**'Fancifull men and crackt imaginations': the antiquarians of Stanton Drew**

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Extracted from the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society for 2019.

Volume 163, 138-154.

# 'FANCIFULL MEN AND CRACKT IMAGINATIONS': THE ANTIQUARIANS OF STANTON DREW

### JOHN RICHARDS

## INTRODUCTION

The megalithic site at Stanton Drew (ST 603 630; Fig. 1) has never had anywhere near the amount of attention lavished on Stonehenge and Avebury, despite having the second largest stone circle in Britain, and being just seven miles from the city of Bristol. In some respects this has been to its advantage. The site is largely undisturbed: there has never been a formal excavation within the circles; there has been no destruction of stones for 300 years, as far as is known; and there has not been the reconstruction that has occurred at Stonehenge and Avebury. The lack of excavation does mean, though, that there is no firm dating evidence for the site.

The site consists of three stone circles, two avenues, a cove, and some outliers: more than 70 stones in total (Fig. 2)[1]. The Great Circle is 113m in diameter, with 26 stones. In the same field is the North East Circle, eight stones and 30m in diameter. Each of these circles has a short avenue of stones heading eastwards and the two avenues appear to meet at the edge of the floodplain of the River Chew. In a field to the south on higher ground is the South West Circle of twelve stones and 45m diameter. Further to the west, in a pub garden, is the Cove, consisting of three large stones. The Cove is in alignment with the centres of the Great Circle and North East Circle. A line through the centres of the South West and Great Circles passes through an outlier, Hautville's Quoit, which some 500m away lies by a hedge on the side of the Chew Magna to Pensford road. There are two other outliers usually considered to be part of the complex, the Tyning Stones, 700m west of the Great Circle.

John Aubrey (1626-97) was the first to record the site, in 1664.[2] He visited just before harvest time when the crops were tall and he was unable to make out the arrangement of the stones. At that time, the Great Circle was divided into three by field boundaries which would have added to the confusion. Consequently, his plan does not make much sense and William Stukeley later described it as 'wretchedly designd'.[3] Aubrey never published, but some of his notes on Stanton Drew were used in the 1695 edition of Camden's *Britannia*.[4] About 1670, Robert Gay wrote about the stones under the pseudonym *Philantiquarius Britannicus*. In *A Fool's Bolt soon Shot at Stonage* he describes a site of eight large stones and at least 60 others, plus the find of some human bones and a large bell. This account was not published for over 50 years.[5]

In the early 18th century, two antiquarians, William Stukeley (1687-1765) and John Wood the Elder (1704-54), wrote descriptions that were to lead to recognition of the importance of Stanton Drew. However, there were other antiquarians who paved the way and whose contributions have not been so widely recognised.

## WILLIAM MUSGRAVE AND JOHANNES KEYSLER

Between 1719 and 1725 there was a short period of heightened interest in Stanton Drew. First, William Musgrave (1655-1721) published a brief account in *Antiquitates Britanno-Belgicae*.[6] He described the Great Circle as having 13 stones remaining, only three set upright: but he expected this circle, when perfect, had 32 stones. He believed all the stones to the east of the Great Circle formed two concentric circles. The North East Circle was the most perfect, having eight stones, still standing. The remaining stones, the ones now considered to form avenues, he saw as the remains of another circle. He concluded that the stones of the outer circle were missing or had been destroyed or moved from their original positions; some could have been used for building or mending roads.

Johannes Georg Keysler (1693-1743) published a similar brief account in his *Antiquitates Septentionales* (Keysler 1720).[7] He said that Stanton Drew is named not from the Druids, but from the Drugone of Stanton, who had once been the feudal owner. One of the circles (the Great Circle) once had 32 stones, of which 13 remained, but only three standing. Nearby, there seemed to be a set of three concentric circles.

