



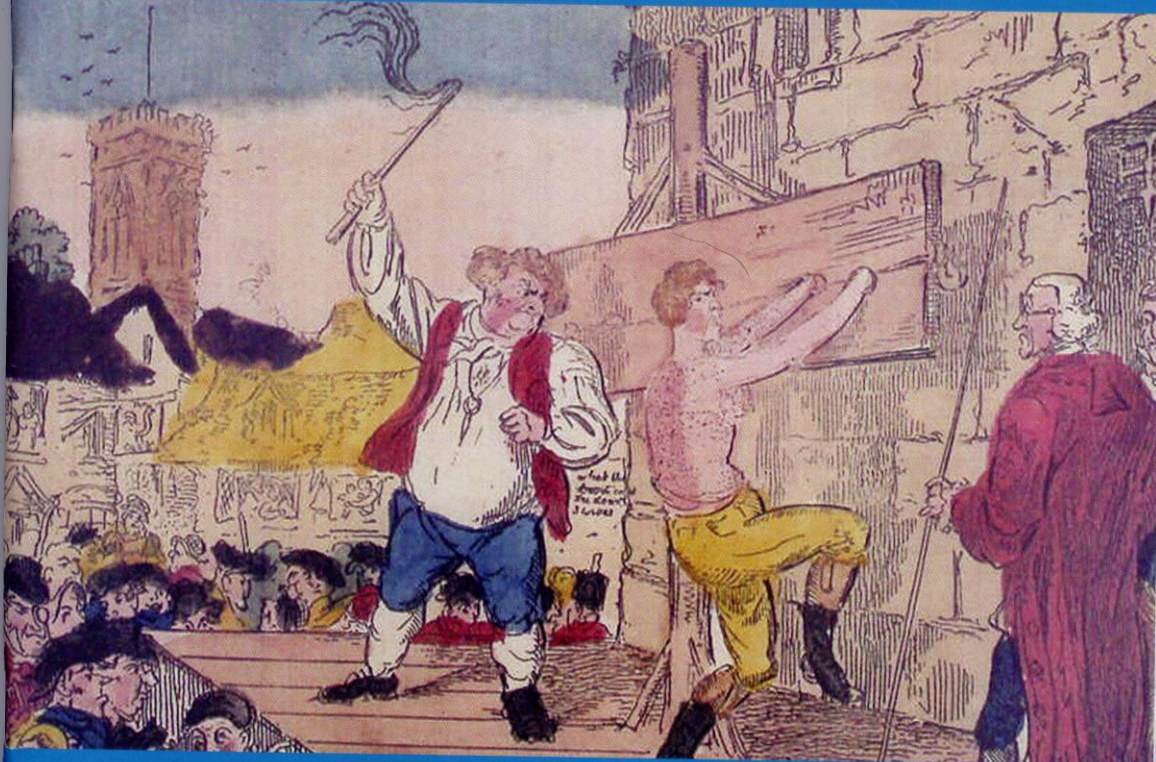
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The Regional Historian

Journal of the Regional History Centre, UWE, Bristol

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Issue No.15 Summer 2006

Archaeology's Best Known Skeleton

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Archaeology's Best Known Skeleton

Brian Edwards

North Wilts Herald, 16 September 1938
TRAGEDY OF 14th CENTURY REVEALED AT AVEBURY
BARBER WHO WAS CRUSHED BY 35 - TON MEGALITH
England's Earliest Pair of Scissors.

'Archaeology's best-known and most 'dramatic' skeleton', the 'Barber-Surgeon' of Avebury, was discovered on 29 June 1938 during the excavations and restorations by Alexander Keiller. Along with the now widely recognised photograph of the skeleton as found, sandwiched between a huge sarsen megalith and the earth below (fig. 1), the *North Wilts Herald* September 16, announced that tests by the Royal College of Surgeons proved the skeleton to be that of 'a man of 30 to 35 years of age'. A buckle was found alongside the remains, as were a pair of scissors, an implement resembling a long probe, and three coins which dated the event to around 1325. The conclusion, in this the earliest known published account, was that he was an itinerant barber-surgeon who was helping to bury the stone when it fell trapping him.²

After unearthing some broken parts of 'bowshears' (sheep-shears)³ in other parts of the same quadrant, Keiller decided the scissors were not at all agricultural and that in any case the sum of money found with the skeleton was too large to be in the possession of a farm-worker.⁴ In addition to which on completion of work within the remainder of the henge, it was discovered that many large pot-sherds survived unscathed. This suggested the interior had not been ploughed to any great extent since the twelfth century. Whatever the intention was when burying the stones, it 'was not to clear the land for cultivation'.⁵

