



Avebury Summer Solstice 2001



Well we didn't make it down for the summer solstice in 2000 due to work schedules (amongst other things!), so we had a "practice run" and went down to both Stonehenge and Avebury for the winter solstice in December. The weather was pretty grotty, and I'm assured there were some really nice chalk carvings in the hills, but all I could see was a very thick bank of fog. Which was pretty much what greeted us at Avebury.

After an enjoyable wander round the stones and lots of pretty photos taken of stones in the fog, we decided we ought to check what time the sun went down (as I'd left my Elfin diary at home). The lady in the tourist information office finally found the time in a diary (after a bit of prompting), and was extremely helpful until one of our members (who shall remain nameless, but I'm sure people can guess who..) mentioned that we needed the exact time due to the rituals we would be undertaking, and by the way was there anywhere he could take his clothes off for the obligatory naked dance round the stones..... Although I'm sure she followed us just to check what we were up to.

We decided on a vantage point on the earth bank, and with the aid of a compass worked out that the sun would set just to the left of the church steeple. Despite the fact that we had to use our imaginations, as we could hardly even see the church due to the fog, never mind about the sun, it turned out to be a very atmospheric, if very cold, experience.

We headed back to the Henge shop for a warm up and a bit of last minute shopping, which was enlivened by the excitement of a group of American tourists as the word was passed round about a ceremony happening later on in the evening. Unfortunately, we couldn't stay for the festivities as we had a four hour drive back home (and some of us had work the following day).

Our appetites whetted by this trip, we planned our trip down for the summer solstice 2001. We were far luckier with the weather, it was hot and sunny on the way down. We managed to park in the last space in the pub car park, and emerged from the car into a small fog bank that had nothing at all to do with the weather and quite a lot to do with what people were smoking (and it didn't smell like Benson and Hedges to me..).

A chat with the local boys in blue ascertained that Stonehenge was bursting at the seams, so we had made the right choice to come to Avebury. We spent the night watching the sky, chatting, and going hypothermic as despite the glorious weather, it was absolutely freezing and of course, we only had

t-shirts and thin clothing on (you'd think after years of skywatches we would have learnt!). We spotted the planetary alignment, and spent half the night marvelling about how bright Mars was, and it was only just before sun-up when we turned round we realised we'd actually been looking at completely the wrong thing - Mars had been behind us all night - oops!

We were kept amused by the various musical instruments, fire eaters and a slightly suicidal man who kept whirling lit fireworks round his head - a couple of times I'm ashamed to admit I hoped he'd set himself alight so we could warm our hands on the conflagration.

As sunrise approached people began to organise themselves into groups to celebrate the moment. The local boys in blue were persuaded into the circle, but retreated before the ceremonies began. There was a prolonged debate about what time the sun was actually coming up, I don't think it was really important as personally I think the important thing is to celebrate the rising of the sun by spotting it as it emerges over the horizon, not by what the latest computer software decrees is the correct time. But perhaps I'm just old fashioned!

The local druids ran a risk by announcing that the sacred plant for the ceremony was hemp, and producing a bag of the stuff, but credit to the local police they looked the other way (although I'm sure I spotted them in earnest discussion with a druid later on.....). All in all, a good time was had by all, it's worth going to a ceremony even if you don't believe in that sort of thing as the whole event had a really friendly atmosphere and it's good to take some time out from work and home worries just to contemplate the wider picture.

After another wander round and a handfasting ceremony, we decided to make tracks home. We stopped at Silbury Hill, but were disappointed to find out that English Heritage have done another of their "keep the public away from everything" tricks, and you cannot go anywhere near the hill anymore, let alone climb it.

But all in all it was an enjoyable night, and we're looking forward to our next trip.









