

A Castlerigg Conundrum

When you take your guests to Castlerigg Stone Circle, what do you tell them ? Do you tell them this is Lakeland's answer to Stonehenge ? Do you ask them to consider whether it is 2500 years old, or 3000 years old, or even 4000 years old ? Do you ask them to consider whether it is a meeting place, or a market place, or a burial site, or a religious site, or an astronomical site ? (Prof. Alexander Thom in his *Megalithic Sites in Britain* (OUP 1967) says that the stones of the circle show seven solar or lunar declensions, four of which cross in the centre of the circle).

Or do you tell them its location and layout is purely for the celebration of its place surrounded by the Lakeland fells ?

Have you noticed that when you are in the centre of the circle (or to be precise, slightly off-centre) you are surrounded by a skyline that is filled by the outlines of the fells, that there are no 'gaps' in the skyline ? And have you never thought that the stones are aligned with those fells ?

As you enter the site from the north there is a large stone on your right. Let's call it the 'Skiddaw Stone'. Let's call the stone on the left the 'Blencathra Stone.' As you walk a few steps - 3-4m - into the circle line up the 'Skiddaw Stone' with the summit of Skiddaw, 6.5km away. Then turn around 180° and in perfect alignment, 10km away, is the summit of Helvellyn directly behind another of the two largest stones in the circle. Amazing ! But have you then noticed that two of the smaller stones in the cove, or 'sanctuary' as it is sometimes called, in front of the 'Helvellyn Stone' echo the shape of the two lower fells (High Rigg and Brown Crag) in front of Helvellyn ?

Furthermore, if you are on the Helvellyn-Skiddaw axial in the right spot you will notice that the 'Blencathra Stone' is in direct alignment with Blencathra ! And while standing on this same spot, with Skiddaw, Helvellyn and Blencathra in your transection, a stone over your right shoulder, at 90°, is in direct alignment with Great Mell Fell (with a ditch-enclosed barrow on top) 11km away. Amazing !

At this intersection, and with a sighting compass over the other stones in the circle, you may be able to identify the other Lakeland fells in view: I won't tell you which - I'll leave that to yourselves.

Whatever you ask your guests to consider, ask them when they return to your transport "How many stones are there ?" You will be surprised that very few have counted them, and those that have differ in the total number !

Chris Wright

How many stones are there ?

There are 38 stones in the circle, 33 of which are still standing. The 'Skiddaw Stone' is No. 38, the 'Helvellyn Stone' No. 13, the 'Blencathra Stone' No. 1 and the 'Great Mell Fell Stone' No. 5. Nos. 13 and 38 are two of the biggest. A further 10 stones are arranged to form a rectangular enclosure, or cove, on the south-east side.

You may also like to tell your guests that one of the stones has a marking on it which is allegedly a fertility symbol. See how many of the ladies - especially the young Japanese ones - will want to sit on it !