

**Sacred sites, contested rites/rights: contemporary pagan engagements with the past**

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## **Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights:**

### **Contemporary Pagan Engagements with the Past**

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#### **Abstract**

Our Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights project ([www.sacredsites.org.uk](http://www.sacredsites.org.uk)) examines physical, spiritual and interpretative engagements of today's Pagans with sacred sites, theorises 'sacredness', and explores the implications of pagan engagements with sites for heritage management and archaeology more generally, in terms of 'preservation ethic' vis a vis active engagement. In this paper, we explore ways in which 'sacred sites' --- both the term and the sites --- are negotiated by different interest groups, foregrounding our locations, as an archaeologist/art historian (Wallis) and anthropologist (Blain), and active pagan engagers with sites. Examples of pagan actions at such sites, including at Avebury and Stonehenge, demonstrate not only that their engagements with sacred sites are diverse and that identities --- such as that of 'new indigenes' --- arising therefrom are complex, but also that heritage management has not entirely neglected the issues: in addition to managed open access solstice celebrations at Stonehenge, a climate of inclusivity and multivocality has resulted in fruitful negotiations at the Rollright Stones.

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## **Introduction**

In the late 1990s, Barbara Bender's Stonehenge: Making Space, in the wake of the exhibition (Stonehenge belongs to you and me) she co-ordinated along with several travellers and a druid, opened a window for analysis of Stonehenge's contested and negotiated meanings. Diverse meanings of this site, within post-modern Britain, were on display and the juxtaposition of dissonant images gave an opportunity to evaluate practices and policies within changing human social contexts. Paradoxically, academic archaeological or sociological studies have neglected this examination. Yet in terms of archaeology's attempts to reach a sympathetic, interested public, spiritual frequenters of prehistoric sites are a prime target audience. They are interested in 'heritage', not only intellectually but as part of the spiritual or imaginal landscapes within which they author identities. They develop specific relationships with particular sites, to which they return time and again. Bender's work represented a raising of issues of meanings, communities and marginalisation, and went beyond this to attempt to present theory and theorising in ways which made these accessible.

Our Sacred Sites, Contested Rights/Rites project is concerned with *access*: not only physically to stones, but to theory, to interpretations, to empowerment. Since the late 90s the situation at Stonehenge has changed --- with managed open access at solstices and equinoxes --- and is changing again as policies alter, plans are made for a new visitor centre, and work is expected to commence on dealing with the roads that currently delimit the immediate landscape of the monument. None of these events are unproblematic. We endeavour, here and elsewhere, to explore meaning and make recommendations. We welcome and applaud negotiations and moves toward reconciliation and accommodation, on all 'sides': for instance the increased flexibility and openness of government and heritage management, or the attempts by 'alternative' groups to organise an event some distance from Stonehenge at the summer solstice, intended to reduce pressure on the monument while enabling a 'festival'. But we most strongly make the point, in our analysis, that local solutions and accommodations to specific events are not all that is needed. There are very different views on 'heritage', site, landscape and the social relations that can inform or be informed by all of these; people's spirituality embedded in landscape and community is also political on a wider scale, and paganism --- the most evident spiritual 'movement' associated with heritage sites --- is growing fast. Today's pagans may campaign for access to sites nationally; they may attempt to have their interpretations recognised; and many become campaigners for community education about heritage and site-preservation, for instance through the Ancient Sacred Landscape Network (ASLaN) --- 'Don't change the site, let the site change you' recommends their Sacred Sites Charter. In the five years or so since this charter was established, however, increasing numbers of contemporary Pagans have been engaging with so called 'sacred sites' and while most leave little impact of their

pilgrimage to sites, others --- often those who have recently discovered themselves as pagans --- leave votive offerings and may not only change the site, but damage it irreparably.

Rather than look at this as matters of 'right' and 'wrong' approaches to megaliths, we are asking why and how sites are considered as sacred; how this perception contrasts with the 'preservation ethos' of heritage management --- if it does, how and why 'sacredness' and 'heritage' become important constituents of British culture today, and implications of 'change' --- personal, political, legal --- in the constitution of 'sacredness' and 'heritage'. Therefore, the Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights project ([www.sacredsites.org.uk](http://www.sacredsites.org.uk)) is examining these physical engagements with sacred sites, theorising how 'sacredness' is constituted within a variety of standpoints, and exploring the implications of pagan engagements with sites for heritage management and archaeology more generally, in terms of 'preservation ethic' vs. active engagement. In this paper we introduce critically the concept of 'sacred site' and ways in which this term is negotiated by different interest groups. We include ourselves here, and examine some of our own relationships to sites and spirits, and how these influence our academic and 'heritage' policy linked work. We then present instances of pagan actions at such sites with brief examples including Avebury and Stonehenge. These case studies demonstrate not only that pagan engagements with sacred sites are diverse and that identities arising within such are complex, but also that heritage management has not entirely neglected the issues: in addition to managed open access solstice celebrations at Stonehenge --- however fraught with difficulties --- we cite the example of the Rollright Stones where a climate of inclusivity and multivocality has resulted in fruitful negotiation. The Sacred Sites

Charter may be pertinent, but practical on-site negotiations have clearly had the best results.

We speak in a particular location and from our own approaches to sites, sacredness, and landscape. The ASLaN (Ancient Sacred Landscape Network) conference, at which an early version of this paper was presented, provided a forum for those who chose to meet, seeking to understand and engage with each other's approaches and recognising 'sacredness', however defined, as something that matters for our joint, cultural, constructions of identity, place and self today. Consistently, sacred landscapes are approached in one of two ways: either it is assumed (by pagans or academics) that people convey (or inscribe) sacredness into landscapes, or it is perceived, increasingly by some pagans and in line with 'indigenous' perceptions elsewhere, that places, spirits, landscapes are inherently sacred: in what follows, we move between these positions. Of further interest is the question of a multiplicity of landscapes and of whose narratives of landscape are privileged in accounts (including our own).

