

**WILLIAM STUKELEY**  
**antiquary**  
**‘Father of British Archaeology’**

Over recent years the Society has been active in the erection of Blue Plaques round the town, following on from a tradition of historical bronze plaques erected in the early 20th century. It started with Sir Malcolm Sargent in 1995 and is now followed by one to William Stukeley (1687-1765) on his house at 9 Barn Hill. The society has tried to concentrate on people of national importance and William Stukeley surely qualifies. The plaque describes him as ‘antiquary’ and ‘Father of British Archaeology’, but this is not all. Certainly he was a Fellow of the Royal Society, a friend of Sir Isaac Newton (and incidentally the first person to record the story of Newton, gravity and the falling apple), and the first secretary of the Society of Antiquaries. But he was also a medical doctor and later, in 1729, was ordained an Anglican priest. He was the foremost archaeologist of his day and his fieldwork recording the great circles at Stonehenge and Avebury has permanent value. In fact his famous books, *Stonehenge: a Temple Restor’d to the British Druids* (1740) and *Abury: a temple of the British Druids* (1743) were written during his residence in Stamford.

While Stukeley spent much of his time in London, he never lost touch with his Lincolnshire roots. He was born in Holbeach, practised as a doctor in Boston and Grantham and was appointed Vicar of All Saints, Stamford, in 1729. While here he lived for the first ten years (1730-1740) in the former St Peter’s rectory on St Peter’s Hill, but in 1740 bought what is now 9 Barn Hill. The present house was not built until soon after 1800 and the house Stukeley lived in was a ramshackle mixture of historical periods from the Middle Ages onwards. All his life Stukeley was a keen gardener and this, combined with his antiquarian interests, led to some most interesting designs. His Barn Hill garden is typical, with an overall layout of an ancient circle, a hermitage at the top end, and the whole filled with medieval sculpture and stained glass rescued from destruction, and several carved texts, some of which survive.

One of the more important introductions to the garden was parts of the Stamford Eleanor Cross, which was perhaps Stukeley’s major discovery during his stay in the town. The Stamford Eleanor Cross, one of those set up by king Edward I in the 1290s in memory of his beloved queen, was situated near Foxdale on Casterton Road. It had been destroyed during the troubles of the Civil War a century earlier, but a mound remained at the side of the road. Stukeley was able to excavate this in December 1745

and discovered the base of the cross and several pieces of associated carving. He took back part of the upper cross shaft to his garden, a part of which survives and is now in Stamford Museum, and this remains the only part of any cross shaft from an Eleanor Cross to survive.

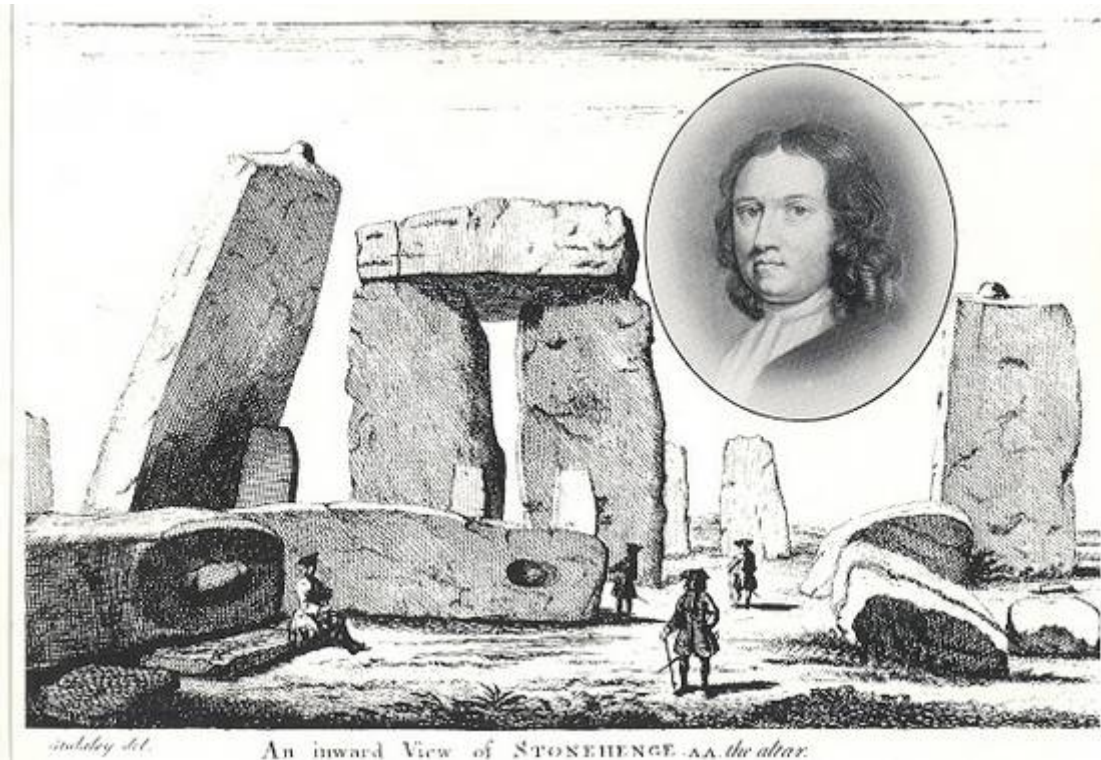
Stukeley was also greatly interested in architecture and commissioned Stamford's foremost architect, George Portwood, to design a triumphal Roman arch to span the width of Barn Hill. He was able to do this as some of the upper rooms of his house at that time were above a bridge spanning the road and joining it to what is now the garden of Barn Hill House. The proposed monumental design, until now unrecognized as an archway, was in the event never built, but appeared a little later in an attenuated form as the St George's Square façade of 26 St Mary's Street.

