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## Photographs of Hole in Silbury Hill, Update Part 1

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Seven foot square shaft that unexpectedly opened up in top of 6,000 year old Neolithic Silbury Hill and reported to local Avebury, Wiltshire police on May 29, 2000. Britain's private conservation charity, the National Trust, sealed off the hill for public safety and repairs. Photograph © 2000 *Wiltshire Gazette and Herald*.

Earthfiles, news category.

**June 14, 2000 Silbury Hill, Wiltshire, England** - Around 3700 B. C. - almost 6,000 years ago by some estimates - an enormous complex of stone avenues, stone circles and the largest artificially constructed mound in all of Europe were created in Avebury, England. The huge artificial mound that rises 130 feet and covers five acres at its base is known as Silbury Hill. Two weeks ago on May 29th, a large hole was discovered on top. The last time there was any such wound in the great hill was 1776 when the Duke of Northumberland decided to look for buried treasure inside. When he found nothing, his workers closed up the shaft they had dug - perhaps only "capping" the top - which apparently now more than 200 years later has sunk in. Witnesses also reportedly saw unidentified lights near Silbury Hill and the West Kennett Long Barrow around the end of May and first of June, but no one knows if there is a connection to the large transforming crop formation that appeared June 1-2 in the West Kennett Long Barrow, followed by two more large formations on June 11, 2000 in the barley field right next to Silbury Hill.

The private British charity called the National Trust that cares for Neolithic and other sacred sites in the United Kingdom is responsible for the repair and preservation of Silbury and has sealed off the hill while engineers and archaeologists decide what to do. Today, I talked with the National Trust's Avebury Property Manager, Chis Gingell, who inspected the hole in Silbury shortly after the police were notified on May 29th. I asked him what he could see.

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**Interview:**

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

"The hillside is a flat grassy summit on a big conical hill 130 feet high. The grassy summit is perhaps 50 or 60 feet in diameter. And there are a number of shallow depressions in the turf. And in one of these shallow depressions was this ragged hole in the turf perhaps 5 feet across. It had freshly broken, so the turf was hanging dangerously into the hole. If you lay down and wriggled towards the hole and peered down inside, once your eyes had adjusted you realized it was just the opening of a vertical shaft rather wider than the tear in the turf at the surface. The shaft was about 7 feet square. And once your eyes had adjusted you could see that it was 30 to 40 feet deep. Our measurement was about 34 feet.



Local residents inspecting the unexpected hole that opened in the top of ancient Silbury Hill, Wiltshire, England on May 29, 2000. National Trust Manager, Chris Gingell, had the Neolithic mound sealed off while engineers and archaeologists decide

what to do for archaeological documentation and repairs.

Photograph © 2000 by *Wiltshire Gazette and Herald*.

**THAT IS AN ENORMOUS AMOUNT OF SOIL AND IT HAS RAISED THE QUESTION THAT I THINK EVERYBODY HAS ASKED: FOR THAT SOIL TO SINK DOWN IF RAIN WAS THE ANSWER, IT WOULD HAVE TO BE AN ENORMOUS HOLE BELOW FOR THE SOIL TO GO.**

There would. But we understand from mining engineers and archaeologists, indeed, who worked on early mining sites in Britain. Remember this shaft was dug for antiquarian purposes and was dug by professional miners.

**YOU MEAN THE 1776 DUKE OF NORTHUMBERLAND?**

Indeed, indeed. There were two near contemporary reports about the Duke of Northumberland's and Col. Drax's excavation on Silbury Hill. One report from miners came from Cornwall. And the other came from the Mendip Hills. Those are both traditional mining areas in the west of England. And certainly the way it's cut is reminiscent of early hand-excavated professional mine shafts.

**ANOTHER QUESTION: WHY WOULD THEY HAVE GONE VERTICALLY DOWN? WHY NOT IN HORIZONTALLY AT THE BASE**

## **OF SILBURY HILL IN?**

I suspect that in many ways, that a vertical shaft if they were going to the center of such a, it's quite a big hill. A vertical shaft would be their preferred method. You see, it wouldn't need shoring up in this loose chalk rubble the way a horizontal tunnel would. It would in many ways have been similar to digging a well shaft. A little bit of propping up and a little bit of timber supports so the men could climb in and out and some sort of platform to hoist the material. But it wouldn't necessarily be such a complex operation as going in as a horizontal tunnel.

