



Welcome to Past Participate CIC

Hello and welcome to our Past Participate CIC newsletter,

We’ve found one! We’ve hit the jackpot in terms of Neolithic artefacts. Who’d have thought it? A polissoir in South Dorset!

Those of you who took part in our sarsen survey may remember that our primary objective was to map the distribution of natural sarsen stone across the Tenants Hill landscape. During the training Anne (jokingly) promised a bottle of whiskey to anyone who discovered a polissoir- a stone used during the Neolithic for polishing stone tools. They are as rare as hens teeth and we didn’t find one on Tenants Hill.

I can now announce, however, that **ONE HAS BEEN FOUND** nearby, in the Valley of Stones. Natural England and EuCan had cleared some undergrowth and, as a result of volunteer communication, we were invited for a look at newly exposed sarsens. Jim spotted it!

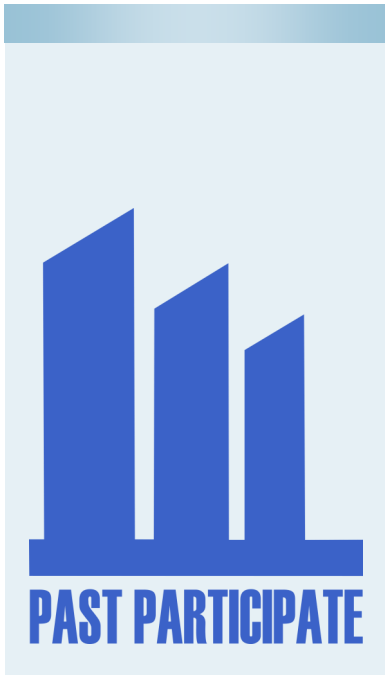


*The polissoir– the worn dish is where they polished stone axes in the Neolithic.
Photo cc Historic England.*

We have spent the winter coordinating with Historic England, Natural England and specialists to put a programme of analysis together. We have also managed to squeeze in a small excavation on Tenants Hill this summer. We returned to the long barrow we started to excavate in 2022, asking questions such as “how was it constructed” and “how does it relate to other monuments”?

Inside this issue

What is a polissoir?	2
Why is it so important?	2
Historic England Research.....	3
Moving forward	4
Social media	5
Recent publications	6



What is a polissoir?

I can already hear you thinking, what is a polishing stone? Why did they polish stone tools in the Neolithic?

During the Neolithic period they used polished axes, hafted into wooden handles for woodworking, for a large variety of tasks from chopping down trees to building houses or monuments. These axes were polished on portable or earthfast polissoirs.

They also had a symbolic value. And were used, re-used and deposited in

ritualistic contexts such as burials. Often they moved across large distances from the natural sources of the stone from which they are made.



*The polissoir stone
Photo taken by Historic England*

“Great introduction to practical archaeology with an interesting and diverse group of people, with friendly knowledgeable professional support, and in an amazing location”

The Valley of Stones

The polissoir is located in a natural sarsen field in the appropriately named Valley of Stones. This is nature reserve managed by Natural England. It is known for its butterflies and mosses, as well as the geology and archaeology.

Within the valley are prehistoric field systems, enclosures of either Roman or medieval date, post medieval quarrying, a brick works, and probably more archaeological features.



Why is it so important?

Several examples of portable polissoirs have been found but there are only a handful that have been found on larger, ‘earth-fast’, stones such as ours. Several of these are in the Avebury area, and almost all have been moved from their original location. Some were moved in prehistory, such as those used to build West Kennet Long Barrow. Others have been spotted repurposed in farm walls! There is only one comparable, unmoved polissoir known. It is also in near Avebury (Fyfield Down) and was excavated in 1963.

We have a chance to accurately date the use of the polissoir. How long a time period was it used over? What sort of tools were being made here and what materials were they using? Are there any other features nearby or is it an isolated artefact?



Christina taking moulds to look for any tiny marks or scratches that will help us understand how the polissoir was used.



Volunteers using a plane table and tape measures to survey in the Valley of Stones with Historic England

Historic England research

Landscape archaeologists from Historic England (HE) are beginning a project to look at the whole 75-hectare scheduled landscape of the Valley of Stones and beyond, including detailed investigation of some individual features, most of which have received little attention from past researchers. To kick this off, the team from HE has been having a closer look at the large rectangular enclosure (known as Littlebredy '5a'), which straddles a small dry valley off the main valley, just north of Crow Hill. We will keep you posted about future chances to get involved.

Historic England have also conducted detailed scans of the polissoir. This has allowed us to record the surfaces used for polishing axes. This is a link to the 3D model that they have created.

