

# ANCIENT AND MODERN

**NEIL THOMAS** VISITS A REMARKABLE PROJECT TO BUILD A NEOLITHIC-STYLE MONUMENT TO THE DEAD IN COMPANY OF THE VISIONARY YOUNG MAN BEHIND IT



It is not every day you encounter a Neolithic-style burial chamber . . . especially one that is brand new! But venture to the outskirts of Wem and that is what is taking shape.

This new community monument is being built on land at Soulton Hall. More than 26ft high, it comprises hand-built stone chambers with private niches under an earthen mound, aligned to the sunrise on Midsummer's Day. It is, you might not be surprised to learn, the first of its kind to be constructed in Shropshire for 5,500 years.

It is a fascinating project, reconnecting us with ancient history while having the practical purpose of providing a rather unusual final resting place.

It is a rare, though not unique, scheme for similar barrows – as the mounds are called – have been created in Wiltshire and Cambridgeshire. Tim Ashton, of Soulton Hall, a keen historian as well as being a farmer and hotelier, was inspired by them to bring the idea to Shropshire.

The project, which started earlier this year, has already caught the public imagination, with more than 30 per cent of the niches – places where ashes urns are stored – already reserved in the first of the four chambers.

Niches come with 99-year leases with prices between £1,950 for a single (holding one urn) to £5,850 for a large niche (for five urns), where family members can rest together.





Tim says: "We have had a lot of people already coming to take a look and express an interest."

The Souldon Hall Long Barrow scheme is being carried out in association with a company called Sacred Stones, as well as experts at Cambridge University.

Toby Angel, managing director of Sacred Stones, admits the public response to the mound was above what they were expecting. He adds: "The response we have had from the public has caught us off guard really. People have already been coming down to lay stones for loved ones."

Tim explains: "Three years of collaboration with Sacred Stones and researchers at Cambridge University has enabled the construction of a beautiful, sincere and enduring monument on our farm.

"The Souldon Long Barrow takes its inspiration from the Neolithic period, and, like those ancient monuments, is a focus for honouring loved ones we have lost, for contemplation and celebration of life, and for supporting the community and each other.

"The barrow is aligned to the rising sun on Midsummer's Day and, when complete, will have an aperture which also addresses the sunset on Midwinter's Day.

"It is a community monument to be used much as the first ones were, to provide in a rural landscape a monument to the dead as well as a place of rest and reflection for the living, as an alternative to what is for many people the unsatisfactory modern crematorium ritual," Tim reflects.

"Preparing for this project I consulted specialists at Cambridge University and made some 30 trips to see ancient





megalithic monuments. These visits increased my respect for these ancient people and the complexity of their values, dimly understood over all these centuries and for their intelligence as sophisticated as our own.

“I also developed a sense of obligation 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.

“The first barrows, and their cousins thousands of years later, are deceptively simple but also profound buildings. They invite you to look afresh at matters which are so fundamental that, while profound, are capable of being observed and stated simply.

“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.”

He continues: “Built with care, monuments 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 and in being aligned to a particular sunrise 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 be of help to some people.”

■ There is the chance to look over Souldon Hall Long Barrow yourself at an Open Afternoon on Sunday September 9, 1-4pm. Visit [www.souldonhall.co.uk](http://www.souldonhall.co.uk) for more details.

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:**

The monument connects with the sky; individual niches provide an unusual final resting place; Tim Ashton consults plans on the next stage of the project; the rural landscape of north Shropshire provides a perfect setting.

**P131 FROM TOP:**

There is a solemn and artistic beauty to the structure and its niches; the remarkable new burial monument on the outskirts of Wem; Tim is the brains behind Souldon Hall long barrow.

