

## Protecting Skylines - the points where Sky and Landscape Meet

*Summary of argument: Since horizon astronomy is the basis of prehistoric siting of ancient monuments, the remaining undisturbed skylines, still not built upon or altered, need to be preserved. This is a particular problem in mid-Wales where the landscape is neither a National Park nor an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and is being covered by wind turbine installations.*

The location of a prehistoric site is its key feature. All over the hills of Britain, for example, cairns and stones often seem to be set up in arbitrary places, which seem odd to modern people. We wonder why they were not built in more prominent or distinguished positions nearby. But this is because we are looking down on them individually rather than around them at their own level on the landscape and horizon.

In fact, almost always ancient people placed their monuments so that they linked up with the positions on the horizon where the sun or moon could be seen at key points in their cycles. This could be a natural feature such as a notch or peak or, for example, a man-made cairn built at exactly the right place on the horizon to link up with another stone or cairn below. Alternatively the horizon point may be lower - for example a distant island at sea-level. Along the western hills and coasts of Wales, Bardsey Island (Ynys Enlli) and the hills of the Llyn Peninsula were often used in this way. As soon as you understand this, the location of many cairns and stones becomes explicable.

As well as the sites discussed here on Sky and Landscape, the marvellous website [www.megalithicsites.co.uk](http://www.megalithicsites.co.uk) gives many examples of astronomical alignments in Britain and abroad, and especially in mid-Wales where the lack of protected status for the landscape has made it particularly open to exploitation. (Look out for the stunning alignments under the heading *Llananno, Powys*, where sadly the views in many directions are gradually getting filled with wind turbines.)

Across the country in general, modern machinery can easily gouge out new ways through the hills for roads and motorways, creating on the horizon what seems to be a natural notch but is actually a modern man-made alteration to the ancient landscape. Because of the advances in engineering, individual houses, and even whole housing estates can now be built on the tops and slopes of hills - and often are. Distant large buildings, such as factories, tall office blocks or flats, can also rise above a nearer horizon, blocking the further view.

In remote areas of the British countryside, however, changes to the skylines in recent history simply came from where a stone wall or fence crested a hilltop or vegetation grew or was removed. The exception to this has been Forestry Commission plantations blanketing the hills, but even these are cut down eventually. Apart from the ancient

ridgeways which deliberately used higher land above forested and boggy valleys for long-distance routes, country roads usually followed the lower contours of hills to enable easier travel along them. The conspicuous appearance of Iron Age forts, over 2000 years ago, has therefore been the main example of an intrusion on to our country skylines. However, even these Iron Age encampments have often incorporated or preserved cairns or marking stones from earlier times. For example, at the hillfort of Gaer Fawr, near Lledrod, south of Aberystwyth, a large quartz stone still remains on the hillside close by marking an equinox sunrise over Dolmen Milwyn near Cymystwyth in the east.

The most pressing danger for our skylines in contemporary Britain, however, has undoubtedly been the construction of industrial wind turbine complexes, which inevitably seek out the windiest, most exposed locations on the horizon for their siting. Against this, conventional power stations, with their insatiable need to be supplied with cooling water, tend to be built on lowland sites near the sea or by rivers or lakes. The main argument against both these types of power station is, of course, aesthetic. Wind turbine installations are excrescences which destroy the beauty of line which distinguishes the natural rise and fall of hills and mountains. Concrete roads and metal pylons spread out across the landscape from the turbines themselves. The natural peace and beauty which draws people to remote areas of the countryside is immediately destroyed. From the top of Plynlimon (Pumlumon Fawr) in mid-Wales, walkers can already see about 200 of these metal constructions on the nearby ridges and hills and many more are threatened, especially by the proposed Nant y Moch power station.

The justification for these intrusions into the British countryside has usually been expressed in terms of the imminence of catastrophic man-made global warming and the necessity therefore of developing energy sources with low carbon emissions. All other considerations, aesthetic or historical, are brushed aside in the face of these dire warnings of doom and destruction. The arguments for this threat of global warming, however, are still very much in doubt. The earth has not warmed up as predicted over the last decade. There have also been warm climatic periods in the past before human beings could be blamed for causing them by industrial activity (for example, in the Neolithic period when most of the cairns and other stone monuments were raised). There is therefore no certainty that wind turbines or other forms of renewable energy would prevent global warming even if the present meteorological predictions turned out to be true.

We all want a less polluted environment but it is really only the huge amounts of government money being given to the developers that drives the building of these inefficient, unreliable installations over our hills. It is not some missionary zeal to save the planet, although the publicity for these machines is presented thus. The amount of electricity produced is minimal. The builders continue to claim that it is somehow "green" to do it! Yet how can the destruction of the countryside be on the side of nature and the environment? The real modern "green activists", in my opinion, are the people who are fighting for areas of natural beauty to be preserved.

Although the prime concern is for the visual appearance of the hills, however, the preservation of our historical heritage is also tied up with this. In remote areas of the

British countryside, especially in Scotland and Wales, it is still possible to study the astronomical alignments to prehistoric sites built thousands of years ago because fewer of the individual standing stones, cairns, dolmens, stone rows and other stone artefacts have been removed and destroyed. Simply because they are difficult to reach on foot or with farm machinery, they have tended to be preserved and are now a marvellous source of research material for the growing study of archaeoastronomy. Nor can history and aesthetics be ultimately separated. If you watch a sunrise or set in an alignment from an ancient site you are authenticating the archaeoastronomy, but you are also observing one of the most emotive sights in nature with the added thrill of identifying directly with the prehistoric people who built it originally in that spot.

A classic example is the threat to the world-famous skyline at Callanish on the Scottish Island of Lewis. From the famous lines of stones at Callanish, set up about 6000 years ago, there is a view of a nearby ridge of hills shaped like a recumbent woman. She has been called the Sleeping Beauty or the Old Woman of the Moors (Cailleach na Mointeach). From her "knees" the moon rises at one of its extreme points about every 18 years (at the Major Standstill) and skims low along the length of her body until it can be seen through the group of tall megaliths that make up the central circle of the Callanish complex. All the associations of the Moon with women and the unconscious are combined with precise astronomical observation and visual drama. It seems unthinkable that this most famous horizon is currently threatened by a large turbine complex, some of whose blades would be seen along the ridge itself, yet this is what is planned.

Developers argue that they are being respectful to our prehistoric heritage if they merely avoid destruction or removal of the stone monuments themselves. A developer once told me that even if they actually put a turbine in the centre of a stone circle, I need not worry because they would leave the stones themselves untouched! But the landscape context of the monuments is ignored, and therefore the brilliance of the careful positioning of these cairns and megaliths so that they frequently incorporate both solar and lunar alignments in one place. If the hills can be preserved by careful planning decisions and the granting of AONB or National Park status, tourists can benefit but so can the ancient historical landscape which this website is dedicated to, especially that delicate line between the land and the sky.

The ancient skylines around our cities have largely disappeared in the past century, but at least some are left intact in the hills and mountains. In my opinion they should be defended just as strongly as the prehistoric monuments themselves, by Listing or Scheduling perhaps. Once we destroy and deface the fragile lines where sky and landscape meet, we shall never see them again as they were when our prehistoric forbears forged their links in stone, a liminal space between earth and sky.