.

**Most popular with modern archaeologists** A unique site in the densest concentration of ancient religious monuments in Britain. Burials around Stonehenge contain craft objects of exceptional value and status, implying that the religious power conferred by the stones gave political power to their guardians. There are several ritual landscapes like this in Britain: perhaps each was the centre of a different group of people.

Bare brown skeleton  
my dear dead girl  
those beads around your neck  
cause me this pain  
for your unspoken name.

I think if I look softly  
I can see  
within its bone-made cage  
your young desire  
a small and furry animal  
stuffed and stiff  
among the scattered soil  
and faint and quivering  
the silver veins of spring's delight  
you forfeited.

Before they laid you in your new  
your glass and steel compartment  
and lit you with a light that mocks the sun  
my dead and nameless daughter,  
may worm and root  
and mould and mouse  
have worked most perfectly  
their secret alchemy  
and freed your spirit for those corridors  
where comets are its timekeepers.

And may the pinions of your soul  
unseared by centuries' inevitable dust  
beat unconfined by the curator's wire.

Eve Machin

**Exhibit - Utrecht Museum.**





### Where do the Stones come from?

All the known megaliths at Avebury are sarsen, a very hard, locally present sandstone: there were around 600 altogether. The nearest source today for large sarsens is Piggledene, a valley 3½ km east of Avebury. However, 4500 years ago there may have been many large sarsens lying right where the stone rings and rows were built.

Most of the stones at Stonehenge are also sarsen (originally about 80 or more). These may have been brought from the Avebury area 27 km to the north. It is also possible that when Stonehenge was built, large sarsens lay on the ground in the vicinity.

More famous are the Stonehenge “bluestones”, megaliths of non-local rock, of which 45 have so far been identified (including buried stumps). Except for the Altar Stone, a fallen sandstone slab nearly 5m long, the bluestones are all much smaller than the sarsens.

Geologist William Judd suggested in 1902 that these alien stones reached Salisbury Plain in glaciers in the long distant past. Twenty years later, Herbert Thomas identified the source as south Wales, especially the Preseli Hills. He thought the stones were dragged and rafted from there to Wiltshire by the architects of Stonehenge, a theory widely accepted.

Now, however, ideas have changed again. The most detailed study ever done has recently been completed by a team at the Open University led by Richard Thorpe. They determined that most of the bluestones do indeed come from South Wales, but were almost certainly transported by glaciers some 400,000 years ago. The only stone at Stonehenge known to have been brought intentionally from Wales, is the one erected by English Heritage at the visitor reception area. This was donated by D G Williams, Lord of the Manor of Mynachlog-ddu, and was brought to the site in a lorry in 1989.



Moving the milestone.



Two partly buried bluestones, one with a mortise hole just visible.

## Uses for Megaliths at Stonehenge

*Water purifier* “It is generally averred hereabouts that pieces (or powder) of these stones putt into their Wells, doe drive away the Toades” (17th century).

*Picnic shelter* “A party of Goths lighted a fire against one of the stones and several fragments were broken off by the heat” (19th century).

*Hoarding* RADIO CAROLINE (painted in 1974) can still be read in lichen growth on the inside of one of the sarsens.

*Vehicular support* “One large stone was taken away to make a Bridge” (17th century).

*Visitor book* Before fenced in, the sarsens were grail to graffiti artists. Strange letters were found under a large fallen stone in 1861, and thought to be ancient: but it was later decided they were carved by a lithe itinerant mechanic.



Once upon a time a small  
stone viaduct got bored  
of going somewhere. It curled  
up snug, forgetting all

about timetables and connections, so  
its train of thought runs round  
and round for ever and  
its little whistle goes

