

Proto-Druid Landscapes of Prehistoric Britain (Part 1)

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Abstract

Advances in technology have allowed the landscape positioning of British Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments (circa 4000 – 1600 BC) to be investigated in ways that were virtually impossible before the twenty first century. Since using this technology, I have plotted hundreds of alignments amongst the British prehistoric landscapes and my research indicates that there was a surveying technique being applied to the landscape on a scale never previously considered before. This technique follows a specific formula whereby the location for a monument, in its respective landscape setting, was determined by using elements of astronomy and measuring so that the intended monument could be aligned towards either another monument or a natural feature within the landscape. In the first part of this two-part article I shall discuss how such technology has been used to investigate for alignments amongst prehistoric monuments within the Peak District National Park and, then, in part 2, I shall consider the prehistoric ritual landscape surrounding Stonehenge (Figure 1)

Index terms—

1 Introduction

Advances in technology have allowed the landscape positioning of British Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments (circa 4000 -1600 BC) to be investigated in ways that were virtually impossible before the twenty first century. Since using this technology, I have plotted hundreds of alignments amongst the British prehistoric landscapes and my research indicates that there was a surveying technique being applied to the landscape on a scale never previously considered before. This technique follows a specific formula whereby the location for a monument, in its respective landscape setting, was determined by using elements of astronomy and measuring so that the intended monument could be aligned towards either another monument or a natural feature within the landscape. In the first part of this two-part article I shall discuss how such technology has been used to investigate for alignments amongst prehistoric monuments within the Peak District National Park and, then, in part 2, I shall consider the prehistoric ritual landscape surrounding Stonehenge (Figure 1).

2 II.

Case Study one: Alignments in the Peak District National Park

The Peak District National Park covers an area of approximately 11,000²km and I have examined the geographical positioning of just over 400 extant Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments that are still to be found within this National Park. Both computer mapping software and Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) technology were used in the field to capture the positional data, whilst a Geographical Information System (GIS) was used to analyse the captured results. The 400 monuments I investigated can be categorised as either funerary "barrows" (i.e. long or round shaped, earthen burial mounds) or ritual monuments (i.e. henges and stone circles) with the former outnumbering the latter by a ratio of 10:1. In particular, I measured the positioning of every individual monument and then considered that position in relation to both its nearest monumental neighbour and its nearest natural landscape feature (such as a cave, hilltop, river and valley).

Author: University of Liverpool. e-mail: johnhill.ma@googlemail.com Analysis of the results in this National Park showed a tendency for the prehistoric monuments to not only cluster around the Park's natural caves, but they were also set out in alignments towards them (Hill, 2005). Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss my full survey. However, one particular region, which I personally refer to as the 'High Wheel don and Fox Hole Cave zone', can be discussed.

The High Wheel don and Fox Hole Cave zone is so named by me after the two natural features found at the centre of a network of alignments containing some 56 prehistoric monuments. This network is spread across a landscape of approximately 30²km in size that is bounded by two major river systems; the River Mersey to the south-west; the River Mersey to the northeast (Figure 2). At the very centre of this zone is the distinctive, pyramid-shaped summit of High Wheel don (422m) and the nearby Fox Hole Cave, which is located approximately 100m down slope from the summit (Figure 3). Unfortunately, there is no prehistoric archaeology that I can offer associated with the summit (it has yet to be excavated). However, the Fox Hole Cave has produced much archaeology.

Standing 400m above sea level the Fox Hole Cave possesses an entrance and three small chambers all of which are connected to each other by the same long narrow passage. Space throughout the cave is confined and it is hard to imagine that this would have been successfully used as a domesticated site -rather it was more likely used for rituals that were, perhaps, hidden and secret.