### **Contemporary Paganism**

First, though, an introduction to contemporary paganism. As a generic term, paganism encompasses several recognised and coherent sets of beliefs and practices (e.g. Harvey 1997; Greenwood 2000; Blain 2002; Wallis 2003). Loosely put, paganism (or the more correct but cumbersome 'paganisms') comprises a variety of allied or associated 'paths' or 'traditions' which can be seen academically as sets of discourses and practices giving adherents standpoints from which to engage --- often spiritually -

-- with the natural and social worlds, and terms and concepts with which to theorise and further develop these engagements. With paganisms emerging in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, changing and developing within the 21<sup>st</sup>, pagans are constructing their own forms of worship or engagement with sites and spirits. The dynamic nature of various paganisms has been theorised by (among others) Harvey (1997); Blain (2002); Green (2002); Wallis (2003); and Greenwood (forthcoming). While this article is not the place for a detailed discussion of pagan identity, the concept of dynamic practice is important for our discussions of sacred sites.

Pagan worldviews may include spirits, goddesses and/or gods, and ‘nature’ as an entity or as an animist perception of many other-than-human-persons. The best-known pagan ‘paths’ or ‘traditions’ today are Wicca, Druidry, Heathenry, and Goddess Spirituality, and while not all pagans concern themselves with sacred sites, many, particularly Druids and Heathens, do (Druids being seen by today’s media as the classic ‘Stonehenge worshippers’). Others, notably adherents of the ‘new age’, also flock to the better-known sacred sites, with Stonehenge and Avebury receiving coach loads of ‘spiritual’ tourists who may see themselves as ‘on pilgrimage’. So-called ‘New Age’ Travellers (better simply ‘New Travellers’ --- [McKay 1998:28], or more loosely ‘travellers’) have their own sets of relationships with sacred places, ranging through pagan, ‘partying’ and ‘pilgrimage’ orientations and relating to economic and social conditions as well as an apparent choice of freedom (see Hetherington 2000; and articles in McKay 1998; Martin 2002).

All sites (or at least all well-known sites) are subject to multiple ‘appropriations’ by those who have little acquaintance with the places as well as those who have. Our central point is that while pagans, Travellers and others arrive at sites from many different (theoretical and physical) approaches, the sites hold meaning for them --- or

they invest meaning in sites, as part of their paganisms, their identity, and this investing of meaning is also a discursive creating of identity, central and important to the individuals or groups concerned. Increasingly, along with tourist impact, pagan activities are now having a noticeable impact on sacred sites, and this requires academic study and responses from heritage management.

### **Pagans and Archaeological Sites**

We have argued elsewhere that pagans' engagements with archaeological monuments are both embedded in and constitutive of a 'new folklore' (e.g. Wallis and Blain 2003): sacred sites are approached as places of special importance, as 'sacred', where the immediacy of 'nature', 'ancestors', various entities (gods, goddesses, spirits and other nonhuman-persons) can be felt, experienced and engaged with, and encountered at its/their most potent. Specific narratives are forming around individual sites or around more general pagan relationships with landscape. Sites of interest are, for the main part, Neolithic or Bronze Age constructions, but may also include Iron Age, Romano-British, Anglo-Saxon (e.g. the Sutton Hoo mounds) and other 'ancestral' remains. As we have indicated, there is no single pagan relationship with such places. Pagan relations with such sites are not singular or monolithic, ranging from adhering to heritage management 'preservation' agendas widely marketed by English Heritage, the National Trust and non-professional, pagan-related organisations such as ASLaN, Save Our Sacred Sites and Cruithni (some more accommodating, some less, to pagan and other 'alternative archaeology' perspectives) to claiming particular and individual reasons for whatever engagements seem appropriate at the time. These range from the



deposition of so-called 'ritual litter' (Figure 1) --- such as flowers and other offerings, candle wax and tea-light holders; the 'tagging' in specific places with symbols such as spirals or pentacles inscribed in stone on chalk; and the deposition of crystals, coins and other materials at sites, often into the cracks of megaliths. More destructive practices include the lighting of 'ritual' fires at many sites, with demonstrable, irreversible effects (particularly on megaliths), and there are instances of deliberate vandalism, most notably graffiti --- linked by some to pagans (e.g. Antiquity 1996:501; The Ley Hunter issue 126 Spring 1997:p.2; 3<sup>rd</sup> Stone: The Magazine of the New Antiquarian edition issue 35:p.3) --- on, for example, the West Kennet Avenue at Avebury in two instances (around summer solstice 1996 [Figure 2] and 1999) (See [www.sacredsites.org.uk](http://www.sacredsites.org.uk) for some details). Such 'ritual litter' has been documented elsewhere: our concerns are less to prescribe 'best practice' than to examine meanings and relationships that construct diverse practices, and the 'worldviews' (or ideological/discursive assumptions) that underlie these practices.

