

AVEBURY SOUNDSCAPES

1. First Light

The sound of sunrise. Walking into Avebury just before dawn, we hear birds flapping out of the trees. Binaurally recorded, they appear to be overhead when played on headphones. An ensemble of theremins play. The sun rises with an electrical drone that rotates around us. The bell sounds are Woodstock Chimes, harmonically tuned in just intonation.

2. Windmill Hill

Earliest occupied site in the Avebury area, the hill's huge circular earthwork dates from around 3650 BC. We hear the lowing of cattle, which were periodically brought to Windmill Hill by semi-nomadic herders. There they held great feasts, leaving behind a vast quantity of buried animal bones and broken pottery.

3. Great Circle

Inside the Avebury henge is a stone circle a quarter of a mile across; within that are the remains of two smaller circles. Sound reflects eerily from the stones – perhaps these echoes were once regarded as the voices of ancestral spirits? The echoes from the inner and outer circles form the rhythm of this track. Headphone listeners will hear many of the instruments rotating all around them. The overtone singing was recorded in an underground stone chamber not far from Avebury.

4. River of Souls

'Living water' was important to Neolithic people, and springs and rivers are an integral part of Avebury's sacred landscape. The West Kennet Avenue, a double row of standing stones, once ran for more than a mile from the Avebury henge. What were avenues for? Perhaps they were symbolic rivers, leading the souls of the dead to the Otherworld? As well as half-speed Woodstock Chimes, this track features several binaural recordings made around Avebury: thunder booms overhead and springs gurgle below.

5. Silbury Rising

This colossal mound was built up over many years by piling up hundreds of layers of chalk and soil, excavated from the surrounding ditch. Adding the layers was likely an annual festive occasion for the whole community. We hear sheep grazing in the Silbury meadow, bubbling springwater, and other binaural sounds that endlessly rise in pitch and rotate when played through headphones.

6. Exaltation

The Avebury landscape has a large population of skylarks. In the spring the male birds display by flying high into the air, singing as they go. They then dive dramatically, almost to the ground. This track features a recording of skylark song that has been slowed down to half, quarter and eighth of the original speed.

7. Palisades

In the valley just east of Silbury, Neolithic people erected a vast complex of timber structures: two massive enclosures, and other features that ranged half a mile across the landscape. Their purpose is unknown, but people were feasting there on pigs, which we hear in the track along with a theremin. After less than a century of use the Palisades were destroyed by fire, the sound of which ends the track.

8. The Sanctuary

On Overton Hill, east of Silbury, there was once a mysterious geometrical structure of timber posts, arranged in concentric circles of 6, 8, 12 and 16 posts each. At the end of this track, the Sanctuary's geometry is expressed as a rhythm.

9. Bone Ceremony

Ancestral bones were housed in the Neolithic West Kennet long barrow, but were its stone chambers also used for rites of initiation? The barrow has strange acoustic properties, including an infrasonic resonance of about 9 Hertz that can potentially produce 'altered states'. In this imagined initiation ceremony, the monument is resonated first by whirling the bull roarer, then by a group of drummers playing at nine beats per second. An incantation in Proto-Indo-European (a language used from 4000 BC) summons the ancestors, four of whom duly appear... The overtone singing and other sounds were recorded in the actual barrow; some are binaural.

BONE CEREMONY INCANTATION

Sky Father, Holy Earth Mother

God-inspired powerful magic force

Dream and remember, dream and truly see

A bright light in this place of darkness

Earth and stone, rock and bone

Rain and river, springs and blood

Sun and moon, wind and fire

Dream and truly see, you sons and daughters

Dream and truly see

Dream and remember, dream and truly see

Dream and remember, dream and truly see

Dream and remember, dream and truly see

Young woman, young man

I am your great grandfather

And I am your great grandmother

I am your great-great grandfather

And I am your great-great grandmother

Dream and remember, dream and truly see

Dream and remember, dream and truly see

Dream and remember, dream and truly see

10. Geomancy

A few miles south of the Avebury henge lies a beautiful Norman church with unique acoustics. Close by is an ancient yew tree and springs. This track was made by sequencing samples of sounds that were played in different positions inside the church and re-recorded binaurally. With headphones, the sounds may be heard to dance around in three-dimensional space.

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Skylark recorded by Keith Betton

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