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## Hole in Silbury Hill, Update Part 2

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Britain's National Trust hauls metal roofing up 130 foot high Silbury Hill to cover hole that suddenly emerged in the top on May 29, 2000. Photograph © 2000 *Wiltshire Gazette and Herald*.

**June 14, 2000 Silbury Hill, Wiltshire, England** - Continuing interview with the Avebury Property Manager for the National Trust Estate in Wiltshire responsible for the repair and preservation of the Neolithic Silbury Hill.

### Interview:

**Chris Gingell, Avebury Property Manager, National Trust Estate, Avebury, Wiltshire, England:**

**"HAVE YOU NOW GOT A TIME TABLE FOR WHEN YOU WOULD PUT REMOTE EQUIPMENT IN THERE TO PHOTOGRAPH?"**

Not immediately. There are three stages to this sort of thing. When it first arose on the 29th of May, when the shaft fell in, there was an immediate health and safety issue and risk to the public safety. So that has been the first stage to place an engineered capping structure across the top of the shaft, much larger than the top of the shaft.

**THOSE ARE THE METAL SHEETS THAT I'VE SEEN PHOTOGRAPHS THAT YOU DRAGGED UP MAN TO MAN?**

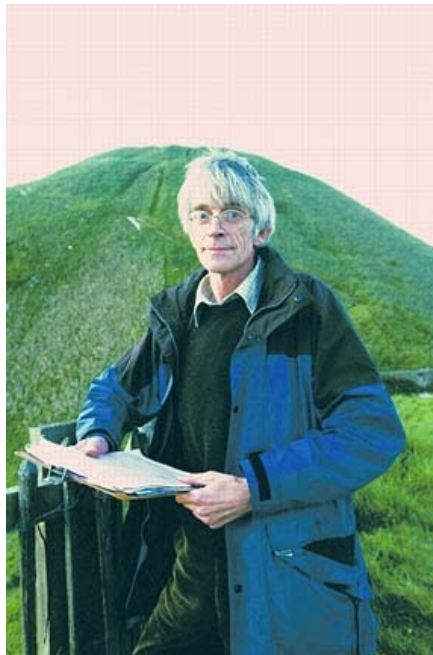
Those are just the sheeting over. Actually a structure of girders and scaffolding, quite a heavy and substantial structure has been placed across the top of the shaft. That was the first stage.

The second stage is to gather the information and that's where the photographic and other survey work that both the archaeologists and the engineers we've got to help solve the problem finally will need. And that's started. There's a site meeting in more than a week's time where all that planning will be agreed.

Then the third stage is, when you've recorded it, when you've found all the information you can, is the final stabilizing of the feature itself, both for public safety and of course to preserve the hill. Because interesting though the shaft is, it is exposing this ancient and wonderful prehistoric monument to the risk of further erosion because undoubtedly the shaft will collapse further if left open for any great length of time.

**HOW DO YOU REPAIR THIS HUGE HOLE? WHAT METHOD DO YOU USE? AND ASKING THAT, I HEARD YESTERDAY FROM SOME PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN WILTSHIRE ABOUT IT AND THEY SAID THEY HAD HEARD YESTERDAY, THE 13TH OF JUNE ON SOME LOCAL RADIO PROGRAM, THAT THE NATIONAL TRUST OR SOME ONE IN BRITAIN HAD PROPOSED THAT THEY ACTUALLY FILL THE HOLE UP WITH CEMENT?**

Oh, certainly, I think that's speculation. It's not one of the techniques that National Trust or English Heritage, the principal bodies involved in managing the hill would have considered. I think cement or concrete is an unlikely choice. I can't say what material will be chosen as the final specification. But the most likely thing is the chalk, the material out of which the hill itself was made, will be the chosen material to refill the shaft.



Chris Gingell, Property Manager for the National Trust's Estate in Avebury, Wiltshire, England on May 29, 2000 during his visit to Silbury Hill to examine the newly opened and unexpected hole on top of the 6,000 year old Neolithic mound. Photograph © 2000 by *Wiltshire Gazette and Herald*.

