

Part 1: Introduction

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1.1 Background

The Avebury World Heritage Site (WHS) and its wider hinterland comprises a landscape which is a palimpsest of archaeological features. Avebury is one of a small number of areas in southern Britain which appears to have acted as a focus for ceremonial and ritual activities during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age; it is one of the richest and most varied of these areas. The particularly rich assemblage of archaeological sites, both visible and buried, provides a vivid record of past landscape patterns and use and has exerted a considerable visual and cultural influence on the surrounding landscape for more than 5000 years.

The Avebury WHS, an area of 22.5 square kilometres, together with Stonehenge, was inscribed onto the World Heritage List by UNESCO in 1986 in recognition of its outstanding universal value. Avebury is located on the Marlborough Downs in Wiltshire, around 40 km north-west of Stonehenge. The Avebury Henge and Stone Circles, Silbury Hill, West Kennet Avenue and other associated sites greatly contribute to a distinctive historic and cultural landscape.

Since 1990 a group of archaeologists has been meeting regularly to discuss archaeological issues affecting the Avebury WHS (Chadburn 1998). From February 1996 onwards a key focus of discussion has been the formulation of a comprehensive research agenda for the WHS and its wider hinterland. During the last decade, the composition of the group has often changed, and this publication represents the written and verbal contribution of many people (Appendices A and B). This volume takes the form of a series of individually-authored papers written in consultation with other members of the Avebury Archaeological and Historical Research Group (AAHRG), rather than a document written by committee. The following text therefore displays a diversity of styles and approaches to the archaeological potential of the area.

AAHRG was set up in early 1993 following the publication by English Heritage in 1992 of the Management Statement for the Avebury WHS (English Heritage 1992) and AAHRG (1993). The EH document established a number of principles for management of the WHS, and recommended that two sub-groups be set up to assist a main WHS Working Party in the matters of a) archaeological and historical research and b) visitor and traffic management.

The specific role suggested for an archaeological sub-group was to:

seek to co-ordinate the efforts of the various bodies with interests in the WHS. Besides formulating broad

research designs and meshing individual projects, such a group would allow for efficient information exchange. English Heritage (1992, 11–12).

The Management Statement recognised that a suitable group to undertake this work – the Avebury Environs Forum (AEF) – had already been in existence since 1990. In due course the AEF agreed to undertake the role set out in the English Heritage Management Statement, although they reserved the right to meet separately if necessary as their role was wider than that set out by English Heritage.

In September 1996, a Management Plan Officer was appointed by the National Trust (funded by English Heritage), with the specific aim of writing a management plan for the Avebury WHS. This initiative was part of a national programme to ensure that all British WHS had management plans. The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) guidelines for the contents of management plans suggested that research programmes should be included (Feilden and Jokilehto 1993, 28 and 39).

The ICOMOS requirement was set against the general need for research designs in the wider archaeological community at this time. In 1995, following its earlier work on research frameworks (English Heritage 1991b), English Heritage conducted a survey of research designs in England to record existing research frameworks, and to make recommendations as a focus for a wide ranging debate about the way forward (Olivier 1996, 2). The publication of *Frameworks For Our Past* (*ibid.*) promoted the planning of future priorities for archaeological research and the development of regional strategies, resulting in publications such as *Wessex Before Words* (Woodward and Gardiner 1998) and *Framework for the Eastern Counties* (Glazebrook 1997). However, despite the ICOMOS guidelines, we have been unable to find any detailed published research agenda for any WHS, and we believe this document represents the first formal and detailed research agenda of this kind in the world.