Without doubt, a large proportion of this damage occurs in ignorance of not only conventional archaeological interpretations of sites, but also of what results in detrimental or problematic (for other users) effects. Peak District archaeologist John Barnatt (1997), in an extreme but exemplary example, describes a stone circle being 'altered' by a group who, according to their information obtained from dowsing, apparently believed the stones were positioned wrongly in the first place. In contrast, pagans have also volunteered as 'guardians' of sites, and recently pagan groups in Cornwall worked with English Heritage to repair Men-an-Tol which was vandalised with a Napalm-like substance. In all, pagan understandings of and engagements with these ancient places are diverse and complex. As said above, it is not sufficient to examine such practices on their own as untheorised 'behaviour'. Pagans, as site users

--- as people to whom 'sacred sites' have meaning as an immediate and important part of their lives --- theorise sites and landscape. In less academic terms, they think about them and their thinking occurs in a context, and includes terms and concepts from discourses familiar to them: elements of (often older<sup>1</sup>) academic interpretations of site and symbol, literature, history, and indigenous perceptions. Into this theorising come narratives of gods, landwights, and snippets of local folklores. Pagans use these to construct narratives of landscape for today --- Silbury Hill as the body of the Goddess, cup-mark rock engravings as offering-cups for elves. This is not a matter necessarily of 'belief' as much of how landscapes and sites become components of stories, both scenarios and players in an ongoing drama, together with people. Pagans approaching sites may see 'spirits of place' (wights, land spirits, goddesses, etc) as present a priori, as, for want of a better phrase, actually there (Blain & Wallis 2002), with the implication that sites, stones and spirits are active contributors to stories of place. Indeed, relating to landscapes through narratives in which stones and spirits have agency, and in which humans and spirits exist in a state of mutual dependency (Harvey 2001), may be a way in which pagans, at times consciously, align themselves with indigenous people elsewhere --- we use the term 'new indigenes' (of the British Isles) to refer to this constructed identity. These narratives, though, are hard to convey through the discourse of academic rationality. Layton (1997) has pointed to shifts in focus between 'native' (in his case Australian Alawa) discourses on 'sacred sites' and those of Western representation, and an impossibility of complete translation. With narratives of sacred sites in Britain today, even where the language is apparently shared, discourses of 'spirits in the stones' become incomprehensible or 'irrational' within discourses of human inscription of meaning. One effect is to further marginalise and trivialise 'spirit' discourses, which, together with interpretations

based on them, are invisible within formal interpretations or public representations of landscape. A recent example was the BBC Time Flyers programme on Avebury, broadcast on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> December, 2002, that trivialised ‘druid’ engagements, yet managed to create an almost united front of pagans from many different approaches who were astounded and horrified that the programme would light a fire under a sarsen stone (in the area from which the Avebury sarsens came) in order to ‘reconstruct’ destruction by mediaeval villages as a television spectacle, thus deliberately (in pagan discourse) wounding the earth, or breaking a spiritual connection with a landscape that may have been important for the initial choice of the Avebury stones.

This leads on to our analysis. We are using techniques familiar in anthropology and critical linguistics --- ethnography, and discourse analysis. Less formally, let us say that we are looking at what people do, what they tell us it means and how it relates to other things in their lives, and how they say it; in interviews, in ‘sound bite’ quotes, or in lengthy articles and even heritage management plans. We examine what people tell us, and what they write. We go further, and examine our own engagements with the sites, the stones, the meaning. We ‘visit’ sites and walk through landscapes to attempt to understand them, to meet wights, to engage with ways that past peoples may have experienced these places and their spirit inhabitants, employing techniques including meditation, deliberate engagement of altered consciousness (‘shamanic’ journeying etc.), formal heathen and pagan rituals, and celebrations. We have each our own special places to which we are drawn back, and in line with new theoretical directions within anthropology and archaeology we accept that our experiences influence our analyses and our abilities to deal with the differing views of others who engage with site and landscape. We are not pretending an outsider’s Archimedean

stance or non-involved objectivity. Like all people today who claim some relation to these sites, we are involved. We have our own particular locations within academia, within paganisms or more specifically Heathenry, and we speak from where we are. So, what follows is what we see, how we ourselves relate to places, and the ways that these locations can inform policy and practice within both heritage management and paganism.

### **‘Sacred’ Sites, Sacred Landscapes**

Use of the term ‘sacred site’ by pagans may derive from its use by indigenous communities, most famously Native Americans and Aboriginal Australians, who attempt to repatriate land, human remains and artefacts they deem ‘sacred’. Some pagans, aligning themselves with indigenous people elsewhere (as their use of the term ‘new tribes’ indicates), often draw on these indigenous histories --- and we have adopted the term ‘new/indigenes’ to examine such identities. Yet pagans are not the only site users to term monuments ‘sacred’. Heritage managers, once viewed (and often still) as conservative, atheistic civil servants are now also deploying the term: Pomeroy in the Avebury English Heritage Management Plan links ‘Paganism’ with ‘the increasing interest in the mystical significance of Avebury as a “sacred” place’ (Pomeroy 1998:27), and commenting on their negotiations with pagans, David Miles (Chief Archaeologist, English Heritage; voiced in Wallis & Lymer 2001:107) and Clews Everard (former Site Director, Stonehenge, in an interview with Wallis), use the term ‘sacred site’. ‘Sacred sites’ are in vogue. However, within this new folklore of the ‘sacred site’, the meaning of sacredness seems remarkably diverse and there is

little serious analysis of what the term implies, or to whom such sites are indeed 'sacred'. 'Spiritual use' and 'sacredness' in management plans for Britain's heritage assume a passive 'visitor experience' and archaeologists similarly see the cultural landscape as imposed upon a natural one (Blain & Wallis 2002). Yet growing numbers who define themselves as pagan see 'sacredness' as a property intrinsic to place, not necessarily inscribed by people. In this way, 'sacred sites' become locations for communion and direct communication with ancestors, land-spirits, otherworld beings, in line with engagements described for indigenes elsewhere (e.g. Guédon 1994), and people and identity may be constituted by place and landscape.

