

A survey of visitors to the Rollright Stones

Introduction

The Rollright Stones are a group of three prehistoric megalithic monuments situated on the Oxfordshire/Warwickshire border some two and a half miles north of Chipping Norton. The *King's Men* is a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age stone circle, probably built around 2500-2000BC. The *Whispering Knights* is the remains of a 'Portal Dolmen' burial chamber, probably dating from 3800-3000BC. The Kings Stone is a single standing stone, possibly a marker for a Bronze Age cemetery dating from around 1800-1500BC (Lambrick: 1988; Burl: 2000: p300 - 306).

Despite their relatively modest dimensions, the Rollright Stones are, after Stonehenge and Avebury, amongst the best known and most visited prehistoric monuments in Britain. This is in part due to their accessibility, located immediately adjacent to a public road and within easy driving distance of Oxford, Birmingham and the tourist towns of the Cotswolds. The stone circle is also an important sacred site for local Pagan groups and a focus for the eclectic memberships of the Earth Mysteries and New Age movements.

The Rollright Stones were listed in the schedule of the first Ancient Monuments Act (1882) and have been in state guardianship ever since, a role now exercised by English Heritage. The site itself was privately owned until relatively recently, although it has always been open to more or less unrestricted public access. Since 1997 the Stones have been managed by *The Rollright Trust*, a small registered charity, which also owns the core area of the site.

From its inception, the Trust set out to avoid the conflicts over access and control which had characterised the administration of Stonehenge in the 1980s and 1990s (Bender: 1998: p114-130) and the Trust's board includes local Pagans as well as professional archaeologists. However the management of the site presents unavoidable dilemmas:

Access and conservation

The Trust is engaged in a difficult attempt to balance the requirement for physical and intellectual access with the conservation of the site and the preservation of its rural character. It is likely that between 20,000 and 25,000 people visit the Stones every year. Much of this foot traffic is concentrated in a relatively small area around the stone circle and causes a persistent ground erosion problem, particularly in wet weather. In 2004 the Trust completed a substantial programme of access improvement following several years of negotiation with neighbouring landowners. While these works brought some significant benefits by increasing the size of the area open to visitors and allowing wheelchair access, they inevitably gave the site a more 'managed' look.

The surfaces of the stones are fragile and ecologically sensitive because of the presence of some of the oldest lichens in Britain and visitors are not allowed to climb on them, which families with young children find frustrating. Various practices associated with Pagan and New Age rituals – lighting candles on the stones and the placing of coins and other objects in crevices - are prohibited for the same reason. The scattering of cremation ashes, a practice which appears to be growing in popularity, is also undesirable because of its distorting effect on the archaeological record, but impossible to prevent.

The requirements of different users

While the great majority of visitors to the Stones are 'normal' tourists and day-trippers, the site is of particular spiritual and social significance to the Pagan community, both in the immediate area and nationally. Pagan groups have been closely involved with the site for many years and in the recent past many of the volunteer site wardens were recruited from them. The Trust allows the site to be pre-booked (for a fee) for Pagan rituals and *handfastings* (marriage ceremonies), and will allow the site to be closed to other visitors at certain times for these events. While there is no history of conflict between Pagan and 'ordinary' visitors, the special access requirements of Pagan groups create particular management issues.

Finance

Although English Heritage has guardianship responsibilities under the Ancient Monuments' legislation it does not make any financial contribution to the upkeep of the site. The capital cost of the major landscaping work undertaken in recent years was financed by grants from local government and various environmental bodies. However the normal running costs of the site, including the warden's salary and the ongoing cost of repairing ground erosion and damage caused by vandals (see below) has to be met out of admission charges. Over the last two years, the gate money has barely covered these costs and the admission price has recently been raised from 50p to £1. The need to collect money from visitors imposes a significant logistic burden. At one time much of the work was undertaken by volunteers, but these are now fewer in number and the site is frequently unmanned, especially on weekdays.

Vandalism

The site has suffered persistent vandalism over many years, some of it associated with attempts to break into the warden's hut or the 'honesty box' in search of petty cash and some of it apparently motiveless. In recent years these attacks have escalated in scale and seriousness. On April Fool's Day 2004 the stone circle was systematically splattered with yellow paint which took many months of painstaking work to remove. In early 2006 the warden's hut suffered a serious arson attack which destroyed most of the roof and rendered the structure unsafe. The building was subsequently demolished and replaced with a steel

shed which was intended to be fire-resistant and burglar-proof. In December 2007 this new building also suffered an arson attack, together with an attempt to cause an explosion, which rendered it unfit for use. There is no obvious solution to the vandalism problem: the site is unmanned for the great majority of the time, it is in a rural area and easily accessible from a public road. The trustees have considered various protective measures but all of these would be costly and not necessarily effective.

