

The Megalithic Portal

Ten years and counting as a community of interest social network

Presented at Central TAG, December 2011

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At the Megalithic Portal, photos and other information on ancient sites is sent in to us all the time by contributors. Each one is checked by a human editor, or site admin.

We have a team of about 12 volunteers working behind the scenes processing all this information that comes in. The majority of us are English, but we also have three Germans, an American and a New Zealander helping to extend our coverage world wide.

We've been doing this since 2001, the visitor input goes back this far. Our database was seeded from research I did on megalithic and other ancient sites to be found on early web sites. Also from site data from Aubrey Burl who could see early on the power of releasing such information onto the web. We have been adding to and in a few cases correcting his data ever since.

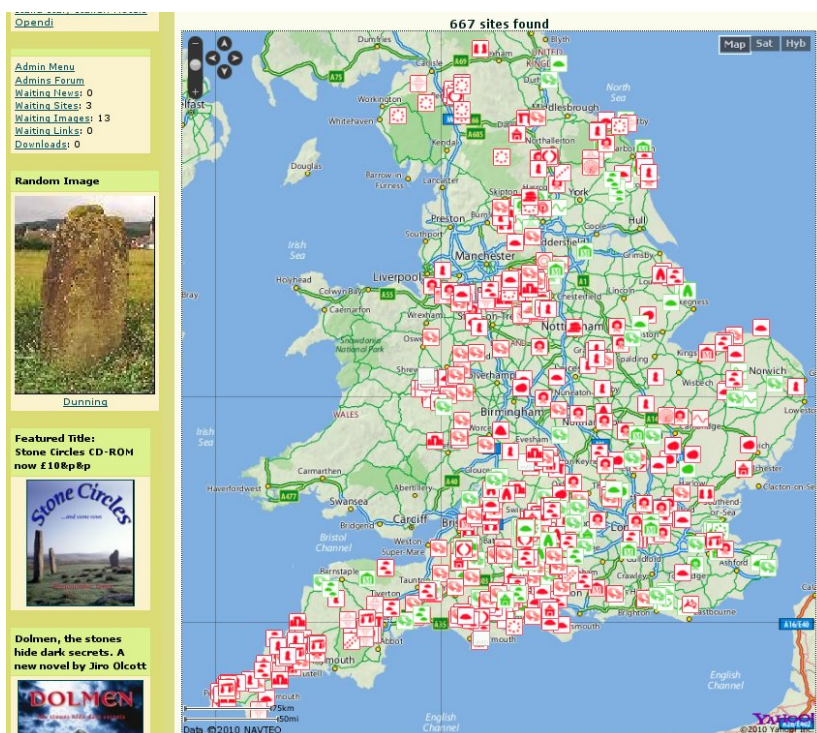
The screenshot shows the front page of the Megalithic Portal website. At the top, there's a header with the site name 'The Megalithic Portal' and a search bar. A central banner promotes the 'Megalithic Portal Society' with a 10% shop discount. To the right, there's an advertisement for 'Expena Vinyl Flooring'. Below the header, a navigation bar includes links for 'Latest Entries', 'Find a Site / Maps', 'Join In', 'News and Links', 'Forum', 'Shop', 'About Us', and a welcome message 'Welcome Andy B'. The main content area is divided into several sections: a 'Main Menu' on the left with links to various site features; a central area with 'View What's New (Latest)', 'More new Pictures', and 'Switch to UK News only'; and a 'Categories' section on the right listing various site types and their counts. Below these, there are three map thumbnails: 'The Megalith Map UK and Ireland', 'Megaliths and Prehistory in Europe', and 'Rest of the World'. A 'Photo Pages' section features a post titled 'V/V' submitted by 'ShropshireTraveller' on Tuesday, 01 June 2010, with 681 reads. The post includes a photo of a rock art site and a description of the V/V cattle company mark. Below this, another 'Photo Pages' section features a post titled 'Down Tor' submitted by 'shropshiretraveller' on Sunday, 30 May 2010, with 6300 reads. This post includes a photo of a stone circle and a description of its features. On the far right, there's a 'Kilmartin Guide' section with a book cover image and a 'Survey' section with a poll question: 'Are you put off from going down a public footpath where there are cows in your way?'. The survey options include 'No, I am completely fearless, why all the fuss', 'No, I am careful and they don't really worry me', 'No, but I don't like scary ones with big horns', 'Yes I don't like it but I still go for it', 'Yes I won't go near cows, my dog doesn't like them', 'Yes I won't go near cows, my kids don't like them', and 'Yes I won't go near cows, my dog doesn't like them'.

