

# Blowing a Trumpet for a Stone: The Blowing Stone at Kingston Lisle

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## SUMMARY

*The Blowing Stone is a curious megalithic monument near Kingston Lisle. A visitor could, until quite recently, purchase a four-page pamphlet on the stone written by the archaeologist L. V. Grinsell. This is the only literature specifically on the Blowing Stone. While many works have mentioned this megalithic oddity, none, aside from the pamphlet, are devoted to it. The dearth of scholarship, particularly archaeological, on the Blowing Stone is reason enough to write an article on it. However, in this article I aim to do more. I trace the histories attached to the stone and in doing so argue that often a monument's history cannot be disentangled from its myths. Furthermore, I relate the stone to a nascent field in archaeology – which can be called the 'archaeology of the intangible' – and suggest the stone's heritage is composed of parts immaterial and physical. Last, I argue that the stone is not merely an object of antiquarian interest but one of genuine archaeological significance. Grinsell writes in the first paragraph of his pamphlet that the 'interest of the stone is botanical and geological rather than archaeological'. I want to demonstrate that this is not the case; the Blowing Stone deserves to be seen as a part of the archaeological landscape of the North Wessex Downs alongside its more famous neighbours such as the Uffington White Horse and Wayland's Smithy.*

*'What is the name of your hill, landlord?'*

*'Blawing Swtun Hill, sir, to be sure.'*

*'what queer names,' say we.*

*'Bean't queer at all, as I can see, seeing as this is the Blawing Stwun his self,' putting his hands on a square lump of stone some three and half feet high, perforated with two or three queer holes.*

*'Like to hear um, sir?'<sup>1</sup>*

The Blowing Stone is a large perforated sarsen (sometimes 'sarsen') – a kind of sandstone boulder particular to the area – in south Oxfordshire (formerly Berkshire), near the village of Kingston Lisle.<sup>2</sup> It sits at the foot of an eponymous hill on the North Wessex Downs, a couple of miles away from the more renowned sites of the Uffington White Horse and Wayland's Smithy. Its name derives from naturally occurring cavities which reverberate if a small hole in the top is 'blown' like a musical instrument.<sup>3</sup> A megalithic trumpet indeed. The sound produced has been variously said to resemble: a 'conch-shell horn',<sup>4</sup> a 'fog-whistle',<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> T. Hughes, *Schooldays at Rugby, By an Old Boy* (1857), pp. 14–15.

<sup>2</sup> L.V. Grinsell, *The Blowing Stone* (1993). This has since been replaced by an abridged two-page leaflet.

<sup>3</sup> The holes in sarsens are caused by root and water action: J. Hepworth 'Aspects of the English Silcretes and Comparison with some Australian Occurrences', *Proceeding of the Geologists' Association*, 109 (1998), pp. 271–88.

<sup>4</sup> J.E. Vincent, *Highways and Byways in Berkshire* (1906), p. 238.

<sup>5</sup> W.C. Plenderleath, *The White Horses of the West of England, with Notices of Some Other Ancient Turf-Monuments* (1885), p. 19.



Fig. 1. *The Blowing Stone in the early twentieth century.*

a 'ghost-like' 'moan and roar combined',<sup>6</sup> the 'snorting of a megatherium',<sup>7</sup> or something between 'a French horn and the bellowing of a calf'.<sup>8</sup> From personal experience, the latter description is the most accurate, but, of course, the sound produced will vary according to the player.<sup>9</sup> One writer even claims that connoisseurs 'can tell where the player comes from'.<sup>10</sup> Common to all players is that the note produced is seldom attractive.<sup>11</sup> Grinsell writes that 'no special knack is necessary' in order to produce a noise and that 'the secret is simply to cover the hole completely with the mouth and blow'.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, I took a long time and many tries to create a sound of any decent reverberation,<sup>13</sup> and certainly not a sound that could be

<sup>6</sup> J. Cook, *England Picturesque and Descriptive; Reminiscences of Foreign Travel*, volume 2 (1900), p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> F.P. Palmer and A. Crowquill, *The Wanderings of a Pen and Pencil* (1846), p. 270.

<sup>8</sup> C. Knight, *The Journey Book of England. Berkshire: Including a Full Description of Windsor Castle, with Twenty-Three Engravings on Wood, and an Illuminated Map of the County* (1840), p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> A good example of it being played, by a smartly dressed man, can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNbNsfz85DM>. The man in question has a blog where he has posted some interesting thoughts on the monument: <http://simonchadwick.net/2016/05/the-blowing-stone.html>.