Survey aims, design and implementation

Although the site warden and volunteer wardens have always sought informal feedback from visitors, no systematic attempt has been made to survey visitor attitudes since the Trust took over the management of the site eleven years ago. In February 2008 I asked the Chair of the Trust, George Lambrick, for permission to carry out a short visitor survey as part of my Masters course. He was enthusiastic about the idea, provided the Trust was given access to the results of the survey, to which I agreed (this was disclosed to participants). After discussing the matter with George, the other directors and the site warden, Julia Phillips, I decided that the aims of the survey should be:

- To collect some basic quantitative data about visitor profiles
- To investigate visitor attitudes towards the way the site should be managed and how the vandalism problem should be addressed
- To find out what proportion of visitors saw the site as spiritually significant, and whether their attitudes towards management issues differed from other visitors

The method I adopted was semi-structured interview, using a questionnaire form completed by a researcher. I designed the questionnaire so that the interview could be completed in under five minutes by a subject who answered all the questions in a straightforward way. However interviewees were asked some open attitudinal questions which gave those who wished an opportunity to talk at greater length about their experience of the site. In March Julia ran a pilot test of the questionnaire on half a dozen visitors: I made some changes to the ordering and wording of questions as a result of her feedback.

My original intention was that the sample frame should be all of those visiting the site between 10am and 5pm on a chosen Saturday. Julia kindly agreed to act as my fellow researcher. The day I selected - 5th April - turned out cold and wet. In the early afternoon the weather deteriorated: visitor numbers tailed off significantly and we had to abandon the exercise with only around 30 completed responses, which I did not think was sufficient to generate meaningful data. The following weekend (12th/13th April) Julia and I spent one day each at the site and with somewhat better weather succeeded in collecting a further 50 responses. A

comparative analysis showed no significant variances between the results collected on the two weekends. We conducted the interviews outside (and occasionally inside) the warden's hut, which is at the entrance to the main part of the site and the point at which admission fees are normally collected. As they arrived, a random cross-section of visitors was asked whether they would be willing to take part in a short survey on completion of their visit: the great majority agreed. Not all of these were in fact interviewed, since those who had finished their visit could not reasonably be expected to wait while the researcher completed another interview, especially in bad weather. Generally I felt the exercise worked well, although certain methodological problems became apparent:

- Nearly all the sample were visiting the site in groups of two or more. In practice it often proved impossible to detach individuals from their groups to conduct interviews. As a consequence, it was sometimes difficult to assess whether we were recording the responses of one person or of several people answering collectively. The sample consisted of 43 groups containing a total of approximately 120 individuals. Our approach was that if more than one individual in a group was involved in the interview conversation and they appeared to hold mutually independent views, at least on some matters, this should be recorded as more than one response. However in cases where one 'group leader' did all, or nearly all, the talking this was recorded as a single response. Adopting this approach, we ended with a sample size of 80 individuals. This involved some unavoidably subjective judgements, and it would be prudent to allow a variation in nominal sample size of +/- 15%. I do not believe that this difficulty significantly affected the results of the survey, although in some cases it may have affected the statistical significance that can be attributed to them.
- Both Julia and I had considerable prior knowledge of the recent history of the site and of the management issues which are of most concern to the trustees. This was both an advantage and a disadvantage. I was able to compose the attitudinal questions with a good understanding of the contentious issues, but this may in itself have introduced biases into the result. While conducting the survey we held quite detailed conversations with some respondents. These were often informative, but they were not one-way conversations and some of the respondents' recorded views may have been contaminated by our own opinions, although we tried hard to prevent this.
- Most of the interviews were conducted outside, and the weather conditions inevitably had some impact on participants' willingness to give full responses, particularly on the first day.

- In retrospect I believe that two particular survey questions were placed in the wrong order, and that this almost certainly distorted the responses to the second question: see 'Management Issues' below.

Survey results: Visitor profile

Note: Where questions and suggested responses are quoted verbatim, these are shown in *italics*.

