

OUT & ABOUT

HISTORY EXPLORER

Neolithic treatment of the dead

As part of our series in which experts nominate British locations to illustrate historical topics, Richard Bradley visits **Wayland's Smithy**, a Neolithic long barrow once believed to be the home of a Saxon god

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In a lush tree plantation along the Ridgeway National Trail lie the remains of a great Neolithic stone tomb, known for centuries as Wayland's Smithy. The monument has long attracted speculation, not least because it takes its name from the Saxon god Wayland who forged the mail shirt worn by Beowulf in the epic poem of the same name. Legend has it that if you tether your horse at the site overnight, leaving with it a sixpence, the animal will have been re-shod by the morning.

But the prehistoric monument is much older than *Beowulf* (written between the 8th and 11th centuries) and was used between about 3600 and 3450 BC. Built out of sarsen – a kind of sandstone that littered the local chalk, similar to that used at Stonehenge – it was one of Britain's first works of architecture: a place where a group of selected people were celebrated as ancestors.

What can we see today? There is a long trapezoidal mound that was originally flanked by ditches. At its southern end stands a row of four upright stones (originally six), the largest of which rises at least twice as tall as a modern adult. The tallest of the stones flank the opening to a narrow-roofed passage that leads to three small chambers, each covered by a slab. The upright stones look rather like statues and may well have been selected for their resemblance to the human form.

But this was not the earliest monument at Wayland's Smithy. Beneath the mound a smaller monument lies buried. Evidence shows that a tree trunk was split in half, and

the two resulting parts set upright in the ground like a pair of brackets. Between those posts, 14 bodies – 11 males, two females and a child – were interred at intervals over a period of about 15 years.

The bodies – which were housed in some kind of container, apparently made of wood – were originally complete but had been reduced to mere bones over the course of a single generation. The remains were then covered by a mound, effectively cutting off the dead from the living. The circumstances surrounding the deaths are unknown, as are the reasons why these people warranted a tomb at the site, though the discovery of a broken arrowhead tip embedded in one of the pelvic bones suggests that several may have been killed during one or more conflicts.

After less than a century, that structure was replaced by a more elaborate building constructed out of stone that, though sourced locally, would have taken an enormous effort to move. This is the tomb that we can visit today.