The cave had remained unknown until modern times when a dog had to be rescued from it during the 1920's. This rescue led to an exploration by Jackson (1951), followed by a more thorough excavation in the 1960s by Bramwell (1971). Bramwell recovered archaeology associated with the Mesolithic (circa 10,000 -4000 BC), the Neolithic (circa 4000 -2500 BC) and the Early Bronze Age (circa 2500 -1600 BC). During the Neolithic, the cave was used as a burial site. Indeed, Bramwell discovered the remains of a limestone burial cist which had been built into the cave's entrance. Inside the second chamber, he uncovered a purposefully laid out cobbled pavement. Fortunately, he was able to use this pavement as a means of distinguishing the Neolithic archaeology from the Early Bronze Age archaeology. Above the pavement, the Early Bronze Age level, he found evidence of hearths, shards of beaker pottery, a barbed and tanged arrow head, scrapers and animal bone. Beneath the cobbled pavement, the Neolithic level, he found human bone, shards of Peterborough pottery, ironstone nodules, quartzite pebbles, a greenstone polished axe-head and more animal bone.

3 a) Alignment One

Figure 4 shows two alignments. Alignment One links High Wheeldon's summit with another cave, the Dowell Cave, as well as a Bronze Age barrow located upon Hollins Hill. Dowell Cave was also excavated by Bramwell (1958) and he found evidence of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeology. Again, by the time of the Neolithic, this cave was also being used as a burial site.

4 b) Alignment Two

Figure 4 also shows how alignment Two links High Wheeldon's summit and Fox Hole Cave with an important Neolithic earthwork known as Arbor Low henge (circa 3000 -2500 BC). This is an enormous ditch and bank earthwork with central stone settings (Figure 5). So impressive are the extant remains of this henge that it is often referred to as the Stonehenge of the north. But what is even more impressive about this henge are the number of alignments it forms with both the burial sites and natural caves surrounding it.

In Figure 6, we see just one sample of a selection of alignments orientated north-east of the henge. Moreover, Figure 6 shows quantifiable evidence showing that the prehistoric communities were actually surveying and measuring their ritual landscapes. For example, attention is drawn to the position of the southwest Cales barrow. It would appear that the position of this barrow seems to have been determined by using some form of measuring. It will also be seen that the measured distance between Arbor Low henge and both the south-west Cales barrow and west Cales Dale barrow are exactly equal to 1.00km; and that the measured distance between the two barrows themselves is 0.50km (that is, half that distance between the two barrows and the henge); finally, the measured distance between south-west Cales barrow and the Ash Grange barrow is 0.75km. These measurements show a distinct pattern and they are all measurements which are all proportional with each other. Similarly, attention is also drawn to the other two sets of measurements shown between, one, Bee Low barrow and north-west Youlgrave barrow (1.20km) and, two, Bee Low barrow and Flax Dale barrow (1.20km), both these sets of measurements are also equidistant. Significantly, Figure 6 is just one of the many dozens of other similar clusters of alignments that I have plotted within the Peak District National Park.

5 III.

6 Astronomical Alignments

My data seems to imply a desire by the people to position their monuments to a specific formula: that is, any monument had to be placed in a landscape setting such that the distance between it and its nearest monumental neighbour or cave site was either equidistant or proportional, and such a feat could have only been achieved by carefully measuring parts of the landscape. But there is another factor which needs to be taken into consideration:

that is, the communities were also 'astronomically' orienting their alignments. When studying the positional data between a monument and cave site and, in particular, their respective angles of orientation (i.e. bearing), I discovered a range of survey data that coincided with certain solar and lunar 'astronomical' azimuths, all of which being associated with the important solar and lunar cycles of the year. Figure 7 presents an example where both astronomical alignments and measured distances combine with each other in order to dictate where a number of barrows should be positioned in the landscape west of Arbor Low henge.

IV.

8 Proto-Druids

What appears to be emerging from my data is that during the British Neolithic and Bronze Age there once existed a body of knowledge (or rather sets of rules) relating to where monuments could be positioned in the landscape. This knowledge seems to have required an understanding of astronomy, geomancy and the acknowledgement of the importance of natural features in the landscape. Furthermore, the development of the High Wheel don and Fox Hole Cave zone was not something that could have been set out overnight, more likely it was set out over a period of time of at least 500 years and this factor would have required these sets of rules to have been passed on from generation to generation. As the British Neolithic and Early Bronze Age communities were preliterate then we are probably looking at some kind of oral tradition of passing on such information. But is there, within the British archaeological record, any evidence for such a body of knowledge to have not only existed but was also capable of being passed on by word of mouth? Perhaps there is and the nearest explanation that can be offered is the "knowledge" held by Iron Age Druids.