### *Avebury*

The consequences of these engagements are quite noticeable, and while there has been little analysis of them, they are best documented at various monuments of the Avebury 'complex' in Wiltshire (see also Wallis & Blain 2002; Wallis 2003). Around midsummer (actually 19<sup>th</sup> June) in 1996, white and black 'pseudo-magical symbols' (Carpenter 1998:24) were painted on some of the megaliths of the West Kennet Avenue, Avebury. While these images may simply be graffiti, connections to paganisms were made in the media, with the archaeological journal *Antiquity* suggesting they may have been executed by 'New Age crazies' (*Antiquity* 1996:501). This damage was not an isolated occurrence: two more stones of the avenue were vandalised in the June of 1999, one covered in red and green paint, the other painted with the word 'cuckoo'. Then, enigmatic markings were scratched into stones of the central chamber in West Kennet long barrow at the Summer Solstice in 2001. In

addition, West Kennet and various parts of Avebury henge have been subject to fire damage and scorch marks, with one sarsen fragment from the barrow, fractured due to a fire positioned immediately next to it, having to be restored with a gluing agent. Other 'sacred sites' have also been damaged by 'alternative' interest groups, from the 'restored' stone circle at Doll Tor, Derbyshire, and piece of stone chipped from one of the Rollright Stones, to the aforementioned 'napalm' damage at Men-an-Tol, in Cornwall. These are serious instances of vandalism, but they cannot all be linked reliably to pagans and in our collating of them here we do not suggest a cohesive link; at the very least, the decentralised and heterogeneous nature of paganisms signals these are isolated and rare events.

More obvious and regular impacts on sacred sites which can be reliably linked to either pagan or 'new age' site-users, are in the form of votive offerings --- of flowers, candle wax and tea-light holders; the decoration of specific places with chalk symbols such as spirals or pentacles; and the insertion of crystals, coins and other materials into cracks (Figure 3). For some pagans, these offerings forge and strengthen links with sites, and honour wights, goddesses or some other local spirits. Indeed some will come long distances to leave their offerings at a well-known site. (West Kennet long barrow apparently attracts offerings from all over the world.) For others, particularly those who visit the same site regularly and who also uphold the preservation ethic, this is 'ritual litter' to be cleared up and discouraged, as outlined in a variety of pagan documents, but particularly the ASLaN sacred sites charter. Local pagans often attempt to keep a careful watch on activities of 'outsiders' --- as demonstrated by reactions to a notification in spring 2002 that a Prophets' Conference was to be held in Oxford with trips to Avebury, Stonehenge and the Rollright Stones, with the goal of 'awakening the stones' through ritual. (Numerous representations from pagans and

from the Rollright stones site management resulted in the postponement of the conference.)

Indeed it would be 'monolithic' to suggest that all pagan engagements with sacred sites are destructive or non-cognisant of issues of conservation. ASLaN, for example, has pagans in its numbers. At Avebury, also, there has been a National Trust Guardianship scheme (e.g. <http://www.rollrights.org.uk/cp.work.html>), under which local pagans and others joined forces with the National Trust to clear up ritual litter, monitor impact on sites, and provide on-site guardianship during annual pagan festivals. According to Chris Gingell (then site manager at Avebury) reports in the pagan magazine Pagan Dawn (Lammas 1997) of this Guardianship Scheme presented it as very effective, and after reading the piece so many pagans 'from all over Britain' offered voluntary help that Gingell had to write a reply to the journal (Imbolc 1998) pointing out that the National Trust was too 'decentralised' to deal with all the inquiries.

Relations between the National Trust, pagans, and other interested parties are not simple or straightforward, however. Although 'the village in the stones' seems to accommodate all comers, Avebury exists today as a partially reconstructed monument within a historical situation of Keiller's restorations and evictions of some local people, and further evictions by the National Trust of people to nearby Avebury Trusloe<sup>2</sup>. Today some pagans are local (or some locals are pagan) and pagans, particularly at festivals when they outnumber the bikers (and, for that matter, any other visitors), swell the tourist trade of the Red Lion pub. In 2002, several thousand converged on Avebury at the summer solstice, particularly after Stonehenge 'closed' on solstice morning, until the National Trust 'closed' the car park to solstice celebrants on the Saturday. Media perceptions of pagans and travellers there drew on

rather mild sensationalism; for instance Rod Liddle's account in The Guardian of circumstance surrounding a pagan handfasting or wedding:

Nobody, however, wished to leave. One of the main objections to moving on was that they were so utterly and totally drunk that they would constitute an enormous traffic hazard on the A303 --- an excellent and, I would have thought, incontestable, defence... Badger --- a cheerful, lank-haired hippy --- intended to marry his beloved in a ceremony conducted by some similar creature known as Arthur Pendragon. But nobody was quite sure when it would all happen. A policeman who was asked surveyed the scene with good-natured concern: 'Dunno,' he replied, 'all depends what time they find Arthur Pendragon. He's probably drunk and asleep in a hedge somewhere...'

But the authorities were immovable. Get out of town or you will be locked up, was their response to the exquisite romance of the moment (Liddle, 30 June 2002).

While this points to tensions between the 'authorities' and pagans, it conveys nothing about sacredness or meaning, and pokes fun at (homogenously) drunken pagans to make a (political) point. This stereotyping does nothing to promote dialogue and co-operation between authorities and pagans. And other tensions have manifested: the National Trust has, in recent years, operated an unofficial camping policy in the Avebury environs, so long as it is small-scale and brief. Now, though, there are rulings designed to prevent camping on the site other than controlled camping in the small overflow carpark --- instituted as part of the court ruling supporting the National Trust's eviction of a small traveller community known as the



'hedglings' of Green Street, in March of 2002. Tentative attempts to create a parking/camping field for summer solstice 2003 misfired. So Avebury, too, is constituted within tensions and competing discourses, which heighten as pressure of numbers increases.