The initial reaction to the discovery of the scissors and awl, and a consensus arrived at by Keiller and others including the archaeologist Will Young, was that the skeleton was that of a tailor. This too had been dismissed according to the local newspaper report, because the scissors were of a different design to a pair found in France. Those were of a later period, however, and were not mentioned or cited again. No other evidence contradicted the 'tailor' theory it appears, so it is rather surprising that it was somehow decided otherwise. The possibility of the tools belonging to a tailor was retained in the excavation report published in 1965, but this was little more than a caveat. The mystery man appeared in the index of the official report as he



Archaeology's best known skeleton as it was first seen in 1938. The skull of the so-called barber-surgeon can be seen lying on its side between earth and stone at the centre of the photograph (author's collection).

was now widely known to the public – the 'barber-surgeon'.

The idea of the skeleton being an itinerant practitioner perhaps came to mind through recollection of *The Times* on January 1, 1937, that featured a report headed 'The Barber-Surgeon'. This included in some detail, a newly discovered Cranbrook practitioner's notebook dated 1688-1725.⁶ This report brought to life a visiting country physician, hauntingly reminiscent of the Doctors Maurice, a family practice from Marlborough that attended Keiller and everyone else in Avebury for generations.⁷ The term 'barber-surgeon' was therefore not only in circulation, but could easily be associated with a remarkable line of family practitioners, that through the generations were highly regarded and very much admired. This may all be unrelated, but in a letter he wrote a year after the appearance of the newspaper report and shortly before the discovery of the skeleton, Keiller made quite detailed reference to his maternal ancestors having been barber-surgeons.⁸

My maternal ancestors (that is not the side of the family which consistently died from overwork, although indeed the hereditary profession might well justify it) have been surgeons for generations, back into the chirurgian-barber days and later that toughest of all jobs surgeons on whalers, and I have a vivid recollection of my uncle's



attitude when addressed as 'Dr'. I wonder if you ever came across him by the way? He was David M. Greig, finally Conservator of the College of Surgeons Museum at Edinburgh.

23 January 1938

The reference to his paternal side having 'consistently died from overwork', is perhaps an indication of how that particular year, 1938, loomed large with Keiller. He always held a celebratory focus on his birthdays, but he would be forty-nine that year, the age at which his father had died. His father had died *the day after* his forty-ninth birthday, which must have made the spotlight on Keiller's forthcoming birthday all the more intense, and as his birthday was in December any feeling of presentiment quite possibly increased as each month passed. There were certainly enough old medicine bottles discovered at Avebury Manor after this period to suggest someone was looking closely at their health.⁹ Another indication perhaps, is Keiller arranging to marry to his third wife shortly before his birthday. The arrangements were being made at the time the barber was made public and the marriage took place shortly after, the honeymoon plan was to spend Christmas in Paris, but it was hastily brought forward with the couple returning to Avebury on December 1st - Keiller's birthday.

In the year following the discovery the barber was further publicised by the new Mrs Keiller, Doris Emerson Chapman, a member of the Institute staff, who made the barber a feature of her guide - *Is This Your First Visit to Avebury?* Regularly reissued, this guide kept the barber story in circulation for more than two decades, and overlapped the appearance of the first official 'short' excavation guide published in 1959.¹⁰ It was this guide, alongside the more detailed excavation volume of 1965, that cemented the 'barber' legend into popular memory by outlining a motive for the stone burials that dramatically overshadowed any unconscious suggestion of agricultural clearance.

it is clear that such a (pagan) cult was practiced.... Eventually the Christian authorities found it necessary to take drastic action. A breach was made in the circle by throwing part of the bank nearest the church into the ditch and some of the stones were overthrown and buried. ... Religious motives alone could have induced such a man to take part in a task of this sort.¹¹

The incident that befell the barber was further believed to have caused the process to change and come to a close. As Isobel Smith remarked in 1959: 'Perhaps it was as a result of this accident that some of the stones were merely overthrown and not buried'.¹² It seems the incident, as Mike Pitts put it in 1985:

may have brought stone burial in Avebury to an end.¹³

In 1999 Mike Pitts located the remains of the 'barber-surgeon', which characteristically turned-up having been thought lost to the blitz.¹⁴ The legend then continues, leaving many questions unanswered.

