We get the Stonehenge we deserve

Robin McKie

There was a familiar sound to the fanfare that greeted the announcement that scientists had uncovered the true purpose of Stonehenge. It was really a royal burial ground for an ancient dynasty, said researchers led by Mike Parker Pearson from Sheffield University. Radiocarbon dating of human remains found nearby suggested it was a cemetery right from the start of its construction about 3,000 BC.

We got the “Revealed: the secret of Stonehenge” headlines which, some readers might have noticed, had a close similarity to those in April, when Geoffrey Wainwright said that the true purpose of the great Wiltshire stone circle was as “the Lourdes of the Bronze Age”, where the sick and wounded sought cures by appealing to the great bluestones, which had been dragged to Wiltshire from Wales for their magical healing properties. Stonehenge was the accident and emergency ward of the southwest, said the former English Heritage archaeologist Wainwright. Look at the graves of sick and deformed people in the area, he added. Nor was he impressed that his theory had a new rival. “A very elegant theory,” he remarked about it, “lacking only the quality of a shred of evidence.”

There are more theories about Stonehenge’s purpose than there are stones in it. The trend goes right back to the idea that its monoliths were assembled on Salisbury Plain by the magician Merlin, although why he bothered to do so remains a mystery. Every age gets the Stonehenge it deserves, as the archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes once remarked. In medieval times it was built by giants; in the 1960s, at the dawn of the computing era, researchers said you could have used it as a giant calculator; and in more mystical New Age times it was a spaceport for aliens.

For my money the suggestion that it was really built as the base for Britain’s first public inquiry is the best. I would argue that the World Heritage site is probably best viewed today as a monument to government prevarication and deceit.

Ministers now seem to have abandoned any attempt to protect it, and so cars and lorries will continue to hurtle by and tourists will be stuffed into its cramped visitors centre. According to the government, it’s low-rent tat – which is the Stonehenge Britain deserves.

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1p  40  Which of the following characterises the first sentence?
In this sentence the writer
A  expresses enthusiasm.
B  shows concern.
C  uses a mocking tone.

"a new rival" (line 15)

1p  41  Which theory is meant?
The theory referred to in line(s)
A  3 (“a royal ... ancient dynasty”).
B  5-6 (“a cemetery ... 3,000 BC”).
C  10-12 (“the Lourdes ... healing properties”).
D  12-13 (“the accident ... the southwest”).

1p  42  Which of the following is the writer’s intention in writing this article?
A  To call for action to protect Stonehenge from the damaging influx of too many visitors.
B  To criticise the authorities for their policy with regard to Stonehenge.
C  To discuss why the purpose of Stonehenge is still obscure.
D  To make clear that Stonehenge has lost its value as a historic monument.