Since the 2002 solstice events, pagans and other 'spiritual' attendees have been writing to the National Trust, challenging interpretations of 'visiting' and site management; our interviews indicate that friction between National Trust and many local people is if anything increasing, and the historic tension between 'management' (or ownership) and 'locals' has grown. Here we have many versions of 'ownership'. Avebury is constituted today within ambiguous political and spiritual contexts, and the people who come and go --- and wish to park their cars --- include locals, pagans, travellers and 'stones' enthusiasts, together with tourists (many of whom subscribe to aspects of so-called 'new age' thinking), bikers and other 'publics'. The categories are neither monolithic nor exclusive, but pagan/spiritual use is growing, and pagans are now appearing as concerned and often irate citizens who claim a say in planning and are active and vocal critics of events and management.

### *Stonehenge*

These examples from monuments in the Avebury region suggest there are pagan practices which impact sites physically, sometimes destructively, but there are also acts of collaboration with heritage managers to address such concerns. Such examples also indicate the situation is by no means simple, and the case of Stonehenge, particularly recent events at the summer solstices 2002-2004, demonstrates the

diversity at hand at a very different site in a very different landscape --- a diversity of forms of pagan engagement with sites, of responses from heritage management, of the interests of other people such as locals and tourists, and of forms of knowledge and power constructed and contested at sacred sites. At the centre of our discussion, illustrated in the example of Stonehenge, is how the 'sacred' in 'sacred site' is constructed and played out amongst the diversity of interest groups.

Meanings inscribed in or attributed to 'the stones' are complex. Stonehenge as component of English national identity (see the scenic nationalism discussed by Thomas [2001]) clashes with Stonehenge as British tourist symbol, Stonehenge as traveller meeting-place, and Stonehenge as pagan temple. Indeed, Stonehenge, famous internationally as an 'icon of Britishness', is infamous as a contested sacred site: free-festivalers, 'new travellers', pagans, druids, and other 'alternative' interest groups have campaigned consistently for improved access to 'the stones', particularly for summer solstice celebrations. There is a long-running, well-documented (e.g. Chippindale 1986; Bender 1998, Worthington 2004), history of protest since the 'people's free festival' was 'cancelled' by the authorities and the police clashed with the 'convoy' at the battle of the beanfield in 1985. The campaign to 'reopen the stones' has reaped positive results in recent years and the first free English Heritage 'managed open access' event in 2000 was, by most accounts, successful; events in the years following have been billed likewise. We have discussed these events in detail elsewhere, as individuals (e.g. Blain 2000; Wallis 2003), and collaborators (e.g. Blain & Wallis 2001; Blain & Wallis 2002; Wallis & Blain 2002) on the Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights project. Events at summer solstice 2002 and 2003, with a mention of 2004, rapidly as this article hits the press in June 2004<sup>3</sup>, bring this debate up to date.

These years saw a third, fourth and fifth managed open access event facilitated (or permitted) by English Heritage. In 2001, around 14,500 people celebrated the solstice at Stonehenge; there were some concerns among celebrants over the appropriateness of lighting which obscured the early minutes of sunrise (as stated in our report: Blain & Wallis 2001), and English Heritage expressed concerns over drunken behaviour with a view to health and safety. In 2002, an estimated 23,500 people attended. The lighting was more effective and turned off with time to spare before dawn (though still not without a considerable amount of shouting from various quarters of the site as lights were doused in rotation) and there was a significant police presence which only made a handful of arrests --- some for drunkenness. For the purposes of our project, three issues were brought to light that year, and in 2003 when the crowd swelled to 31,000: the impact of huge numbers of people on a tightly focussed site, the vast amount of litter as a result, and how the ongoing debate --- and monitoring --- of this 'event' may be seen to result in a swing towards a 'party' rather than 'spiritual' event. The 21,000 attending in 2004 (with a mere 'few hundreds' at Avebury) may, if anything, demonstrate this increased tendency: the drop in numbers indicates that not all would-be celebrants match the popular media stereotypes, but have 'day jobs' that require them to be elsewhere.

Many people have worked long and hard to effect a situation of stable 'managed' access (Figure 4), in a situation where the effective site management, conscious of responsibility for a 'national icon,' has been uncertain, and yet willing to take some risks to meet the requirements of both spiritual access and vast numbers. For two years, some sense of 'spiritual celebration' had held sway. In 2002, the 'vast numbers' descended into what is a small, confined space --- 'the stones' --- and our ethnographic perceptions were of problems resulting from both 'management' and

‘user’ groups, but much more from the situation in which both were embedded.

Essentially this was a situation of mutual distrust.

People came to Stonehenge, in their marked diversity, constructing and signifying identity through their dress and accoutrements, green branches or face paint, police uniforms or steward ‘yellow-jackets’, mayoral robes or England flags, peace-steward badges, microphones, cameras and videocams, or ‘druid’ robes. Their constructed meanings and emotions included rejoicing, ritual, dancing, sadness, annoyance, bravado, watchfulness, worry, fear, boredom or dismay, loss or finding or seeking something unknown --- listening to the stones talking, performing, trancing or even weeping.

People came to Stonehenge, in their families or friendship groups or alone, or to meet others. On the way in, they had to pass through gate checks. Questions were raised about musical instruments. A small drinking horn which one of us had brought --- to toast the sunrise --- was (briefly) taken for examination and consultation, by an official who, though friendly and polite, did not seem to know what it was. Bags and backpacks were thoroughly searched, and people were asked to leave behind sleeping bags or anything that pertained to an overnight ‘camp’ --- even when they had young children who were obviously going to need to sleep. People also brought with them those things they thought were needed for a celebration or a party: drums, candles, cannabis, alcohol, the occasional flute or fiddle, and especially more drums. Some of these worked, and were non-invasive of others’ space --- some less so. The morning’s litter included large amounts of beer cans and shredded plastic glasses.

People came to Stonehenge for the experience and to share that experience with others (Figure 5). Many people broke the strict rules issued as a condition of entry.