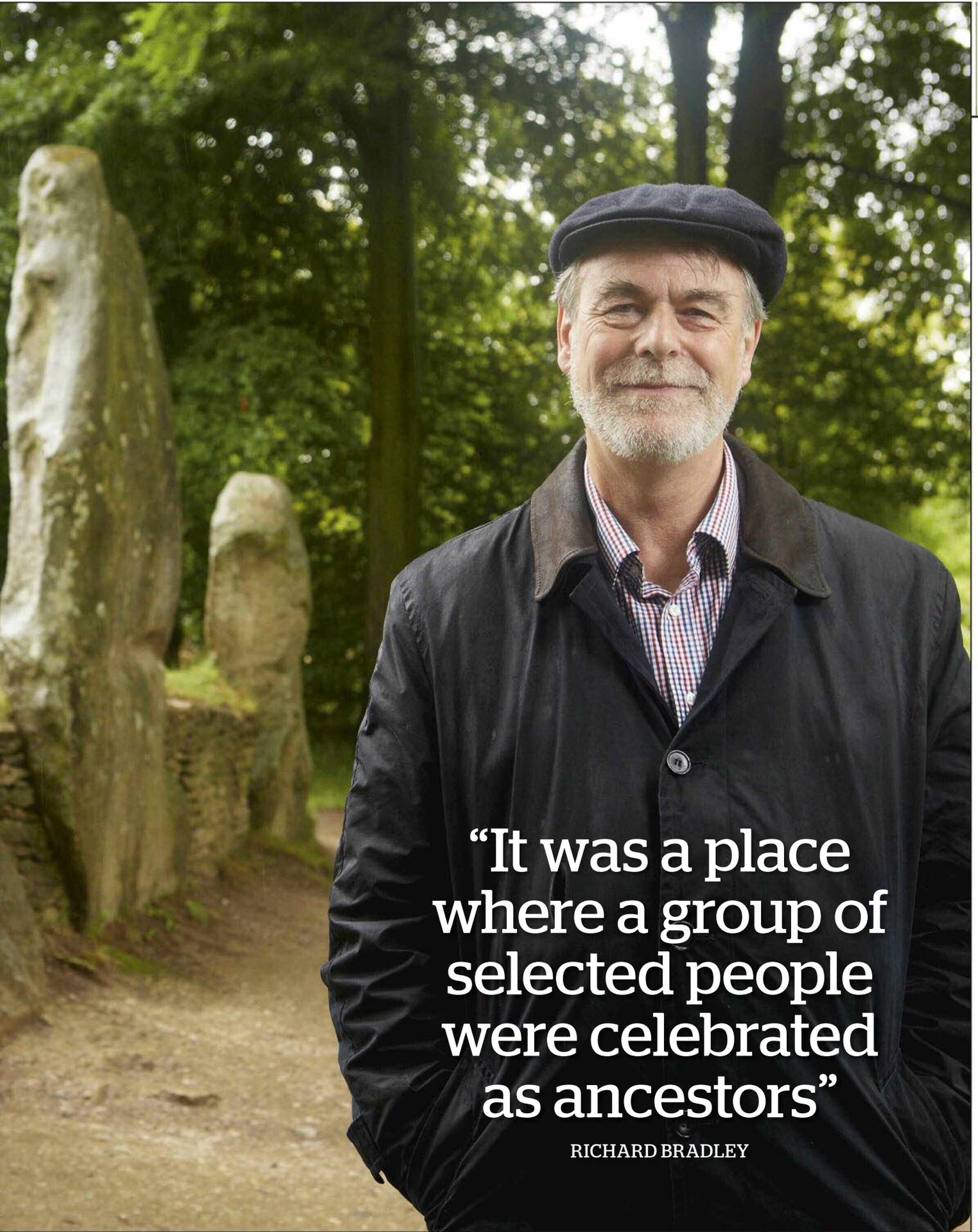
It is much larger than its predecessor, and bounded by a stone wall. But like the earlier wooden structure, its entrance faced south; when newly built, the monument's covering of white chalk would have gleamed in the sun. All three burial chambers would once have contained human bones, but few have escaped the ravages of early excavators.

Rebuilding Wayland's Smithy in stone ensured that it would survive and be recognised for many years – indeed, centuries – to come. Large stone monuments of this kind are known as megaliths, and are

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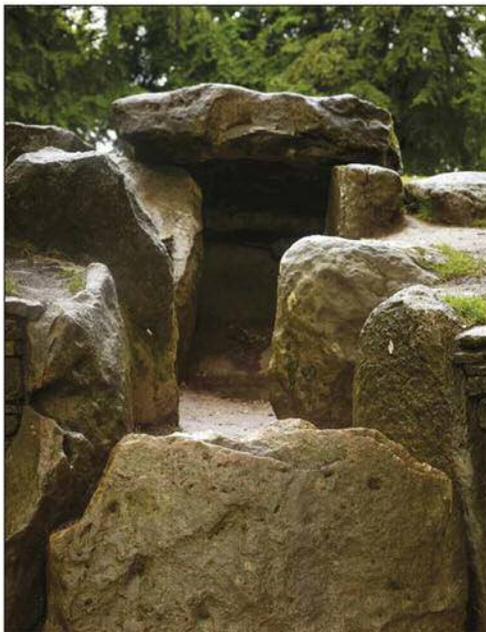
Professor Richard Bradley investigates the Neolithic tomb of Wayland's Smithy. The stone monument we see today hides an earlier wooden structure that held the remains of 14 people

Photography by Oliver Edwards



**“It was a place
where a group of
selected people
were celebrated
as ancestors”**

RICHARD BRADLEY



The narrow stone entrance to the later stone tomb at Wayland's Smithy



Four of the original six towering sarsen stones now guard the tomb's entrance

found throughout Britain and Ireland. The closest counterpart to Wayland's Smithy is West Kennet long barrow near Avebury; at both sites the entrance was closed after the last bodies were introduced to the chambers.