The Megalithic Portal Front Page www.megalithic.co.uk

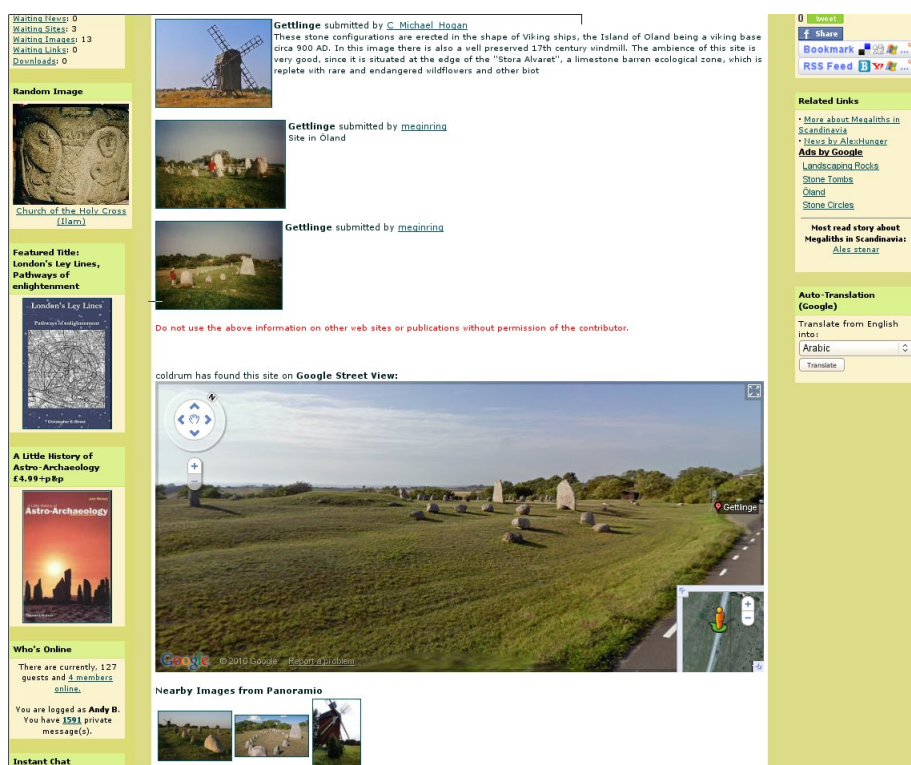
The presentation includes a brief overview of the workings of the Megalithic Portal which is available on video.

Google Street View is a surprising resource for images of stones and other ancient sites. It is amazing how many of these you can see from the roadside. 95% of UK roads are now covered in amazing detail. In 2010 we ran a competition to see who could find the most and those taking part came up with over 1200 sites visible.

You can also download our site data as points to display on Google Earth. Each point shows an icon of what it is and gives a summary plus a thumbnail image.



Over 1000 sites found on Google Street View by Megalithic Portal contributors



Example Street View image on the Megalithic Portal – Gettlinge in Sweden

Thoughts on Alternative Archaeology

It has probably not escaped your notice that there is a huge following for 'alternative archaeology' on the internet. For whatever reason the general public don't feel 'satisfied' with what conventional archaeology has to offer. Especially not the book buying public who seem to have an insatiable appetite for the ideas of Robert Bauval, Robert Temple, Knight and Butler, Andrew Collins and the like.

Now I'm not suggesting archaeologists try to emulate these authors, I'm just making the observation that there is a huge demand out there for exciting ancient history narratives, especially ideas of very ancient technologies that we don't understand, or linkages between ancient sites in different parts of the world.