Of course, the Druid appeared almost two thousand years after the creation of the High Wheel don and Fox Hole Cave zone. More so because our understanding of the British Druid generally comes from three sources: Roman and Greek classical sources; Medieval Irish and Welsh folklore; and from archaeology (Piggott, 1968:3). Therefore, taking all three sources into consideration we can comfortably place the appearance of the British Druid into a period of time between 300 BC -400 AD. Unfortunately, I cannot push these sources any further back in time. However, a number of prehistorians are starting to think that the origins of a number of attributes associated with the Druid might be pushed much further back in time than previously thought. For instance, Iron Age specialist Barry Cunliffe (2013:344-5) now considers the possibility that aspects of druidic knowledge could have originated in Britain as far back in time to the very start of the Early Bronze Age i.e. 2500 BC.

Undoubtedly, I believe that we could be looking at some kind of Neolithic and Bronze Age "proto druid": a ritual specialist who possessed those attributes of astronomy and measuring that would later be observed by the historical Greek and Roman classical writers. Obviously, for this to happen then the practice of astronomy and measuring would have had to continue across many generations. But if it did, then just how far advanced did these practices become by the time that the Governor of Gaul, Julius Caesar, wrote about them in the middle of the first century BC? Although he believed that Druidism originated in Britain, our knowledge of what he writes about the Druids comes from his time spent in Gaul. Still, Caesar presents some tantalising clues as to how the practices of astronomy combined with measuring could have culminated by the late Iron Age (circa 350 -50BC): "Besides this they (druids) have many discussions as touching the stars and their movement, the size of the universe and of the earth" (De Bello Gallico, V1, 14; endrick, 1994:78).

Incidentally, Caesar also tells us just how proficient the Druids of Gaul were at measuring, so much so that they were able to determine the precise centre of Gaul: "These Druids meet, at a certain time of the year, meet within the borders of the Carnutes, whose territory is reckoned as the centre of Gaul" (De Bello Gallico, V1, 13; endrick, 1994: 77).

Definitely, without using modern technology, finding the geographical centre of Ancient Gaul would have taken some measuring -but not impossible (Figure 8). Writing nearly four centuries before Caesar, the Greek historian, Herodotus, provides us with a comparative analogy as to how an entire country could have been measured using ropes:

"The length of Egypt itself along the coast is sixty reels of string?...men who are poor in land measure their tracts in yards; men who are less poor in furlongs; and those who have a great deal in miles; and those who have a boundless quantity in reels of string. A mile is 8 furlongs and the reel -a measurement peculiar to Egypt equals 60 furlongs" (Book 2; lanco et al, 1992:76).

Like the ancient rope stretchers of Egypt, I believe that the British prehistoric communities were also using measured lengths of rope to survey their lands. I base my belief upon a number of experimental exercises I have performed amongst the ritual landscape surrounding Stonehenge (Hill, 2009:14-5). Certainly, human pacing could have been used but I have found that the accuracy of this method breaks down when one covers distances above a kilometre, especially when one is attempting to experimentally position the sites for three potential monuments so that their distances between each other are equal.

V.

9 Summary

The degree of precision whereby monuments are orientated towards natural features of the landscape seems to be too deliberate to be simply dismissed as fortuitous. It implies that we may be seeing evidence of a surveying technique: a technique that combines astronomy and measuring in order to align monuments not only towards each other but also towards natural features of the landscape. Furthermore, these alignments incorporate Neolithic monuments with Early Bronze Age monuments. This suggests that the formula behind the layout of this type of landscape continued over many generations and remained throughout this time period. I have also proposed that the knowledge required to position such monuments might have existed as a set of rules that was communicated across generations of specialists whom I refer to as protodruids. In part 2, I will describe further the practices of these specialists using a case study centred on the prehistoric landscape surrounding Stonehenge.