It may seem odd that the first farmers in the British Isles are known from their tombs – but little remains of their settlements. Where traces of their houses do survive, most were built within a few centuries of the arrival of settlers from the continent. Dwellings dating from after that time are more difficult for archaeologists to recognise. This could be because they were more lightly built and occupied over

shorter periods, perhaps by people who were moving around the landscape with their livestock. The change happened around 3700 BC and may have taken place as fertile land became scarce and conflicts developed between different communities. There was an increased emphasis on raising stock, and it was at this time that people first engaged in monument building on a large scale.

Unlike hunter-gatherers, each farmer made a long-term investment in the land, from clearing native woodland to protecting livestock from predators. Farmers, therefore, emphasised the importance of ancestry as a way of demonstrating that particular places had been occupied over a considerable period – possibly one reason why tombs became so important.

Wayland's Smithy illustrates this point in several ways. It was associated with a series of human burials, and the tomb itself became more elaborate over time. It remained so conspicuous, in fact, that Bronze Age burial mounds were erected nearby 1,000 years later in recognition of its significance.

Neolithic treatment of the dead varied from place to place. Tombs similar to Wayland's Smithy have revealed incomplete skeletons, suggesting that bones may have been removed as relics. This theory is supported by evidence from excavations at earthwork enclosures of the same period, which often included isolated human bones as well as the bones of people who were originally buried elsewhere.

In other places, especially in Ireland, corpses were burned; excavated burial chambers revealed cremated remains. There are also instances in which only one person, most likely of a high rank in the community, was associated with a burial mound. But, in contrast to monuments such as Wayland's Smithy where funeral offerings were rare or absent, those bodies were accompanied by weapons and ornaments. Such practices lapsed by about 3000 BC, but appeared again with the adoption of metalwork 1,000 years later.

Evidence relating to the treatment of the dead during that period (between about



Wayland's Smithy



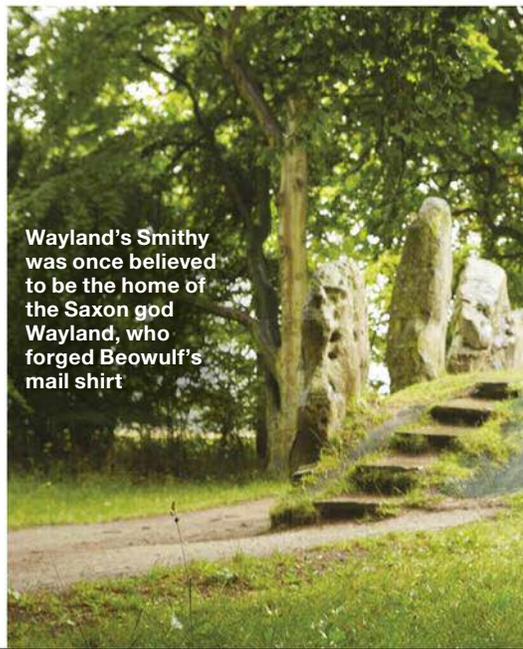
Wayland's Smithy, nr Ashbury, Oxfordshire SN6
english-heritage.org.uk

3000 and 2000 BC) is sparse, though burnt and unburnt bones have been found at stone circles and at enclosures known as henges. Such places fulfilled many roles: some include rings of posts, which may sometimes have been roofed, providing venues for feasts. Others contain the settings of upright pillars and have been found exclusively with the remains of the dead.