Geoffrey Wainwright, the then chairman of the main Avebury WHS Working Party, suggested in late 1995 that AAHRG should take the research framework forward for use in the Avebury Management Plan. The published Management Plan (English Heritage 1998), taking into account the first draft Research Agenda (AAHRG 1997) heavily emphasises the need for ongoing archaeological research, the further development of the research agenda, and for sustainability in research methods (Section 1.2 below). The Plan also highlights the high potential for further

research and the close link between research and cultural heritage management in the Avebury WHS. One of the 26 main objectives in the Plan focuses specifically on research, aiming to:

Encourage and promote academic research to achieve a deeper understanding of the WHS necessary for its appropriate management. All research should be carried out with due regard to the principles of sustainability and to appropriate standards of work. (English Heritage 1998, Objective Z).

The Research Agenda presented here is primarily concerned with academic and scientific research issues rather than management issues, and in this respect the Research Agenda and Management Plan are two separate documents. However, the two are designed to be closely intertwined and together they comprise a *universal framework* as described in *Frameworks for Our Past* (Olivier 1996, 5, and fig.1).

The recently published WHS Management Plan for Stonehenge announces the intention to develop a separate research agenda for this part of the WHS (English Heritage 2000, section 4.7.8).

1.2 The Need for a Research Agenda

Research agenda have long been the subject of archaeological debate in Britain. The introduction of PPG 16 (DoE November 1990) led to concerns that development-sponsored work was being undertaken in an academic vacuum. Even before this there were similar concerns, principally following the rescue programmes of the 1960s and 1970s. Recently, Olivier concluded that the archaeological discipline needed a general framework of well-synthesised investigation to support the development of a new generation of research, and to provide reference points for cultural resource management. In particular, regional as well as national strategies were needed (Olivier 1996, 2). Morris argued convincingly that research-driven archaeology was both good for archaeology and cost-effective, and that without research strategies and agenda 'all that happens is that another avalanche of data is added to a largely unconsulted archive which is increasingly unaffordable to store' (Morris 1997, 11).

Such problems were felt at the local level in the Avebury area which was, despite its international status, experiencing difficulties in the co-ordination of research. Although the importance of the key archaeological features has been recognised and studied, the cultural landscape of the Avebury WHS is not particularly well understood or documented. The extant earthworks are easily recognised and can be planned for and managed. However, a wide range of archaeological features and sites exists in the area, the

evidence for which is less tangible and more elusive. There is a strong possibility of the discovery or rediscovery of as yet unknown archaeological sites, as illustrated by the recent discovery (1987–9) of the buried features of the impressive Late Neolithic 'palisade enclosures' complex at West Kennett and the 'Beckhampton Avenue' in 1999. Moreover, the RCHME (now English Heritage) has recently undertaken a thorough examination and transcription of all aerial photographic coverage of the WHS area as part of their National Mapping Programme (described in Section 5.7). This work has already resulted in the discovery of a number of previously unknown sites and landscape features, including ploughed-out barrows, enclosures and parts of field systems. Part 3 of this volume presents the many gaps in our current state of knowledge for all periods, and the great potential of the area for answering important research questions.

The Avebury WHS is well protected by the various designations for conservation and by planning policy. Thus, the opportunities for making new discoveries through the development control process are limited. This makes the existence of the Research Agenda and framework for implementation of crucial importance.

The WHS, because of its intrinsic values and international importance, does attract a great deal of interest and concern from the public as well as from archaeologists. The existence of the Research Agenda associated with the Management Plan is essential to aid a good level of public awareness and to stress that research is in the public interest.

The Sustainability of Research

It is essential for the long-term preservation of the WHS that all uses of the site are sustainable. Therefore, like any other land use, *research* has to be undertaken on a sustainable basis. In the context of research, sustainability can be defined as *meeting today's need for improved knowledge and understanding of the WHS without jeopardising the ability of future generations to do the same*.