## WILLIAM STUKELEY

The first substantial description of the site was made by William Stukeley. He was accompanied on his visit on 23rd July 1723 by John Strachey, FRS (1671-1743), who owned the nearby Sutton Court estate. Eight
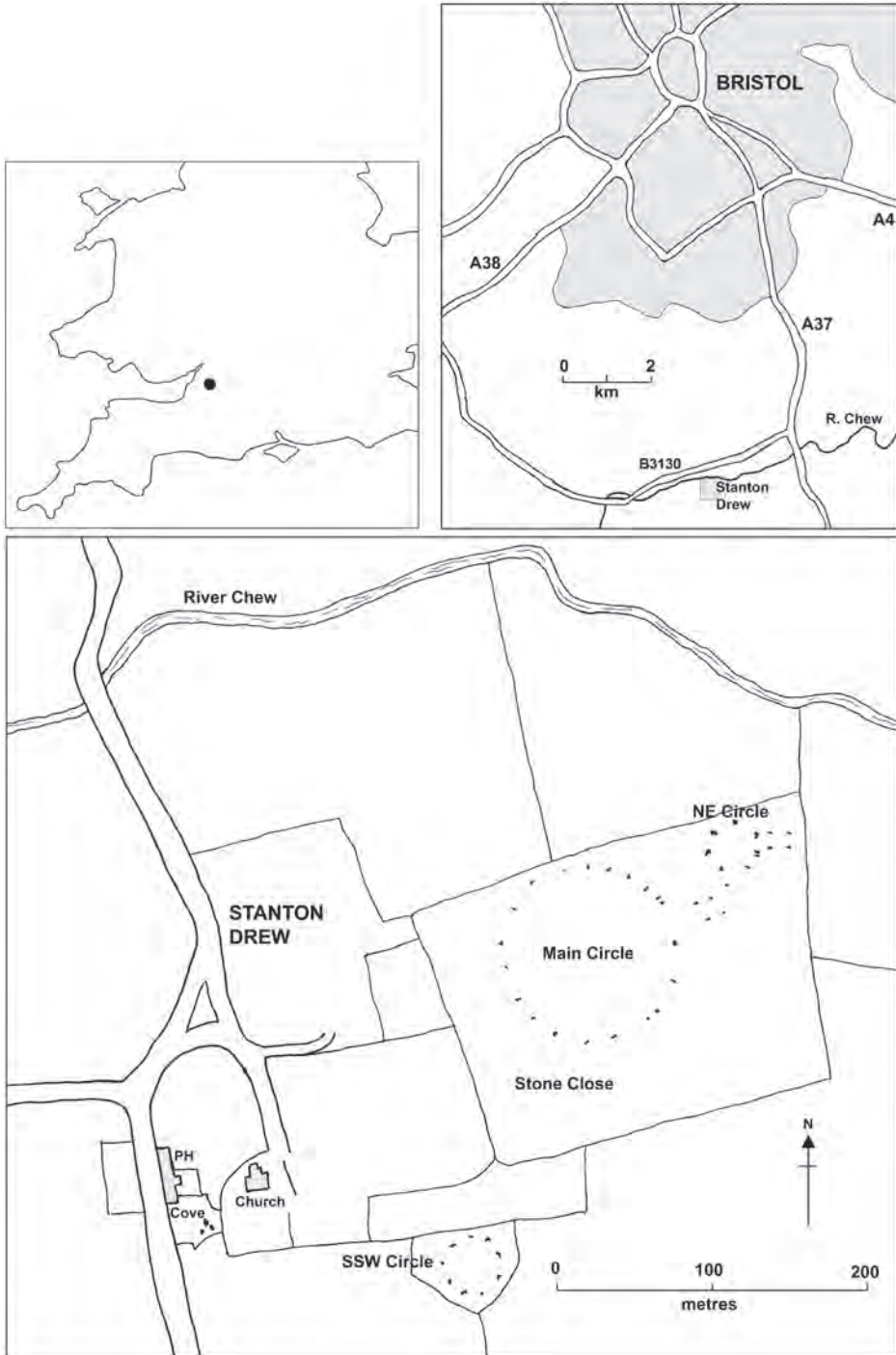
*Fig. 1 Stanton Drew stone circles – location map (Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society)*
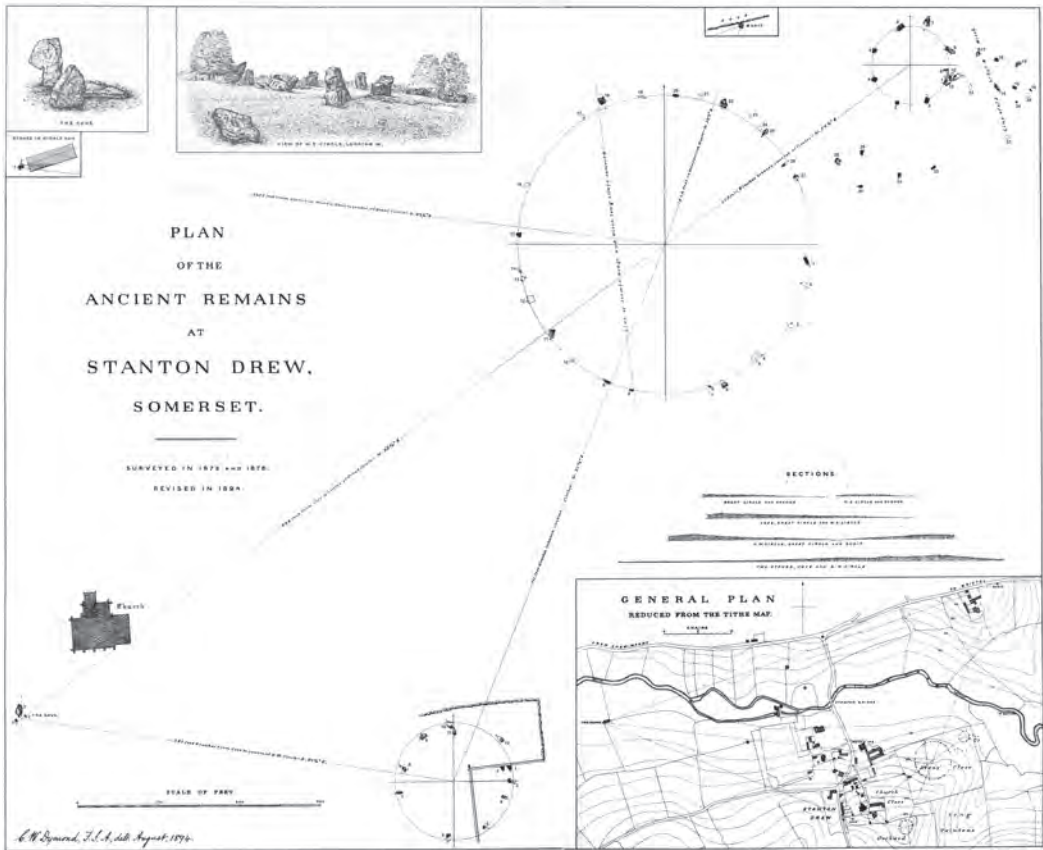
*Fig. 2 Charles Dymond's 1894 plan of Stanton Drew*

months later, Stukeley wrote down an account of 'The Weddings', the name given to the site locally because the folklore had it that the stones were the petrified remains of a wedding party that had been punished for dancing on the Sabbath.[8] However, the account was not published until after his death, in the second volume of *Itinerarium Curiosum*.[9]

Stukeley did not tarry long at Stanton Drew. He was in Bath on the 22nd July 1723.[10] His drawings of Stanton Drew bear the date 23rd July. But by 26th July he was at Marlborough Castle.[11] The distance from Stanton Drew to Marlborough is over 40 miles, probably two days' journey by horse or coach. He could not have spent more than 24 hours at Stanton Drew and there is no record that he ever returned. However, it was a productive visit, as Stukeley made at least five drawings of the stones and surrounding countryside.

Stukeley regarded Stanton Drew as the third most magnificent stone circle site after Stonehenge and Avebury, describing it as a prototype for Avebury, which makes it

more surprising that he never revisited. He is credited with being the first to describe the group of three stones near the Church, which he named the Cove, and the South West Circle of twelve stones and 120 feet in diameter.[12] He claimed the Great Circle had 20 stones remaining of its original 30, of which just three were standing, and a diameter of 300 feet. He also mentioned a 'pair of coyts', one of which was Hautville's Quoit and the other was apparently to the west of it, but no longer to be found.[13]

Stukeley believed that the name of Stanton Drew was derived from the monument: Stanton from the stones and Drew from the Druids. He knew that a family named Drew was said to have lived there, but he felt it most likely they had taken their name from the place, rather than the reverse.

Where Stukeley disagreed significantly with current interpretations is at the North East Circle, where he saw a quincuple circle consisting of five concentric rings: a big increase on Musgrave's two and Keysler's three. Stukeley was not averse to bold interpretations: Thomas

Hearne described him as a 'very fancifull Man'.[14] The outer circle was said to be 310 feet in diameter, originally with 32 stones at 30 foot intervals; the second of 250 feet in diameter and 28 stones; the third of 230 feet diameter and 22 stones; and the fourth of 150 feet diameter and 16 stones. The fifth, and innermost, ring is the North East Circle, of 90 feet diameter and nine stones (but two of these crowded together). Charles Dymond called this quincuple circle a 'monstrosity evolved out of … (Stukeley's) too fertile imagination'[15] because there were just a dozen stones left of the ones that were supposed to form the four outer circles. If Stukeley had been correct, then 86 stones would have had to disappear without trace. Stukeley indicated these missing stones by dots in a panoramic drawing of the site.[16]

Stukeley interpreted the Great Circle as a large circular solar temple, with the South West Circle as a lunar temple. The Cove was dedicated to the Goddess of the Earth. The quincuple circle was consecrated to the five lesser planets. Stukeley felt there was a missing component, needed to balance the three temples and the Cove and create a numerically pleasing total of five, an additional cove near the manor house, dedicated to water.[17] As this illustrates, Stukeley saw a divine significance in number[18] and believed that Stanton Drew would be steeped in numerical symbolism, in this case based on the number five.