What is the status of these rules, and to what extent, we ask, can they be flexible

rather than dogmatic? Yet an assumption of flexibility in turn requires responsibility within the community of celebrants, and here there is a problem --- identified by numerous people connected with the negotiations. Where, here, do the bounds of 'community' lie, and where does the interaction of 'authority' and 'community' remove decision-making from those who choose to come to 'events' while seeing these as only entertainment, or merely a venue provided for some 'happening' which might, marginally, be called 'spiritual'. Here lies a profound dis-ease that we have with some events. What is 'spiritual', what is a non-spiritual 'partying'? First, we see no clear dichotomy. Partying can be spiritual --- as documented not only anthropologically, but specifically at Stonehenge 2001 where a leading druid commented: 'And it is about --- a lot of people partying. There's nothing wrong with that, that's a spiritual thing too, or can be'.

Yet there remains a sense of how spirituality can be conducted or communicated among very large crowds. There may be different and diverse manifestations of both 'spirituality' and 'partying', some allied, some in opposition --- and in the context of the recent history of the Stonehenge Festival, its suppression, and attempted negotiations in recent years regarding a 'park-up' for those needing a place to be between solstice and the start of the Glastonbury festival (a reminder that paganisms and 'solstice' exist within a wider context of today's Britain including 'alternative' and 'partying' culture) there was, and remains, a tension between authority and resistance which requires considerable exploration and theorising. Put simply, the strict application of rules on bag-searching and sleeping bags, etc, did not help to make the occasion more 'spiritual'.

At the 2002 'event', some had come specifically and deliberately (and sometimes with some fears) to experience a 'pagan' happening; others had come as pagans to an

occasion meaningful to them. Still others had apparently come to be seen --- by pagans or others --- and have their presence noted in a context of the World Cup (England played Argentina on the morning of 21<sup>st</sup> June). There remains potentially a large number who attended simply to be there, perhaps to party, perhaps to get drunk, and/or perhaps to sell things (e.g. handicrafts), and some who had come specifically to show resistance to authority. Many of course came for multiple reasons --- as indeed did we --- and moved in the course of the night between positions of spiritual meditation or celebration, partying, playing with meaning, performance, and, on some level, resistance. More important, perhaps, is the specific interaction of all these people with the site and the specific, overlapping, multiple landscapes they were constructing or experiencing. We have discussed how ‘sacred sites’ in other (prehistoric) times may have owed as much custom to social events or ‘partying’ as to an appreciation of sacredness (e.g. Wallis 2003; Wallis & Blain 2003) --- yet where partying is part of resistance with the ‘sacred’ element omitted, this leads to other implications for the site, the traffic it can bear, and most importantly the ways that people interact with the landscape and with each other. (There is also of course ‘sacred resistance’ which motivates many attendees and has informed considerable amounts of the negotiation and the peace process, and which links the spiritualities here with various indigenes elsewhere). It is possible that there may be other cultural ways of seeing the distinction. Is behaviour respectful to the landscape and the spirits of the land which many pagans perceive as an intrinsic part of that landscape? When is dancing on stones respectful? When is it something else? How does it form part of acts of resistance, and what situations have created these?

As academic researchers, we have interests in analysing such events in terms of ‘neotribes’ (Maffesoli 1996; Letcher 2001), flexible and fluid groupings of those

seeking identity, some of whom --- as travellers and/or pagans --- identify themselves specifically as ‘tribes’, adopting or appropriating this term and its meanings as a complex construction of identity vis-à-vis perceptions of dominant ‘conventional’ class-based society<sup>4</sup>. In particular, ‘the stones’ and other sacred sites are important to Traveller identities as meeting places for ‘the tribes’. It is then easy for a ‘spiritual’ event to become simply a ‘party’ and vice versa, depending on how it is constituted for specific groups, and the circumstances and discourse surrounding it. A further point is that while many pagans profess a desire (at conferences, in email discussions and other forums) to not be ‘political’, the summer solstice celebration is inherently political, and many of the crowd choose to express their political-spirituality at Stonehenge, rather than at some quieter venue, in order to add to the numbers seen to be ‘resisting’ what may be perceived to be non-spiritual appropriation by English Heritage and other bodies.

It is interesting that English Heritage’s public comments on the 2002 managed access have praised the ‘spiritual’ dimensions, emphasised the diversity of attendees (a large number of children were there, for instance) and pointed to only one problem --- people standing on stones. They would prefer to have no ‘stone-standing’ for conservation reasons, but the crowd draws a different line. Given the circumstances of darkness, crowding, and simply wanting space and wanting to see, several people --- inevitably --- stand or sit on fallen stones. Figure 5 illustrates ambiguities inherent in definitions and narratives of site and ‘rules’: power inherent in setting rules, and negotiations around acceptance are implicit in the situation. Even stewards did not seek to remove those children from the stones, although they were in contravention of the ‘terms and conditions of entry’. The crowd therefore draws a distinction between upright stones (which should not be climbed) and fallen stones (which are deemed

more appropriate for standing on by some), and a further distinction between small upright (bluestones) and sarsens: and, the element of resistance at the event seizes on stone-standing as an activity which expresses meanings of many kinds. Each year there have been attempts to reach the lintels --- shouted down by the crowd in 2002 and 2001 (as well as escorted off the premises by EH officials or police). Some revellers, however, perch on bluestones, and some dance on them --- the latter constituting a safety hazard to others as well as to the dancer on (in 2002) a stone slippery with rain. One person attempting to scale a sarsen in 2002 did fall. This was caught on camera by an independent media team, who had been attracted to the location by another camera team's lighting. Robin Pender of [Back Hill TV](#) gave us an account of the circumstances, which illustrates some of the complexities and problems of the situation.

My cameraman and I were wandering around the site filming revellers, when we noticed a commotion; lights and shouting, coming from the edge of the trilithon ring. We made our way around, where a young man in climbing shoes had shimmied up between two high stones, and was trying to inch round to the top of the trilithon.