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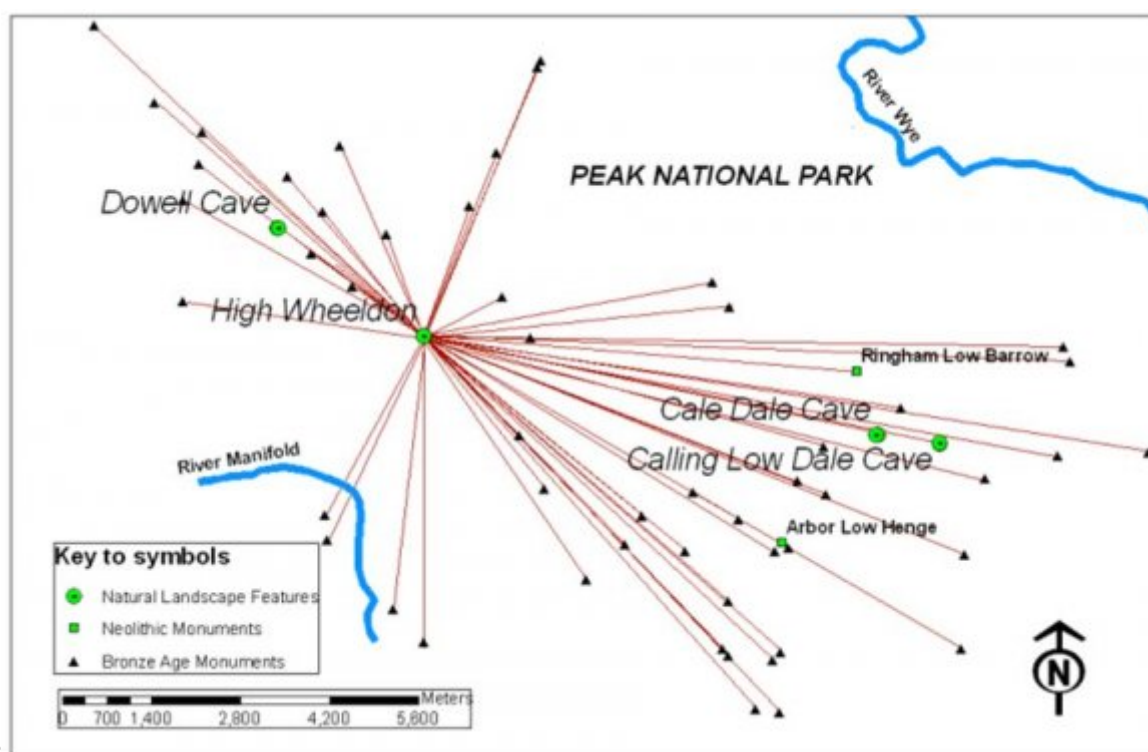


Figure 1: Figure 1 :

