

## construction of second 21<sup>st</sup> century niche barrow

The editor first asked me to write 'Why build a barrow?' for the Winter 2015 issue of *The Journal* to try and explain what their appeal might be. Having embarked on my research over two years ago I am drawn to the many testimonies and conversations I have had since then which offer a greater understanding.

The formation of Sacred Stones (SSL) was in direct response to the extraordinary public reaction to the Long Barrow at All Cannings in Wiltshire. Recorded in the Autumn 2014 and Autumn 2015 issues of *The Journal* as work progressed and the opening ceremony took place, the Long Barrow was inspired by farmer and Stonehenge steward Tim Daw; his own personal 'dream'. The structure was designed and built by two master stonemasons, Martin Fildes and Geraint Davies. We believe it to be the first of its kind in the country to have been built in circa 5,000 years.

As is often the way a 'chance meeting' between Martin, Geraint, me and one other (Mark Davies) helped us formulate our strategy and create SSL. Setting us on an extraordinary journey.

The basic premise was and remains that people seemed to find incredible 'connection' with the barrow structure. I suspect unbeknown to visitors this experience was nothing new. Our ancient ancestors had established these 'monuments to the dead' thousands of years ago.

During the preparation for our inaugural planning application we took counsel from our County archaeologist. I won't bore you with the finer detail however, there are some fascinating, and I believe salient theories, which are as pertinent today as they were thousands of years ago.

Barrow building was the dominant method of housing the dead into the Middle Bronze Age, when people, or their cremated remains, were buried either on their own or accompanied with arrangements of grave goods. Distinctive Food Vessel pots or Collared Urns (some huge and overturned over small and tiny urns) were sometimes buried with them. Some barrows were in use for generations, probably housing the remains of extended families over many decades.

More than just a tomb, these handcrafted, hand-built stone monuments were designed for generations to use as a territorial marker, a place of religious offering and even a focus for community activity. Ancient burial mounds were built by the community in order to venerate their dead, and the evidence of feasting, found at some sites, suggests that they were places where the community came together to remember their lost loved ones through celebration.

Throughout their life, these monuments may have been modified and portions added laterally or vertically and at

each stage deposits of cultural material or human burials may have been inserted. As such, Historic England believes the best way to consider barrows is to compare them to a parish church where, over the centuries, additions of aisles, towers, porches etc. have all but obscured the original structure, while burials and memorials of various dates, placed both inside and out, serve to mask the original function.

So we seem to be discussing our shared desire to remain 'connected' with life. There appears to be a strong desire to commemorate through structure and form – this could be a natural object, or a combination of natural objects in the form of a structure. Either way it's in our DNA to want to come together and share. Be it loss through death, love through union (marriage) or through creation (birth).

Now at this point I must stress I make no claim to being an expert in archaeology, sociology or indeed funereal practices past or present. My views are based entirely on experience.

Having been given a modest insight into ancient burial structures SSL began to draw connections between our history lesson(s) and latter day experiences, both at The Long Barrow at All Cannings and through conversation, and of course through personal loss.

Collectively we feel the Victorians seem to have shrouded death and bereavement in a very dark cloak. Whilst a macabre form of commemoration is seen through the architecture of its time, the Victorian social legacy is to treat death a 'taboo'. We simply don't talk about death, and certainly, it would appear, the majority of people don't express their wishes.

I often refer to a vacuum or void surrounding the end of life. This is based on personal experience, but echoed time and time again as we chat to people.

Loss is challenging for anyone, be it your favourite pub, TV program or more lastingly, life. Of the many stages often used to 'frame' grief, frustration has been my most prominent stage. I felt incredibly frustrated that the cremation service lacks sincerity, is hurried, impersonal and frankly unsatisfactory.

That being said the funeral for my late father-in-law – a burial – was an incredible moment to cherish. It was a truly magnificent 'send-off'.



Principally, I suspect, as the 'assembled' totalled well over 500 people. Community came together to share in their sorrow. But importantly it was as much about celebrating the life of one who had given so much, to so many.

So the vacuum to me is about the lack of sincerity, a lack of knowledge and thus choice. Families seem to relinquish responsibility to the commercial devil that is box-ticking and prescribed process. This absolutely serves a purpose, and for many the industry provides an extremely valued, sensitive service. However, the more I listen to people the more we realise there is need for greater alternatives.

So why a 'barrow'?

I think the best way to answer this question is to provide testimony. These can be found in full on our website, but for the sake of 'capturing the moment' here's an example:

*"When I visit my brother's ashes I feel no connection to his beautiful person in that impersonal graveyard with all those gaudy headstones, there is no sense of him there, I cannot feel his presence and I am acutely aware of the busy Chapel of Peace bustling with others' grief and I am distracted. The fact that I visit with my family and those that I love is the important part; together we feel my brother, live through his eyes, share our memories and re-connect.*

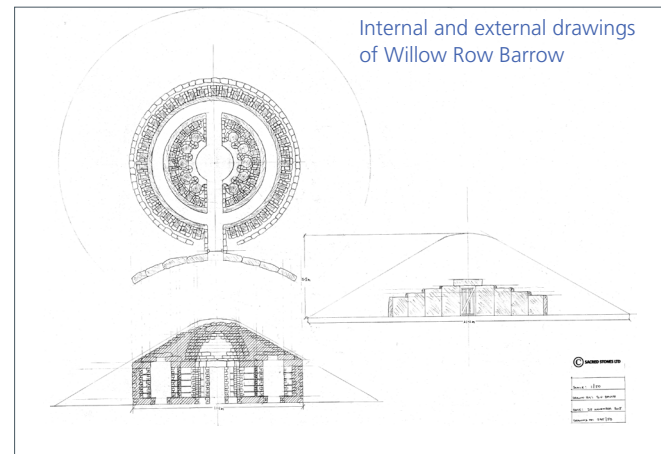
*"But the thought of taking a walk through a beautiful setting to prepare the mind, to focus on the person we love, to be somewhere calm and peaceful is compelling; away from roads and gravestones and distractions and the doctrine of religion. Somewhere where the spirit is present and our connection to loved ones that have moved on feels like a natural progression rather than an end. I had this sense of peace and connection as Toby described the carved stones and the shape of the chamber itself."*

