

Article in Countryman Magazine August 2009
Revealing Ancient Landscapes
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“What is more thrilling than walking along a coastal path and picking up bits of flint, still sharp and viable, that someone hasn’t held for 6,000 years?” asks Mary Baker. “Or looking at a map, spotting where there might be an earthwork, and going the next day to find out?”

“People in the UK pay a fortune to visit the pyramids in Egypt and they don’t see what is on their doorstep. We have much older and more mysterious sites in fantastic countryside,” she continues. “It’s my mission to raise interest in our archaeology – such an underrated resource – and to get people to explore the hidden and exciting places that tell us how our ancestors lived in the landscape.”

To achieve her goal, Mary set up Archaeotours five years ago: offering tailor-made tours to individuals and small groups curious to visit Britain’s ancient sites. Transport is by people carrier, with picnics and hot chocolate along the way, plus Mary’s inimitable mix of effervescent wit and knowledge.

“I’ve loved archaeology since I was a child in Oxfordshire, where we were always digging up Roman finds in the garden,” Mary says. Between then and now she has led a colourful life: singing and playing guitar in a warm-up act for The Wurzels, teaching in primary school and running a guesthouse in Pembrokeshire, where she has lived for over 20 years. In her late forties she took a degree in archaeology at Trinity College, Carmarthen.

“I knew that I wanted to lead tours based on my love of archaeology. The qualification added authority to do it,” she says.

She is joined in her venture by Shirley Matthews, who has an equally varied background encompassing the Wales Tourist Board, farming and social work. “When I was young, I wanted to be an explorer until I realised I didn’t like frogs and snakes,” Shirley says. Instead, for over 20 years, she has been a volunteer warden on the island of Skomer, monitoring wildlife and helping with puffin and seal counts. Like Mary she studied as a mature student, completing an anthropology degree “because I’m nosy about people and their habits,” she says.

The pair’s combined expertise makes for lively insights and they have a particular passion for their own doorstep, Pembrokeshire. Boasting Britain’s only Coast National Park, the still-mysterious landscape is besieged on three sides by waves, while the Preseli Hills and gorse-strewn fields seem unbothered by passing time. It’s here that I meet them.

“Pembrokeshire is particularly blessed with sites. People came here because it was on a sea route to Ireland and the soil was good for farming,” Mary says, before describing how the Gwaun Valley was created by torrents of melt water at the end of the last Ice Age, how Stone Age man made flint arrowheads for fishing on the seashore, when Neolithic farmers arrived and where we will find the best Bronze Age relics.

Mary is fascinated by prehistoric settlements and tool manufacturing sites. “If I had a choice between finding a lump of gold and a stone axe, I would choose the axe,” she says unhesitatingly. “I really admire the skilled workmanship. Axes offered the means of making a settled life. I think a lot of early people were attracted to places by the available stone. At Strumble Head and in the Preseli Hills you get volcanic rock that’s as hard as flint and really good for making axes.”

Suddenly, we're debating whether the spotted dolerite – bluestone – from the area was transported 180 miles to Stonehenge by glaciers or man. It's this mix of tantalising evidence and rich conjecture that opens up archaeology to everyone, Mary and Shirley say. Whatever the truth of the bluestones, life flourished here in Pembrokeshire, as Neolithic burial chambers, Bronze Age cairns, stone circles, standing stones and Iron Age forts all testify.

Pentre Ifan communal burial chamber in the Preselis near Nevern looks strangely solid yet precarious with its 15-ton capstone balanced on bluestone slabs. Erected as early as 3,500 BC, it has hidden its secrets along with the distant dead.

“It was probably covered in dirt and there was a forecourt,” Mary says pacing an imaginary boundary. “Who would have been allowed into the chamber and what rituals happened there? Sites like this make you address belief systems and universal truths. Perhaps Pentre Ifan was about power in death, status, a stamp of ownership of the land, reminding people that you are still there.”

Shirley points to further stones in the landscape, possibly connecting into the same site. Carningli (Angel Mountain), woodland and wide, wide skies complete an undoubted sense of natural theatre. “Ty Canol Woods and Pengelly Forest are relics of the first forests here,” Shirley says, adding, “There are more than 300 different types of moss and lichen in Ty Canol now.”

Thus discussions continue on a typical Archaeotours jaunt. Extant volcanoes, remains of Bronze Age hut circles, the recreated Iron Age hill fort at Castell Henllys, Celtic crosses and medieval pilgrims' footsteps preserved in rock at Nevern – each new sight engages us with our ancestors and their landscape.

Wherever we go, jackdaws cackle around ruins, nuthatches dart, buzzards and red kites pursue their instinct across fields. Hills, river, sea unfold. It's easy to understand the defensible qualities of many sites we visit, also giving access to food sources. But did our ancestors have an aesthetic appreciation of landscape, too? It's another topic dear to my companions' hearts.

“If you accept, from braids and beads that are found, that people had a sense of vanity and fashion, then they must have had a sense of beauty and of place,” Shirley says.

“I think there was something particularly powerful about the west of Wales, the land of the dying sun, that attracted people,” Mary adds. “They must have wondered if the sun would rise above the mountain ridges again. The light is special, too, because Pembrokeshire is surrounded on three sides by sea.”

Ideas about living in harmony are quickly dispelled, however, when Mary suggests that Bronze Age man caused greater industrial damage than the Victorians: burning tracts of land, bronze smelting with arsenic and lead, cattle churning up ground.

“We've never learnt. We're still exploiting the countryside,” she says. She does her bit to counteract man's ingrained flaw. When not running Archaeotours, she works part-time for the education department of Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, which includes taking a puppet show around schools to highlight environmental issues.

Fortunately, a special sense of place prevails in Pembrokeshire's countryside, spirituality even. Not for nothing did early saints like David set up here. Walk the Coastal Path today and the vegetation is spectacular with spring sea pinks, violets, sea campion, blackthorn and bluebells. Cliffs lean in dramatic folds.

"All our tours, to Ireland, Cornwall and Devon combine beautiful places with fascinating sites," Mary says. "Often people are interested in local myths relating to sites, especially King Arthur, and we're happy to explore them. But we really believe that the truth revealed through archaeology is sensational enough, you really don't need to make things up." Nor travel farther than our very own countryside.

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