Such things as cosmic energy grids (which make ley lines look positively pedestrian), interest in theories of the world ending in 2012, crystal healing and into what you would call 'new age' type beliefs over to the completely wilder suggestions that we are all ruled over by lizards, or whatever.

I really don't really make a habit of following such things but in my role of running a high profile 'ancient sites' web site it soon became clear from my inbox that a substantial minority of our visitors are interested in such things.

Now like it or loathe it, it is a reality that there is a huge interest in such subjects and we ignore it at our peril. At a practical level I do come across people interested in burying crystals and all manner of things at ancient sites, and I try to play a direct role in educating these people about the correct way to approach archaeological sites - that it is of course NOT OK to bury things in the ground there, or burn candles in the alcoves of West Kennet Long Barrow as seems to happen routinely down there.

Or indeed to bring over a 'Mayan spiritual guide' over for a course in their spirituality, which is all well and good until it involves conducting a fire ceremony inside Castlerigg stone circle - removing turf to light a bonfire, to give the most damaging example I can think of.



Removing turf at Castlerigg to begin a 'Mayan fire ceremony', photo by TheCaptain



Continuation of 'Mayan fire ceremony' at Castlerigg - photo by TheCaptain

With the posting of those images online, one of our contributors traced who the group was. It was a bit late to get much more than an apology, which was offered, along with an undertaking that it wouldn't be repeated.

(Ref: <http://www.megalithic.co.uk/modules.php?op=modload&name=Forum&file=viewtopic&topic=2994&forum=4&start=0>)

So it's clear that the old adage of 'leave nothing but footprints' isn't getting through to everybody. So given that we know these people are out there and visiting both our web pages and the sites themselves, then it seems to me essential that we engage with them.

The way we do that is to keep the majority of our site at a purely factual level, but also to find room for alternative viewpoints to be debated. We try to keep things up to date with post processual ideas, 'archaeology of the senses' and the like, I know there is a great interest in such subjects with our visitors.

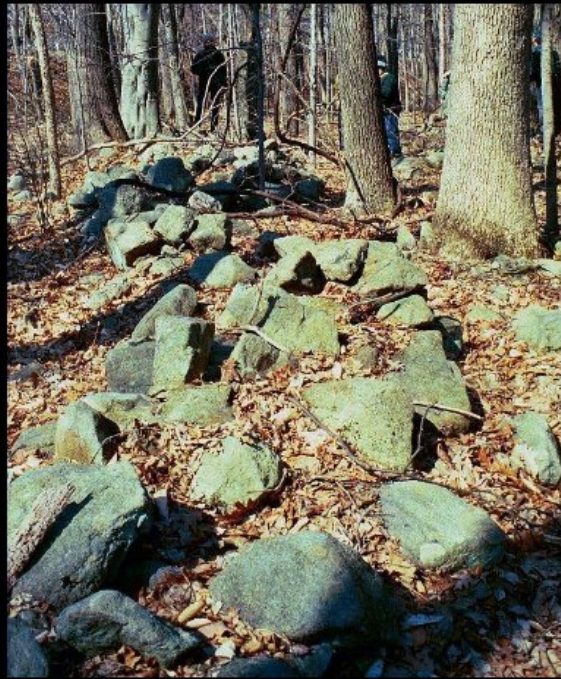
At the same time we like to give room for new ideas from our readers. We try and keep these plausible, in other words we're talking about 'standing stones as long distance route markers', shadow casting at stone circles, the possibility of glacial action being responsible for depositing the Stonehenge bluestones and so on, rather than the numerous ones relating to Stonehenge as anything from a giant rotary grain grinder, having a giant wooden roof, storing sunlight energy in the stones or suchlike. So steering clear of those, we also try to concentrate on lesser known prehistoric sites wherever possible.

Over in North America the definition of 'prehistoric' is rather different (pre-Columbian being more common) but we were, as far as I know, the first archaeology outlet to highlight the phenomena of Native American 'Rock Piles'. American archaeologists have treated these rather scathingly in past decades, but they are now starting to gain acceptance as a legitimate monument type.



