

Bronze Age

This week Glastonbury Festival is taking place, allegedly in a mystical place where the echoes of the long past are still a powerful force in the world today, where leylines converge, bringing ancient earth power to energise a new generation of party-goers. On Saturday it was the longest day of the year, the summer solstice. You may have seen that Druids gathered at Stonehenge to mark the moment, claiming the site as their own spiritual home. Well, pardon my scepticism. The druids came thousands of years after the builders of Stonehenge, and there is no continuity of worship between them. Glastonbury will take place and fun will be had, but it will have little to do with any leyline. However, both the druids and the festival goers have got one thing right – the influence and power of the deep past upon our lives. Let me explain.

Although many thousands of years separate us from our ancient ancestors, we are their descendents. When the bones of a Neolithic man were discovered in the Cheddar Gorge, scientists were able to extract a sample of his DNA from a tooth. They went to the nearest village and did DNA tests on those inhabitants who believed their family was from the area. They found people in the village who were a direct descendant of the 9000 year old body in the cave above the village.

When people think of prehistoric monuments, they often think first of Stonehenge. However, Stonehenge is dwarfed by the nearby astonishing monument in the village of Avebury. The Avebury stone circle is astonishing because it is the largest and one of the most complete groupings of stone circles and processional routes in this or any other country. Situated near the holy river Kennet, beside the man made hill of Silbury, the Neolithic henge of Avebury was built over 5000 years ago. The builders had no metal tools and used the shoulder blades of deer as spades. To make it, 98 huge stones, weighing up to 100 tons, were placed in a gigantic circle, which held two smaller circles within it. Miles of stones mark processional routes into the central holy spaces, and the whole arrangement was surrounded by a vast ditch. The scale of the thing, even now, after 5000 years of infill and damage, is breathtaking. The more famous Stonehenge is about a quarter of the size.

A visit to it shocks one with the sense of the vastness of the time during which this island has been inhabited. This island was home to people for at least 5000 years before they raised those stones. For the builders of Avebury are about as far in time from those nomadic hunter-gatherers that reinhabited England as the icecaps of the last ice age retreated, as we are from them.

These stone circles were not created as works of art. They were places of work, where important functions were carried out. Their location in the landscape was of vital importance. But they look beyond the landscape.

They also refer to the movement of the heavenly bodies above us. Some are aligned with uncanny precision on the sun – designed so the sun rises on the shortest day of the year right over the key stone. In many burial mounds, the whole tomb is aligned so that the first rays of this shortest day shine through a tiny opening in the walls to illuminate the bones of the ancestors. Why? Perhaps because the shortest day is also the day when the year begins to cycle back towards spring - a rebirth of nature which suggests that the builders hoped for rebirth themselves. Remember those Druids last Saturday celebrating the summer solstice at Stonehenge? They are six months out

and looking in the wrong direction. The builders of Stonehenge were interested in the shortest day, not the longest. Other stone circles are designed to act as observatories for the moon and its phases, the movement of the planet Venus and even certain star formations. As such they link heaven and earth.

We might be tempted to think of these circles and their builders as being impossibly remote from us. Well, 5000 years is a long time, by any reckoning, and everything in society and our religion might seem to have changed. But more of the builders of the circles has survived into our times than you might think. What do we know of our Neolithic ancestors and their beliefs? We know they worshipped in stone circles, and their eyes were turned upwards to the sun, moon and stars, and downwards towards the deep barrows for the dead and pools of water for the gateway to the realm of the gods.

Therein lies the first of the modern links with the builders. For them, pools of water were a path to the gods. Their gods were not just up there in the sky, but also under their feet, in the earth. It seems that certain pools were held to be sacred in the Neolithic and Bronze age. The gods wanted the gift of valuable objects and, occasionally, human sacrifice, to be thrown into the water for them. We are all familiar with the stories of King Arthur.

Some think that the story of his sword, Excalibur, which was given to him from a pool of water and was thrown back into the pool on his death is a folk memory of the ancient custom. Others point out that the early experience of making the first metal swords must have been mystical – hence the Arthurian story of the sword in the stone. It might retain the memory of the wonder when stones were transformed by fire into metal. And if that seems a little fanciful, think of the last time you passed a pool or fountain or well and looked into it. Did you notice that people had thrown coins into the water for good luck? Neolithic water offerings die hard. Wishing wells are older than you think.

What other relics from the Neolithic or Bronze age remain to haunt our modern life? Well, how about the cult of a fertility goddess? She had the head of a rabbit and was worshipped at the time when the new crop was ripening and the animals breeding. What was her name? Eostre. You might know her better as Easter. And what symbol do we associate with Easter? The Easter bunny. Eostre brought new life – now you know why we have Easter eggs. Welcome to the Neolithic – some are still worshipping alongside them, it seems.

In my thoughts on modern links to ancient practices, we come to the next and most gruesome. It too is preserved in a nursery rhyme. It is interesting that the willingness of children to repeat a rhyme has held onto elements of the past which would otherwise be long lost. Consider the rhyme: ‘London Bridge is falling down’. In the rhyme it is suggested that the bridge is remade of various materials. None will do. Finally the singers of the rhyme form a line that has to pass through the linked hands of two others. This pair move their hands up and down to allow each person in the line to move through as they chant: “Here comes a candle to light you to bed; here comes a chopper to chop off your head.” With that last word they capture someone between their linked hands. Odd indeed. The rhyme seems to make little sense. That is until you remember that holy sites like Avebury were marked by a protective burial – a human body placed in the foundations as a guardian. One such body – of a

child - was found in the foundations of the old London bridge. Could the rhyme be a relic of the selection process by which the community chose the sacrificial victim? Could a children's song preserve the most terrifying of Neolithic and Bronze age rituals, where a member of the community was chosen to die for its gods? Perhaps so.

Despite the silly notions of the Druids at Stonehenge (who are looking the wrong way at the wrong time of year) and the festival goers at Glastonbury (who imagine that have a pyramid shaped stage will channel the earth energy of the leylines and create a festival mood) they both get one thing right. The past – even the ancient past – is a powerful continuing force upon our lives. Prehistory seems so far away in time. The age of their stone structures is staggering. The alien nature of their distant culture is disorientating.

But at the same time, some of our most familiar actions and children's songs seem to have been handed across those thousands of years to us. And we are, of course, descended from them. The past may seem far away, but in fact, even the farthest reaches of history that we can see are connected to us – not just in what we do - not just in what we believe - but in our very bones themselves.