<sup>10</sup> 'Otter', *The Modern Angler* (1864), p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> Only one author seems to have thought otherwise: 'I cannot help thinking that if some London speculator in concerts were to get the Blowing-Stone up to the Hanover Square Rooms or St. James's Hall, and announce that a distinguished performer would play solo up on it, he would have a crowded house.' M. Collins, *Pen Sketches by a Vanished Hand*, 1 (1879), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Grinsell, *The Blowing Stone* (1993), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Past visitors have shared my frustration: 'the wanderer may blow if he pleases; he will most likely not produce any substantial volume of sound, and will probably bruise his nose into the bargain, if it be at all prominent': Vincent, *Highways and Byways in Berkshire*, p. 238



Fig. 2. A postcard depicting Blowing Stone Hill.

heard from Faringdon Clump, five or six miles distant, a feat a number of authors assert is possible.<sup>14</sup>

It is the distinct sound produced that relates to the stone's myth. That is, that '[t]he Bleawin Stwun in days gone by/ Wur King Alfred's bugle harn'.<sup>15</sup> This verse, recorded (or possibly composed) by Thomas Hughes (born in nearby Uffington), pertains to the legend that King Alfred used the stone to summon local men from the Vale to help fight the invading Danes, culminating in the nearby Battle of Ashdown.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, I outline the known references to the stone in chronological order. Second, I try to unpick the some of the stone's mythology, focusing on its connection with King Alfred. Last, I place the Blowing Stone in the context of other archaeoacoustic monuments and suggest we might gain insight by studying the stone in regard to what I refer to as the 'archaeology of the intangible'.

## THE BLOWING STONE: A CHRONOLOGY

The very earliest reference to the Blowing Stone is cartographic. It features on John Rocque's map of Berkshire from 1761 (Fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> Curiously the map has 'blowingstones' plural labelled. There is a gap until the next mention which is the earliest known textual reference. This dates from 1811 in the *Transactions of the Linnaean Society* and records a Mr Sowerby's visit to the stone in 1809. This Sowerby was likely James Sowerby the famous naturalist and illustrator, although possibly his son, also James Sowerby and also a naturalist and illustrator. There is another cartographic mention in C. and J. Greenwood's map of Berkshire of 1824. Kingston Lisle Park is labelled 'Blowingstone Park'. The stone is next mentioned in 1835 in volume four of *The Penny Cyclopaedia of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*. The entry describes the stone and mentions an old elm tree that grows behind it. It also states that the authors 'believe that there is no account of this stone in either Lyson's *Magna Britannia*, or any other publication'. Charles Knight's Berkshire volume of the *Journey Book of England* from

<sup>14</sup> Knight, *Berkshire*, p. 120; Hughes, *School Days at Rugby*, p. 23; 'Otter', *The Modern Angler*, p. 75; Anon., 'Excursion to White Horse Hill and Lambourne, Berks.', *Transactions of the Newbury District Field Club*, 1 (1871), p. 148; Plenderleath, *The White Horses*, p. 19; Cook, *England Picturesque and Descriptive*, p. 146

<sup>15</sup> T. Hughes, *The Scouring of the White Horse: Or, The Long Vacation Ramble of a London Clerk* (1859), p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> John or Jean Roque was cartographer to Frederick, Prince of Wales.





Fig. 3. Detail from John Roque's map of 1761. 'Blowingstones' is marked just above the word 'VALE'.

1840 more or less repeats the *Cyclopaedia's* description (Knight published the *Cyclopaedia*).<sup>17</sup> Next is a reference to the stone in an 1841 work of fiction, *Old Saint Paul's* by William Harrison Ainsworth,<sup>18</sup> followed by a brief reference in Mogg's *Great Western Railway Guide* of 1842.<sup>19</sup> *The Wanderings of a Pen and Pencil* by F.P. Palmer and A. Crowquill, published in 1846 features the earliest depiction of the stone I have been able to find (Fig. 4).<sup>20</sup> In addition to the illustration, the work features a description of the stone in line with the earlier texts and some speculation on the etymology of 'sarsen'. Crucially, none of the references thus far mention a connection between the stone and King Alfred.

