



Chapter 16.

Interaction Today – Care and Use of the Monument

'We can *all* do it if we work together with love,
care and concern for the earth and all its manifestations.'
(Hamish Miller)

West Kennet Long Barrow is one of Britain's prehistoric wonders. It has come a long way in the last five and a half thousand years – having witnessed over twenty two thousand seasons. Up on a ridge, deep in the Wiltshire landscape, it has witnessed the coming of metal tools, plagues, the Norman Conquest, two world wars, the rise of technology, and the first man on the Moon. Left to its own devices, it may have outlived Mankind.

However, people started taking an interest in the sacred barrow once more, and this time it was not for spiritual, ancestral, or astronomical reasons. The monument bore the brunt of farmers taking away chunks of its mound and stones; it also survived, somehow retaining its dignity, invasive excavations and a somewhat insensitive restoration; and it has endured thousands of people who have ventured into its interior, most wearing their 'tourist hat'.

It is ironic, therefore, that the greatest threat to the monument today comes from the very people who come to honour and revere the site, the ancestors, and the Earth. Damage to the stones from soot and deposits of wax are now woefully common, as I can attest from my regular 'tidy ups'. People who no doubt come with good intentions do not always think about the repercussions of their activities, and of the effect of what they leave behind.

Let me point out at the outset, that I am not banging a drum for authorities such as the National Trust or English Heritage – I myself embrace Pagan beliefs. The information below is principally aimed at fellow-Pagans. A few examples of what I am referring to may not go amiss.

Ritual Litter and Damage to the Stones

At the summer solstice of 1996 serious scorch marks were left on some of the interior stones at WKLB. At the mid-summer of 2001, scratch marks, unreadable though they were, were made on stones inside the chambers. Robert Wallis reported that, 'There is the problem of fire damage at West Kennet, caused by mainly the lighting and thoughtless positioning of candles.... One forecourt stone has been so damaged that a fractured piece of it had to be repaired with a gluing agent' (Wallis 2003, p. 169).

Over the years, items such as cigarette butts, condoms, tampons, and beer cans have been left behind in the chambers. But, fortunately, this type of rubbish is not the most common. That category is what has become known as



Left: soot deposits and burning of megaliths, October 2010. Right: This large pile of 'ritual litter', which filled a rucksack, was collected on **one** visit to WKLB in the summer of 2010.

'ritual litter', left behind following ceremonies, rituals, and meditations, etc. Items include metal tea-light holders, candles, candle wax, fruit, coins, feathers, crystals, small stones, and various effigies from clay models to corn dollies. Chalk graffiti is also daubed on stones, which, if not removed by someone who really cares about the site, may take years to wear away. David Taylor points out, "... it isn't just tourists and road builders who damage ancient sites, recent "pagan" activity at WKLB is caused by a mindless minority..." (Taylor 1997). A votive offering may be left behind, with all good intention, by Pagan, Druid, or New-Ager, but it is 'litter', none the less.

It is a little sickening for me to have to point out that most of this refuse is left by Pagans and 'Earth Healers', which is the great irony of it all. I am a Pagan, not an archaeologist or other 'straight' preaching from an academic soapbox. It saddens me that the people who do this are letting down fellow Pagans.

At sunset at Samhain 2010, Sue and I went up to the barrow, only to find intentional damage to one of the skylights, and also lots of candle wax, which had been allowed to drip down the sides of several megaliths. As well as numerous metal nightlight holders, there was even a casino chip for \$1, and sherds of glass in the west chamber from the smashed skylight.

On a weekly basis, Sue and I retrieve all sorts of rubbish from inside WKLB. Although we are thankfully not alone in this practice, I would like to 'recruit' others to the cause – including you!

Before we look at how we can best accommodate the various requirements of people who visit WKLB today, I would respectfully request everyone who visits WKLB to please follow this proposed *Code of Practice*.

Some Do's and Don'ts

1) NO OPEN FIRES, even outside; the archaeology of the site extends beyond what is immediately obvious.

2) Please do not light candles or nightlights next to or on top of the stones, or under their overhangs (where the undersides will become sooted), or in holes or crevices. If the light is fading, use fully-enclosed lanterns, or else battery-powered or eco torches.

3) Should you need to light a nightlight, place it only in the **centre** of the chambers. There is no evidence that the original ancestors burnt or sooted the stones – they were very careful, and so should we. Afterwards, remove any spilt or dripped wax.

4) Do not leave **anything** behind you when you leave, be it general rubbish or 'ritual litter'. The ancestors are interested in your intentions and what is in your heart, not what you leave for others to clear away.

5) During the daytime, please do not 'totally occupy' the west chamber - there are four other chambers which can also be used for ritual and meditation, and which are less intrusive to other visitors. If you wish to use the west chamber for ritual and healing work, please be aware of others wishing to enter, and make your stay there as brief as possible.

6) Do not mark the stones in any way whatsoever, even with chalk. Our ancestors do not seem to have, so what gives you the right to!

7) Be aware of who may already be in WKLB when you arrive, or who may arrive whilst you are there, respecting other people's rights to also be in the chambers. It's all about respect. Arriving at WKLB and bashing a drum whilst others are meditating is very disrespectful. Wait your turn. The monument has been there for 5,500 years – it's not going anywhere.

8) Please take away any candle fragments, empty nightlight holders and other such items you may find inside. It may not be your litter, but I believe that clearing items will help those who follow you to enjoy a more enhanced experience of this magical sacred site. And, perhaps, the Ancestors may be pleased with your efforts too. As a Pagan myself, I am conscious that people

may have left items inside with great intent and love. When clearing the inside of such items, I do so carefully and mindfully, and often re-deposit items such as corn dollies, flowers, fruit and other **biodegradable** items on the mound outside. The objects therefore stay on the barrow, but Mother Nature is now able to take them naturally back into her body.