Age, Gender and Party size

We recorded the apparent age of respondents but did not ask people their age. 63% of the sample appeared to be aged between 31 and 55, 14% over 55 and 23% between 18 and 30. People who appeared to be under 18 were excluded from the sample. Numbers of males and females were nearly equal. 53% of the 43 visiting groups in the sample consisted of two people and 28% of three or four people. There were 6 groups of five people or more (14%) and 2 single visitors (5%).

Domicile

21% of the sample lived locally (within 10 miles of the site) and 68% lived elsewhere in the UK. Only 11% were from overseas: this result is in sharp contrast to data recorded at Stonehenge, where nearly three quarters of visitors were from overseas (Bender: 1998: p123). The obvious explanation for the difference is that Rollright is not an internationally-known heritage site which overseas visitors would normally include in a sightseeing tour of Britain: more than half of the overseas respondents had been brought to the site by English friends.

Travel distance and Time at site

53% of respondents had travelled less than 10 miles to the Stones from their previous night's lodging. 32% had travelled between 11 and 25 miles and 15% had come over 25 miles. Some of the parties in this last group had come a considerable distance: from Southampton in one case. 86% had come by car: the exceptions were three groups of hikers who had walked the public footpath from Chipping Norton and one pair of cyclists. Most parties spent between 15 and 30 minutes at the site. Three parties stayed for over an hour: all of these contained respondents for whom the Stones were spiritually significant (see below).

Visitor history and Future intentions

Respondents were asked whether they had visited the site on previous occasions and if so how often. The results were as follows:

| | |
|--|------------|
| <i>First visit:</i> | 50% |
| <i>One previous visit:</i> | 12% |
| <i>Between 2 and 5 previous visits:</i> | 25% |
| <i>Between 6 and 10 previous visits:</i> | 7% |
| <i>More than 10 previous visits:</i> | 5% |

Those who reported that this was their first visit were asked whether they intended to visit again: 32% said yes and 68% said no. This data, and the conversations I had with respondents, suggests that visitors to Rollright can be roughly divided into casual visitors and committed fans who make fairly frequent visits. There was no significant correlation between number of previous visits and travel distance: several of the 'fans' lived quite a long way away.

Reasons for visit

Respondents were asked to give their reasons for visiting the site. The researcher suggested three possible answers, which were chosen by the following percentages of the sample (respondents were allowed to nominate more than one reason):

| | |
|--|------------|
| <i>A day out with friends/family</i> | 68% |
| <i>Interested in archaeology/history</i> | 42% |
| <i>Interested in Pagan religions/ley lines/dowsing/Earth Mysteries</i> | 18% |

Survey results: Visitor Attitudes

Management Issues

Respondents were asked: *Would you like to see the site just left to look after itself, with no active management and no admission fee, or do you think it needs to be more actively managed, or is it about right as it is?*

| | |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| <i>Left to itself:</i> | 1% |
| <i>More actively managed:</i> | 10% |
| <i>About right as it is:</i> | 89% |

Several respondents remarked that they liked the rather amateur character of the visitor arrangements. One man told me he was glad the site had been 'kept out of the hands of the Heritage Industry'. Several people commented unfavourably, and unprompted, on the

management of Stonehenge. One person who lived locally told me that she often brought overseas guests to the site because 'it's typically English and under-stated, which is quite hard to find these days.'

Respondents were asked two questions about the current management arrangements:

Generally, do you think the Trust is doing a good job of managing the site?

Do you think the admission price is good value for money?

100% of respondents answered the first question in the affirmative and 97% also said the £1 admission price represented good value for money. I think this suspicious unanimity must have partly reflected a desire to avoid giving offence (The respondents had been told at the beginning of the interview that, in addition to being used in my academic project, the results of the survey would be made available to the Trust). When respondents were given the opportunity to suggest specific improvements they were often less complimentary.

