

Ancient Landscapes – Shadows of the Past

In the fields a few miles north of Marlborough, standing or prone, are the huge stones, remains of the avenue, or the circles of the Temple of Avebury ... These groups are impressive as forms opposed to their surroundings ... and in the irrational sense, their suggestion of a super-reality. They are dramatic, also, however, as symbols of their antiquity, as hallowed remnants of an almost unknown civilization.

Paul Nash, statement on *Equivalents for the Megaliths*

(1937)

The mysteries surrounding ancient sites such as Stonehenge and Avebury have perplexed and unsettled generations of visitors. The uncertainty around the intentions of their builders has spun a tangled web of legend and folklore linking their creation with Merlin, the Druids or otherworldly spirits. Paul Nash found the stones at Avebury 'wonderful and disquieting'. Henry Moore was captivated by a moonlight visit to Stonehenge; the artworks he made in response convey its monumental impact but also a darkness and ambiguity that gives the

stones a disconcerting presence. The connection between barrows and chambered tombs with the burial and veneration of the dead, coupled with their isolated locations can also give rise to unnerving atmospheres.

Ancient people left a tangible imprint on the landscape: paths and roads, field patterns, earthworks, barrows, standing stones and ruins, remains that haunted successive generations of settlers. The sense of a weight of history and an unsettling expectancy is present in Paul Kershaw's *Minninglow*, the artwork for the Ghost Box album *Chanctonbury Rings* and in John Piper and John Craxton's images of the ruined church within an earthwork at Knowlton in Dorset.

In his essay *The Uncanny* (1919) Sigmund Freud argued that the return of primitive beliefs such as animism, that had previously been repressed, result in a feeling of the uncanny. We are haunted by our 'disavowed past' and impressions that convince us of the reality of primitive superstitions, or that secret and hidden things may be revealed, are disconcertingly eerie. The people who made these monuments believed in the returning spirits of the

dead and the agency of supernatural beings from an invisible Otherworld and sometimes those ideas can bleed into today's supposedly rational and enlightened times. In her book *The Living Stones: Cornwall* (1957) Ithell Colquhoun described her encounters with the area's ancient history, particularly what she described as 'the animist's trinity' of rocks, wells and trees.

Peter Ackroyd has written that the ghost stories of M.R. James are marked by an 'English sense of being haunted by place and by a specific history associated with it'. The academic protagonists of James' stories are exposed to ancient horrors, having deserted their university libraries for a countryside littered with the remains of a shadowy past. Francis Mosley's illustration for *A Warning to Curious*, a cautionary tale on the perils of scholarly treasure hunting, captures the sense of watchfulness and implicit threat against those willing to unearth secrets best left undisturbed.

Derek Jarman (1942-1994)

A Journey to Avebury

Super 8mm film, colour, 1971

Courtesy and © Luma Foundation

A Journey to Avebury is a ten-minute montage of the Avebury landscape: windblown grasses and nettles, clumps of trees, grazing sheep, trackways, fallen monoliths and the circles and avenues of standing stones. The strange mustard-coloured skies created with a yellow filter lend a brooding atmosphere to scenes that might otherwise appear bucolic and restful. There is also a darkness that reduces the stones and trees to ominous silhouettes. The rapid cutting between shots combined with the slight judders of the handheld camera add to the sense of disorientation and unease. Jarman's artificial colour cast and choice of Super 8 as the medium places the film very much in time as well as space. The format beloved of home movie makers during the 1960s and 1970s is central to the strange and hallucinatory ambience.

Ghost Box

'Chanctonbury Rings' by Justin Hopper, Sharron Kraus and The Belbury Poly

Promotional Poster, 2018

Design by Julian House

Given the poetry and prose content and the folk music influences in the music, Julian House hit on the old Topic Records folk anthology albums of the 1970s as the ideal reference point. These depicted simply executed ink landscapes overlaid with a single block of colour. Justin Hopper, the author of the text on the album, was keen that the very distinctive shape of Chanctonbury Hill be represented so the main image was created by Julian as a collage of single colour elements.