**6,000 YEARS AGO NEOLITHIC PEOPLE ARE SAID TO HAVE SOME HOW WORKED HAND TO HAND IN RELAYS TO MAKE THIS ENORMOUS MOUND. BUT TODAY, HOW WOULD YOU GET**

**HUNDREDS OF TONS OF CHALK UP THERE AND DOWN INTO THAT HOLE?**

A very serious possibility is to lift it in place by helicopter. Because any method of hauling it or carrying it up the sides of the hill with conveyors or anything like that is going to produce more disturbance to the hill itself than simply lifting it into place by helicopter and running it into the shaft from some sort of chute. That's the sort of solution that engineers will come up for us.

**THE SIZE OF THE HILL, THE 7 X 7 X 34 FEET, THAT YOU JUST MENTIONED, THAT WOULD FILL UP ABOUT FOUR LARGE DUMP TRUCKS. HOW LONG WOULD IT TAKE FOR HELICOPTERS TO PUT THAT MUCH CHALK INTO THE HOLE?**

I'm afraid I couldn't say, but I imagine we would be talking about big lifting helicopters like Chinooks and I couldn't tell you how much chalk they could lift at a time. But if the chalk or whatever material is used can be delivered close to the site so that the helicopter is reloading and emptying on a fast sort of shuttle service on to the hill, it shouldn't be too formidable a task. We do use this sort of technique for repair work in remote places.

**IN YOUR BEST EDUCATED GUESS, HOW LONG WILL IT BE BEFORE THE ACTUAL REPAIRS OF THE HOLE WILL TAKE PLACE?**

One of the things we've learned is that it's very important to consult very widely, not just about the technical method of repairing a site like this but of also about the information that is gathered from it and to give people time to comment on the methods we use and so on. There will be consultation at each stage in the work, so I wouldn't like to put a guesstimate of the time.

**DO YOU THINK THAT SILBURY HILL WILL BE CLOSED OFF IN THE CONDITION THAT IT'S IN NOW FOR ANOTHER 6 MONTHS?**

Remember that Silbury Hill has been closed to the public for 25 years. It's just that the security measures are more rigorously maintained while this really quite serious risk with the shaft in place. I'm sure it's everybody's intention that during this summer, the entire project will be completed. I have no doubt about that. But how, one, two or three months, I couldn't even begin to say.

**I WOULD THINK THAT PART OF THE CONCERN FOR THE NATIONAL TRUST AS WELL AS THE WILTSHIRE COUNTY AREA IS THAT SILBURY IS NOTED FOR WHAT SOME PEOPLE ARE SAY AS HAVING A CERTAIN KIND OF IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT THERE, WHAT EVER THESE LAYERS OF CHALK ARE ON THE INSIDE. SO, IT SEEMS NOW THAT YOUR CHALLENGE WOULD BE: HOW DO YOU REPRODUCE WHAT THE ORIGINAL BUILDERS ABOUT 6,000 YEARS AGO DID WHEN YOU'RE NOT CERTAIN WHAT THE INTENT OF SILBURY HILL WAS IN THE FIRST PLACE?**

Yes, I think you've got to accept that this vertical shaft dug in the 18th century, a lot of material was lost over the side, just like the horizontal shaft or tunnel excavated in the most recent one in the late 1960s by archaeologists. That the fill of those excavations will never be the same as the material around them. A lot of the original chalk fill has been lost through, from the 18th century shaft and you can't reconstruct that. You can't reconstruct with exactly the same type of material containing the same environmental evidence and artifacts. It would be a pastiche. And what is usually a more acceptable method is to repair it with something that is sympathetic to its character, to the character of the hill, but

which future generations of archaeologists will recognize as being a 21st Century repair.

**IS IT TRUE THAT INSIDE OF SILBURY HILL WHEN THEY DID THE PREVIOUS HORIZONTAL EXCAVATION THAT THEY FOUND THERE WAS THIS UNIQUE LAYERING OF VARIOUS COLORED CHALKS?**

Not so much colored chalk. No, the big distinction is between the very core of the mound, the first phase which consists of turf and gravelly soil which was excavated from a very wide area around Silbury Hill, several acres, and forms this central core of the mound. And then the layers of chalk above. The chalk above was simply excavated from the great quarry ditch which originally surrounded the hill now filled with wet material. It has weathered in over the last four and a half thousand years. But the chalk in the main (internal central) mound was all excavated from the site around. Yes, it was constructed in a number of phases and there is some detail difference between each phase. But the chalk material is the same. The big distinction is between the turf core and the chalk mound.