1 2

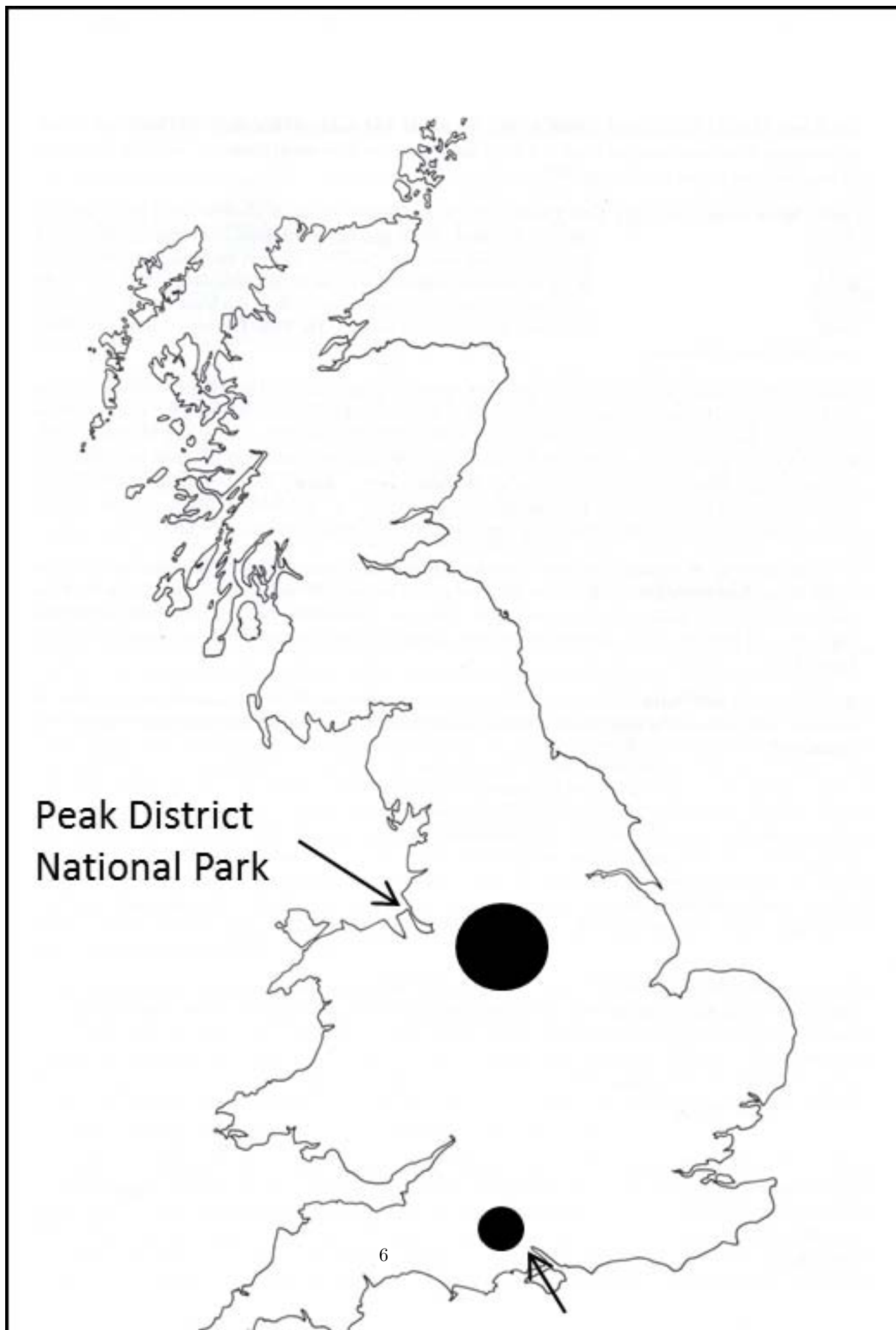
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Figure 2: Figure 2 :





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Figure 4: Figure 4 :