It's an illustrative style that will also be familiar to people of a 1970s vintage from school poetry anthologies and English textbooks, so it made perfect sense to adapt the album art into a poster with a layout more appropriate to an old paperback book. The overall effect is more than just a piece of nostalgia, but feels somehow like something oddly familiar that must always have existed. *Jim Jupp*

John Piper (1903-1992)

Fields Near Avebury

Black and white negative, date unknown

Tate Archive. Presented by John Piper 1987

Piper identified strongly with the Romantic spirit in British art, particularly its ability to see '*something significant beyond ordinary significance*' and the '*sense of drama in atmosphere, in the weather and the seasons*'.

This photograph shows a cluster of barrows on Overton Hill seen from West Kennet Avenue. Sometimes referred to as hedgehogs, these are Bronze Age burial mounds which were later planted with beech trees. Silhouetted against the horizon and stark against the surrounding ploughed fields they have a brooding presence.

Paul Nash (1889-1946)

Maiden Castle

Black and white negative

Tate Archive. Presented by the Paul Nash Trust 1970

Nash came to Maiden Castle hillfort in 1935 while preparing the *Dorset Shell Guide*. A major excavation was under way and Nash was struck by uncovered skeletons in an Iron Age cemetery: *'the gleaming skulls like clutches of monstrous eggs'*. Despite these macabre sights, it was the scale of the earthworks that impressed him most.

The inclusion of a shed and a distant electricity pylon in this photograph shows Nash's eye for the surreal potential of the incongruous: jarring intrusions by modern civilisation on a landscape that he felt was still marked by the shadows of its ancient inhabitants. In the *Dorset Shell Guide* Nash commented: *'Its presence today, after the immense passage of time, is miraculously undisturbed; the huge contours strike awe into even the most vulgar mind; the impervious nitwits who climbed on to the monoliths of Stonehenge to be photographed, slink out of the shadow of the Maiden uneasily.'*

John Piper (1903-1992)

Knowlton Church Ruins, Dorset

Black and white negative, date unknown

Tate Archive. Presented by John Piper 1987

Piper was impressed by the strangeness of Knowlton Church, which lies on the edge of Cranborne Chase, one of England's most significant Neolithic and Bronze Age ceremonial landscapes. Piper's visits inspired abstracted collages in the late 1930s, wartime watercolours and a later mixed media work.

The church was built in the twelfth century, placed in the centre of a Neolithic henge constructed some four thousand years earlier. It is surrounded by barrows, henges and ring ditches whose exact purpose remain a mystery. The building of Christian churches on pagan sites is seen as an attempt to encourage conversion through continuity of worship. Knowlton Church was abandoned in the seventeenth century and has a reputation for being haunted. The archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes wrote that *'there lingers in the air some flavour of the sinister and macabre'*.

John Craxton (1922-2009)

Knowlton Church

Pen and ink wash, 1941

The Ingram Collection of Modern British and Contemporary Art

The ruins of Knowlton Church caught the attention of John Craxton who felt an affinity for the area having stayed nearby during his childhood. This heavily worked Neo-Romantic drawing was influenced by Graham Sutherland and Samuel Palmer's pastoral sepia drawings. Although associated with the Neo-Romantic movement, Craxton preferred to be thought of simply as a latter-day Romantic.

Knowlton Church displays his growing ability to look beyond the immediacy of the scene and convey something more, something unknown. He constructs a highly charged image perhaps reflecting the tensions of wartime. Craxton imbues the twisted creepers with an agency such that they climb menacingly in front of the ruins as if about to metamorphose into some predatory animal.

Frederick Landseer Griggs (1876-1938)

The Cross Hands

Etching, 1935

Stuart Southall Collection

F.L. Griggs made his name as an illustrator but turned to etching to achieve a lifetime's quest to create visions of a land where the Reformation had never happened: *'a series of views - ideal views - of such remains of an earlier and better England as might be found remaining - where the conditions had been kind enough.'* The prints portray a lost medieval world inspired by a hauntological craving not just for a vanished past but also an unrealised future.