Cairn from Poconos cairn field by Aluta

Unfortunately this uncertainty has played into the hands of some landowners, who have been known to bulldoze these rock piles to make way for development. In many cases the locations of such sites are kept quiet by the people who do recognise and appreciate them so as to protect them from such damage. In this case we just record an approximate location so they can be still be plotted to indicate the general area on our worldwide ancient site map.



Hackettstown Ceremonial Stone Landscape by Aluta

Left: The serpentine wall at Hackettstown, New Jersey. Note the curving form of the wall.

Top Right: Aluta writes: The tipped-up stone at the end of the serpentine wall at the Hackettstown site. When I took this many years ago, I took it reluctantly, at the urging of others, as I was sceptical of the snake/wall concept. I have now seen it enough times to know that this was a very good example of this common feature.

Bottom Right: More rock piles at the Hackettstown site, with someone there for scale.

Refs: Hackettstown Ceremonial Stone Landscape
[http://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=17578:](http://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=17578)

Rock piles on mall site will remain a mystery
<http://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=2146412435>

Tribe, Developer, Battle over Rhode Island Rock Piles
<http://www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=16803>

Cabell cairns pique archaeologist's interest
<http://www.wvgazette.com/Outdoors/200911140679?page=1&build=cache>

Clearly most damage to ancient sites is not caused by Pagan groups, most often damage is caused by the landowner. Earlier this year a large segment of the southernmost Priddy circle, one of the four large Neolithic circular henges near to Wells was bulldozed flat. All we can safely say at the moment is that a 72 year old man was arrested, interviewed and released on bail pending further enquiries.



Aerial view of Priddy Circles showing the area of the Southern circle that was flattened earlier this year. Photo by JJ Evendon from some years before the damage



The cut through the southeastern bank of Priddy S circle – photo by our contributor TheCaptain - the first photo of the damage

As part of writing this for the TAG 2011 conference I asked some of our contributors "Why are you still here" what with all the social media out there you could be engaging with?

"For the database" was the reply, referring to the vast mine of information and photos we have on tens of thousands of ancient sites worldwide.

But also for the helpful and friendly attitude of the site admins and other contributors.

"The team that helps Andy B keep the Megalithic Portal up to date and as accurate as possible are a remarkably devoted and dedicated group. They do not stand on ceremony and are delightfully helpful. They respect integrity - if you think something may be wrong - do tell them - they will hear you out."

"When I first started suggesting (with some naïveté) there might be potential errors I was treated with the utmost courtesy. If they thought I was wrong, they told me so ever so politely - I was not 'put down' or 'dismissed', I was very much encouraged - they're a great bunch - have no fears - just leave a note on the relevant page" - 4clydesdale7

I like to think that at the Megalithic Portal we have developed a unique stance to welcome and respect all our visitors. The way we do this is that from a spiritual point of view our site's stance is agnostic rather than scientifically atheist as a purely archaeological view would typically be.

In other words we accept that ancient sites have deeper meanings to people than exist on a purely factual level, and we undertake to respond to and 'serve' this group of visitors at the same time as the more conventionally minded people with whom you would have a conventional archaeological discourse.

While we may personally believe in the archaeological and wider scientific method, we don't necessarily believe they are the 'be all and end all' of research. You could take the study of folklore as an 'acceptable' example of this.