Although it may seem odd that Stukeley could be so confident in his designations of the circles to particular deities, it was a logical consequence of Stukeley's mindset. Stukeley held strong beliefs about the development of religion. He subscribed to the idea of a *prisca theologia*, literally a pristine theology, a pure religion created by God at the beginning of time. All subsequent religions were derived from the original religion and were, to a greater or lesser degree, corruptions of it. Judaeo-Christianity was a less corrupted form, and Church of England Protestantism was the closest yet to getting back to the *prisca theologia*. In his view, the religion of the Ancient Britons, which he had decided was Druidism, was a proto-Christian religion in which astronomical bodies, particularly the sun and moon, were worshipped. He believed he could show this as fact by comparison with other ancient religions with which Druidism was associated. These religions had circular stone temples open to the sky in which they worshipped their deities. Hence, when Stukeley encountered a stone circle he saw it as a Druidic temple used to worship the sun or moon or other gods.[19]

## JOHN WOOD THE ELDER

After this brief period of activity, nothing is recorded until the visit of the architect John Wood the Elder, in August 1740.[20] John Wood was the first person to point out that the centres of the Great Circle and the North East Circle and the Cove lie on a straight line, and also that a line drawn from Hautville's Quoit passing through the centre of the Great Circle would pass through the centre of the South West Circle. The reason that he was able to identify the alignments and to calculate the distances for his planetary model was that he had produced a careful plan, which was not surpassed in its detail and accuracy until Charles Dymond's survey 137 years later.[21] Unfortunately, Wood's plan[22] (kept in the British Library) has never been published.

Wood concurred with Stukeley that the place name meant the 'Stone Town of the Druids',[23] but apart from that his interpretation was considerably more fanciful. Stanton Drew was elevated to the role of the university of the Druids. King Bladud had placed there the four philosophers he had brought from Athens and they were the leaders of the British Druids. The Druids knew all about the form and magnitude of the Earth and the courses of the stars and their revolutions, and the stones were a model of the solar system. The Great Circle was a temple dedicated to the Earth, the South West Circle was dedicated to the Sun, and the North East Circle represented the Moon. The Cove was identified with the planet Venus, Hautville's Quoit with Jupiter, and the Tyning Stones (here mentioned for the first time) with Saturn. This left Wood without any representations of the remaining two known planets: Mars and Mercury. Nothing daunted, Wood invented two stones that he 'supposed' must have been there originally: one stone (Mercury) between the Cove and the South West Circle and one stone (Mars) towards Hautville's Quoit. Wood claimed that this formed 'a perfect Model of the Pythagorean System of the Planetary World' and to prove this he included two astronomical diagrams (one is shown in Fig. 3).[24] He used these to show that the ratios of distances between bodies in the accepted Pythagorean model were very close to the ratios of distances at Stanton Drew.

Like Stukeley, Wood saw the remains of five concentric circles in the north-east of the site, but he had a more complex interpretation: while the North East Circle itself symbolised the moon, the surrounding four circles had a more earthly purpose, representing the temple that Cyrus commanded the Jews to build in Jerusalem in 536 BC, thus, as an added bonus, ingeniously fixing an earliest date for the construction of Stanton Drew. Wood imagined even greater destruction than Stukeley: he calculated the number of stones originally in the four outer circles as 114, of which just twelve remained.

## AFTER 1740

John Wood the Elder died in 1754, but the name of Stanton Drew was kept alive by his *Description of Bath*, published in 1765.[25] The site was now sufficiently
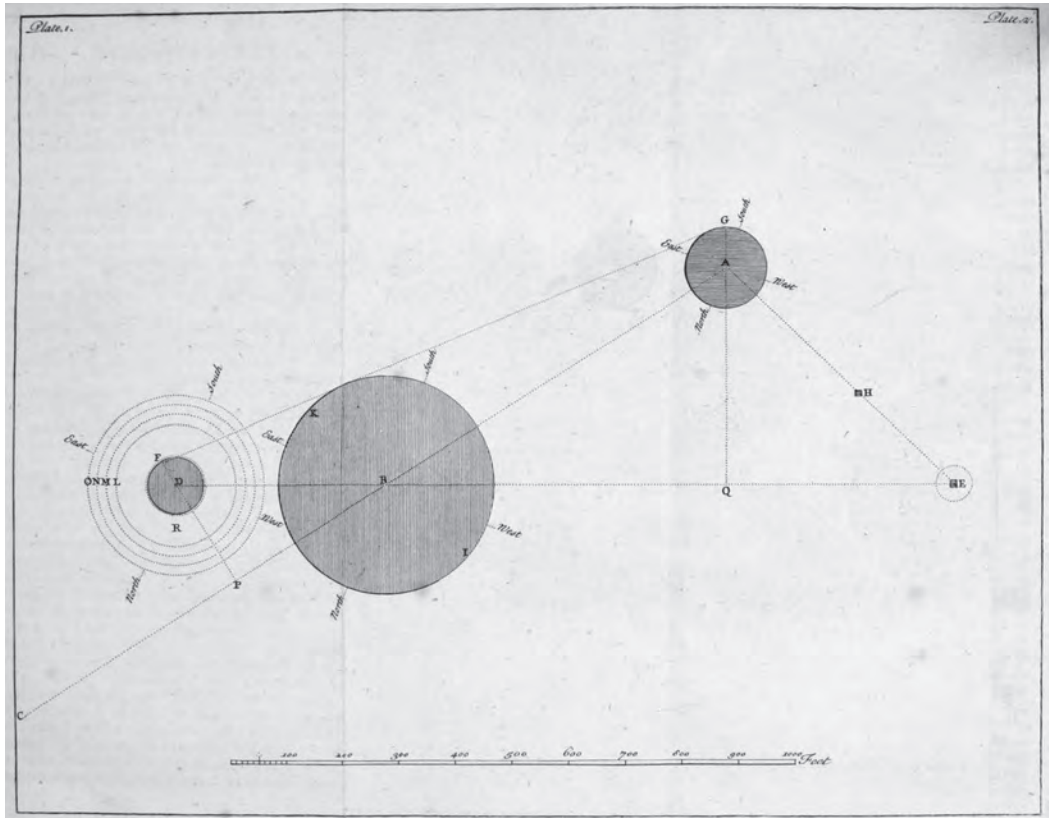
*Fig. 3 John Wood's planetary model of Stanton Drew. North is downwards. Key: A: the Sun;*
*B: the Earth; C: Jupiter; D: the Moon; E: Venus; H: Mercury. D, together with the four*
*concentric circles L, M, N, O, represents the Temple at Jerusalem decreed by Cyrus the Great.*

well-known that Benjamin Donne included a small plan of Stanton Drew in the border of his 1769 map of Bristol and surroundings.[26] It is a measure of its perceived importance that the only other illustration in the border is one of St. Vincent's Rocks, at the Avon Gorge in Bristol. The plan shows the Cove, the Great Circle, South West Circle, North East Circle, and the stones of the avenues, without a single concentric circle to be seen. Charles Dymond praised it as the first in which the avenues were clearly recognised and delineated,[27] but as Donne did not supply any textual description, or draw any lines to indicate avenues, we cannot know whether Donne saw them as such.