*If this was a Barber, where was his comb?
If he was a surgeon, where were his other
instruments? If he was digging a hole,
where was his spade? If he was working
for the church, why wasn't he reburied in
the churchyard?*

Many elements in this story are equally puzzling: monks meted out free help and treatment, so where there was a priory even one with such few monks as Avebury, an itinerant surgeon wouldn't be speculatively visiting. Barber-surgeons accounted and protected their instruments in a tool roll, and a professional wouldn't be in a hole - let alone dig one carrying instruments they could damage. Few people at all would be digging a hole carrying a pointed pair of scissors that would likely catch or stick in them, and even fewer would work down a hole carrying money they were to likely lose.

The original conclusion was find-based - arrived at 'in the absence of any known medieval reference to the Avebury stones',¹⁵ since which time some texts have emerged. The most outstanding detail in these accounts is that the number of sheep held at Avebury suddenly developed to very large numbers during the first quarter of the fourteenth century. This was the case throughout the downland neighbourhood, for large flocks similarly featured at Winterbourne Monkton, Rockley and the Ogbournes. To some extent this was a reflection of the local wool economy, but the numbers appear exceptionally large, which was particularly unusual prior to the Black Death of 1348.¹⁶ Afterwards, of course, it was the decrease in farmhands that led to an increase in sheep numbers, and the unique bargaining position that farm workers found themselves in set the scene for the Peasant's Revolt 1381. This

Archaeology's Best Known Skeleton - continued

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is all relevant to considering the increased sheep numbers in the Avebury neighbourhood earlier in the century, because a long-running peasant's revolt was already in full swing on the downs. This was no ad-hoc protest, but an organised and structured insurrection which started in the late thirteenth century and raged-on into the fifteenth century. This revolt took the shape of prolonged and extensive resistance to authority centred on the Ogbournes, and included the wholesale refusal of services.

The dispute began to escalate when four tenants of the Ogbournes that had brought a writ against the abbot, were refused an answer because they were only villeins. A further writ was issued in 1312, in which the grievances were stated more meticulously, and although it was issued by the same individuals, this time it was twinned with another writ supported by twenty-two more tenants. The revolt hit a peak with assaults committed on the king's ministers and the insurrection became wider-spread and broke-out across England in 1327.¹⁷ Which of course is around the date that the 'barber' died!

Avebury's sheep numbers at this time totalled perhaps well over a 1,000, as more than 900 alone belonged to the manor.¹⁸ This is far more than was held on the demesne just a quarter of a century earlier, when there was only enough grazing for a tenth of the present manorial flock.¹⁹ Extensive areas of ground then had to be prepared to accommodate the large flocks, and the choice location for lambing and shearing of the manorial flock is perhaps evident. Sheep were already perhaps held in the henge, which is suspected of being divided-up in a manner which exploited those areas free from stones.²⁰ There is evidence that established boundaries were changed at this point, areas were being opened up it appears, and due to an agreement a particular path was provided for the church which appears to have crossed the henge.

Previous routes through and around the henge had unsurprisingly been chosen as they avoided stones as they proved troublesome to wheels endangered axles and made horses shy. Now things had to change, for with foresight or following some incident, it would be recognised that with large numbers of sheep in close proximity ill-balanced standing stones would soon be undermined. Indeed sheep demonstrate a penchant for the bumps and stones of the

area, so precariously positioned and potentially hazardous stones would have to be prevented from falling lest they injured the flock. Which topically resonates with councils across England and Wales instigating a procedure of 'laying-down' or cordoning-off less than secure gravestones following the deaths of three teenagers due to falling headstones in the opening years of this century.²¹ At Avebury it was evidently decided that the very large and well-rooted stones could be left, but in respect of the others there was no point moving stones that would merely prove a nuisance elsewhere, and rolling stones into the ditch was not an option as it was still in use as a road. The obvious answer was to bury those stones that could be buried, and the others could be pushed or pulled over with or without digging a pit. It is quite probable that several teams were at work and approached their tasks differently, so some stones that could have been buried remained in view whilst others were completely covered as if with reverence. Without question, however, the only stones repositioned were those that proved manageable. This probably took place some time during the 1320s for the henge it seems was cleared by 1335 when a document relating to tithes refers to the manor's 'newly tilled land and assart'.²²

As with the revolt of 1327 the timing of the 'newly tilled land and assart' (1324-1335) coincides with the demise of the 'barber', for the coins dated the incident to around 1325. Whether there was any direct connection between this death and the revolt we might never know, but there may perhaps be reason to consider an indirect link in that the revolt and the clearance of the south-west sector may in some way have been intertwined. The south-west quadrant was divided by a boundary route segregating the most northerly area later known as the 'common pound', from the area in which the skeleton was found. The ditch and bank which included a road was also used as common grazing, and the area of stones immediately east of the southern road appears to have become petrified and discarded following the changes at this time. It is therefore tempting to think the area in which the skeleton was found may have been apportioned or abandoned to the manorial tenants as common. However, whilst being a rebel would at least provide a convenient reason why he wasn't reburied, it still doesn't tell us who was buried beneath what is now known as the 'Barber Stone'.