As a new company we have resisted 'labels' and 'corporate identity'. Suffice to say our ethos is based on 'secular beliefs'. A commemorative venue needs to be inclusive, free from any form of prescribed doctrine, and it must convey a purity and honesty that helps the ritual of commemoration and ultimately celebration.

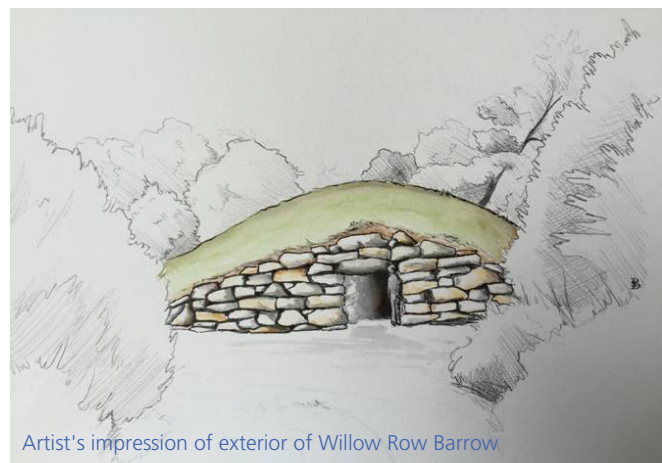
It's impossible to know quite what the ancients were hoping to achieve in their feasting and celebratory ceremonies but faith in their community spirit must have played a part. Thus we describe our venues as non denominational, but full of faith. This seems to chime with the people we've engaged with so far, be it in England, America or Canada.

Our barrow designs and form are typically based around a circular chamber, and even this numbskull remembers some of his lessons in geometry!

The ancient Greek culture viewed the 'circle' as the perfect shape, a form of divine symmetry, echoed throughout natural forms. Take a moment to review your surroundings now, I bet you can spot circles everywhere.



Acoustics and a sense of security seem also to play a significant part in people's appreciation for the stone structure. It is thought that a low frequency hum (inaudible to the human ear) created as wind passes the passage opening to a barrow, imbues a meditative state. If nothing else the 'security' afforded from the outside elements is very calming.



On a cold, blustery, and grey day in October 2014 I visited two Wiltshire based long barrows in one day. The first was the West Kennet Long Barrow (circa 3,650 BC), and the second The Long Barrow at All Cannings (circa 2015 AD). In both cases walking out of the October weather was transforming. The sense of calm and security away from the elements was intoxicating. The fact it was a natural experience (i.e. no air conditioning) I believe heightened the sensation. This was also the case when revisiting The Long Barrow at All Cannings on a hot, sultry day in July. Heat and humidity were transformed into cool, calming sanctuary as we stepped inside.

There also seems to be a need to 'prepare' ones mind for the commemorative experience. In the testimony above Anna Pugh from Bedfordshire volunteers her own experience, and the need to 'get into the zone'.

Now we have the second 'modern-day' barrow in England, and, as far as I am aware the UK. We have also been invited to build barrows in a number of other counties

Unlike the Long Barrow All Cannings, Willow Row is known as a 'round barrow' and, once completed, will have 345 niches.

One of the first visitors to our site in Cambridgeshire pre-build was a local vicar. She commented that the walk from her car to the barrow site was akin to a pilgrimage. Some 450 meters in length, but importantly away from any form or reference to modernity, its wasn't a religious plug *per se*, simply the value in being able to clear the mind through a gentle physical activity.

Nestling next to the rural village of Hail Weston, near St Neots, Willow Row Barrow is named after the numerous willow trees that fringe the nearby brook. Willow Row is a haven for shrubs, hazel trees and wildlife and the perfect place for quiet reflection. It is here that our award-winning stonemasons began building the barrow, a circular chamber, 11 metres wide and five metres high, with provision for both double and family niches as well as capsules for individuals, in April 2016.

A dedicated site manager will ensure the area is maintained properly, whilst covenants on the land will ensure the preservation of the barrow and the surrounding fields, so those who choose to inter their ashes or those of a loved one can be confident that this place of natural beauty retains its profile and character for generations to enjoy.

Open Days were held during the course of the build, and will be held thereafter; the first was held at the end of May, with completion of the project expected in August 2016. [As *The Journal* went to press.]

*The London Society of Death visit the site on the Barrow's first open day on 28 May 2015*



I would humbly suggest, if given the choice most would elect to walk in a peaceful, unpolluted environment than in a traffic-logged city or town landscape. In fact why shouldn't we provide a venue that has no time limitation. When placing an urn into a niche we encourage the family to spend as long as they need to complete the service, and by default begin the commemorative journey. It could take all day.

To conclude, I am not for one moment suggesting our service is the answer to all, absolutely not. It will appeal to some, and not to others. It's about informed choice, and allowing people to celebrate in their own way. Our stone structures, once covered in earth are 'bedded to the natural environment'. They provide calm contrast to the modern day, and for some this helps fill a void.



**Toby Angel**  
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