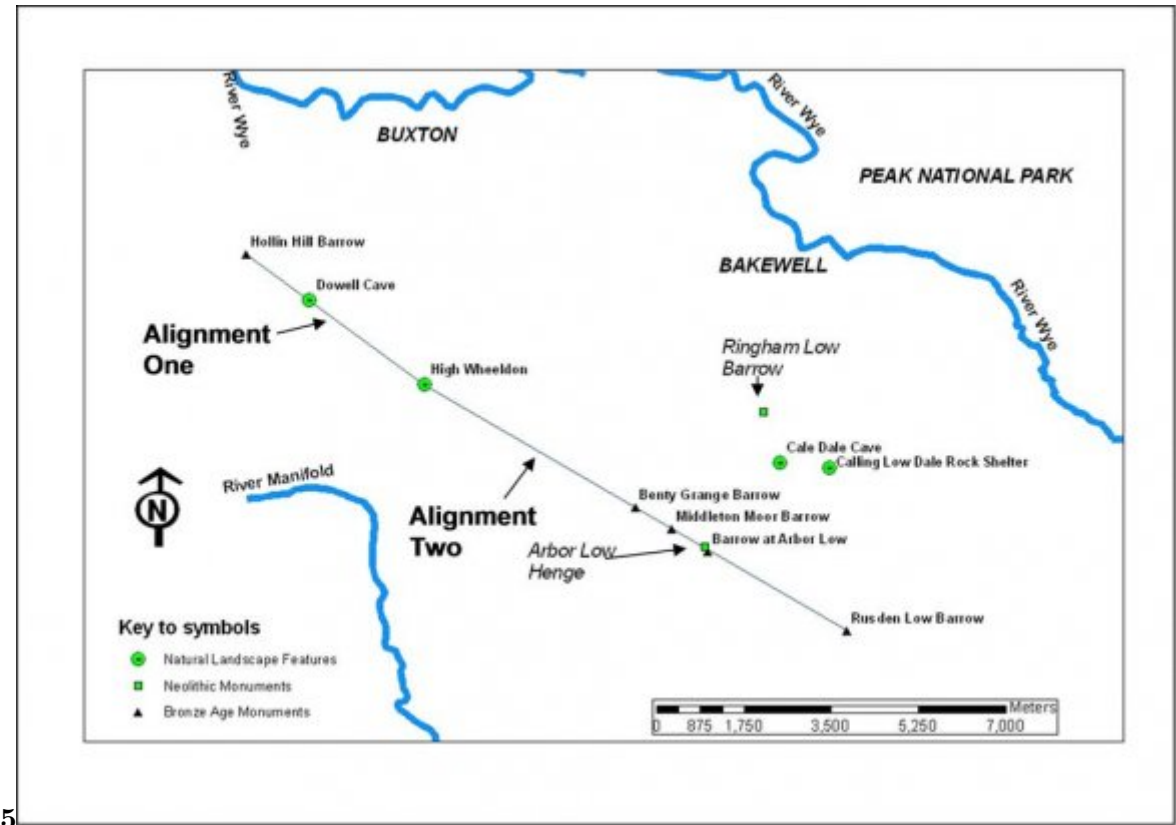


Figure 5: Figure 5 :



Figure 6: Figure 6 :