This brings us to the most renowned writer to mention the Blowing Stone, and one who clearly spells out its Alfredian mythology. This is, of course, Thomas Hughes. The author first mentions the stone in the novel *Tom Brown's School Days*, published in 1857.<sup>21</sup> Hughes' schoolboy protagonist grows up in Uffington and explores the Vale of the White Horse. This was a familiar landscape to Hughes who himself was born and raised in Uffington. The epigraph at the beginning of this article is taken from the novel. The monument is described as 'a square lump of stone some three feet and a half high, perforated with two or three queer holes, like antediluvian rat-holes, which lies there close under the oak'.<sup>22</sup> Hughes does not mention King Alfred. Only in Hughes' later publication *The Scouring of the White Horse* (1859) is the stone's mythological connection with the Anglo-Saxon king stated. A mere two lines of a song entitled the *Ballad of the White Horse* which is supposed to have been sung by the scourers as they worked mention the Alfredian myth: 'The Bleawin Stwun in days gone by/ Wur King Alfred's bugle harn'.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> C. Knight, *The Journey Book of England. Berkshire* (1840), p. 120.

<sup>18</sup> W.H. Ainsworth, *Old Saint Paul's* (1903), pp. 370, 401. The novel, published serially, is based around the events of the Great Fire and Great Plague.

<sup>19</sup> E. Mogg, *Mogg's Great Western Railway and Windsor, Bath, and Bristol Guide* (1842), p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> F.P. Palmer and A. Crowquill, *The Wanderings of a Pen and Pencil* (1846), p. 270.

<sup>21</sup> The first edition was published under the title *School Days at Rugby, By an Old Boy*.

<sup>22</sup> Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Hughes, *The Scouring of the White Horse*, pp. 101–102. The area was clearly very meaningful to Hughes. In the utopian community he helped establish in Tennessee called Rugby, he named his house 'Kingston Lisle'. The settlement was founded so that the second sons of gentry might enjoy the kind of life denied to them by



Fig. 4. Illustration by Alfred Crowquill. Palmer and Crowquill, *The Wanderings of a Pen and Pencil* (1846), p. 270.

This is, however, not the first mention of the stone's Alfredian link in writing. An anonymous collection of poems published in 1855 entitled *A Day on the Downs* features a poem entitled *The Blow Stone, or King Alfred's Bugle*. I quote the poem in full here but save the discussion of its content for the next section of this article:

This stone, which utter'd many a blast,  
In silence lay for ages past.  
By man unheard, by man unseen,  
Tradition said it once had been,  
And that for miles its loud alarms  
Were heard when Alfred blew to arms.  
And this tradition had it still,  
The stone was on White Horse Hill.  
From sire to son the Blow Stone tale  
Thus circled round the White Horse Vale.

In recent times the stone was found,  
Imbedded near the battle-ground.

primogeniture. See K. Sweeney-Justice, 'Thomas Hughes' "Rugby": Utopia on the Cumberland Plateau', *Cultural Resources Management*, 9 (2001), pp. 13–15.

The wandering shepherds first saw there,  
 And Atkins has preserved with care,  
 This mystic remnant of the day  
 When Alfred ruled with regal sway;  
 And when the wise decrees of fate  
 Made friend and foe confess him great,  
 This trumpet loudly did proclaim  
 His wars, his wisdom, and his fame.

Why should the poet here describe  
 A relic known both far and wide?  
 Which tourists yearly come to see,  
 And wonder how it well can be  
 That when a blast is gently blown  
 Through one small hole into the stone,  
 It can emit a sound  
 Distinctly heard a long four mile  
 On either side of Kingston Lisle,  
 Or four-and-twenty round;  
 And further still along the vale,  
 Unless some strong opposing gale  
 Should bar its further bound.

There has not yet been found of men,  
 In level strath or mountain glen,  
 Much less was ever blown,  
 A bugle like King Alfred's rare,  
 Which might in size with his compare,  
 So far as we have known,

Lest some rude hand this stone deface,  
 Come, move it to a safer place.<sup>24</sup>

Subsequent mentions of the stone propagate this Alfredian myth.<sup>25</sup> However, others are more sceptical,<sup>26</sup> while some advance altogether different mythologies.<sup>27</sup> Other relatively recent mentions include *The Berkshire Book* written by the local Women's Institute,<sup>28</sup> William Horwood's fantasy novel *Duncton Wood* about a group of moles, and a television programme called *Along the Ridgeway*, broadcast in 1998,<sup>29</sup> in addition to several online blogs and videos.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Anon., *A Day on the Downs by the Vale of the White Horse in the County of Berks* (1855), pp. 12–13.

