

ALEXANDER KEILLER MUSEUM, AVEBURY

The museum was founded by Alexander Keiller – a member of the Keiller marmalade family – to display the finds from his excavations at Avebury and Windmill Hill; it was opened to the public in 1938. Keiller's methods were ahead of their time and incorporated pioneering techniques including aerial photography. As a result, the museum now houses one of the most important prehistoric archaeological collections in the country.

Historical Description

The rich prehistoric landscape around Avebury is registered as a World Heritage Site. Its most visible monuments include the great henge in Avebury village, with its stone circles and avenues; the causewayed camp on Windmill Hill; the long barrow at West Kennet; and the largest artificial mound in Europe, Silbury Hill – all built during the Neolithic period (c.4000 BC to 2000 BC).

The building of these ceremonial structures was made possible by the adoption of agriculture and may have been necessitated by the development of increasingly elaborate rituals to ensure its success. The larger monuments indicate, and may even have been intended to foster, a greater degree of social cohesion between formerly separate communities in the area.

Learning Opportunities

What religious or secular authority undertook the construction of the enormous complex of ritual monuments in and around Avebury? On what was its power based? What sort of ceremonies took place here?

Questions like this may have to remain unanswered for many years: after all, what would we know about Christianity if we had only the bare ruin of Westminster Abbey as evidence? However, a visit to the Alexander Keiller Museum is a crucial link in assisting children to relate the site today to what archaeologists have been able to discover about its past.

The lives of the Neolithic farmers of Avebury were probably governed by powerful traditions with the history of their community, its place in the landscape, the cycle of the seasons and the importance of

predicting changes in the weather. Preparation for a visit might usefully begin by looking at modern communities where there is a direct relationship between the use of natural resources and survival, and at past societies (e.g. the Egyptians or the Aztecs) where highly elaborate rituals were believed to be essential if life was to continue.

It is important to establish that the builders of Avebury were not 'primitive'; they were highly skilled in the production of polished tools and hunting weapons, and wore well-made leather and woven garments. Evidence from elsewhere suggests that they probably lived in small hamlets or in individual homesteads surrounded by small neat fields, which were probably ploughed using teams of oxen; they clearly had an aristocratic elite of some kind, whose status is reflected in the construction of shrines and burial complexes such as West Kennet and Silbury Hill – the largest man-made mound in Europe.

The Alexander Keiller Museum has a separate Education Room and there is a comprehensive study pack (see *A Guide to Resources* below) which provides both background information and suggestions for investigative work on site. In the museum itself, work can focus on the way the past is presented. Are pictorial or three-dimensional reconstructions of the past helpful and, if so, how do we ensure they stay within the bounds of possibility: how many different interpretations can be drawn from the same piece of evidence?

The skeleton of a prehistoric child invites speculation as to the motives and feelings of those who buried that small body. The contents of a purse belonging to a medieval man, crushed beneath one of the stones of the Great Circle when he and others were trying to demolish it in the 14th Century, prompts the question: why should people of one age set out to destroy relics of the past, whilst people of another (our own) try to preserve them?

National Curriculum Work

At Avebury and its associated sites pupils are encountering the visible remains of a complete way of life: *English, R.E and Art* can be brought together in a consideration of the nature or belief and the kinds of myth and legend which the Neolithic farmers might

have used to explain their world. *Geography*, which is concerned with the relationship between people and their environment, can also be studied in relation to past societies, whilst pupils can reconstruct in models and displays the *Technology* used in building the major monuments. *Science* enters into all of these activities because scientific archaeology provides the basis of our knowledge of the prehistoric past. Of particular interest are those methods which help establish the date of archaeological finds.

Opening Hours

1 April – 31 Oct: Open Daily 10am – 6pm
1 Nov – 31 March Open Daily 10am – 4pm
Closed 24-25 December and 1 January

Location

1 mile north of the A4, as junction of A4361 and B4003, 6 miles west of Marlborough.
OS Map 173, Ref: SU102699

How to Get There

Road: On A4361, Swindon to Devizes, 1¼ miles from Beckhampton Roundabout on the A4.

Bus: Thamesdown 49/A Swindon-Devizes/Marlborough; Wilts and Dorset 5/6 Salisbury-Swindon (all pass close to Swindon Railway Station).

Train: Nearest stations are Swindon 11 miles and Pewsey 10 miles.

Facilities

Parking: On site.

Refreshments: On site.

Toilets: On site.

Access: Good for wheelchair users.

Education Room: Handling collection and other resources may be booked with the museum custodian.

Bookstall: Sells guidebooks, postcards and souvenirs.

Contacts

The site is managed by the National Trust, The Alexander Keiller Museum, Avebury, Marlborough, Wiltshire, SN8 1RF. Tel: 01672 539 250.

National Trust Education Officer: Barbara Webber.
Tel: 01985 843 622.

English Heritage Regional Office: English Heritage, 29 Queen Square, Bristol, BS1 4ND.
Tel: 0117 9750 700

English Heritage Regional Education Officer: Amanda Feather. Tel: 0117 9750 729.

Free Educational Visits

There is normally an entrance charge to the museum but visits by educational groups are free provided they are booked in advance. A preparatory visit is also free to enable teachers to plan the trip more efficiently.

Booking Procedure: By application to the form from the museum (as above).

Limit on Party Number: 100

Required Teacher/Pupil Ratio: 1:15

Nearby and Related Sites

Avebury is part of a rich prehistoric landscape. The other main monuments are West Kennet Long Barrow, Silbury Hill and Windmill Hill: information about these sites are available in the study pack.

A Guide to Resources

Coupland L and Spring C, The Avebury Monuments – A Study Pack for Teachers, 1998, English Heritage, ISBN 1-85074-173-5.

The teachers' guide in this study pack contains a full bibliography and a list of other available resources..

Video: Working on the Evidence: Avebury. Suitability 9-13 years. 22 minutes. 1987.

Video: Looking at Prehistoric Sites. Suitability 11-13 years. 20 minutes. 1982.

All English Heritage resources are available from English Heritage c/o Gillards, Trident Works, Temple Cloud, Bristol, BS39 5AZ. Tel: 01761 452 966, Fax: 01761 453 408.

E-mail: ehsales@gillards.com

English Heritage Education

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