

U3A VISIT TO LONG MEG AND HER DAUGHTERS

2.00 to 4.00pm Thursday 20 July

On a gloriously dry, sunny day a large and enthusiastic group from Penrith and North Lakes U3A greatly enjoyed exploring the local stone circle: 'Long Meg and her daughters' under the excellent guidance of Paul Frodsham, an archaeologist from Durham University and Paul Logan, a geologist with a wealth of experience and a former lecturer for the Open University. Paul Frodsham's interest in this monument was awakened much earlier in his career when the spirit of the isolated site moved him quite deeply.

Members of the group were encouraged first of all to contemplate the site from the vantage point of the tallest stone, known as Long Meg, to walk round it to view it from all angles, to examine its spirals and concentric circles and to feel the rock's surface. Interestingly, the spiral shapes carved on one face are more like those found in Irish passage tombs than those found in more usual cup and ring carvings. The western face also has quartz crystals over the surface which would have sparkled in the sun. Questioning the guides was invited making the whole visit an interactive one with plenty of discussion. New archaeological excavation has recently led to a fresh understanding of the site and consideration of the research is ongoing so it is very much a 'work in progress.'

Paul Logan's recent arrival in Cumbria is leading to important clarification of the source of the rock used for Long Meg, for example, and geological evidence is helping to link the circle's large stones or 'daughters', most of which are erratics left after the last Ice Age. Examples include various stones include microgranite which can be found near Threlkeld, others are Borrowdale volcanics and one stone contains Criffel granite from across the



Solway. Long Meg herself, has been confirmed to be of Penrith Sandstone, a sedimentary rock, unlike the rest. It was most likely brought from just beyond Lacey's caves, where similar large slabs can be seen on the banks of the Eden.

The whole Long Meg complex now comprising 69 stones is one of the largest in Britain. Recent use of carbon dating points to its origin being about 4,475 years ago, a very similar date to that attributed to another stone circle site near Gretna but which has now been ploughed over so it does not yield enough information to draw further comparison with the Long Meg site. Paul Frodsham emphasised the need for us to recognise that the skill and intelligence of those living in that era, sometimes described as the Neolithic period when farming first began, should not be underestimated but their thought processes and beliefs may have been quite different from ours. The purpose of creating such stone circles has long been a source of speculation but as at other similar sites it is apparent that the alignment of the stones links with the summer or winter solstice. On the shortest day of the year the line between the largest stone in the circle and Long Meg itself points directly towards the setting sun and its long shadow stretches to the far side of the circle.

Paul Frodsham is intending to establish a local 'Friends of Long Meg group' to prompt further interest in and gather support for more research into Long Meg. The latest published archaeological information on the site can be found in 'New light on the Neolithic of Northern England' edited by Gillian Hey and Paul Frodsham.