Stone structures often replaced those made of wood, recalling the development of Wayland's Smithy hundreds of years before. Here, the earliest structure was built of wood and permitted to decay. The stone tomb that took its place may well have been intended to last forever – equally true of the memories of those who were buried there. **H**

Richard Bradley is professor of archaeology at the University of Reading and author of a number of works on prehistoric archaeology

OLIVER EDWARDS



Wayland's Smithy was once believed to be the home of the Saxon god Wayland, who forged Beowulf's mail shirt

THE UPRIGHT STONES LOOK RATHER LIKE STATUES - AND MAY HAVE BEEN SELECTED FOR THEIR RESEMBLANCE TO THE HUMAN FORM

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 Wayland's Smithy, Oxfordshire

ON THE PODCAST

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1 Grey Cairns of Camster, Caithness

● historic-scotland.gov.uk

The three circular burial cairns, established here around 3700 BC, are among the oldest stone monuments in Scotland. There is evidence of later rebuilding; at some point two of the monuments were encased in a longer cairn, seen today. Little is known about who was buried here, but the structures are well preserved and can be entered: the long cairn – the larger of the structures – is 4m high and nearly 60m long.

2 West Kennet Long Barrow, Wiltshire

● english-heritage.org.uk

Built c3650 BC, West Kennet bears many similarities to nearby Wayland's Smithy, just over 20 miles away. The long barrow is impressive: five chambers open off a central passage, fronted by three huge sarsen stones.

At least 31 people were interred here but, as at Wayland's Smithy, the tomb was later closed and blocked with sarsen stones – probably around 2000 BC.



Three sarsen stones at the front of West Kennet Long Barrow

3 Knap Hill, Wiltshire

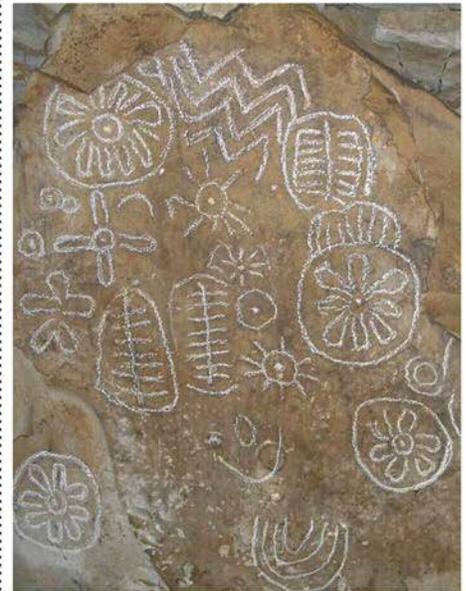
● discover-wiltshire.com/knap-hill

The first Neolithic causewayed enclosure to be recognised in Britain, Knap Hill was built between 3530 and 3375 BC and, like Wayland's Smithy, saw a brief period of use. The hill on which the enclosure sits has been the focus of activity over many periods and may have been sited on the steep bank for defensive purposes. Excavations in the early 20th century included the remains of a human infant, pottery and animal bones. Knap Hill forms part of a nature reserve and parking is provided.

4 Loughcrew Cairns, County Meath

● loughcrew.com/wp/cairns

The megalithic tombs on the Loughcrew Hills – built between 3500 and 3000 BC – fall into three principal cemeteries, of which the central group is open to the public. Cairn T is the most famous of these tombs; its passage is lit by a beam of light on the equinoctial sunrise, during which the symbols on the chamber's decorated backstone are illuminated. The meaning and relevance of the stone's symbols is still debated.



The decorated backstone in Cairn T at Loughcrew Cairns. Its meaning remains a mystery

5 Arbor Low, Derbyshire

● english-heritage.org.uk

Arbor Low is a stone circle in the Peak District, consisting of a large bank and internal ditch surrounding a central area with stone settings. All of the monoliths – large stones – are now lying flat, but they would once have stood upright, with between 41 and 43 stones making up the stone ring. A central part of the henge was associated with human bones. The site also boasts a Bronze Age burial mound built on top of the enclosure bank, while another Bronze Age barrow known as Gib Hill can be found a short distance outside the enclosure: this was superimposed on an older long barrow. Both of these structures may have been attempts to forge links with the past.