An article in the Gentleman's Magazine in 1785 gave a short account with a hastily made and inaccurate plan.[28] 'T.P.' thought the Great Circle and North East Circle formed two intersecting circles of the same diameter with centres 70 feet apart, forming an ellipse. The stones of the Great Circle avenue formed part of the intersecting circles, but he said he could make nothing of the stones of the other avenue.

Edmund Rack included Stanton Drew in his Survey of Somerset (c. 1781-7).[29] He saw the westernmost five stones of the Great Circle avenue as forming an avenue between the two circles. He described seven smaller stones lying to the north of the North East Circle and irregularly spaced. Despite saying he would base his description on Stukeley and Wood, he did not mention any concentric circles.

The Reverend John Collinson described Stanton Drew in his *History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset* in 1791 in an account where he quoted Stukeley and Wood, but again the concentric circles are omitted.[30] Collinson saw an oblong of five stones between the two circles. To the south-east extremity, he described an ellipsis of seven stones, 40 feet long.

The concentric circles theory had been quietly forgotten and was rarely mentioned thereafter; commentators preferring to describe what Stukeley

got 'right' and ignore what he got 'wrong'. There were occasional other interpretations of these stones. The most popular was that the stones form an extremely curved avenue connecting the Great Circle and the North East Circle.[31] However, eventually the concept of two short and straight avenues became the accepted one.

## A MONSTROSITY OF CIRCLES

In theory, in 1740 John Wood was unaware of Stukeley's ideas on Stanton Drew as they were not published until 1776. Wood and Stukeley both assigned planetary bodies to elements of Stanton Drew, though they differed in which body was assigned to each. Wood's interpretation is considerably more complex and contrived. The surprising coincidence is that both saw five circles of stones at the North East Circle. Whereas Stukeley identified this as a model of the minor planets, Wood had another interpretation: the circles represented the moon and Cyrus's Temple of Jerusalem.

Both Stukeley and Wood had access to the work of Musgrave and Keysler so would have been predisposed to the idea of concentric circles. It is still remarkable that all four antiquarians could come up with something that required imagining so many vanished stones. But both Stukeley and Wood increased the number of circles to five, and apparently independently of each other.

It is not known what Stukeley thought of Wood's description of Stanton Drew (or if, indeed, he ever saw it), but he did read Wood's treatment of Stonehenge[32] and he was not at all happy with it, as he recorded in his diary (with a certain lack of self-awareness): '3 Aug., 1763. This day I read over Wood the architect's account of Stonehenge, written to contradict me. … The very best things in his book, he has pillaged from me – the design and nature of the work, the avenue, the ditch around, the 2 odd stones and cavitys thereon, even the word *trilithon*, all that is in any wise valuable, he takes from me, without the least acknowledgement; never uses my name but with a studied intent to contradict. The whole performance he stuffs with fabulous whimsys of his own crackt imaginations, wild extravagancys concerning Druids, without the least true foundation and knowledge concerning them.'[33]

Both Stukeley and Wood had produced planetary models of Stanton Drew (although with different attributions); both saw five concentric circles; and there were other similarities leading to suggestions that Wood must have seen Stukeley's manuscript.[34] Both gave similar etymologies for the place names of Stanton Drew and Pensford; and described the religious processions they believed were held around the site. Mowl and Earnshaw believe that James Theobald FRS (1688-1759), Stukeley's successor as secretary to the Society

of Antiquaries, was responsible for providing Wood with access to Stukeley's private papers. Theobald was a friend of Wood's, and it has been suggested that it was Theobald who was responsible for Wood becoming interested in antiquarianism. He had trading connections with the West Country and knew influential people in Bath politics, such as Ralph Allen and the Duke of Chandos.[35]

However, there are better candidates for the link between Stukeley and Wood, and those are John Pine, an engraver, and the man who accompanied Stukeley on his brief visit to Stanton Drew, John Strachey.

## JOHN PINE

John Pine (1690-1756) was one of the leading engravers of his day, an antiquarian and a close friend of Stukeley. In July 1722, the two men were among the 16 founding members of the Society of Roman Knights, a peculiar antiquarian club for the study of Roman Britain whose members took the names of notable figures from that era. Stukeley was Chyndonax and Pine chose Adminius.[36] The same month, they visited Avebury together.[37]

Pine engraved plates for the first volume of Stukeley's *Itinerarium Curiosum* which appeared in 1724,[38] and he may have done some of those that eventually appeared in the second volume (Stukeley had a large number of plates unused after the publication of the first volume).[39] Around this time, Stukeley may have shown Pine his Stanton Drew sketches, including his landscape. If so, Pine would have seen the five circles and wanted to know more.

Later, Pine did a number of engravings for John Wood, including a map in 1735,[40] and, in particular, he did the astronomical diagrams of Stanton Drew (Fig. 3).[41] It has to be a possibility that Pine passed on some of Stukeley's ideas.

## JOHN STRACHEY

John Strachey owned Sutton Court, an estate, two miles south of Stanton Drew. His father died when he was very young. Strachey married Elizabeth Elletson when he was 21 and they had 18 children. She died in 1722. In 1725, he married Christiana Stavely; they had just one child and she survived him.

Strachey was similar to John Aubrey in that he had wide interests and carried out numerous investigations over his lifetime, but struggled to publish his efforts. He was primarily a geologist, and made significant contributions to the understanding of the stratigraphy of mines. His first publication was *A Curious description of the strata observ'd in the Coal-Mines of Mendip*[42] (1719) and he was elected to the Royal Society in December the same year. He was also interested in local history, particularly of gentlemen and their estates and

genealogy, and local antiquities, and spent many years researching and compiling notes. It was his intention to create a map of Somerset and to publish a book entitled *Somersetshire Illustrated*; but only the map was to appear in print. Stanton Drew was one of the places on which he made notes, and these are kept in the Somerset Archives in Taunton. Some extracts from the manuscripts have been published.[43] However, the full extent and importance of Strachey's work and his influence on his fellow antiquarians have not previously been realised. Strachey was the first person to identify the main elements of the Stanton Drew site and provided his research to Keysler and Stukeley, and possibly to Musgrave and Wood as well.