<https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/valley-of-stones-polissoir-dorset->



The back of the scanner, showing the 3D image as it records

Videos on Stone Axes

James Dilley shows the process in this short video www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryMJ3c1gHuw including the use of a portable polissoir at the end

Graig Lwyd: A Neolithic Axe Landscape in North Wales

<https://youtu.be/Q2jRTmoygAA>

Making A Flint Axe From Start To Finish With Will Lord

<https://youtu.be/sRQCfuzvfXM>

Polishing a Neolithic flint axe head

<https://youtu.be/Gb68-RQAZJQ>

Stone Tools in Action - Shots of Making A Stone Axe Handle

<https://youtu.be/PUwJbRvL81w>

How to attach a Neolithic axe head to a haft/handle

<https://fb.watch/kjndnHU2u8/>

Battle of the flint axes: Mesolithic versus Neolithic

<https://youtu.be/sT99CvsSt1Q>

Megaliths on the radio

Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss megaliths - huge stones placed in the landscape, often visually striking and highly prominent. Such stone monuments in Britain and Ireland mostly date from the Neolithic period, and the most ancient are up to 6,000 years old. In recent decades, scientific advances have enabled archaeologists to learn a large amount about megalithic structures and the people who built them, but much about these stones remains unknown and mysterious

[https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001jkzg?
partner=uk.co.bbc&origin=share-
mobile](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001jkzg?partner=uk.co.bbc&origin=share-mobile)

Moving forward

We've been very frustrated that we haven't been able to tell you about the polissoir discovery sooner, but it was important that the scanning and microware analysis were conducted before you were all tempted to go and run your fingers on its smooth surface. On top of this our Tenants Hill excavation was conducted without a budget, so everything has had to be kept small scale.

Going forward we are planning a multi-year community archaeology project, focused on the Valley of Stones (although we aren't going to forget Tenants Hill) to further expand and share the archaeological knowledge generated by the discovery of the polissoir. We hope

that the National Lottery Heritage Fund will award us money to expand the sarsen survey, conduct more excavations, field surveys, guided walk and lectures.

It is important to us (and for the funding) that this is a project that is appropriate to you. Please let us know your thoughts. Any evidence we can gather of community support or activity preference will be extremely valuable. If there is something you would like us to consider please let us know.



Katy Whittaker giving a talk to volunteers about sarsen stones

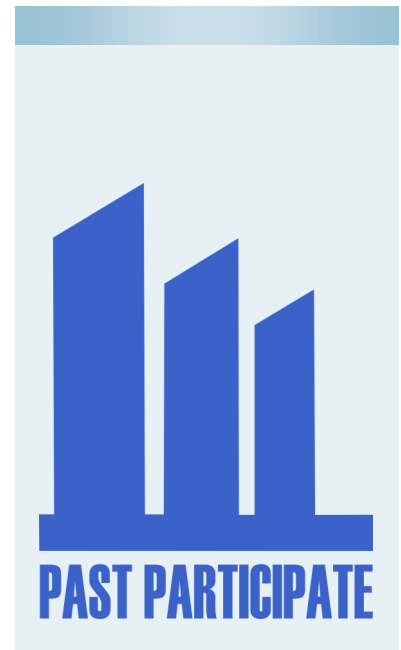
Fundraising

We do not charge for participation in our projects so that they are open to all. Not only do we incur costs whilst in the field, but the artefact analysis and other post-excavation work can be very expensive. For example we will probably need to use a method called Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL) in order to date the polissoir. This is expected to cost several hundred pounds. If you would like to make a donation to help us out our details are [Sort Code: 090129 Account Number: 32355552](#)

Social Media

We've been updating our website and social media pages. Please give us a follow on Instagram and Facebook. Our website now also has some blogs posts about our research journey to date. If you'd like to contribute, or have any information you think other volunteers might like to read about, either online or in the newsletter, please share with us.

As we get updates on the polissoir research we will post about these on online so keep an eye out.



“There was generous, expert help on hand at all times and the impromptu lectures and demonstrations added greatly to my understanding of the work in hand. Despite my increasingly limited mobility, flexibility and strength... I was made to feel a useful and worthwhile member of the team.

Heidi's charity bike ridge

Heidi, whom many of you will know as our fantastic archaeological supervisor has just completed a 50 mile bike ride along the Wessex Ridgeway. Raising money for The Alzheimer's Society she started at Avebury and cycled across the prehistoric landscape to Streatley.

“the terrain was the most difficult we've faced. Uphills were brutal. Downhills were bonkers. We couldn't get anywhere near our projected speed but with our best efforts managed a steady 7-10kph. Dave fell off twice, once into ditch. I fell off four times, one was a face plant”.

She is going back for a 2nd stint, to do another 33 miles. If you wish to donate she has a page at www.justgiving.com/fundraising/relay2ridgeway



Heidi with her colleague Dave at Avebury, the start of their epic ride.

Recent publications

Prehistoric Plague

Plague was transmitted via a bacteria and the earliest traces of this bacteria have been found in skeleton from Late Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age burial contexts in Somerset and Cumbria.

www.nature.com/articles/s41467-023-38393-w

Measuring the passage of time in the Neolithic

Last year Prof Tim Darvill suggested that Stonehenge was a Neolithic calendar that measured the passing of time over a year. A recent paper disputes this theory, disagreeing with some of the technical calculations and assumptions made. Prof Darvill responded in the same journal providing a stronger argument for his case, by referring to archaeological evidence and theory. The articles are behind a paywalls but let me know if you're interested in reading them.

Magli, G., & Belmonte, J. (2023). Archaeoastronomy and the alleged 'Stonehenge calendar'. *Antiquity*, 1-7. doi:10.15184/aqy.2023.33

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