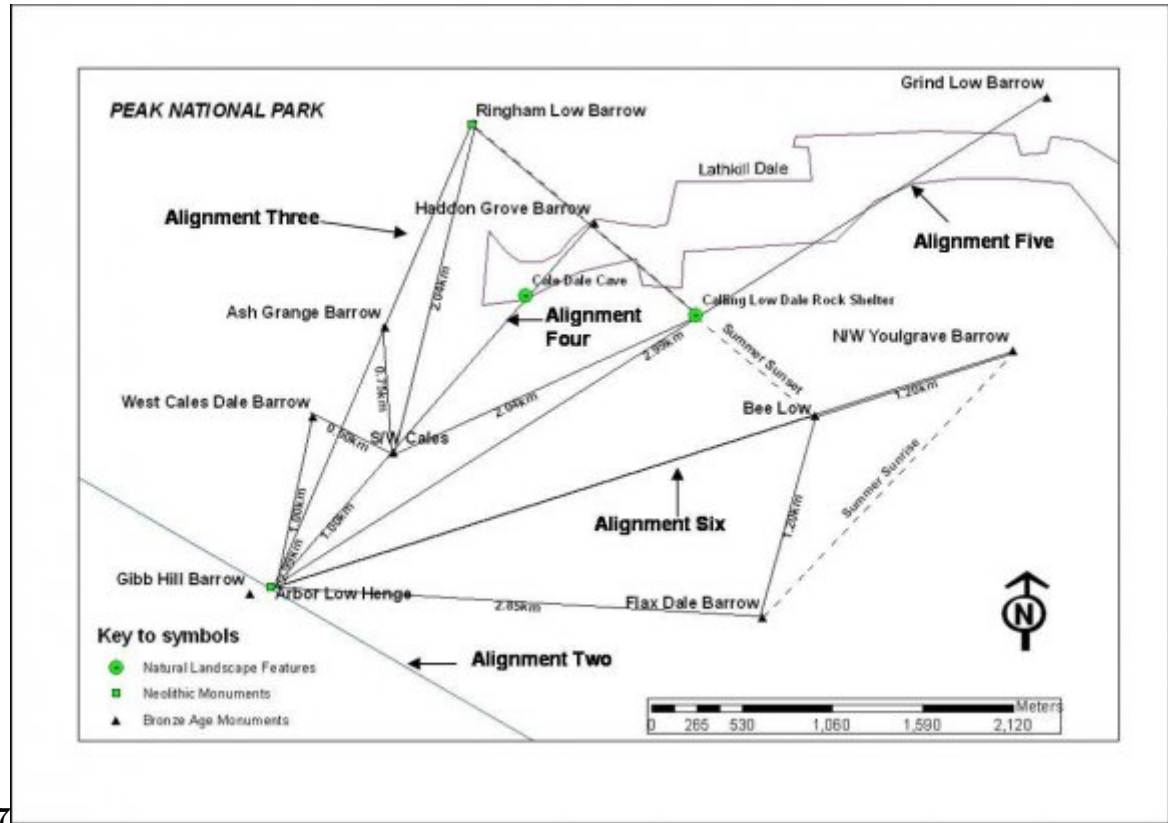


Figure 7: Figure 7 :

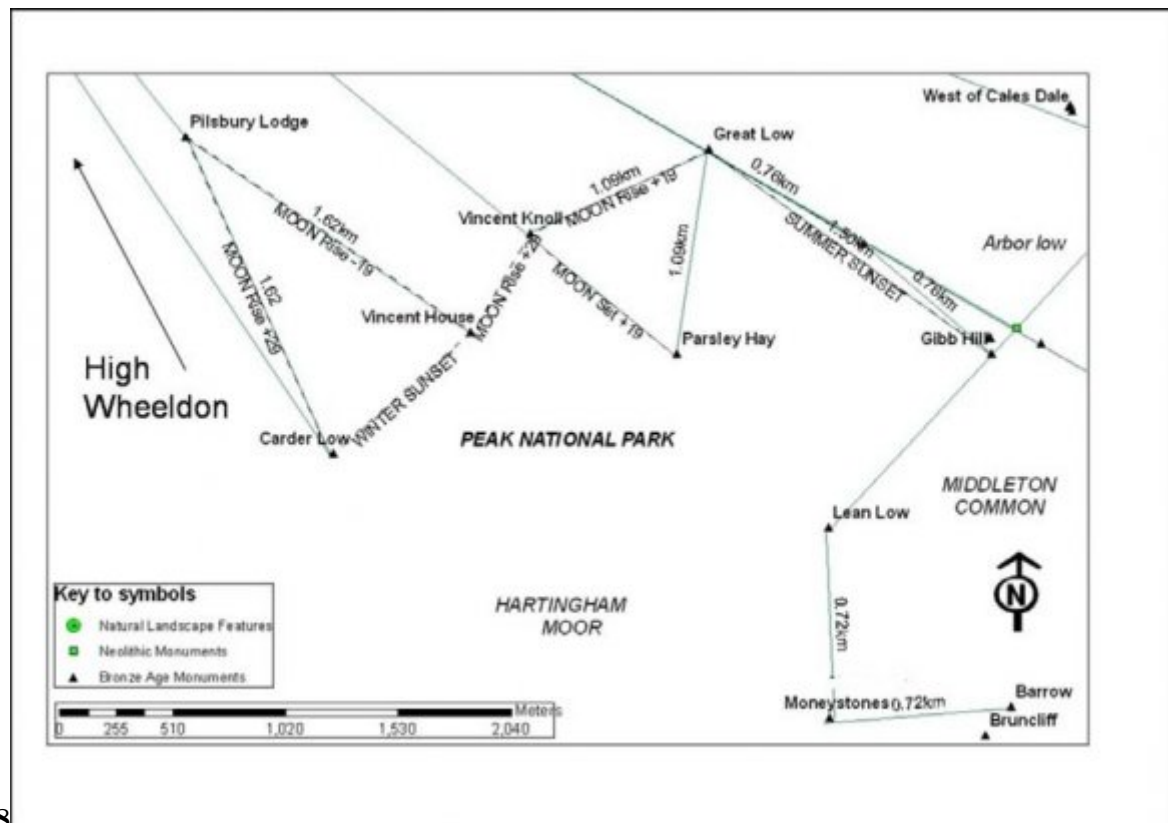


Figure 8: Figure 8 :

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