There was another cameraman there, with a camera-mounted light illuminating the scene.

Eventually the climber, unsuccessful in his efforts, slipped, and fell into the crowd, where he was promptly apprehended by two security personnel and escorted away from the stones. The other cameraman followed them away. We stayed in this position for a while, as it gave us a great position for filming the party that was going on inside the central ring.



About 30 minutes later, we were approached by two women from English Heritage who were concerned about film crews encouraging climbers, particularly by lighting them; we discussed it with them and they left, apparently satisfied that we were being sensitive.

Attendees and campaigners were aware of tensions and problems, and have suggested several possible solutions, notably that a way to avoid some of the tensions and to turn the occasion to something both more spiritual and more enhancing of community is to move the hours of managed access into daylight of the longest day. The current event, indulging a 'night-club' approach, has elements that are exclusionary. We, like many others, did not spend much time in the centre of the stones which was crowded and where the 'partying' (spiritual or not) was focussed, where the monotonous drumming was amplified by the acoustic properties of the site --- less inspiring, at least to us, than the previous year's bagpipe-playing. Long-standing campaigner and negotiator Brian Visiondanz voiced two suggestions:

So next year, a daytime gathering, so that the 'nightclub/intoxicated' environment can be replaced with a more wholesome family gathering that will include 'Middle England' because they will feel more secure in that environment.

(Also) a longer gathering close to the stones area to allow our community to develop, renew relationships and grow stronger --- for some this 'alternative' community is their only family.

The 2003 event ran from midnight to midday --- enabling some daytime access to the stones but bringing its own problems of long traffic queues in the middle of the night, and exclusion before the precise time of solstice. The situation in 2004 again restricted daytime access, with car park access officially from 8.00 p.m. and entry to the stones from 10.00 p.m until 9.00 am, drew 21,000 people - the reduction in numbers for this Monday morning indicating that contrary to some of the more sensational press notices previously referred to, many celebrants work 'conventional' hours. While the non-local police in attendance seemed friendly, their numbers were described by celebrants as 'over the top' for the size of the gathering; stewards examining bags seemed again uninformed and celebrants complained of inconsistencies in applying rules – some being asked to leave behind blankets or have them confiscated, while others were allowed to bring in blankets for children to sit on. (It should be added that 'blankets', worn as a cloak, are an article of dress in Traveller and other alternative communities and very practical on an all-night vigil, so that some experienced a removal of clothing not bedding). For future years, a longer period of daylight access seems unlikely to be approved. Brian's latter suggestion is in line with an idea voiced by many (e.g. Sebastion 2001) to facilitate a music event, at some distance from the stones, to draw 'partying' towards it; this is a difficult area, a fine line between 'access' and 'festival'. The suggestion has meanwhile being repeated, or re-invented, in numerous discussion groups, email lists and other forums, gaining some popularity, though numerous problems surround the organisation of such an event by any other than official bodies. In 2003 a group of volunteers attempted to form a limited company and actively work for such a gathering, preparing a press release about a potential 'licensed, non-profit making, week-long

celebration of life, love and unity'. The event did not materialise. Attempts for 2004 ran into problems of meeting insurance and other costs.

As mentioned earlier, in 2002 several thousands of those evicted from Stonehenge on solstice morning headed for Avebury, where a more spiritual ambience persisted until, once again, 'closing time'. In 2003, roads were packed (with the police towing away cars parked illegally) and parking in Avebury car parks full. In 2004 parking at Avebury was further restricted, to the extent where local businesses suffered from reductions in trade, and 'closing time' came at midday on 21<sup>st</sup> June – indeed a Pagan group, though having previously arranged use of the Avebury carpark for a handfasting on Monday afternoon, elected to go elsewhere rather than add to confusion in the carpark. The issue of people seeking spiritual space --- with camping and somewhere to sleep --- at the summer solstice is not going to go away. It is now part of the British cultural scene (the hard-line 'Thatcher years' attempted to but did not eliminate it) and other areas are becoming increasingly affected --- which on the whole we see as a positive development, problems notwithstanding.

The issues raised by access to the megaliths of Stonehenge have wider implications for the management of, and pagan engagements with, sacred sites more generally. Strategies to address appropriateness of behaviour at sites are site specific necessarily: where the limited space available at Stonehenge makes the presence of a 'party' problematic, the open areas at monuments of the Avebury environs result in reduced --- though by no means insignificant --- impact; and where the perception of Stonehenge as an 'icon of the nation' means it is currently fenced off, yet a focus of contest, a previous reactive approach of the National Trust --- indeed recruiting site guardians --- had resulted in a more relaxed approach from curators and site users at Avebury (though management has since changed and tensions are again increasing, as

previously noted<sup>5</sup>). A different set of circumstances is evident, yet again, at the Rollright Stones, the case study with which we close our discussion, and where some pagans and some archaeologists appear to have made common cause, in part by drawing actively on the diversity of discursive interpretations and positionings.

### *Rollright Stones*

The Rollright Stones are not curated by English Heritage or the National Trust: a campaign beginning in 1997 has resulted in eventual purchase of the land by a private charity, the Rollright Trust (with a board including archaeologists, a biologist, pagans and others). As a recent entity, the Rollright Trust has engaged with pagan interests from the start, and pagans sparked its formation. The management stance is that the stones and associated sites such as the King's Stone and King's Men are not in themselves pagan, nor do they have any other religious or cultural affiliation, but they are 'sacred' in the usual heritage sense of the term: they are ancient, part of our heritage and should be protected. While endeavouring not to impose a context on the site, to not impose a context is of course imposing a context nonetheless. What we identify of major interest here though, and of consequence for other sites, not only of similar size but with implications in terms of negotiation for elsewhere, is the Rollright Trust's inclusive approach: plans are underway to foster interest in the stones and their setting in ways that permit use by pagans and others while setting and explaining limits, re-narrativising the stones, within today's social and community contexts rather than only as 'timeless heritage'.