who who

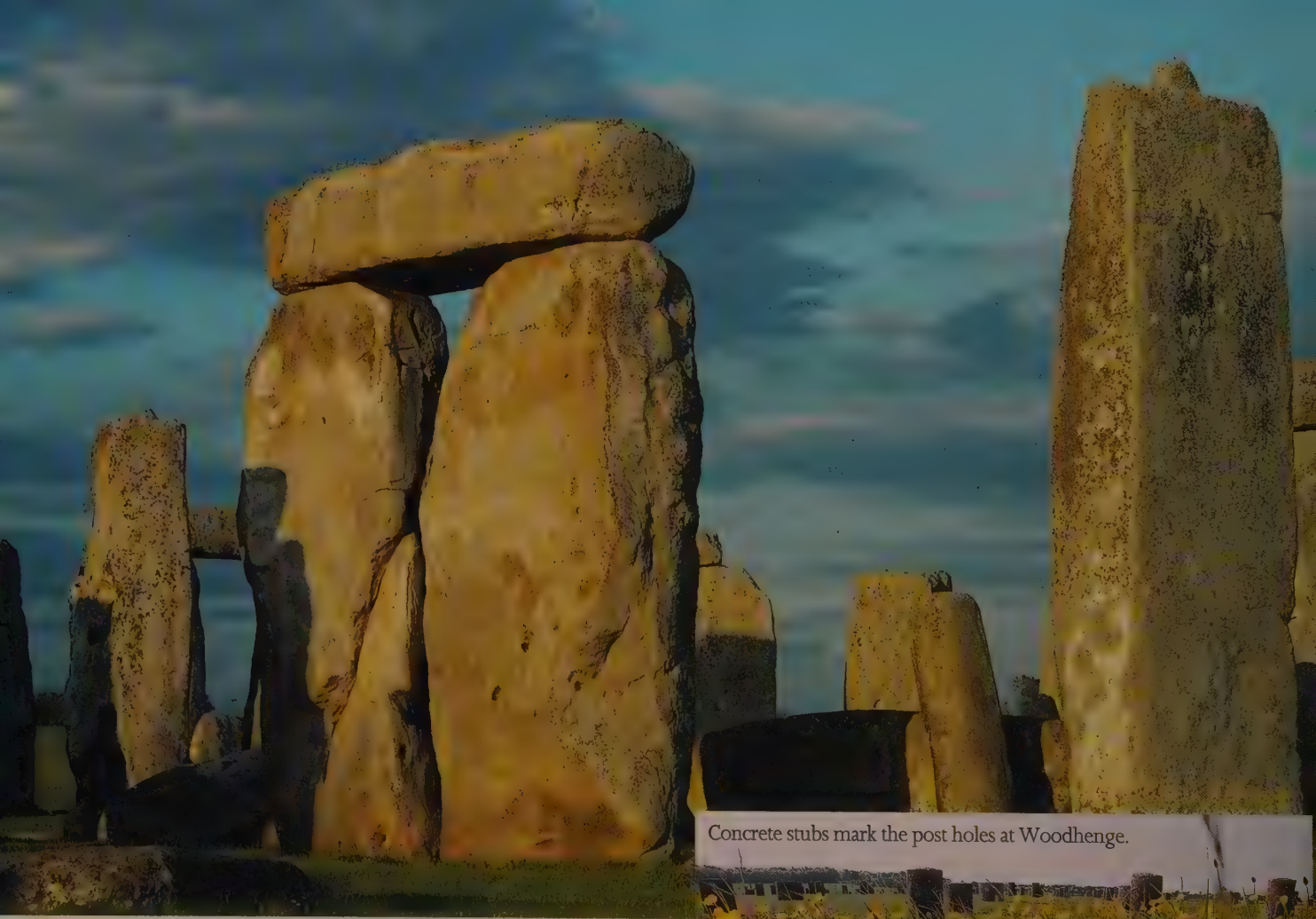
who who

who who

Philip Gross from

**A Game of Henge.**





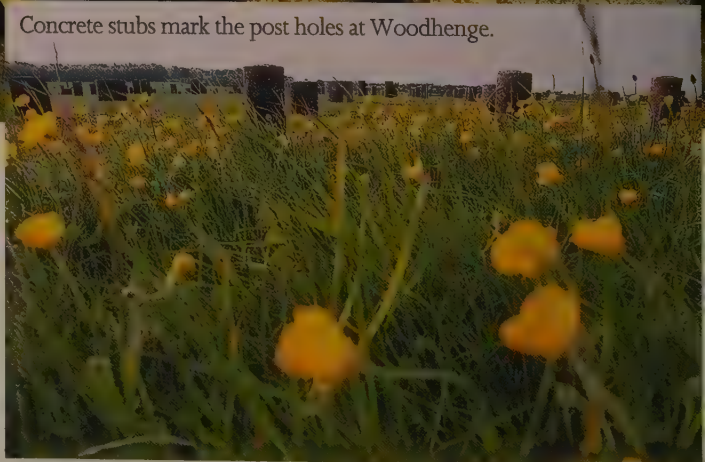
## **Stones at Stonehenge**

**Tallest** The two stones of the Great Trilithon: 6.7m above the ground (one is 9m long).

**Smallest** The western Station Stone: 1.2m high.

**Carvings** The best at any stone circle in Britain – although now very difficult to see (perhaps they were painted when new). At least four sarsens have engravings of groups of simple copper or bronze axeheads. There is an irregular rectangle shape on one of the big Trilithon stones; some archaeologists think this may be an image of a mother goddess (honest).

Concrete stubs mark the post holes at Woodhenge.