Johann Keysler wrote in a footnote that he had obtained his information on Stanton Drew from the recent reading of a paper by John Strachey at the Royal Society of London on May 29.[44] He was out by one day: it was on 28 May 1719 that Strachey delivered his paper.[45] It seems likely Stukeley was in the audience as well as Keysler; Stukeley had become a Fellow the previous year and by 1719 was on the Council. Stone circles would have been a hot topic for him: fewer than ten days earlier he had seen Stonehenge and Avebury for the first time.[46] The minutes of the meeting seem never to have appeared in print, so it seems appropriate to give the account in full:

> *'A paper communicated by Mr. Strachey was read being a description of the Monument of Stones called the Wedding at Stanton Drue in Somersetshire with some conjectures concerning it to which was subjoined a draught or plan of the said monument.*
>
> *This monument stands between Pensford & Chew Magna about 5 miles South of Bristol a little to the East of Stanton Church. & did consist of several large stones set at equal distances in rings or circles, the place is now very much over run by the growth of Hedges & Trees and their order of the stones is something interupted by the loss of several of them. Some of which have been removed & others sunk into the earth by one who formerly owned the land. But what appears is as follows.*
>
> *Next the Church is a large circle of 140 yards diameter, in the circumference of which are 13 large stones each being 6 foot square & 3 foot thick they formerly*

*stood upright upon their lesser base, but are now all thrown down except 3. The stones which stand nearest to each other are at such equal distances that the whole circle will contain 32.*

*About 60 or 70 yards from the circumference of this circle to the S.W stands two large stones which some antiquarys call the King and Queen Stolen, but the country people call them the Parson & Clark.*

*About 16 yards from this circle of stones more eastward from the Church, is another lesser monument which seems to have been made up of 3 circles one within another about the same center. The least & innermost is 27 yards in diameter and this is entire, containing 8 cylindrical stones 6 foot high & 21 foot in girt all entire ex[ce]pt one.*

*The outermost (at about 32 yards from the circumference of the Great Circle which makes the other monuments) contains only 7 stones which seem to be what are left out of 22 to make it entire. Within these two circles are two other stones 10 yards from the outermost & 22 from the innermost which seems to be the remainder of another ring. About 12 yards south east of outermost of these 3 rings is another stone like the former, and beyond a little river near two furlongs distant is a round flat stone larger than any of the former. This they call Hautville's Quoit and it seems to belong to this monument.*

*The Author having given this description he next proposes this as a provable conjecture that these stones were erected by the Ancient Britains in memory of some advantage gained by them over the Romans, in some battel fought near this place. And particularly that it might erected by the ancient Cangi in the time of Claudius Cesar when Oftorius commanded the Roman army here in England.*

*To support which Conjectur he proposes several reasons for proving that the*

*Cangi mentioned by Tacitus in 12 libr*
*inhabited in and about Somersetshire*
*according to what Camden was inclined*
*to believe, first from the similitude*
*of the names of several places such*
*as Cannington Cainsham Alcanning,*
*Caun & several other places, next*
*from several garrisons mentioned by*
*Tacitus in the same book as settled by*
*Ostorius upon the Sabrina & Antona.*
*There being several Roman Camps &*
*fortifications still visible in that Country*
*about the Severn & Avon which last*
*this gentleman concluded is the Antona*
*of Tacitus. He offers another reason*
*for placing the Cangi in Somersetshire*
*from the Ancient Camolodunum which*
*concludes was among the Cangi. And*
*there is a place [in] Somersetshire now*
*called Camaled, by some Cadbury*
*Castle and the adjoining villages of*
*South Camel, Queens Camel & West*
*Camel all which he takes to derive their*
*names from Camelodunum from all of*
*which he thinks it provable that this*
*monument of stones is near those places*
*where some of the battles mentioned by*
*Tacitus were fought.*

*He was ordered the thanks of the*
*Society. Dr. Welsted proposed Mr.*
*Strachey as one desirous & fitting to*
*be a member of the Society & it was*
*referred to the next Council.'*[47]

Strachey was duly elected a Fellow of the Royal Society on 5 November 1719.[48] One of the proposers was Dr Welstead. It is said that his election was as a result of his geological work, but it appears that it was at least partly because of his Stanton Drew paper.

John Strachey's extensive knowledge of Stanton Drew makes him a plausible candidate for passing on Stukeley's ideas to John Wood. There is no proof that Strachey and Wood ever met but they could have easily come into contact with each other. John Wood was known to the most powerful men in Bath and he and Strachey must have had mutual acquaintances. Sutton Court is less than 13 miles from Bath. They had common interests, with Wood writing his *Description of Bath* and Strachey compiling his information on Somerset. It may even be that James Theobald introduced the two men. Theobald and Strachey owned the manors near Frome at Nunney and Elm, respectively;[49] they are just three miles apart. If they met, then Strachey could have told

Wood of his own theories on Stanton Drew and also those of Stukeley, including the origin of the place name, the planetary model, the five concentric circles and Stukeley's idea about religious processions. There would have been no need for John Wood to have seen Stukeley's papers.

The plan that Strachey presented at the Royal Society has been lost, but within Stukeley's Commonplace Book is a second plan of Stanton Drew titled 'The Weddings at Stanton Drew as represented by Dr. Strauchey (sic)' (Fig. 4).[50] It appears that Stukeley drew the plan from Strachey's own. The positioning of the stones is so precise with respect to the field boundaries, and the portrayal of the group of four stones close together in the North East Circle, together with the alignment of the circles with the church, suggest it was drawn by someone who knew the site well. However, there are clues which suggest this plan predates Stukeley's visit in 1723. The measurements on the plan are exactly the ones that Strachey gave at his Royal Society talk, but they are inaccurate. The diameter of the Great Circle is given as 140 yards (420 feet), but it is generally accepted to be about 50 feet less. The diameter of the North East Circle is said to be 27 yards (81 feet), rather than Dymond's 97 feet. Crucially, they are significantly different to the measurements Stukeley recorded on his 1723 visit. It seems Stukeley based his plan on what Strachey had said at the Royal Society and corrected his measurements after his visit four years later.[51]

In addition, the plan contains two stones that Strachey had called the Parson and Clark (sic) in his Royal Society talk and described as being 60 or 70 yards south-west of the circumference of the Great Circle (the two stones towards the bottom left corner in Fig. 4). These stones do not exist in that location today, and they are absent from Strachey's other manuscripts and drawings. John Aubrey had also mentioned a Parson's Stone along with a Bride's Stone and a Cook's Stone, but not a Clerk, which he said were five or six feet high. He denoted their locations with Greek letters, which unfortunately do not appear on his plan.[52] Stukeley said the three stones of the Cove were called the parson, bride, and bridegroom[53] (but at other times he placed the bride and bridegroom in the North East Circle[54]). John Wood also positioned the stones at the Cove, writing that the country people called the two erect stones the minister and the clerk.[55] A plausible explanation is that Strachey's words were recorded incorrectly in the minutes and he was indeed describing two stones at the Cove. However, the Cove is 200 yards further away in the direction of the Church. Also, the Cove stones do not fit Aubrey's description – the tallest being over ten feet high. There is no other obvious candidate for a pair of large stones that stand alone. Another possibility is that the stones did exist

*Fig. 4 The Weddings at Stanton Drew as represented by Dr Strauchey (Wiltshire Museum)*

in 1719 but had disappeared by 1723. Destruction and removal of stones may not have been that rare. John Aubrey in 1664 wrote that villagers broke the stones 'with sledges because they so encumber their good land, and they told me they are much diminished within these few years'.[56] In 2003, Jodie Lewis and David Mullin excavated a stone that had been moved and buried 40m to the north-west of the South West Circle, most likely in the 14th century.[57]

