ANCIENT TIMES

BROUGHT TO YOU BY STONE CLUB

ISSUE 5



DREAMS IN GRANITE

BY JOE MARSHALL

There's a map on the wall of our local pub in St Erth. It shows the Penwith Peninsula as an island, way back in the Pliocene, 5.3-2.4 million years ago. It's not so hard to imagine when I stand at one of the high points on the peninsula, like the Bronze Age hill fort of Caer Bran and see the ocean surrounding the land on three sides, the Isles of Scilly, shimmering on the horizon like mythic islands to the west. Though connected to the island of Britain as it (currently) is, there is nowhere else on this mainland where being on an island feels more apparent.

I find myself drawn again and again to those Penwith uplands, where the golden gorse scents the spring air like cocoa butter and the late-summer heather turns the hills to purple. These moorlands are familiar to me, having grown up near the Peak District, but here they are different in their own way, isolated by the ocean; more mysterious, perhaps.

It endlessly fascinates me that the granite outcrops across the southwest, from Dartmoor to Bodmin Moor, Penwith, and the Isles of Scilly, are all part of the brilliantly named Cornubian Batholith.

This huge granite deposit, far beneath our feet, bursts from the earth in just these and a few other sites across Cornwall. And like stone mushrooms fruiting from this epic subterranean substrate, standing stones pop up in clusters at these granite outcrop dreamscapes.

What drew people to this deep time archipelago of stone? When I visit ancient places, I try to imagine what the landscape might have been like in the time they were built. Would the sea level have been different? How many more trees would be here? What did the people who lived here look like?

If I could only skip back in time five thousand years, just for a quick look.

If you approach Men-an-Tol from the southwest, with Ding Dong mine behind you, you may walk through a grove of olive willow, where it's easy to imagine that you have passed through some kind of arborial time-slip; a portal into an Elysian otherworld. Take the short walk across the fields, and you will find Men Scryfa – a six-foot monolith, tantalisingly inscribed in Roman numerals with words that allude to a "Raven King", as some historians believe.

But so much is folklore or guesswork; so much more is unknown.

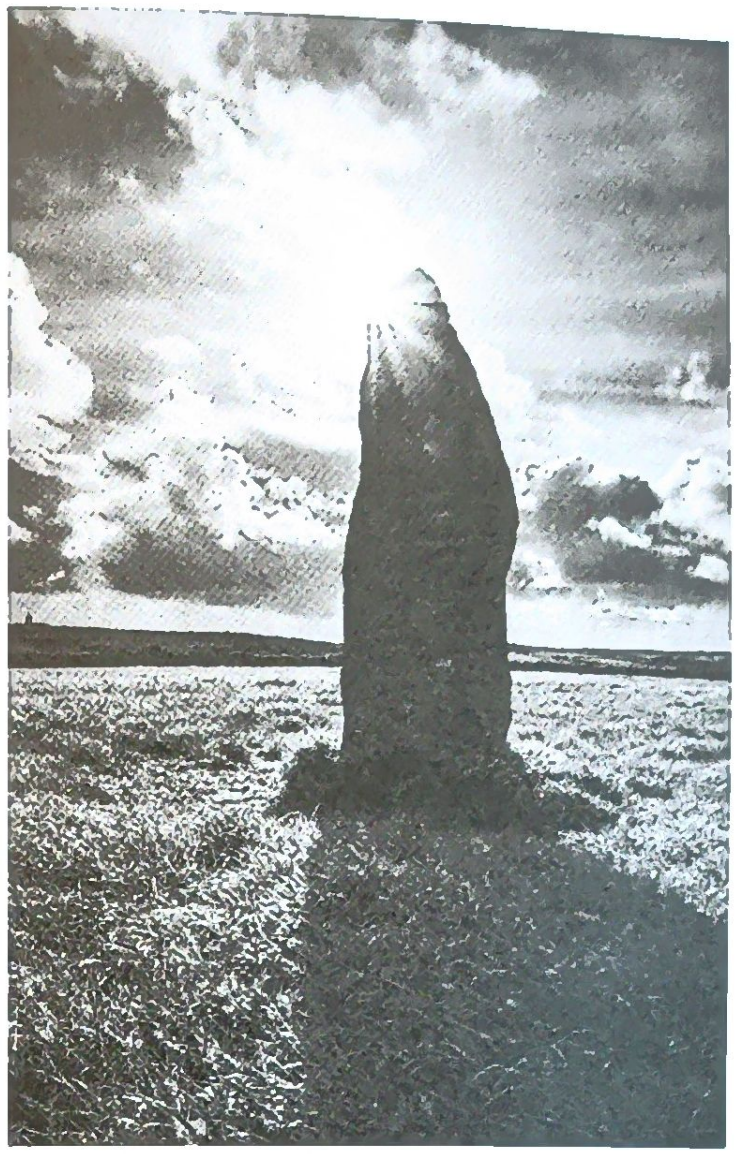
It's that unknowing that makes these places and their monuments all the more alluring to us. And when facts and knowledge are absent, imagination fills the void.

When I photograph old stones, I try to capture their otherworldliness. And they are from another world, because the past is another world. And the less we know about it, the more it becomes a world of imagination.

These old stones are tangible connections to that other world of the ancient past and the people who lived in it. People who must have placed them in the landscape to have meaning, celebration, even? Perhaps they corresponded with some celestial body, or perhaps they were tributes to the very landscape that surrounds them.

Or perhaps they were simply placed by people who wanted to cry out to the ages and say, 'We were here.'

Whatever they were left here for, I am forever grateful. Because whoever left them has shaped my imagination. Whoever they may have been, all those thousands of years ago, they have spoken to us across the ages.



men scryfa



tregeseal holed stone