Crucifixes or Martyrs? Wiltshire Quakers and the Law in Fourteenth-Century England

Ruby Taylor

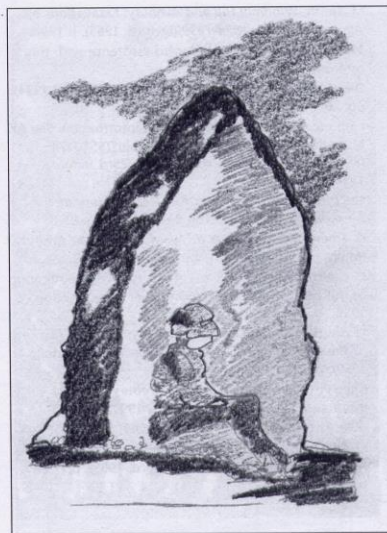
He always was suggested as being involved in the stone burial, but the indication that the ground was cleared for accommodating sheep puts an entirely different emphasis on his role. For shepherding duties in this period included being responsible for folding, fencing, hurdling, and the preparation and maintenance of ground.²³ The chance that this was a shepherd is also perhaps increased as medieval shepherds were not few and far between, as we are more used to imagining from more recent centuries. Local accounts quite remarkably record shepherds in the employ of groups of tenants, and the flocks of these tenants could be larger than those of the manor. In respect of large flocks shepherds were appointed solely to one range of care, so one was responsible for ewes, another for year-old lambs, etc. This meant there were at least four shepherds employed to cater to large flocks, such as that held by the manor. The manorial shepherds were select permanent staff, and as a result had a number of privileges including being allowed to maintain their own sheep along with those of the manor. Those employed by the tenants had similar privileges, and all shepherds were well paid, which could perhaps account for the coins. Shepherds were highly valued and well remunerated precisely because of another of their responsibilities. They were individually liable for the health of the flock.²⁴

The fourteenth century in particular throws up a series of early attempts to deal with sheep ills in North Wiltshire, such as sheep-scab and red death.²⁵ These were not so easily dealt with, but the incidence of clover on the downs which induces life threatening 'bloat' when consumed in quantity can be instantly relieved if quickly dealt with by a trochar, a tool similar to a lance. The use of this tool might most famously be recalled in the hands of Gabriel Oak saving Bathsheba's flock from bloat in Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*.²⁶

Another common threat which to this day remains prevalent in 89% of flocks in the southwest is Myiasis, commonly referred to as 'fly-strike'.²⁷ Infestation is discouraged by dagging - the removal of dung-tainted tail-wool, which today is carried out by clippers or shears, which is all well and good when there is a hut or a vehicle in which to store them. Shears are designed for speedy bulk work whilst never leaving the hand, whereas scissors would have been in many ways more practical. Scissors offered more precision and flexibility than

shears, and wouldn't as easily inflict accidental damage when used in the open. Scissors wouldn't involve the hands being so far along the blade as to become covered in dung and risk spreading and transferring it, thus tainting the wool and inviting Myiasis. Scissors certainly would have proved easier to carry and retain on the person whilst carrying out other duties.

The scissors and trochar could be comfortably retained in the lamb-warming pockets of the shepherd's cloak, but recalling the buckle and purse found with the skeleton brings to mind a fifteenth century tapestry featuring a cloaked shepherd retaining tools hung in loops or scabbards next to his purse on a utility belt.²⁸ No crook was found at Avebury of course, but this could have rotted or been retrieved. Perhaps like the shepherd illustrated in the 15th century tapestry, he simply didn't use one. He wouldn't of course have one to hand if he was burying the stone, but the shepherds and others drawn by the Revd. Skinner in the nineteenth century suggest he could have been sheltering against the weather (fig.2). If he was taking a nap, or retrieving a sheep, however, he could just as readily have become trapped.



A nineteenth century shepherd sheltering beside an Avebury megalith. The stones have provided cover for field workers against strong winds and bad weather for centuries (Illustration drawn by the author, after the Rev. Skinner, 1814)

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