Strachey did write that stones had in recent years been pulled down and buried by John Cowly, a tenant farmer, but that the grass refused to grow on the thin soil above the sunken stones.[58] Stukeley's papers in the Bodleian Library contain descriptions of Stanton Drew based on Strachey's information.[59] Stukeley crossed out and corrected large parts following his visit in 1723. Passing on the story of the buried stones, Stukeley adds that John Cowley was a Quaker. There was a John Cowly (or Cowley, or Cowling) of Stanton Drew who was a Quaker and in 1702 was imprisoned for a time for refusal to pay tithes[60] but nothing else is known about his farming activities. He died in Bristol in 1719.[61] Interestingly, John Wood also heard about Cowley from 'every ancient body' at Stanton Drew, who told him that Cowley had blown up stones with dynamite and

undermined them because of an argument over tithes.[62]

As mentioned above, Strachey's notes and archives are stored at the Somerset Archives. The notes for *Somersetshire Illustrated* survive as a set of rough notes[63] and a fair copy.[64] Study of the archive reveals the extent of Strachey's work at Stanton Drew and how his ideas evolved over time. The notes are undated, but R. G. J. Williams has argued that the rough notes were bound together in their present form no earlier than 1736, and that the fair copy was started in that year and worked on until Strachey's death in 1743.[65]

The archive consists of:
A.　　DD/SH/1/107 – the 'rough notes', a site description and the local legends
B.　　DD/SH/2/108 – the 'fair copy' containing:
　　B1.　Notes on the Cangi, creators of the monument
　　B2.　A description of the site
　　B3.　A plan of the site, with additional notes

In the rough notes (source A), Strachey set out a description of Stanton Drew and recounted some of the local legends. He said the first part of the place name is taken from the monument of stones called The Wedding, which consists of three circles. The greatest circle has a

diameter of 90 paces and [blank] stones (he obviously intended to make a count on a future visit). Just two of these stones were standing up and they measured nine foot high, six foot wide, and three foot thick.

The North East Circle is described next. Strachey said it contains *three* concentric circles, of which only the innermost remains complete with eight stones, some eight feet high and cylindrical, or rather octagonal, in shape. The next outermost circle is five yards from the perimeter of the first, with the last circle another five yards away. This last circle has five stones, known as the fiddlers.

In the orchard to the south-west is the remains of another circle (the South West Circle) with twelve stones all flat on the ground. In another orchard to the west of the church is a fourth monument, a Cove of three stones, with an altar stone 15 feet long.

Strachey then related the local legend of why the monument is called The Wedding, namely that a bride and groom, together with their guests and some fiddlers, were turned to stone for continuing their dancing into the Sabbath. He considered that the story can be no older than the Christian era, but it is not unlikely that the monument may have been erected in memory of a peace concluded there and an alliance sealed by a wedding by the Cangi, a Celtic tribe, who he thought had built the site.

Finally, Strachey described Hautville's Quoit, as lying by the roadside near Belluton, 'a large stone round & flat therefore called a Coyt'. He gave the 'ridiculous story' of the Quoit being thrown from Norton hill by a 'Gigantick person Hautvil' whose effigy is lying in Chew church, and is no bigger than many men of the present. He also mentioned another stone towards Chew which is very similar to the Quoit; remember Stukeley described a 'pair of coyts', one now vanished.

In the first portion of text in the 'fair copy' (source B1), Strachey expanded on the Cangi, saying that the stone circles may be temples erected where their warriors died in a victorious action against the Romans, or as Osterig (possibly the Roman commander Publius Ostorius Scapula) retreated when he was called to the North.

The second portion of text (source B2) has a description of the site. Strachey gave the position of Stanton Drew as 'A mile east from Chew & about ye same distance from Pensford & five mile South from Bristol'. The resemblance to the start of Stukeley's article on The Wedding is striking: 'There is an old proverb common in Somersetshire: 'Stanton Drew, *a mile from* Pensford, *another from* Chue''';[66] though Strachey is more prosaic.

Strachey repeated his earlier assertion that Stanton is derived from 'stone town', but added the information that the name Drew is taken from a man named Drugo. The stones were not as large as those at Avebury or

Stonehenge, but far exceed the Rollright Stones in Oxfordshire. It consisted of three distinct circular monuments and a Cove of three stones to the west. A King Stolen or single stone called Hautvills Coyt was 300 to 400 yards away on the other side of the River Chew. Several of the stones had, in recent years, been pushed down and buried by John Cowly, the tenant farmer, but the parched grass in dry weather exposed where they lie, and he had proved it by thrusting his sword into the ground.

The Great Circle was composed of stones about eight feet high and broad and four feet thick. He had by now decided the North East Circle consisted of five concentric circles, the innermost having eight cylindrical stones nine feet high and 21 feet in girth. The South West Circle had 12 irregular stones of unequal sizes, all lying flat. He referred the reader to his plan.

The 'Idle Story' of a wedding party being turned into stone on the Sabbath is despatched in a few words, repeating his observation that this story must be of the Christian era, whereas the monument is more ancient than that. He noted that there are stones called Devills Coyts at both Avebury and Stonehenge, which names seem to have been given by Christians detesting their use as altars to heathen gods. He concluded that there are so many similarities between the three sites that they were all for a like purpose. If Stonehenge and Avebury were temples or sepulchral monuments, then Stanton Drew was also. Perhaps they all were erected near burial places in memory of a victory in a nearby battle.

The plan itself (source B3; Fig. 5[67]) contains all the components of the monument, the river, the church, the roads, and field boundaries. The diameters of the circles are included. Around the North East Circle, dots indicate missing stones in two additional circles.