The optimisation of signage at the site has always been a difficult issue for the Trust, and I included a specific question about this in the survey: *Do you think there are enough signboards giving information about the site, or are there actually too many?*

| | |
|---------------------|------------|
| <i>Too few:</i> | 71% |
| <i>About right:</i> | 29% |
| <i>Too many:</i> | 0% |

In a later question respondents were asked: *What is the single most important change you would like to see?* By far the most frequent answer (nominated by 34% of respondents) to this question was that more written information about the site should be provided, either in the form of sign boards or leaflets. I think it is likely that responses to this open question were significantly influenced by the previous closed question about signage: the order of the questions should have been reversed. Nine respondents (11% of the sample) raised the issue of the warden's hut, which was lacking its external timber cladding and in the process of being repaired following recent vandalism. Most of these focussed on either the ugliness of the hut or the fact that it was too large and obtrusive. Four respondents questioned the need for a hut on the site: one man believed it was a 'magnet for vandals' while another thought it 'just wasn't right here'.

Vandalism

Respondents were asked: *There has been a serious problem with vandalism at the site over the last few years. Do you think it would be a good idea to:*

| | Yes | No |
|--|------------|------------|
| <i>Install CCTV cameras?</i> | 46% | 54% |
| <i>Have a 24-hour security guard?</i> | 20% | 80% |
| <i>Put a fence round the site and restrict access to official opening hours?</i> | 26% | 74% |

Many respondents asked about the history of vandalism at the site. Several people, especially older visitors, became quite upset and angry when we gave them this information. No other topic in the survey elicited such an emotional response. Respondents' views about CCTV were fairly evenly divided. Many of those who supported the installation of cameras made it clear that they did so reluctantly: they were generally opposed to the spread of 'surveillance culture' but conceded that CCTV might be justified in this case. The low level of support for a security guard appeared to be based on the (correct) perception that the Trust could probably not afford this commitment. However the support for a perimeter fence was perhaps surprisingly strong, given that this would not only be expensive but would (at least in my view) severely compromise the appearance and character of the site.

Those who answered affirmatively to any of these questions were asked whether they would be happy to see the admission fee go up (from the current £1 per head) to pay for this, and if so by how much. Results were as follows:

| | |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| <i>No increase:</i> | 56% |
| <i>Go up to £1.50:</i> | 8% |
| <i>Go up to £2.00:</i> | 29% |
| <i>Go up to £3.00 or more:</i> | 7% |

Respondents had been told earlier in the interview that the Trust did not receive any public money. Several of those who did not support an increase justified the apparent inconsistency on the basis that 'people' would not be willing to pay more. Several respondents said that public money ought to be made available to protect such an important site from vandalism. Roughly half of those who supported an increase to £2, and all five of those who supported an increase to £3 or more, were amongst the minority of respondents who saw the Stones as spiritually significant (see below).

Spiritual significance and religious practice

Respondents were asked: *Do the Stones have any spiritual significance for you?*

Yes: 29%

No: 71%

This question, and the two follow-ups (see below), were placed at the end of the questionnaire because I believed that some people might find this subject too personal and would be uncomfortable about answering. In the event no one seemed to find the matter particularly sensitive, and several people went on (largely unprompted) to talk about their spiritual engagement with the site. Most of these clearly felt that the Stones had some numinous quality, but these feelings were expressed in very vague and general terms. Two respondents were more specific. One person told me that she believed the individual stones in the circle might be representations or embodiments of spirit animals. Another respondent told me that on a previous visit she had experienced an encounter with the spirit of her late grandfather beside the King's Stone.

Those who answered this question affirmatively were asked two follow-up questions:

Have you ever attended a ritual or ceremony at the Stones or at any other ancient site?

Do you follow any particular Pagan path or tradition?

Only one respondent answered the first question in the affirmative: she had attended a solstice celebration some years previously. A pair of visitors from Seattle answered the second question in the affirmative, describing themselves as 'neo-Pagans'. The remainder (87%) of those who had affirmed the spiritual significance of the site answered both questions in the negative, in most cases rather dismissively. My impression was that these were truthful answers. If so, it is clear that the Stones have a spiritual significance for a relatively high percentage of visitors, very few of whom are involved in any Pagan religious practice. At the same time, the near absence of professed Pagans from the sample is perhaps surprising: I know from personal experience that numbers of them do live in the area and visit the site. Apart from the relatively small size of the sample, a possible explanation is that local Pagans may be more likely to visit the site at times when the gate is not manned, or to concentrate their visits on the eight Pagan seasonal festival days.

Conclusion

I was a director of the Trust for several years and quite closely involved with the site during that time, and perhaps because of this I did not really expect that my own feelings about Rollright or its management would be changed by carrying out this short survey. In fact the

experience of talking to a diverse range of visitors in a relatively concentrated time frame did make me start to think about the place in some new ways.