Advances in knowledge rely on measures taken now to preserve enough physical and documentary evidence to allow future investigations and discoveries to improve understanding which can be passed on. This raises the question of what level of survival of physical evidence is needed to sustain such investigation into the future, allowing for ever-changing research interests. Paradoxically, excavation means the destruction of the physical evidence (apart from the artefacts and ecofacts). With advances in techniques in the future, it is probable that future generations of archaeologists will be able to extract more information from smaller samples of the evidence. For some interests, past destruction may already have precluded the pursuit of some lines of research; for some, nothing less than total

preservation of what remains will suffice; for others, a more modest level of preservation will be required. In the case of particular archaeological sites and monuments, different levels of preservation might be appropriate to support different lines of inquiry: the requirements of palaeoenvironmental research might be quite different from those of other lines of inquiry. The objective should be to aim at preserving the maximum rather than the minimum sample required to sustain future research.

Although some excavation and surface collection will be necessary to answer key research and hence management questions, it is recognised that these activities do diminish the evidence available to future generations of researchers, and as such do carry some moral obligations of care. These activities should be kept to a minimum and only carried out when there is a valid and defensible reason. The use of non-destructive prospection techniques and ‘experimental’ techniques should be encouraged.

There is a strong necessity for continued academic input and a research framework for the future management of the WHS. Research is essential to informed understanding, management and interpretation. It is difficult to distinguish between academic- and management-led research, as all research can have management potential and implications. Because of the elusive nature of many buried archaeological features, leading to surprise discoveries, it is often difficult to know the management implications until the research has been completed. The extent to which further research is required to help with specific management issues or problems needs to be examined further over the next few years. The continued updating of the Research Agenda should assist in addressing these issues. However, the Research Agenda does not intend to focus on the Avebury landscape and foster archaeological over-exploitation. The Research Agenda should help to ensure that a balanced and sustainable level of research is achieved by providing guidelines for research, mechanisms for consultations, and the coordination of resources.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

The general aim of the Research Agenda proposed here is to:

actively encourage sustainable levels of research into all periods and all relevant aspects of the WHS and its near environs, in order to improve archaeological understanding, to better inform other academics, and to allow informed archaeological resource management to take place.

Detailed objectives to meet these needs include:

- Recognise the importance of research in the WHS.
- Identify gaps in our understanding and promote the appropriate research topics and methodologies to fill the gaps.
- Support research into all periods and all relevant aspects of the WHS and its environs, ensuring the conduct and methods of research are sustainable and compatible with the identification and protection of WHS values.
- Ensure research is conducted in accordance with the objectives of the Management Plan.
- Promote a policy of preserving maximum rather than minimum remains (although some excavation may be desirable), encouraging the use of non-invasive techniques.
- Publish and disseminate existing information and ongoing research results to the land managers, the public and the archaeological community.
- Encourage the use of the most appropriate techniques for the successful investigation of the priority research areas.

The concept of archaeological significance is a dynamic one, which will change with the times and with advances in archaeological method and theory. The Research Agenda will continue to evolve and be updated on a regular basis.

The Agenda is principally aimed at people intending to conduct research, individuals and agencies concerned with conservation and management in the area, and all with a desire to understand more about Avebury’s past. However, it is considered that the Research Agenda will only be effective if widely disseminated to the academic community via conventional publication and electronic access. In general the Agenda itself encourages the publication and wide dissemination of existing information and ongoing research results. It is planned to publish the whole of the text presented here on the English Heritage web site. www.english-heritage.org.uk

1.4 Methodology

The Avebury Research Agenda is presented in line with the definition and structure recommended in *Frameworks For Our Past* (Olivier 1996). The Research Agenda comprises: a resource assessment (Part 2: a description of the archaeological resource and statement of the current state of knowledge); a list of gaps in that knowledge and the potential of the resource to answer questions (Part 3); and a statement setting out priorities (Part 4); and methods (Part 5). Because of the complexity of the palimpsest of archaeological features in the WHS, and the difficulties of dealing with the transitional periods, a holistic and diachronic

approach is used in the Research Agenda. Thus, themes have been identified as priority research areas, whose investigation will improve understanding of most chronological periods.