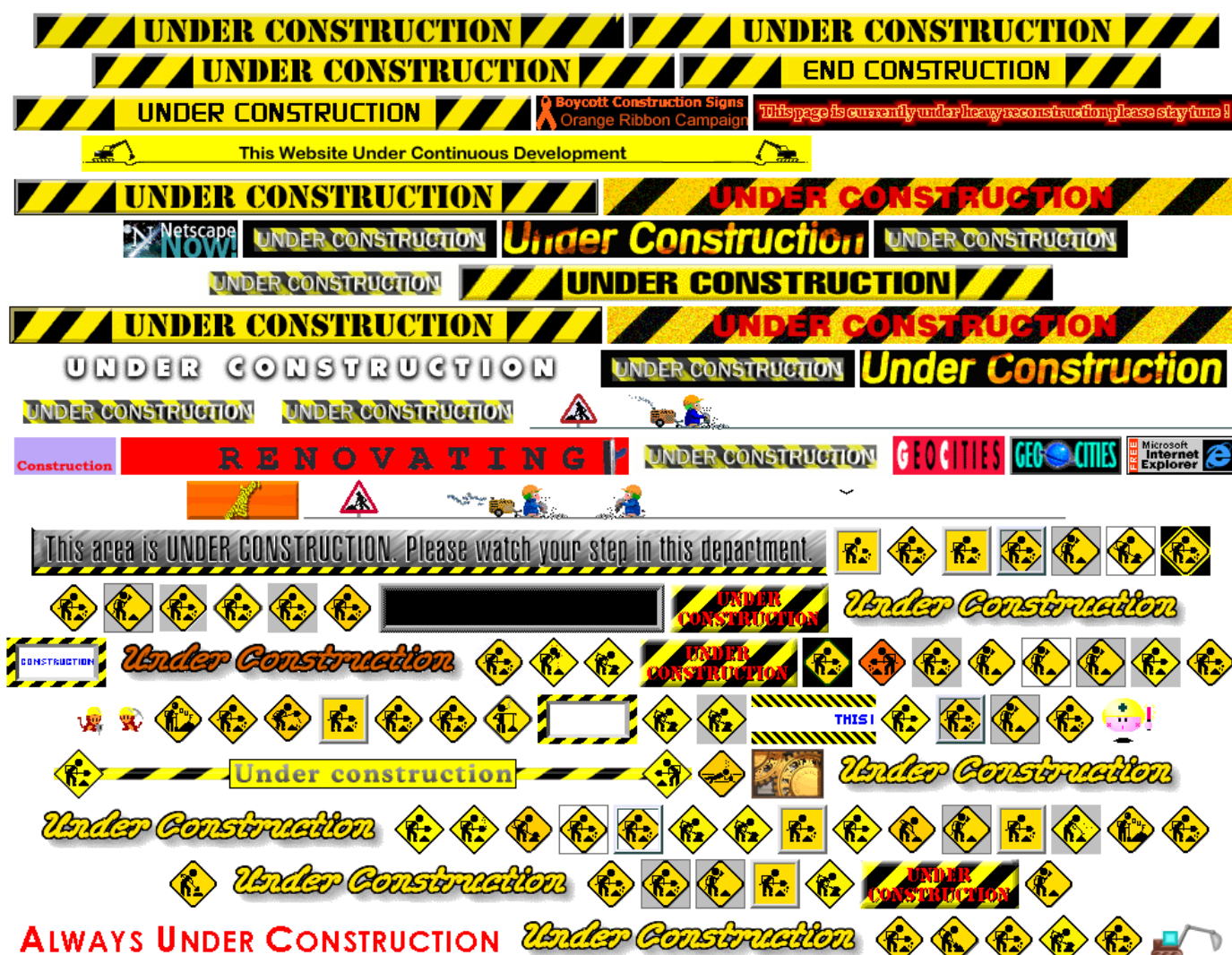
We also look at modern stone circles and other similar modern monumental constructions. As well as being interesting in their own right you can learn from them about the application of symbolism.

So unlike some 'archaeological atheists', we do not belittle people's beliefs or indeed belittle the people who hold those beliefs. We don't lecture them about the scientific method being the 'one true path' or talk down to them. Being 'agnostic' we can choose not to believe their views but we can still recognise their worth.

Thoughts on Social Media

Who here has heard of Geocities? They were set up in 1995 as an easy way to host people's personal web pages and were hugely popular, indeed by 1999 they were third behind AOL and Yahoo in terms of web traffic.

In 1999 they were bought by Yahoo for \$3.5 billion in stock. They were so popular with beginners that they became a bit of a running joke, with all their animated GIF graphics and 'under construction' signs, which probably didn't help with being taken seriously. To cut a long story short, Yahoo never did find a way to make money with them, and in April 2009 they announced they were closing Geocities, giving six months notice that the pages would all be deleted.