Not all is smooth-running: disputes occur, some pagans and others do feel marginalised, and there are incidents of damage, with a piece of one megalith being chipped off, probably as a souvenir, in the summer of 2001. However, the Rollrights provide an example of how past becomes part of present identities, and how ‘guardians’ can have their identities legitimated --- occurring through the direct and intensive work of a number of people who have set out to accomplish shared meaning. Today’s use, and yesterday’s folklore, become simply part of the ways that the monument can be viewed; the stones are not seen as sterile, to be ‘preserved’ behind a fence, without people engaging with them closely. Illustrating these points, the official --- secular --- handing over of deeds occurred in 2001 during a ceremony incorporating Morris Dancers and a play by the local primary school on the local (and relatively recent: Burl 2000) story of the witch, the king and his men. The evening, furthermore, saw a notable sacred ‘party’ in celebration. Other uses of the stones include pagan rituals, family gatherings, and the presentation of plays, ranging in 2002 from Shakespeare to Terry Pratchett’s ‘Lords and Ladies’ while in 2003 the circle became the setting for installation of Anish Kapoor’s sculpture ‘Turning the world inside out’ (see Wallis in prep).

The Rollrights are small yet much frequented. They are not a model for other sites --- each with their unique attractions and problems --- and we do not present them as such. Rather, we present them as an example of what can occur when archaeologists, pagans, and others engage dialogically, attempting to learn each other’s discourse and celebrate a multiplicity of understandings of a site, not as modernist museum fodder<sup>6</sup>, top-down ‘education’, or even as public display, but as living interpretation based on engagement which furthers identity.

## **Conclusion**

‘Sacredness’ is constructed, not given. All approaches to sites, from the extreme hard-line preservationist angle of some site managers to the hands-on engagements of some pagans, with some instances of deliberate vandalism (again linked, but not necessarily, to pagans), impose a context. In this paper we have presented examples of both extremes, but emphasised the plurality of the voices and the diversity of the issues. Issues affecting sites are site-specific, with needs for management according to situated pragmatism. But the situation and history of events at each site has implications for all sacred sites. It is vital that the term ‘sacred’ continues to be theorised, contested and negotiated, that a single meaning is not ‘set in stone’. It is also vital that the interest groups continue to meet and negotiate these issues, developing ways of understanding each others’ perspectives and reaching pragmatic solutions. The example of the Rollright Stones marks an example of these points in action; but other examples we have discussed elsewhere (e.g. Seahenge [e.g. Champion 2000; Wallis 2003], the British reburial issue [e.g. Davies 1997, 1998/9; Wallis & Blain 2001]), indicate there is some way to go before heritage managers, archaeologists and others with direct influence on how sites are managed and represented, are prepared to give up or at least negotiate some of their power to determine how sacred landscape ‘should be’ interpreted, managed, and revered.

## Figures

Figure 1. Offerings of foliage in the end recess of West Kennet long barrow, at the pagan festival of Lamma 2001.

Figure 2. Graffiti on one of the megaliths in Avebury's West Kennet Avenue, linked by some to pagans, executed in 1996.

Figure 3. Chalk 'art' and offerings in West Kennet long barrow at the summer solstice of 2003.

Figure 4. A long-standing campaigner and 'Peace Steward', within the circle at summer solstice 2002.

Figure 5. Anonymous children at Stonehenge, summer solstice 2002, on a fallen sarsen. This might mark one instance of a particularly 'spiritual' moment at the managed access in 2002 --- yet the children are in contravention, technically, of the English Heritage regulations regarding access.

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<sup>1</sup> Older, because much recent interpretation is inaccessible to those without university library cards. Detailed interpretation is what is sought (rather than snippets on information boards and often-simplistic museum displays) and often pagans and other members of the general public will adopt ideas that come from their reading without considering the date. For instance, (a recent reprint of) MacCulloch (1911) is still much read as an authority on ancient 'Celtic' religion within sections of the pagan community. Also, current archaeology is often experienced as dull and boring because it is perceived to be reluctant to give room to imaginative speculation.

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- <sup>2</sup> In the 1930s, the amateur archaeologist Alexander Keiller undertook a partial excavation and reconstruction of Avebury's circles and avenue, re-erecting buried stones and replacing missing ones with concrete markers. This also involved buying tracts of land, relocating villagers and knocking down cottages. For some details see Edwards, 2001.
- <sup>3</sup> Here a history of the article is required. Originally written for a conference in 2002 immediately post-summer solstice, it was accepted by JMC and the 'final ' version expanded to include the 2003 solstice material. In copy-editing in June 2004 - again immediately post-solstice - we have the opportunity to give a swift update. We are both relieved (as regards the academic process) and dismayed (as regards our own orientations to these processes and our hopes for resolution) that there seems to be little change - our 2002 observations match those from 2004, with positions becoming if anything slightly more entrenched.
- <sup>4</sup> An added twist to the adoption of the term 'new-tribes' is that there is an implied claim to permanence --- whereas Maffesoli's analysis deals in shifting groups within post-modernity.
- <sup>5</sup> Avebury management has changed again, on July 2004. Any new arrangements for negotiation or management strategies were not known at the time this article went to press.
- <sup>6</sup> Hooper-Greenhill (2000) theorises museum pedagogy and makes a distinction between the exclusivist teacher-pupil transmission-of-knowledge stance of the modernist museum and the relational, dialogic and multivocal interpretative approach of the postmodernist museum. We see the Rollrights management situation as exemplary of the latter.



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