

## ***The Winter Solstice Sunrise, 2000***

Well they did it! Just before dawn on Thursday, December 21st, a small party of people, including John Nettleship, Derrick Williams and his two lads, Leim, 15, and Scott, 11, Martin McHugh, Don and Ronwen Waring, John Kenney and Jim Pitcher plus a few others unknown to us, climbed up to our own little version of Stonehenge, the stone circle on Gray Hill, to see the Winter Solstice sunrise. However, this year the weather was set against them - all they saw was the sky turning a lighter shade of grey - but nevertheless, they were there! As one of the party remarked, *"You don't actually have to be able to see the sun to sense the kind of 'charge' in the atmosphere at the time of the sunrise."*

This ancient stone circle with its attendant standing stones has stood guard on the eastern face of Gray Hill for 4,000 years. We don't know who they were, but an ancient Bronze Age people manhandled these extremely heavy stones up the slopes of Grey Hill, and embedded them in the ground in the form of a circle, with two other stones standing a little way beyond.

Not just any old circle though. These stones were positioned with an accuracy that is amazing. At the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, the sunrise is aligned exactly with the two single stones when viewed from the centre of the circle. But there is more; the two stones also further align with a 'notch' in the horizon 25 miles away. A line drawn on the map from our stones through this notch aligns exactly with a deep gully that divides two hills near the racecourse at Bath. Coincidence? Maybe - but it's there for all to see.

Alignments like this can be established for almost all of these stone circles and megaliths. So why did they do it? Almost certainly there was a religious motive, and it is considered that the Druids would have been the major spiritual driving force at that time. An important part of the mystique of a spiritual leader in those days was the ability to make celestial predictions by study of the stars and the planets, which, coupled with some surprisingly advanced mathematics, gave them the power to tell their followers the precise point they were at in the agricultural year. The stone circles were the celestial calendars of the day. If you could interpret the alignments of the stones - adding a little showmanship and the mystique of the occasional eclipse to help things along - and you could accurately tell the farmers when to plant their seeds and so on, then you had power indeed.

It may come as a surprise to many to know that the Gray Hill stone circle is regarded by historians as one of the most important legacies of the Bronze Age in Monmouthshire.

It's easy to get to - just take the Usk road through Llanvair-Discoed and leave your car at the Forester's Oaks car park. The stone circle is above you on the top of Gray Hill, and will become visible as you approach the summit. However, bear in mind that Gray Hill is 900 feet high so be prepared for a climb that is fairly steep in parts! The path to the top is quite well defined so there shouldn't be any problems. It's worth the effort though - the view from the top is breathtaking.

The recommended map is the Ordnance Survey Pathfinder series sheet ST 48/58, and the map reference is ST 438 935.

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### References

Children, G & Nash, G.H., 1996, *Prehistoric Sites of Monmouthshire*, Logaston Press