A small sample of the images rescued by the 'internet rescue archaeology project' from Geocities pages before deletion

Many of the Geocities pages were interesting, some were about archaeology. Several groups (archive.org, OOCities and others) decided that they would try and archive the content and they set to work harvesting page information and images. Despite having six months to do it, not all the user web sites have been saved and the groups have now pooled resources to gather up what they have to create an archive. They recently released a torrent of several hundred gigabytes of recovered data. So real rescue archaeology of the Internet itself going on.

To go back to the other top three sites from 1999, AOL and Yahoo, well there you have two other huge user communities which are now virtually defunct. In some ways Yahoo Groups was the 'Facebook' of the early 2000s, it was 'the place' to host your internet mailing list and photo archive and discuss things with your friends. No longer.

Speaking of 'social media', let's not forget the venerable Britarch and other mailing lists - very much alive - use them! Also Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and Instant Messaging services. While not the latest thing, these have their place so don't ignore them.

So to get back to my main point, much of the information that people stored on Geocities is now lost forever. Innumerable other pages hosted on other free web hosts and the user web space of dial-up ISPs that have been long abandoned have all gone the same way.

Now clearly Facebook have found a way to make money. You probably know how. By harvesting, aggregating and selling your personal data, and that of your visitors. There's not time to go into this in any more detail, suffice it to say that many people DO mind about this and won't be joining Facebook in a hurry.

So while Facebook itself isn't going to go away in a hurry, but supposing one of your contributors upsets them, Facebook have the power to delete your pages and user feed at a moment's notice and once gone, they are gone. I know people who this has happened to. Did they have it backed up? No. Is it even possible to back it up somewhere if you did want to? Not that I know of - your data is stuck inside the Facebook's 'walled garden'. In fact in Facebook's eyes is it 'your' information at all? Just some things to think about.

The screenshot shows a Facebook profile for 'Andy Megalithic'. The left sidebar lists 407 friends, with names like Cezary Namirski, Star Lobb, Mario Fiorillo, Sarah Sharp, Erin Hillforts Robinson, Nancy Wisser, Ian McNeil Cooke, and Dafi Smith. The main feed shows a post from Yvonne Cleland about Newgrange, followed by a post from Andy Megalithic about the 'Hohlefels Höhle' exhibition, which includes a photo of a rock and text about the exhibition at the Museum of Schloss Hohentübingen. Below this is a post from Bill Carnaby thanking the site for its content.