The Cross Hands is one of his more eerily melancholic visions of an 'unspoilt' but unreachable Albion. It shows a stone signpost now forgotten and fallen into decay. Spring water trickles into a trough beneath the trees but there is no-one to quench their thirst or seek direction, only a lone deer standing alert in the fading sunlight as the skies darken.

Paul Kershaw (b.1949)

Lud's Church

Wood engraving, 2014, signed and numbered 11/45

Stuart Southall Collection

Lud's Church is a natural chasm in North Staffordshire. Some say the name comes from Lludd the Celtic god of healing, others point to Walter de Lud Auk, a medieval heretic who attended secret religious services within the chasm. Walter's granddaughter was killed during a raid on one of the meetings and is said to haunt the area.

In Kershaw's print the small human figure at the bottom emphasises the height and mass of the chasm walls. The walker is poised to step into the shadows, the rockface bearing down from above. Nature appears intimidating and the weight of legend adds to the expectant and mysterious atmosphere.

Paul Kershaw (b.1949)

Minninglow

Wood engraving, 2013, signed and numbered 26/60

Stuart Southall Collection

Minninglow in Derbyshire is the site of a Neolithic chambered tomb and two Bronze Age bowl barrows enclosed within a ring of trees. Tombs such as this were communal burial places used by ancient farming communities. Even without knowledge of its history the lonely, windswept aspect captured in Kershaw's engraving creates a strange atmosphere, heightened by the incongruous presence of a single stone gatepost.

Francis Mosley (b.1957)

A Warning to the Curious

Hand-coloured etching, 2007, illustration for

M.R. James Collected Ghost Stories (Folio Society)

Courtesy of the artist

A Warning to the Curious concerns the crown of a long-buried Saxon king. The Ager family have historically been the guardians of the burial mound but now William, the last of the line, has died. A young amateur archaeologist excavates the mound at night and discovers the crown but the ghost of William Ager pursues him wherever he goes. His only recourse is to return the crown and we see him set out to do this accompanied by two guests from the hotel where he is staying. The crown is returned but William Ager is not placated...

Francis Mosley

Leslie Moffat Ward (1888-1979)

The Long Man on the Downs

Lithograph, 1943, signed and numbered 13

Stuart Southall Collection

Throughout his life Ward was drawn to survivals from the recent and distant past: historic buildings, ruins and old working boats. There is an elegiac quality to many of his prints, reflecting a consciousness that he was recording a disappearing world.

The origins of the Long Man are unclear. It was once thought to date from the Neolithic period, but recent archaeological work suggests it was created in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Despite these investigations the identity and purpose of its makers remain a mystery. Ward's print shows his flair for dramatic lighting effects, the setting sun creating deep shadows and giving a mystical intensity to the scene. The inclusion of four figures walking at the bottom of the giant emphasises its scale and unearthly presence on the hillside above.

Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988)

The Men-an-Tol

Ink on paper, 1957

Private Collection

From the late 1940s artist, writer and occultist Ithell Colquhoun escaped from her entangled life in London to take refuge in Cornwall, being drawn to its people, landscape and legends. She found a ramshackle, isolated artist's hut to lease in the Lamorna Valley where she wrote much of her book *The Living Stones: Cornwall* (1957).

In it she describes how she once crawled through the Men-an-Tol as a cure for rheumatism, not knowing that to be effective the rite had to be performed naked. Colquhoun made over twenty line drawings for the book including *The Men-an-Tol*. Above the illustration she wrote:

Stones that whisper, stones that dance, that play on pipe or fiddle, that tremble at cock-crow, that eat and drink, stones that march as an army – these unhewn slabs of granite hold the secret of the country's inner life.

