

The following is an essay written in spring 2018, by Tim Ashton about the Souldon Long Barrow was written for “The Brown Book”, the annual alumni publication of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford

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### Building a New Long Barrow

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As Egyptians were beginning to build their pyramids, about 5,500 years ago, the earliest farmers of Anglesey were heaving some enormous stones onto a dramatic peninsular of their island. There, looking out over the glittering, brooding Irish Sea, and back to the immense presence of Snowdonia they built a monument which is one of this country’s very first buildings. This structure, called a barrow, is named ‘Barclodiad y Gawres’, which is Welsh for ‘apronful of the giantess’ (the name has a charming myth if you care to Google it). For those unfamiliar with barrows, these monuments are mounds of earth, often, as in this case, with a passageway leading to a stone chambered interior.

The first holidays I was taken on, in the summers before I was five, were beach holidays to a cottage called Sŵn y Môr on this dramatic coast by this mysterious, magical, ancient thing: to little eyes a little hill with a door in it, and a stone interior beyond, carved with curious patterns by people who had lived so long ago that Christ’s birth is closer to our day than to theirs.

The wonder at this prehistoric, earthy, curious thing from my early consciousness never quite left me, because when you are very young these things can make a disproportionate impression, and also because there is a low hum of references to these monuments in the deep culture of these islands (e.g. the Childe Roland fairy tale, Beowulf being honoured with one, Tolkien writing of Barrow-wights and so on) and our surviving heritage (such as the Sutton Hoo or the King’s Barrows at Stonehenge).

Three years ago, another Oxford alumnus, Tim Daw (St John’s, Agriculture, 1979) who, like me, is a farmer but unlike me at one time combined this role with being the Steward of Stonehenge, was sat in a pub when he ended up committing to revive this practice and build a barrow on his land for the community in All Cannings, Wiltshire. When this task was complete the people there would have a proper, careful, tender monument for the placement of ashes, a modern site rooted in this ancient practice.

Very soon afterwards, some seriously accomplished stonemasons (whom I now know, and am in awe of) sought and made contact with Tim, and shortly after that a truly extraordinary and beautiful barrow was built. The compulsion to see what Tim had achieved was irresistible as soon as I heard it had been done, and I found myself, twenty-five years on, again inside a barrow – this one only a few months old. Conveying the achievement of that building to people who have not visited is a hard thing to do, but it is best done by inviting you to think of a library made up of a sequence of little round rooms off a central passage, with all the shelves of stone and each room having a domed corbeled roof, the light coming

from shafts aligned to specific celestial events, and representing an invitation down the ages to return and pay respects, not only to loved ones, but to the great cycles and rhythms of nature.

Very shortly after that visit the baton of building another modern barrow had passed to me, bringing the masons who had just begun this revival in Wiltshire.

To begin with, my personal preoccupation was that the beauty of what had been created could be expressed similarly where my family farm in Shropshire, and where we have quite a lot of ancient things to farm around in any event (for context, King Cnut murdered one of the previous owners here; an illegal castle was built on the farm in the Anarchy in the 1130s; the Roman Road to Chester follows our eastern boundary; and the woods here are still in Saxon ridge and furrow).

Quite quickly though, the sensitivity, cultural risks and raw power of this project began to hit home, along with some 'Big Thoughts'.

Early conversations with the planners resulted in entirely excusable bafflement – a long barrow had only once been built before in the last 5,500 years – and I can now confirm that the call centre script certainly *does not* run:

*“For light industrial buildings, press one;  
for loft conversions, press two;  
for garages press three; ...  
for Neolithic-inspired megalithic community funerary monuments, press nine.”*

Fortunately in Shropshire the Historic Environment team has an archaeology PhD, Giles Carey, who knows Neolithic period well and had spent many summers at Skara Brae. He helped us to see the importance of being rigorous in connecting this project with the historic record and literature, and in the days that followed that meeting I found myself in Cambridge asking for help from Prof Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Chris Evans (Oxford seemed only to be able to help me with Mediterranean archaeology it seemed – I did of course try my own university first... ) and then barrelling around the UK looking at prehistoric monuments to try to understand them as well as I possibly could. I went to thirty of them in twelve months... Friends and family began to worry for me, suggesting other hobbies...

On these trips I became conscious of a duty to be respectful to the values of people we are unlikely ever to know very much about, but whom we must recognize were as bright as us and were clearly making enormous and culturally significant efforts. Along with those considerations came the responsibility to curate something which was sensitive and useful and inclusive in the current age and, as far as possible, antagonistic to nothing and no one.

At the time we were converting the farm to no-till or 'conservation agriculture'; this (stressful) process forced us to re-learn how to farm. In turn this invited us to think very hard about how we steward and engage with land, biology, and the seasons, a conversation I was fortunate to be able to take forward with Michael Gove as Environment Secretary (English, 1985) on a visit to our farm on 27 October, 2017.

In turn this invites you to look afresh at matters which are so fundamental that, while profound, are capable of being observed and stated simply. Often they are not approached this way. These are: that we are part of the natural world and we are literally of it; that we have wit enough to observe and interpret things beyond our planet, and add meaning by that act of observation and interpretation; that we begin to exist in our communities here; that we are each worthwhile and make a difference and matter to others while we are part of those communities and that continues even after we are physically present; that we ultimately cease to be part of those communities in a mortal form; and that people and communities have

always wanted to make enduring monuments to those that have passed from them and want to support each other around this transition.

Those are actually quite simple statements.

For many, faith interprets it uncomplicatedly and perfectly and that is a powerful thing.

Down the ages great torrents of art and writing have also added perspectives.

For all that, those uncomplicated and observable things are true from whatever point of origin your thinking emerges.

After working on this initiative for a couple of years now, these old, earthy, and superficially, deceptively, humble and crude structures are now, to me, very profound places indeed.

Built of soil and stones, they are monuments to people, but of the earth; built with care they are an expression of human craft and skill; their building and stewardship requires and is an expression of community; in outlasting many empires they are an expression of enduring memory; in being aligned to a particular sunrise, say, they acknowledge that our minds can interpret this environment and share that understanding, and confidently invite others to do it centuries later.

I know when it is finished this structure will be beautiful. It will also, I hope, be able to communicate some simple things in an unpretentious but supportive way, and that will help some people. I know it has a little already.

As I write, two massive megaliths await a capping lintel. We have mounds of earth eight metres high around the site, a first chamber at seat height, and some standing stones adding to the subtlety of the land I have known my whole life, and my family for many, many years before that.

Celtic Christianity has a term, a 'thin space', meaning a place where the boundary between mundane preoccupations and the sublime is especially porous. I really don't know if I personally believe in such things. - But I do feel very fortunate this particular adventure came and found me. When it began, it seemed very strange for a farmer to embark on this journey, but now it seems a natural part of my role.

A friend from my LMH days, the poet Merlin Fulcher (History, 2005) wrote the following poem about the project:

*From waves to rocks  
To hills to sand  
We fell our eyes  
On open ground  
This patch between  
Groves dense and grand  
Where a home is built  
From another land  
For our loves, our youth,  
Our dreams  
Hand-in-hand  
Then as bares  
We ran*

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*Tim Ashton,  
(Jurisprudence, 2005)*