First, I think I came to understand more clearly how for many people the experience of visiting ancient sites is simultaneously social and personal. The original builders of the stone circle at Rollright intended it as a gathering place – probably both secular and religious – and their experience of it would have been essentially social. Practicing local Pagans continue to experience the site in this way. (Modern English Paganism is of considerable anthropological interest [Luhmann:1989; Hutton: 2001], but any investigation of its manifestations at Rollright would clearly be a separate project requiring a different type of fieldwork.) The ‘ordinary’ visitor’s experience of the site is social in another way: with the exception of two solitary individuals, the whole sample had come in groups - some quite large - and it was obvious from watching them that the experience of spending leisure time with friends or family was integral to their enjoyment of the site. At the same time almost a third of the sample said the place had a spiritual significance for them, and I am fairly sure that number would have been higher if we had been able to talk to people without their friends overhearing. However, with a couple of exceptions, none of these people had ever engaged in any collective Pagan religious practice: their spiritual connection with the site was essentially personal. They were quite willing to acknowledge its existence to an intrusive stranger but, with a couple of exceptions again, did not volunteer any specific information about its nature. I think this was only partly because of the context of these conversations, and that most of the people I talked to did not in fact have any very precise conception of the meaning the place held for them, except that it was somehow apart from their everyday experience.

Second, I began to think that the distinction which I had assumed to exist between an interest in ‘archaeology and history’ and in ‘Pagan religions, ley lines, dowsing and Earth Mysteries’ might be rather artificial. Most visitors to ancient monuments are not trained archaeologists or historians and they do not draw clear distinctions between facts and beliefs about the past. The origins of English amateur archaeology in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were inextricably intertwined with the Romantic movement (Hayman: 1997; Wallace: 2004). Since that time, academic archaeology has gone down its own dusty road, but the type of romantic engagement with the far English past in which Neolithic stone circles, Celtic religion and Arthurian legend are blended into a conception of some lost golden age persists in popular culture. For many visitors, I suspect the resonances of sites like Rollright may not be spiritual in the strict sense of ‘sacred’ or ‘religious’ but rather in this peculiarly English tradition of historical romanticism.

Finally, I was led to question the binary division of the structures on the site which I had assumed to exist between, on the one hand, those which were ‘authentic’ – the three major megalithic monuments and the less visible Bronze and Iron Age archaeology – and on the

other hand those things – paths, fences, gates, warden’s hut - which had been installed by the Trust or its predecessors to manage the traffic of 20th and 21st century visitors.

The circle was built around a thousand years later than the Whispering Knights, which is a collective tomb of the early Neolithic era: its location may have been influenced by the earlier structure (Lambrick: 1988: p123), but this is speculative. In the intervening period it is likely that there would have been a profound change in the relationship of the local inhabitants with the surrounding landscape and ‘the constitution of a different sense of time, place and social identity’ (Tilley: 1994: p208). The late-Neolithic farmers who built the stone circle may have seen the tomb, perhaps long eroded and empty, as alternatively a place associated with venerated ancestors, a relic of a vanished culture inhabited by dangerous spirits or simply devoid of significance and not worth a second glance. This is now unknowable: the only certainty is that the circle builders must have constructed their own relationship with the visible past. One of the most visible achievements of the Trust over the last ten years has been the creation of a 500 yard long pedestrian path with wheelchair access between the two monuments. In constructing this route, the trustees decided that the landscape should be altered to allow visitors to inspect both prehistoric structures at close hand with the minimum of fuss and at all times of the year. Is this new interpretation of the Rollright landscape, and the path which embodies it, reinforced with polymer mesh, any less an ‘authentic’ engagement with the visible past?

At the same time that the path was laid, the area around the stone circle which was accessible to the public was considerably extended. This was intended to minimise ground erosion from foot traffic, but also to allow visitors to enter the circle through the original entrance, which was previously blocked by the perimeter fence. In fact very few visitors do this: there are significant gaps in the circle where stones have been removed or damaged over time, and the location of the original entrance is not immediately apparent. Most people simply walk into the circle by the most direct route from the entrance path. Should the Trust construct another path, perhaps with guide ropes, to guide visitors through the ‘real’ entrance in the interests of historical verisimilitude? The answer is not obvious, at least to me. Uncomplicated engagement with the past can exist only in the realm of the imagination: the reality is partial comprehension and messy compromise.

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