Andy Burnham's Facebook page showing content relayed from the Megalithic Portal

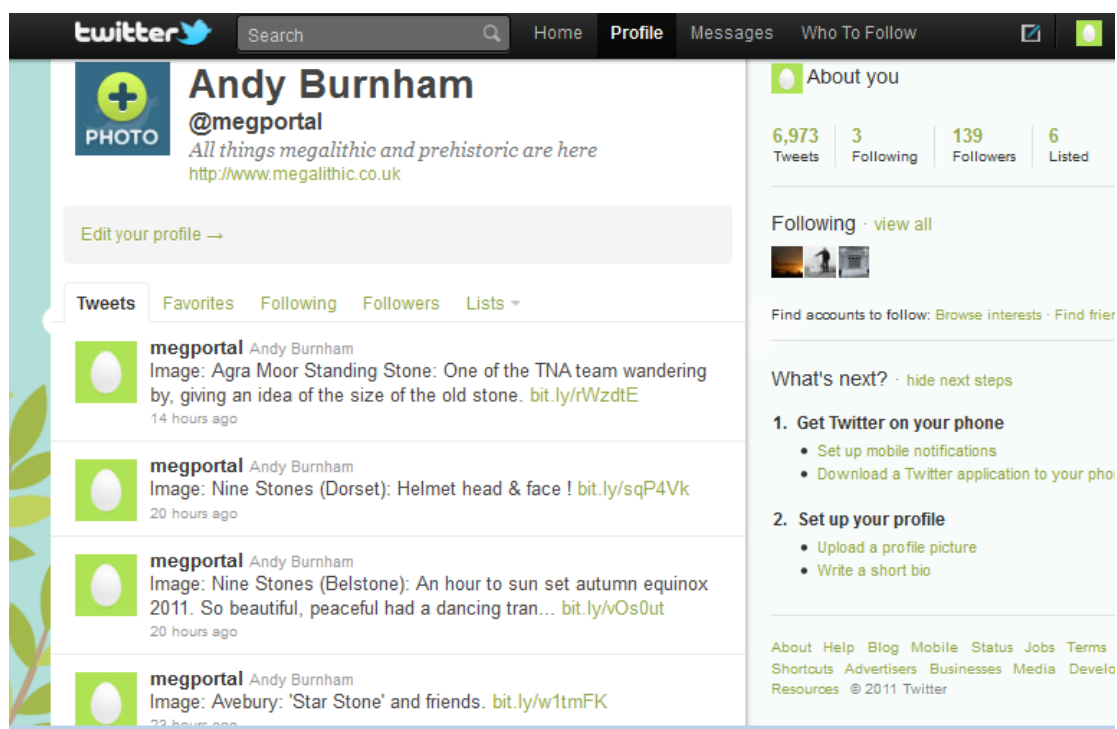
Moving to consider Wikipedia, do you really want to turn the information from your project over to be edited by any wandering PR person who might have an interest.

Conversely to that apparent freedom, several of our contributors have experience of making what they considered sensible and helpful edits to Wikipedia pages, only to find them reverted by unaccountable admins for reasons best known to themselves. The people I'm talking about were by no means out to vandalise Wikipedia, far from it.

Having said all that I am a strong supporter of open source and creative commons content, and there are many other places to share it online. Best if all, why not put photos and text up on your own blog with a creative commons sharing licence. In my experience, if you put the time in to make your own blog a good, clear and authoritative source of information then someone else will do the 'adding to Wikipedia' bit for you - whether you like it or not!

So having got all that off my chest, I'm really quite alarmed to see indications in today's abstracts that web pages are considered by some here to be so 'last year'. In my opinion there really is nothing to beat something you have complete and total editorial control over. Blogs such as those from Wordpress are really easy to set up. They can have multiple contributors and admins set up.

Most importantly, they can also output to RSS, send 'ping's and various other methods to aggregate out your content to other places. Once you have an RSS feed running it is very easy to set up a relay so what you write on your blog is echoed out to your Facebook page, and indeed on Twitter as well if you want. I do both of these from our web site using a couple of third party web applications to do the conversion and upload. (I use NetworkedBlogs and Twitterfeed, there are various others)