The AAHRG group devoted considerable time to discussing the methodology and format of the Agenda. Members felt that the Agenda should not be constrained by chronological divisions or by the limit of the WHS boundary which has little academic or archaeological integrity. Indeed, many of the authors have considered archaeological evidence for some periods from quite far afield in order to place the Avebury evidence in its proper context. However, for practical purposes both a chronological and thematic approach has been taken. The period divisions used are¹:

Lower & Middle Palaeolithic	500,000 BP–40,000 BP
Upper Palaeolithic/Late Glacial & Early Post-Glacial ²	18,000 BP–4,300/4,200 BC
Neolithic & Early Bronze Age	4,300/4,200 BC–1,400 BC
Late Bronze Age	1,400 BC–750 BC
Iron Age	750 BC–AD43
Romano-British	AD 43–410
Post-Roman and Pagan-Saxon	AD 410–700
Later Saxon and Medieval	AD 700–1500

A number of AAHRG members with specific expertise took certain of these periods to compose resource assessments and identify gaps in our knowledge. Data from the Wiltshire Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) was made available for each period. However, more than half of the sites identified on the SMR are undated, indicating the need for further investigation.

The authors were also asked to highlight lacunae and research objectives in relation to a number of themes chosen by AAHRG:

- Settlement and land use
- Environment
- Chronology
- Ceremony, ritual and religion
- Engineering, craft and technology
- People (diet and health)
- Social organisation, economy and subsistence
- Transport and communication.

These themes proved very useful for dealing with the complexities of transitional periods and for allowing a comparative approach across the board.

Much debate continued about the nature of the Agenda, resulting in the completion of the first draft document, compiled by Amanda Chadburn in December 1997 (AAHRG 1997). This version greatly contributed to the research issues written into the emerging WHS Management Plan. The first draft mainly focused on the resource assessment and

identification of gaps in our knowledge, and research priorities by theme (Parts 2, 3, and 4). This version was widely circulated to AAHRG members and other academics and archaeologists for comment. Since then, a series of methods and techniques was written up by experts with reference to the Avebury WHS (see section 5). In addition, a comprehensive report on the environmental evidence was produced with specific reference to Avebury (Allen 2000a). Thus, a more comprehensive second draft, compiled by Melanie Pomeroy, was produced and circulated in October 2000 (AAHRG 2000). Subsequently, a series of maps was prepared by Nick Burton from the Avebury GIS database (Figs 1–3, 9, 10, 13, 15, 19). Finally, Julie Gardiner at Wessex Archaeology undertook the copy editing and publication in February and March 2001.

It is recognised by AAHRG and the individual authors that aspects of the Agenda are incomplete and that there is scope for it making it more comprehensive.³ It was intended to include sections on the post-medieval period and on absolute dating methods. However, at this time it has been difficult to gain contributions from experts in these fields. It is hoped that this volume will be updated on a regular basis as research is conducted, new discoveries are made, and research priorities evolve. It is intended that the AAHRG group will continue to exist to pursue its work on the implementation and updating of the Agenda. Other sections which may be considered for inclusion in the future include topics such as sacred landscapes, cosmology, and the impact of 20th century interventions in the WHS.

As mentioned above, this Agenda has been developed from a series of voluntary contributions from a number of individual authors, without heavy text editing. This is reflected in the different levels of detail given the text and slight variations in the geographical focus of the period sections. Thus, the text purposefully reflects a range of different styles and approaches to the future of the past in the Avebury WHS⁴.

Endnotes

1. The dates given here for the chronological periods reflect the definitions given by the individual authors of the text specifically for the Avebury area. Some of the dates may therefore differ slightly from those included in standardised archaeological period lists used by organisations such as the (former) RCHME and English Heritage.
2. This time-frame excludes the period of the last major glaciation when Britain was largely uninhabited
3. The spelling of the place-names in this volume follows those set out by Isobel Smith (1965)
4. Most of the papers in this volume were written before publication of Peter Fowler's substantial research in the area (Fowler 2000). Future updates of this volume will take fully into account the results of that influential work.