



Visitors converge on Avebury each year to soak up its ancient aura.

bank, which measures approximately 1,380ft (421m) in diameter. But what makes Avebury particularly special is that it is also the only stone circle to have a village built within it.”

Approximately 300,000 visitors flock to Avebury each year to marvel at the stones. The henge bank and ditch was formed in 2600BC and the stone circles erected in 2500BC, more than 4,500 years ago. Not all the stones have survived. Today, approximately 30 remain visible in the outer circle, with just nine left between the two inner circles. Few artefacts have been uncovered from the site, but the size of the stones suggest it was used for gatherings at its peak. However, by 1800BC, it is believed changes in ritual practices meant the henge was abandoned. In the Middle Ages, stones such as these were often connected to devil worship. This led to much of the monument being destroyed or buried. Finally, to accommodate increasing demand for building and farming, many were removed.

In the 1930s, businessman and archaeologist, Alexander Keiller bought the site and undertook major excavations. Buried stones, some up to 3ft (1m) underground, were dug up and replaced. Missing stones were marked by concrete pylons. Some of his archaeological finds, including flint tools and skeletons, are housed in a museum that bears his name in Avebury.

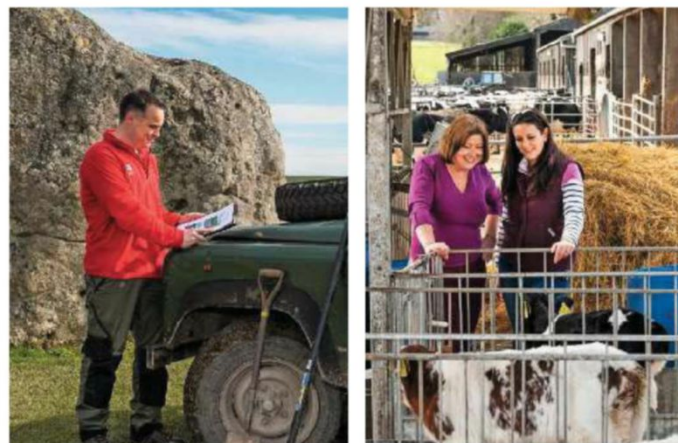
“You can’t help but marvel at the site,” says Peter. The sarsen, or sandstone, stones measure from 10-20ft (3-6m) in height. Aerial and geophysical surveys are helping to identify the order in which the stones may have been placed, but much remains unknown. Keiller eventually sold the 950 acres of land he owned in the village to the National Trust in 1943. He charged £12,000, the agricultural value of the land.

There has been a settlement at Avebury since Saxon times.

*“The Bard has harp’d, but perish’d is the song  
Of praise, as o’er these bleak and barren downs  
The wind that passes and is heard no more.”*

**Robert Southey**, ‘For a Monument at Silbury Hill’

From left: Ranger Peter Oliver, and Judy and Katie Farthing at their farm.



What remains today, much of it built within the prehistoric monument complex, is now home to approximately 400 people. There is also a church, a pub, a National Trust visitor centre and a 16th century manor house. Although privately occupied, visitors can explore parts of the property. There is chance to experience the lives of the people who lived there during the Tudor, Queen Anne, Georgian and Victorian eras.

### A living landscape

The Avebury henge does not stand alone in the landscape. There are other linked places, including Silbury Hill, and West Kennet Avenue and Long Barrow. The magnitude of the whole site is best appreciated away from the village. “One of my favourite spots is the top of Waden Hill, to the south of the henge monument,” says Peter. “From here, you can see all the major features of the landscape, from the stone circles to the enigmatic Silbury Hill and the West Kennet Long Barrow. In May, the air is filled with the high-pitched trill of skylarks in flight, and the hawthorn, or May tree, is coming into beautiful white flower.”

From this vantage point, another of Wiltshire’s key distinguishing features is visible. Known locally as hedgehogs, these are clumps of beech trees resting peacefully in beautiful leafy domes. “They mark the sites of Bronze Age round barrows. They were planted with trees by the Victorians. There would have been more, but many have been ploughed out,” says Peter.

Today, one of his major roles is to protect the landscape from such change. His days are spent maintaining paths and hedges, monitoring the ground around the stones for signs of erosion. He also looks after habitats for the site’s many rare species. These include water voles, one of Britain’s rarest mammals. He has help in these tasks from tenant farmer, Judy Farthing, her husband Tony, and their daughter Katie. They rent their farm, which includes the West Kennet Avenue, from the National Trust, with an agreement to ensure their agricultural practices do not damage the site.

They also belong to a local initiative to create wildlife corridors across the county. This scheme, the Marlborough Downs Project, was originally a government-funded >