The blank space on the plan is overwritten with notes (Table 1 provides a summary of the details). As the notes contain a comprehensive description of Strachey's opinion at that time, a transcription into modern English follows. The 'Monum[en]t called ye Wedding at Stanton Drew' was said to consist of three distinct circular monuments marked A-C and a Cove D. The monument, A, showed remains of five concentric circles whereof the innermost circle consisted of eight stones, though only three were standing upright. The distances from centre to centre of the eight stones were 38 'English' feet (he noted that Stukeley equated this to 35 'Celtic feet' and that was equal to the distances at Avebury). These eight stones were nine feet high and in girth about 25 feet. They seemed to be composed of iron grit and full of 'pibbles & cockles'. The second circle had just two stones remaining on the eastern side and the spacing was 39 feet which would result in only twelve stones in the periphery, 'tho
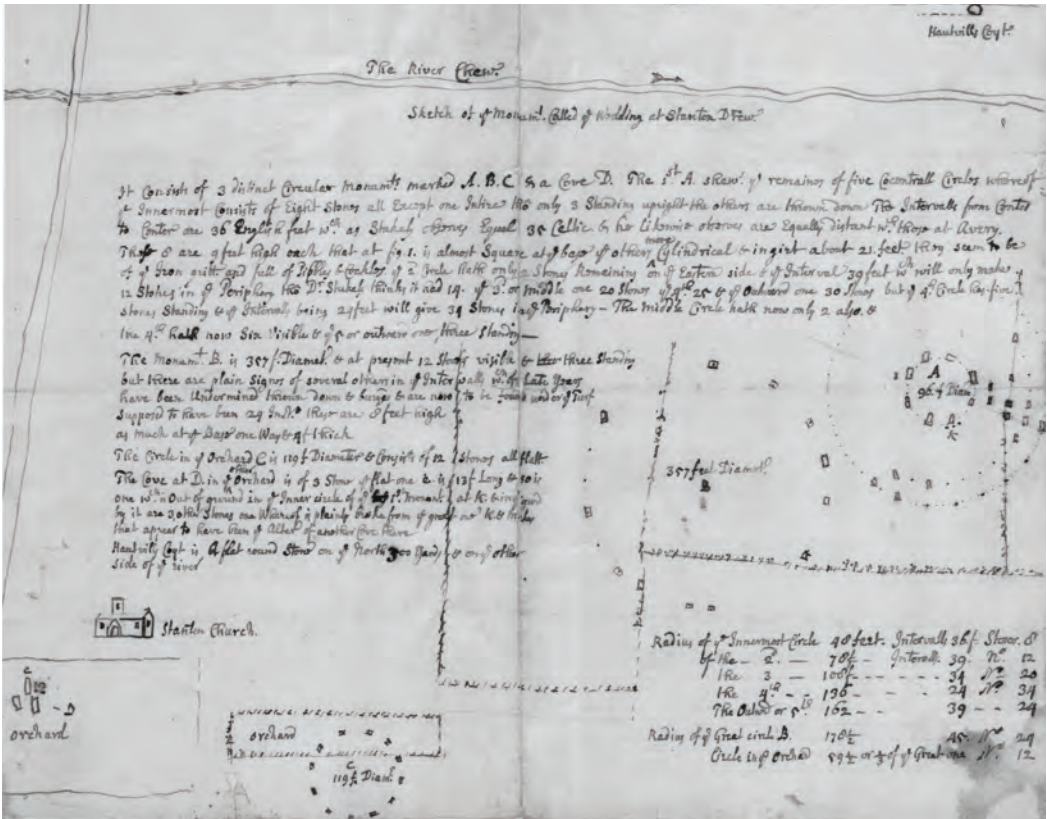
*Fig. 5 John Strachey's plan of Stanton Drew (South West Heritage Trust)*

Dr. Stukeley thinks it had 14'. The third circle had 20 stones, the fourth 25, and the outermost one 30 stones. But the fourth circle had five stones standing and the spacing being 24 feet would give 34 stones in the periphery. The third circle had now only two stones, also the fourth had now six visible and the fifth, three standing.

The monument B was 357 feet in diameter and had twelve stones visible and three standing, but there were plain signs of several others in the intervals which lately had been undermined, thrown down, and buried, and were now to be found under the turf. There were supposed to have been 24 originally. These were eight feet high, as much at the base one way, and four feet thick.

The circle in the orchard C was 119 feet in diameter and consisted of twelve stones, all flat.

The Cove at D in the other orchard was of three stones. The flat one was 13 feet long, and so was one which is out of the ground in the inner circle of the first monument at K, and in the ground by that are three other stones, one whereof is plainly broke from the great one, K, and made it appear to have been the altar of another

cove situated there.

The last part of the notes concerns 'Hautvils Coyt', described as a flat round stone 300 yards to the north and on the other side of the river.

The plan shows three concentric circles, but the notes, which must have been added after the plan, refer to five circles. It is possible that this reflects a change in Strachey's opinion and that this occurred as a result of Stukeley's visit to the site. Stukeley was the secretary of the Society of Antiquaries and well on his way to being seen as the authority on the temples of the Ancient Britons, and it is easy to imagine that Strachey would be convinced by the great man to see a greater number of circles.

## NATHANIEL AND THOMAS PALMER

Strachey was not the only local antiquarian studying Stanton Drew in the early 18th century. There were also a father and son: Nathaniel and Thomas Palmer.

Nathaniel Palmer (1660-1718) of Fairfield, Stogursey, was a Member of Parliament for various Somerset

TABLE 1 SUMMARY OF STRACHEY'S DESCRIPTIONS OF SIZES AND
NUMBERS OF STONES OF THE STANTON DREW MONUMENTS

| Monument | Diameter (ft) | Spacing (ft) | Extant stones | Standing stones | Estimated stones |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A: innermost | 96 | 36 | 8 | 3 | 8 |
| A: 2nd circle | 156 | 39 | 2 | 0 | 12 |
| A: 3rd circle | 216 | 34 | 2 | 0 | 20 |
| A: 4th circle | 272 | 24 | 6 | 5 | 34 |
| A: outermost | 324 | 39 | 3 | 3 | 30 |
| B | 357 | 45 | 12 | 3 | 24 |
| C | 119 | - | 12 | 0 | 12 |
| Cove D | - | - | 3 | 2 | - |

constituencies between 1685 and 1715.[68] However, he was not an enthusiastic attender at Westminster and it may be that he was happier studying local antiquities. He possessed the Alfred Jewel, which he donated to Oxford University upon his death.[69] William Musgrave credited him with providing information on Stanton Drew, saying that, over the long period of preparation for publication, Palmer had very kindly shared his own drawings.[70] Palmer died in early 1718, before Musgrave's book was ready.

Thomas Palmer (c. 1685-1735) succeeded his father as Member of Parliament for Bridgwater.[71] Like Strachey, he had ambitions to write a history of Somerset but it never got near publication. Musgrave credited Thomas Palmer with providing the plan of Stanton Drew (see the wording in the lower part of Fig. 6).[72]

However, the origin of the plan has some doubt. In William Stukeley's Commonplace Book[73] is a plan of Stanton Drew entitled 'The Weddings Somersetshire as represented by Dr. Musgrave from Mr. Strachey' (Fig. 7) and the similarities to the plan published by Musgrave (Fig. 6) are obvious.

It is possible that Stukeley was mistaken, or perhaps the plan was a result of collaboration between Strachey and one, or both, of the Palmers.

There are other reasons to think that the Palmers were not the authors of the information passed to Musgrave, but that it came originally from John Strachey. There is a letter from Thomas Palmer to John Strachey in which he asked that Strachey send him his notes on Stanton Drew.[74] Unfortunately, there is no year specified on the letter; the catalogue entry suggests it might be 1736, but Palmer died the year before, and it could be a lot earlier. The Thomas Palmer papers in the Somerset Archives[75] contain various drafts for his History of Somersetshire, but they are all for areas in the south and west of the county, within 20 miles of Fairfield, apart from a description of Chew Hundred[76] which is described as 'possibly by John Strachey' and

certainly appears to be in his hand. There is a lack of evidence for Palmer obtaining information on the north of the county. Indeed, in 1733 Thomas Hearne made a characteristically acerbic comment that 'Thomas Palmer … hath great collections in manuscripts, but I think he hath not got above 5 miles round Glastonbury, & hath been weary several years, & hath locked them up, so that we must not look for any thing from him.'[77]

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the opening years of the 18th century there was just one published source of information on the Stanton Drew stone circles, and that was just 60 words in the 1695 Gibson edition of Camden's *Britannia*, based on an extract from John Aubrey's notes. Then, from 1719 onwards, there was a brief spell of increased interest. Musgrave and Keysler published short accounts (both in Latin). The second edition of Gibson's revised Britannia came out in 1722, with an expanded entry, doubling the number of words in English to 120. William Stukeley paid his brief visit the following year, though it was to be another 53 years before his account saw the light of day. Then in 1740, John Wood spent a few days carrying out his accurate, but little-known and unpublished, survey and wrote the first detailed account, though it was shot through with his usual wild theories.