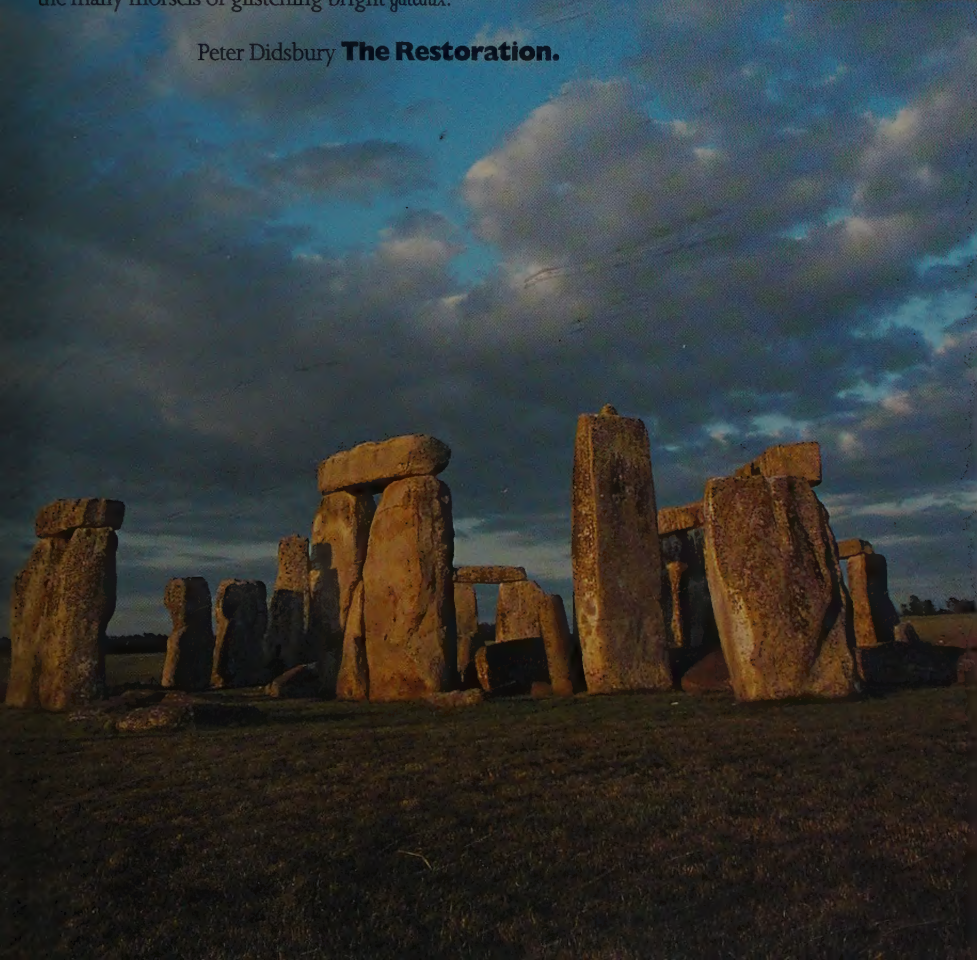


Birthday candles, strewn like the spokes  
of sadly dismantled wheels,  
could be screened going backwards,  
could be seen to go back on the cake.

And brutal clowns, from their half-way down the lane,  
could by invisible hawsers be recalled  
to mend the innocent carts the very  
sight of which had caused them to go berserk.

There could be restored, in the cinemas of time,  
the luminous frames we imagine preceded the action,  
even from splinters of wood and ruined foods,  
the many morsels of glistening bright *gateaux*.

Peter Didsbury **The Restoration.**



### **Excavations at Stonehenge**

**Oldest hole** A pit was dug (why or by whom is not known) in the area of the car park close to Stonehenge, apparently around 9,100 years ago.

**First archaeologist** The Duke of Buckingham. He dug in the middle of Stonehenge for King James I in 1620. Discoveries rumoured to include stagges-hornes a great many, Batter-dashers, heades of arrowes, some pieces of armour eaten out with rust, and bones rotten.

**Least successful** In 1868 "Captain ----" tried to dig at the base of the largest trilithon to find out how deep it went. "He was remonstrated with, but refused to desist till the police opportunely interfered and took him before a magistrate, from whom he learnt a wholesome lesson."

**Most determined** Lieutenant Colonel William Hawley excavated about half the Stonehenge area between 1919 and 1926, hoping that something would turn up to explain what it all meant. It didn't.

**Most recent burials** The Office of Works allowed Druids to bury ashes of deceased friends in the 1920s. The holes had to be very small.





John Agard: "Earthwalk" from Southbank Earth Photography Exhibition (Southbank 1993) by kind permission of John Agard c/o Caroline Sheldon Literary Agency; Richard Burns: poems from *Avebury* (Anvil Press Poetry 1972) reprinted by permission of Anvil Press Poetry Ltd; Peter Didsbury: "The Sleepers" and "The Restoration" from *The Classical Farm* (Bloodaxe Books 1987) and Pamela Gillilan: extract from "Iron Age (On Solsbury Hill)" from *The Tumspit Dog* (P Gillilan and C Cory, Bloodaxe Books 1993) reprinted by permission of Bloodaxe Books Limited; Philip Gross: extracts from "A Game of Henge" and Graham Ovenden: "The Old Stones" originally appeared in *The Green Book* edited by Keith Spencer; Eve Machin supplied "Exhibit - Utrecht Museum". Thanks to you all.

All poems copyright the individual authors.

© 1994 Photography and text by Michael Pitts.

No part of this publication may be reproduced without prior written permission.

Designed and produced by Stephen Nelson. Printed in England.



THE HENGE  
2-25

09-AWN-438

Stonehenge and Avebury, both in Wiltshire, are two of the most extraordinary archaeological sites in the country. In this sumptuous guide, Michael Pitts has brought together anecdotes and up to date facts, a selection of contemporary poems and some of his favourite photos. Inspire your memories!

STONES  
PRINT

ISBN 0-9514076-1-9



9 780951 407615