**THE TURF CORE ITSELF, WHEN YOU SAY TURF, YOU MEAN THE CORE AT THE BOTTOM CENTER OF SILBURY IS SOIL AS OPPOSED TO CHALK?**

Yes, soil and grass itself just cut out into a turf as you might cut turf to lay a grass surface in your yard or something. It was a mound of turf and gravelly soil typical of the valley floor around the hill.

**THAT'S WHAT THEY FOUND RIGHT AT THE CENTER?**

Yes, a very substantial mound, heavily compressed by the hill, by the weight of the chalk above it.

**BUT NO CHALK INSIDE OF THAT CENTRAL MOUND?**

Not significant quantities, no. It's principally a turf core.

**WITH ALL THE CHALK LAYERS ON TOP OF THAT UP TO 130 FEET.**

Indeed.

**WERE ANY ARTIFACTS OF ANY KIND, BONES OR OTHER, EVER FOUND IN ANY OF THOSE PREVIOUS EXCAVATIONS?**

The big 1960's excavation found - like the other excavation almost nothing of any significance in the core of the hill in the material that makes up the hill itself. But the quarry ditch which surrounded it did have quite a lot of bone and particularly the red deer antler picks used in the construction of the monument, fragments of those. And in the upper part of the ditch, later material among other things from the Romans that occupied this area.

**CAN YOU AS A HUMAN BEING AND AS AN ARCHAEOLOGIST STAND AT THE BOTTOM OF THAT ENORMOUS HILL COVERING 5 ACRES, 130 FEET HIGH MOUND, AND IMAGINE PUTTING IT TOGETHER WITH ANTLER PICKS?**

It seems an astonishing feature. Remember of course there have been experiments in modern times to do not on this scale but to create very large sections of earthworks using very primitive tools like that. If you look at the kind of engineering for example, the building of railways in Africa, in West Africa. I understand it was quite common for big railway embankments to be built simply using hoes like agriculture hoes. It's a matter of teamwork which societies that are used to laboring in the fields by hand to working by hand with very simple tools can produce astonishingly great works of engineering with remarkably simple tools. And I think they compensate with the organization of their labor the skill with which they do that for the simplicity of the tools they are using.

**IS THERE ANY TRUTH BY SOME OF THE PEOPLE IN THE SILBURY HILL AREA HAVE SAID THAT SOMEBODY LOOKING DOWN IN THE HOLE, I DON'T KNOW IF IT WAS WHEN YOU WERE THERE OR NOT, THAT WITH FLASHLIGHTS THEY COULD SEE WHAT APPEARED TO BE A TUNNEL GOING OFF AT 30 DEGREES OR SOMETHING FROM THE MAIN SHAFT FURTHER INTO SILBURY HILL?**

No, from our studies at the surface, no, nothing like that we can observe.

**HAVE YOU EVER PERSONALLY BEEN INVOLVED IN ANY RADAR OBSERVATION OVER SILBURY HILL AND THE AREA BETWEEN SILBURY HILL AND THE WEST KENNETT LONG BARROW TO SEE IF THERE IS UNDERGROUND STRUCTURES OR TUNNELS THAT MIGHT CONNECT BELOW SILBURY HILL TO THE WEST KENNETT LONG BARROW?**

No, there has been geophysical work including a certain amount of ground-sensing radar, although other techniques have been more extensively used in the Avebury area. There have been quite a large area surveyed in the area in the general area of Silbury and West Kennett Long Barrow, but I'm not aware of a survey designed specifically to answer that particular question. Remember that any tunnel in that area would lie beneath the natural water table."

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## **More Information:**

The next scheduled meeting with engineers and archaeologists to discuss a timetable to photograph inside the hole and a probable helicopter airlift of chalk material to fill up the hole is June 27, 2000.

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## **Websites:**

<http://www.thisiswiltshire.co.uk/>

## **Credits**

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