It is clear that at least three of these people, Musgrave, Keysler, and Stukeley, obtained much, or all, of their information from three obscure Somerset antiquarians. Musgrave acknowledged his debt to Nathaniel and Thomas Palmer, and Keysler credited John Strachey. Indeed, there is no evidence that either Musgrave or Keysler ever visited the site. Strachey's previously unpublished presentation to the Royal Society in 1719 shows that Stukeley obtained more from Strachey than has previously been acknowledged. Stukeley was less

*Fig. 6 Musgrave's plan of Stanton Drew dated 1718*

forthcoming, in print at least. His manuscripts make clear he received information from Strachey, but in 'The Weddings' he called Strachey his friend, a worthy fellow, and knowledgeable about the local coal mines, but did not mention his knowledge of the stones except to say he was the first to measure them.[78]

The addition of the Royal Society minutes to the known Strachey archive reveals that John Strachey carried out a significant amount of original work at Stanton Drew. He was the first to identify all the circles,

Cove, and Hautville's Quoit. He was the first to survey the site and the first to produce a decent plan. However, he received scant praise.

Strachey listed two stones, the Parson and Clerk, in a location where there are no stones today. It is possible that he was describing the Cove, which is some distance away, or it is possible that these are two stones that have been destroyed or removed. Strachey, Stukeley and Wood all gave the story of the Quaker, John Cowley, who buried or blew up stones in the early part of the 1700s.

*Fig. 7 The Weddings, Somersetshire as represented by Dr Musgrave from Mr Strachey*
*(Wiltshire Museum)*

It is possible that Strachey was also involved with the Palmers and with John Wood. William Musgrave claimed to have used the work of Nathaniel and Thomas Palmer, but there are strong reasons to think that the original source may have been Strachey. It is known that Strachey supplied information on Chew Hundred to the Palmers, and there is no evidence in the Palmer archives of any investigations in the northern half of the county.

It remains to be proven whether John Wood came to his conclusions independently or with assistance from a third party. It is possible that Wood was largely unaided, with some input from the published work of Musgrave and Keysler. It is also possible that he obtained sight of Stukeley's manuscripts, perhaps with the help of James Theobald. But it is a strong possibility that either Strachey or John Pine were involved. Pine and Wood definitely knew each other and would have discussed Stanton Drew (if only concerning the engraving of the plates) but it is unknown how much Pine knew about the site. Strachey definitely had plenty of information, but it is not known if he and Wood ever met. It is very possible that they did (they were in the same part of the country) and that Strachey was characteristically generous with his information.

John Strachey thought he saw concentric circles around the North East Circle and influenced a number of his contemporaries to see the same thing. Although we now regard this as absurd, we should not be too confident in asserting they are really stone avenues. We

make the assumption because avenues occur at other stone circle sites, but the ones at Stanton Drew are not obvious as they are short in length and there are gaps. We can never be certain what the builders of the site thought they were constructing.

Ironically, concentric circles have been found to exist at Stanton Drew, but not in the place that Strachey and his contemporaries were looking. In 1997, a geophysical survey revealed that the site was considerably more complex and significant than had been thought.[79] The Great Circle was once surrounded by a massive ditch up to 7m wide and, it is assumed, an encircling bank. Within the circle, there were once nine concentric rings of large timber posts (Fig. 8).[80] The South West Circle had three concentric rings of timber posts and an encircling ditch or bank. The North East Circle had four large anomalies in a square arrangement at its centre which could have been very large posts.

John Strachey produced descriptions and plans of Stanton Drew which he shared freely with Stukeley and Keysler and, in all possibility, Musgrave and Wood. It is clear that he was the first to identify the Great Circle and the North East Circle, and it is possible that he, rather than Stukeley, was the first to name the Cove, and describe the South West Circle and the Quoit. However, his work on the site is largely unknown and little has been published. He deserves greater recognition.
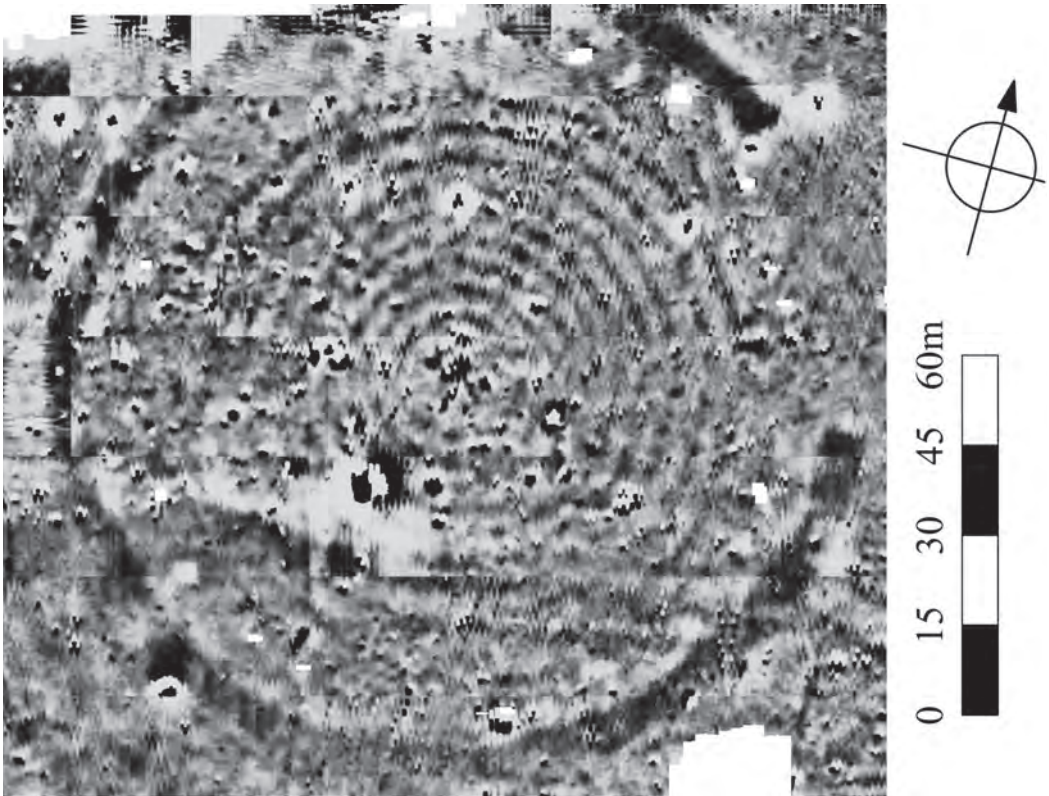
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*Fig. 8 Magnetometry plot of Great Circle (Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society)*

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