9) As you enter, the first chambers on the left and right (the SE and NE chambers) often house nesting swallows during the summer. Please respect their presence, and that of their newly hatched young. Please do not drum or chant in these two chambers when nests are occupied.

The Balance

There is a delicate balance between sacred sites remaining open for ritual and ceremonial use, and the preservation of the archaeology. The National Trust Plan Strategy Statement affirms that the organisation is obliged to, ‘... *Continue to attempt to accommodate ‘new religious’ and other visitors drawn to Avebury... the National Trust does not discriminate on the basis of why people come but is concerned with how they respect the sites and other users*’. Discussions have taken place in recent years between Pagans, Druids, farmers, local government, archaeologists, English Heritage and the National Trust, most notably regarding issues surrounding Stonehenge. High profile Druid Arthur Pendragon has been a thorn in the side of officialdom for many years, as he has fought to re-open sites for ritual purpose, and to have skeletons reinstated into burial mounds. All sides are rarely in agreement on every issue, of course, but dialogue is always a good thing, and hopefully all issues will eventually be resolved to everyone’s satisfaction.

In the past I have arrived at WKLB to find English Heritage staff moving around the interior armed with gloves, brushes and bin-bags, cleaning-up after a festival, especially the summer solstice. I believe that my fellow Pagans and I should ourselves be custodians of WKLB, to clean it up on a regular basis. I do not expect anyone to clear up after me – do you?

At the end of the day, English Heritage have the power to close, and even back-fill, the monument, as they have had to do elsewhere. I am sure they do not want to do this, but their prime responsibility is for the care of the monument. If things got so bad that damage to the monument threatened its preservation, I would be the first with a shovel in my hands to help them fill it in. A love and reverence for this monument resides deep inside me; one could say I have been consumed with adoration for it. So closing it off would be a very bitter pill indeed for me to swallow, but one I would accept.

I would suggest that if everyone who visits WKLB, for whatever purpose, follows my guidelines, then this hallowed place may stay open forever.

Respectful Use of the Monument

I am not being a killjoy, or discouraging people from doing ceremony and ritual inside WKLB. Far from it – I regularly lead groups into the interior to do that very thing. But after our activities, anyone coming in would not even know



Honouring the ancestors inside the west chamber with a drum and a pumpkin, Samhain 2010.

we had been there – not from physical evidence anyway.

For instance, at Samhain 2010 we had gone to WKLB to pay our respects and give thanks to the ancestors. The atmosphere inside was cool and damp, and we could see our breath, even though it was not particularly cold outside. Placing a hollowed-out pumpkin (with a carved smiley face) in the west chamber, we duly paid our respects. Afterwards, we packed the pumpkin back into our rucksack and, after clearing up other people's litter, left the chambers cleaner than when we arrived.

However, all is not doom and gloom. The situation may have improved somewhat in recent years, but the



Full Moon gathering at WKLB, with drums and a didge being played as we watched the setting Sun, before going into the chambers below. After such events there are no physical signs that we have even been there!

problem has not gone away. Every week I go up to WKLB and almost always

have to tidy up something. People like Clare Slaney and Greywolf have shown how to use such sites responsibly and they belong to a growing collection of responsible fellow-Pagans, who, like us, want to ensure the chambers stay open for use by **everyone**. (For a discussion on these issues see Wallis 2003, p. 168-194.)

Respect for others and a tolerance of other people's beliefs is surely one of the wonderful tenets upon which modern Paganism is based. On one summer afternoon I went up to WKLB with a group of Americans, some of whom were on a spiritual quest, but we could not access the west chamber because two men had 'occupied' the whole chamber, having even laid out rugs, and were chanting, playing a sitar, and recording a CD! The music, I must admit, was beautiful as it echoed around the chambers. But they were not showing respect to the many others who were visiting on that busy summer solstice weekend. Why did they not occupy one of the side chambers? Why did they think they had priority over other visitors?

People come to honour and pay their respects to the ancestors, which is a noble thing that I often do myself, but how about respect for the living also? I hold regular daytime field trips to the site, but always respect other visitors, and never 'occupy' the site to the exclusion of others. My full



Peace ceremonies can be held at WKLB if carried out with respect. Here, we gather around a crystal skull in August 2010. (Image: Alex Smith.)

Moon drumming/chanting events are held around and after sunset, by which time the site is usually devoid of other people. If others do roll up, they are invited into the gathering. In any case, I encourage those present to use **all** the chambers, as well as the mound and forecourt outside.

On one occasion, whilst we were inside drumming, a woman came to the site to sleep there for the night. She did not want to bother us, but on finding her patiently waiting outside, I invited her in from the cold. She moved into the SE

chamber, out of the wind. I had no right whatsoever to exclude her from the site whilst we were holding our ceremony, regardless of our 'earth-healing' ideals. I hope the ancestors were pleased. WKLB belongs to no person, to no spirituality, to no sect, nor does it exclusively belong to Pagans, archaeologists, English Heritage, or any one else. WKLB is for the whole of society, for everyone. In Neolithic times, WKLB represented the whole community, and belonged to that community, to the people. In my opinion, nothing has changed. This is the magic of WKLB; it belongs to the past, the present, and the future.

Prevention is always better than cure. We should respect this wonderful legacy of times when the ancestors were central to people's spirituality. After all, one day we will all be ancestors. What goes around comes around, so we should *take* nothing but photographs and, with the exception of a few footprints in the snow, *leave* nothing behind except our love.

'Don't change the site, let the site change you.'
(From the ASLaN Charter.)

CHAPTER 16
OF
WEST KENNET LONG BARROW:
LANDSCAPE, SHAMANS AND THE COSMOS,

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