

Sky and Landscape

by Irene Earis

About twenty years ago my husband and I bought a remote cottage in the hills in mid-Wales and used it for family holidays as our children were growing up. Nearby were some huge piles of stones marked as cairns on the OS map and I boldly told my children that when we got home I would get a book from the public library and find out all about them. Thus began a long process of reading books on prehistoric Britain and archaeology and realising that in fact no one really knows how these monuments were used and why they were placed where they are.

One idea about them that I came across early on in my reading, however, was that cairns, megaliths, mounds and dolmens were often carefully placed to link with the movements of the sun and moon. The study of this idea is called archaeoastronomy – the combination of archaeology and astronomy. But there are very few courses on the subject and often the available books are difficult and off-putting. The concept of building monuments to link the sky and landscape is natural and easy to appreciate, but the business of proving that this was their purpose now after thousands of years is much harder.

However I am convinced that if you get to know a stone circle, dolmen, stone row or other megalithic monument really well, then you can individually make a contribution to the study of prehistoric archaeology. You need to adopt your own particular site and visit it whenever you can at different times of the year to observe sunrises and sunsets, the moon on the horizons and shadow patterns. You need also to take photographs from every angle, study local maps, take compass bearings and measurements and gradually get into the minds of the people who constructed them. There are many points in common between these ancient sites, but part of the fascination is to observe local variations as well.

Archaeologists have marginalised the study of archaeoastronomy, largely in my opinion because they are not prepared to make the effort to study the simple basics of astronomy. This has been tragic for the development of the subject academically, but it also offers opportunities for keen amateurs to make significant contributions. My hope is that there will eventually be so much evidence collected about the links between these sites and the patterns of the sun and moon that it will be impossible to ignore. Then the universities will at last be open to the subject, funding will be granted for further research and megalithic sites receive the protection they deserve and often so desperately need.