Later in his life Stukeley's interest in the ancient druids became obsessional and his theories became more and more fanciful. However, at his death, his good friend, William Warburton, Bishop of Gloucester, summed him up nicely:

There was in him such a mixture of simplicity, drollery, absurdity, ingenuity, superstition and antiquarianism, that he afforded me that kind of well-seasoned repast, which the French call an *Ambigu*. . . . I have often heard him laughed at by fools, who had neither his sense, his knowledge, or his honesty; though it must be confessed, that in him they were all strangely travestied.

There is more detail about Stukeley in the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (available free online at Stamford Library) and the standard biography, *William Stukeley: an 18th century antiquary* by Stuart Piggott (1950, rev 1985). The Phillips Collection in the Town Hall holds his three volume *Family Memoirs and Diaries* (Surtees Society, 1880s) and there are copies of my article (*Antiquaries Journal*, vol. 74, 1994) on Stukeley's discovery of the Stamford Eleanor Cross in the museum and library.

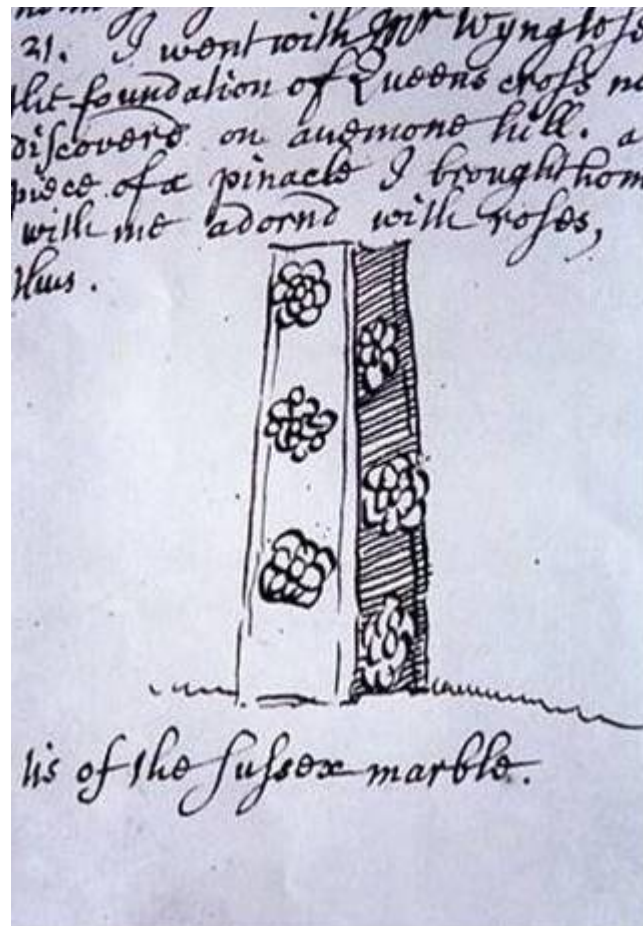
*John F H Smith FSA*



**Print of Stonehenge with cameo of Stukeley**  
*Image courtesy of Stamford Museum*



**Fragment of Stamford Eleanor Cross acquired by Stukeley**  
**In 1745 from the site**  
*Image courtesy of Stamford Museum*



Copy of a page from Stukeley's diary for 21 December 1745.

"21. I went with Mr Wyng to see the foundation of Queens cross now discovered on anemone hill. A piece of the pinnacle I brought home with me adorned with roses, thus. 'tis of the Sussex marble"

*Original in the Bodleian Library, Oxford*