Paul Nash (1889-1946)

Avebury Sentinel

Black and white negative, 1933

Tate Archive. Presented by the Paul Nash Trust 1970

A new world opened up for Paul Nash in 1931 when he was given a pocket Kodak camera by his wife Margaret. As his asthma became more debilitating the camera allowed him to capture found objects, details in the landscape and unusual structures without having to spend long periods sketching outside.

In 1933 Nash visited Avebury and found that *'the great stones were then in their wild state ... Some were half covered by grass, others stood up in cornfields [or] were entangled and overgrown in the copses, some were buried under the turf. But they were always wonderful and disquieting'*. Nash captured this subtle sense of unease in *Avebury Sentinel*. He felt their *'colouring and pattern, their patina of golden lichen, all enhanced their strange forms and mystical significance'*.

John Piper (1903-1992)

The Whispering Knights, Rollright Stones in Oxfordshire

Black and white negative, date unknown

Tate Archive. Presented by John Piper 1987

John Piper took thousands of photographs, some were used as illustrations for books, others were reference material for his paintings and prints. In 1937 he was commissioned to write and illustrate a Shell Guide to Oxfordshire. One of the subjects was the Rollright Stones.

These groups of stones had inspired the legend of a king and his knights tricked and turned to stone by a witch. The Whispering Knights (actually the remains of 5,000 year old burial chamber) were a group of conspirators huddled together in secret conference. As with Paul Nash's *Avebury Sentinel* the close framing of the stones makes them dominate the scene. They seem to have a life of their own and Piper's photograph almost suggests that the railings have been installed to keep them in.

Paul Nash (1889-1946)

Landscape of the Megaliths

Oil on canvas, 1934

British Council Collection

Photography allowed Nash to capture the appearance and something of the atmosphere of the places he visited, but painting allowed his imagination to run free. His fascination with Avebury was expressed in a series of works contemplating standing stones and ancient landscapes made throughout the 1930s.

Landscape of the Megaliths was painted at a time when Nash was trying to reconcile abstraction and surrealism with his love of the English landscape. In this case his solution was to take two monoliths from Avebury and combine them with another favourite place, the Wittenham Clumps in Berkshire. The Avebury stones become found objects placed in an imaginary landscape and the whole assemblage takes on a dream-like strangeness.

Henry Moore (1898-1986)

Stonehenge V – Hacked Stone

Intaglio print and lithograph on paper, 1973

Tate: Presented by the artist 1975.

Henry Moore first visited Stonehenge in 1921: *'As it was a clear evening I got to Stonehenge and saw it by moonlight. I was alone and tremendously impressed. (Moonlight as you know enlarges everything, and the mysterious depths and distances made it seem enormous). I went again the next morning, it was still very impressive, but that first moonlight visit remained for years my idea of Stonehenge.'*

A series of fifteen lithographs (1971-73) revisited the intensity of that first moonlit experience. In some prints the stones are stark against the sky and the poet Stephen Spender found in these images a *'feeling of the inhuman and the terrifying'*. In *Hacked Stone* a looming form blots out the landscape beyond and we are confronted with its shadowy texture. The indentations and gullies may be the product of weathering or they might connect us to the mysterious purposes of Stonehenge's original creators.

Paul Drury (1903-1987)

Ancient Stones I

Soft-ground etching, 1963, third state

Stuart Southall Collection

Paul Drury had studied etching at Goldsmiths School of Art alongside Graham Sutherland and is principally remembered for pastoral prints inspired by Samuel Palmer. After the Second World War he took charge of the etching department at Goldsmiths and from 1959 began teaching summer courses at Urchfont Manor in Wiltshire. Avebury was just a few miles to the north and he took his students there to draw. These visits inspired three prints of which *Ancient Stones I* is the strangest and most ambiguous work.

Drury takes Avebury's 'Swindon Stone' and makes a skull-shaped hole in its base through which a stone circle can be seen. A pterodactyl flies above, reinforcing the feeling of time being 'out of joint'. The image of the setting sun seen through the skull (usually a symbol of mortality) might reflect the challenges Drury then faced as Goldsmiths went through a process of modernisation.