## **HAVE YOU SEEN ANY EVIDENCE HAVING BEEN THERE AND LOOKED INTO THE HOLE YOURSELF OF ANY REINFORCEMENTS AROUND THAT 7 FOOT SQUARE SHAFT?**

No, it's just cut, clean cut through the chalk rubble. And what you can see is the way the capping of chalk rubble - this is local soft limestone - the way this capping has broken at the surface. It appears that early miners, probably almost up to the 20th Century, were in the habit once they had finished with a mine shaft, not of filling it completely, but simply of capping it. To do that, they put in a timber platform. It might be one of the platforms they actually used when they were digging the shaft, boarded over and poured ground rubble on top of that just a few yards thick at the top of the shaft. Really just plugging the top of the shaft. And in areas in Britain where there are long histories of mining, there is a continuous problem of mine shafts opening up in this way.

## **WOULD ALL OF THIS SOIL THAT'S GOT TO BE IN THE HUNDREDS OF TONS TO FILL UP A 7 FOOT BY 7 FOOT BY 34 FOOT OPENING - WHERE WOULD ALL THAT SOIL HAVE GONE IN THE FIRST PLACE?**

Right, I described the top of the hill as being quite a narrow flat platform. We know from both contemporary records and the fact that the bottom of this shaft was canted in later excavations which were tunneled in from the side of the hill, we know that the shaft itself was approximately 100 feet deep. Now, that bulk of soil from a shaft 100 feet deep and 7 feet square...

## **THAT'S THE DUKE OF NORTHUMBERLAND'S 1776.**

That's right. The bulk of chalk and soil excavated from that probably wouldn't have fitted on the narrow summit around the mouth of the shaft on top of the hill. In other words, some of it would have spilled over the sides of the hill. And I imagine what happened is that when they finished the shaft when the excavation was completed from their point of view, disappointed not to find some sort of great burial in the center of the hill, what soil and chalk was left in their heap at the top of the hill, presumably would have been shoveled back down the shaft. And then a certain part of it was kept back to cap or plug the mouth of the shaft itself. And it's that plugging that has finally collapsed down into the shaft.

## **WHAT ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF LOWERING AN ARCHAEOLOGIST RIGHT DOWN THROUGH THAT HOLE FROM A HELICOPTER WITH GOOD LIGHT TO TAKE SOME REALLY EXCELLENT PHOTOGRAPHS OF WHAT HAS BEEN ONE OF THE MOST MYSTERIOUS MOUNDS IN ALL THE WORLD'S HISTORY OF THE LAST 6,000 YEARS ABOUT WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF SILBURY HILL'S CONSTRUCTION AND, AS I UNDERSTAND, IT IS ACTUALLY CONSTRUCTED WITH LAYERS OF DIFFERENT COLORED CHALK IN THE CENTER AND NO ONE REALLY KNOWS WHY.**

Yes, I think access to the hole itself on the present advice we have would not be considered because the sides of the shaft are so unsafe. That doesn't mean,

however, that we can't get a first class photographic and measured survey of the hole itself with remote-controlled cameras - both video and still cameras - methods called photogrammetry, which is taking photographs from fixed positions so you build up a continuous carefully positioned sort of photographic image of inside the shaft. A technique like that is quite possible. But the shaft itself, the material through which it was dug - although an ancient man-made feature is still a man-made rubble mound. The material around the shaft is extremely unstable. The only way you could get safe access to it would be to line it and lining it would be self-defeating because you couldn't actually then examine the sides of the shaft that you wish to. So, I think the first choice will be to use remote-control cameras.

### **WOULD YOU BE WILLING AS AN ARCHAEOLOGIST TO BE LOWERED DOWN INTO THAT HOLE?**

Oh, into a hole of that size, having worked in prehistoric flint mines in the east of England many years ago, to go into a hole that type and size would be a great challenge and experience for an archaeologist. It's just that in this particular case, none of the organizations involved in managing Silbury Hill would be prepared for anybody to be exposed to the danger of working within the shaft itself. That's not to say we won't get a good record of it."

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### **More Information:**

See Hole in Silbury Hill, Update Part 2.

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### **Websites:**

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

### **Credits**

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