

AVEBURY FILM DISCOVERY

BY BRIAN EDWARDS

Readers of earlier editions of this journal may remember UWE research student Brian Edwards' robust attack on antiquarianist tendencies within local history 'The Trouble with Local History;' (No 3, Spring 1999) which provoked a heated correspondence. This was followed by an equally forthright demolition of the heritage industry in "Avebury and other not-so ancient places" which we reviewed in our last issue (No 5, Spring/ Summer 2000). Edwards' claims that ancient Avebury is a twentieth century construct created partly by the marmalade heir, Alexander Keiller, are strengthened by his recent discovery of an inter-war film showing the excavation and erection of stones that form part of the "prehistoric" monument. The 9.5mm film, which includes unique footage of Keiller in his attempt to reconstruct the great Neolithic complex during the 1930s, surfaced following a co-operation between Avebury residents to produce an exhibition of Avebury in old photographs as part of the village Millennium celebrations.

Having never been seen outside Avebury or by an academic audience, the film taken by Percy Lawes between 1937 and 1939, was handed down to a local man (who wishes to remain anonymous) having been stored for half-a-century in a biscuit tin at the bottom of a wardrobe. Unable to obtain a suitable projector to view the film, the owner confided to a friend that he despaired of once again witnessing the footage that they had last seen as children. The film was among several used to entertain local children before the Second World War, that were screened in a room in Avebury's Red Lion where Percy's father Harry Lawes was the landlord.

The film came to Edwards' attention following the 'Avebury in Old photographs' exhibition at Avebury's 'Millennium Fair'. Realising the unique importance of such footage, he arranged to have the film cleaned and mastered onto video tape. The tape was subsequently shown once again in the Red Lion Courtesy of the landlord Richard Bounds in the afternoon of Monday 16th October, more than 50 years after its last public appearance, to an audience consisting of a number of those who last saw it as children.

The content of the film includes footage taken from the tower of Avebury St James, and from the gardens of Avebury Manor. Among the outstanding features of Avebury at that time are the number of cottages and other buildings subsequently demolished as heritage took control of the village. Also captured on film are the new houses at the nearby hamlet of Avebury Truslowe, that ironically were built in the path of the then overlooked Beckhampton Avenue of megaliths rediscovered in 1999.

Including detailed footage of the archaeological dig, the film is now available for viewing by historians at the Local Studies Library in the Wiltshire Record Office Trowbridge. Individuals who want to make appointments to view it should contact Mike Marshman (it is not available for loan). This facility may well be in great

demand as other than the limited number of photographic stills, archaeologists have never before witnessed such intimate detail of the Avebury excavation - or indeed seen Keiller and his archaeological foreman William Young in operation. Brian is prepared to give further screenings with a slide show to local audiences by arrangement for a limited time period. Research is continuing on the film itself, and on enquiry HTV are offering help in supplying a lip reader to discover if there is anything "said" on this silent movie that may shed further light. Brian hopes to interest television companies in making a documentary.

The film reflects an Avebury that visitors would not recognise, with a large percentage of the local population using wells, keeping pet dogs, and frequenting their High Street. Many local people are seen riding bicycles - to commute to the village centre they had been isolated from, having been compulsorily moved to Avebury Truslowe. The reason for the dislocation of this community is revealed towards the end of the film where the camera pans back to show rows of newly erected brilliant white stones cast upright in concrete by Alexander Keiller, to form his imagined "prehistoric Avebury".

Brian Edwards' chapter on 'Avebury: the making of the English heritage landscape' appears in *Seeing History: Public History in Britain Now*, edited by Hilda Kean, Paul Martin, and Sally J. Morgan, (Francis Boutle), 2000, at £9.99. ISBN 0 9532388 9 X