Andy Burnham's Twitter page showing content relayed from the Megalithic Portal

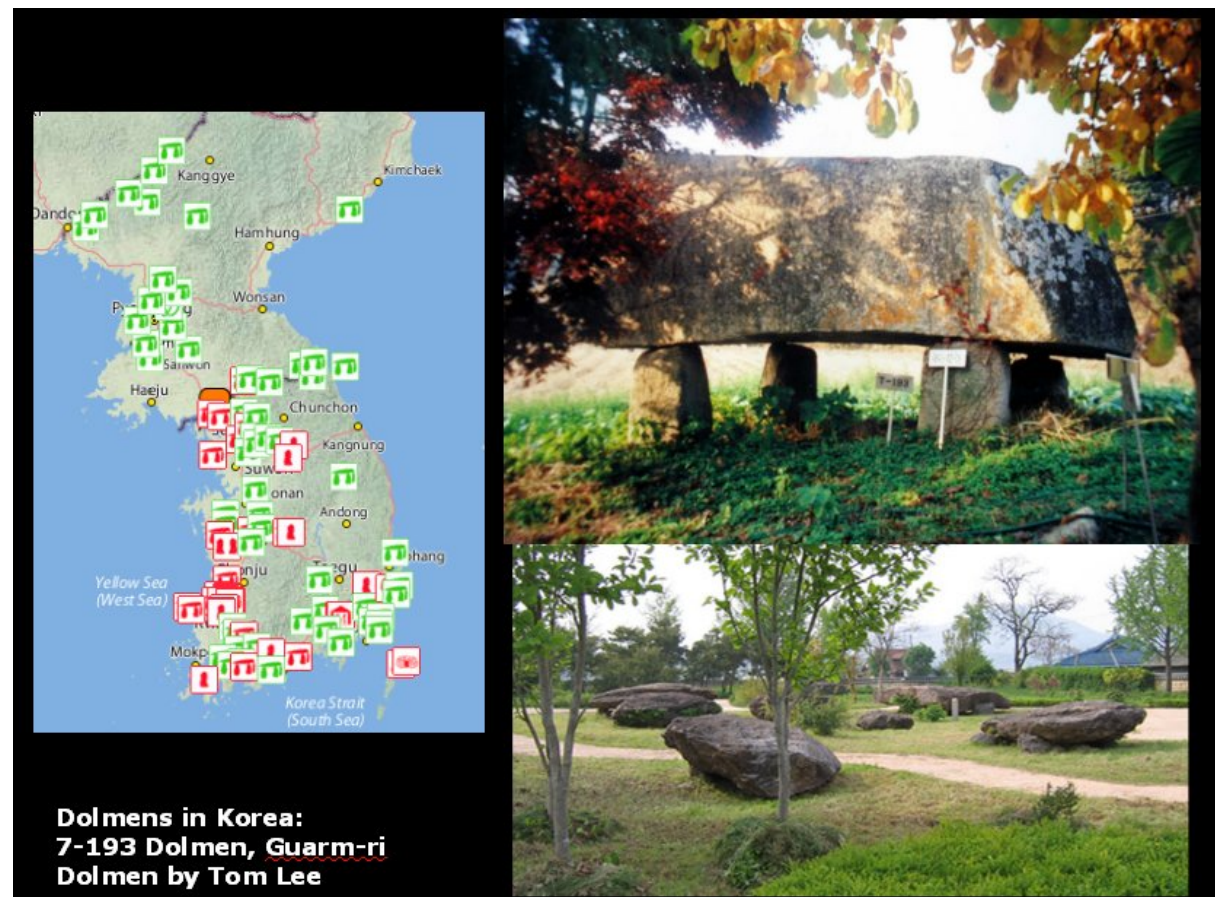
Our main Megalithic Portal pages work like a group blog with a mix of ancient sites news from other sources and our own feature articles and book reviews. Within a few minutes of being put on our blog they are automatically uploaded in summary form to both Facebook and Twitter, with links back to the original content. And as an RSS feed is an open standard, supported by thousands of web applications, you are empowering other people to use and link to your feed on their own blogs, or desktop news readers, or any of the myriad other ways you can send and receive news.

We also do this with our geographic data - in a similar way we offer feeds in the form of KML downloads for Google Earth, or formatted for GPS mapping devices.



So in doing this - having your own blog or web site and feeding data out to the social media sites, you really do get the 'best of both worlds'. You are completely your own boss, not relying on a third party to look after your precious content. But you can still engage with people via Facebook , Twitter and so on. Better still, you are 'future proof' - so when the next great social media service comes along - whatever that may be - you can bet that someone will provide a way to feed your updates into it as well. I really can't see a down side to doing this. Once set up you only have one lot of updates to do and everything else follows from there.

On Twitter briefly, I believe Lorna is going to suggest that Twitter is prevalently used for communication between specialists, and not for communicating with 'the public'. My response to this is that 'the public' are specialists as too. Where possible we like to include and link to the original papers that are the source of archaeology news, people appreciate this first-hand access to information. Certainly having the experts behind the papers available to answer questions would be useful, all too often emails don't get answered. But talk to them like equals, they may have specialist knowledge of their own they can offer back to you.



So best of luck with blogging your finds, and if it includes any prehistory or the related subjects we cover, please do let us at the Megalithic Portal know about it and we'll pass it on to the thousands who receive our email newsletter, and the the hundreds of thousands who visit our pages each month.