<sup>25</sup> 'Otter', *The Modern Angler*, p. 75; Anon., 'Excursion to White Horse Hill and Lambourne, Berks.' *Transactions of the Newbury District Field Club*, 1 (1871), p. 148; Plenderleath, *The White Horses*, p. 19; J. Prioleau 'The Blowing Stone', *The Spectator*, 160 (1939), p. 248.

<sup>26</sup> 'The tale that the stone was "King Alfred's Horn", or a war trumpet blown to summon the tribes, is trivial; it looks like a sham antique': C.J. Cornish 'The Blowing Stone and Kingston Lisle Park', *Country Life Illustrated*, 8, 206 (1900), p. 773; 'the owners of the blowing stone have to thank Sir Walter Scott for having given to it a distinctly fictitious value. As for the theory that it was ever used to summon folks from a distance for any purpose, it does not appeal to my reason.' Vincent, *Highways and Byways in Berkshire*, p. 239.

<sup>27</sup> '[A]ncient Celtic tribes lived on the area of the downs, and here therefore would this rude trumpet of stone be of value for collecting the bands of pastoral nomads with their herds and treasures, their wives and children, within the stout rampart of Uffington': C.C. King, *A History of Berkshire* (1887), p. 24; 'likely Druidical priests sounded a sacrificial death siren with it in some bloody rite, rather than Alfred summoning troops to the Downs with a bugle call to arms': C.A. Spinage, *King Alfred: Myths and Mysteries* (1997), p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Berkshire Federation of Women's Institutes, *The Berkshire Book* (1939).

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.grindelwald.co.uk/html2/rway.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> D.N. Ford, 'Blowing Stone: Royal Saxon Trumpet', *Royal Berkshire History* [online]. Available at: [http://www.berkshirehistory.com/archaeology/blowing\\_stone.html](http://www.berkshirehistory.com/archaeology/blowing_stone.html).





Fig. 5. *Illustration of the Blowing Stone and revellers by Richard Doyle. Hughes, The Scouring of the White Horse (1859), p. 147.*

There is also an entry devoted to the stone on the website founded by popstar Julian Cope, *The Modern Antiquarian*. The page contains much information, photographs, and conjecture on its folklore and myth submitted by various online users.<sup>31</sup> The sound of the stone was recently sampled for a track by the prog rock band Big Big Train.<sup>32</sup>

Before finishing this section on the chronology of references I think it worth repeating what some other authors have noted. Namely that: ‘The antiquaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seem not to have noticed this stone. No allusion to it can be found in Gibson’s, or Gough’s editions of Camden’s *Britannia*, nor in the writings of Stukeley, Hearne or Wise.’<sup>33</sup> To this I would add its conspicuous absence from Elias Ashmole’s *The Antiquities of Berkshire* (1719).

## THE BLOWING STONE: AN AETIOLOGY

My purpose in this section is to outline some of the stone’s mythology. In doing so I am not trying to wantonly debunk its folklore nor not stand in favour of one myth or another. Rather I want to show that the Blowing Stone’s history is its myth. And, in a way, vice versa. Myth and history are often dichotomous; but in the case of the Blowing Stone they are entangled and inseparable. One might even go as far as to say they are one and the same.

As stated earlier, no reference is made to the stone’s Alfredian folklore until an anonymous poem of 1855. This then is a good place to start exploring the stone’s mythology. The first thing to strike one about the poem is that it is presented or styled as a recording of an ancient and extant tale found among the local folk. There is a long local tradition of shepherd and

<sup>31</sup> ‘Blowing Stone’ *The Modern Antiquarian* [online]. Available at: [https://www.themodernantiquarian.com/site/580/blowing\\_stone](https://www.themodernantiquarian.com/site/580/blowing_stone).

<sup>32</sup> <http://bigbigtrain.blogspot.com/2016/04/along-ridgeway-and-salisbury-giant.html>.

<sup>33</sup> A. Gibbons and E.C. Davey, *Wantage Past and Present* (1901), p. 9.

ploughman poets.<sup>34</sup> Is it a faithful recording of vernacular verse or complete concoction? A revealing section of the short foreword to the anonymous anthology suggests more of the latter:

in penning the following pages I have derived very little aid from historical fact. For the most part I have been obliged to avail myself of local traditions received from individuals on the spot. Such sources of intelligence usually savour of the extravagant, of the improbable, and even of the superstitious; yet they rarely rest on matters of fact. After the lapse of ages the superstructures of tradition may be defaced and deformed by fancies, follies, and fictions, but its foundation is deepseated, and still rests upon the basis of truth.<sup>35</sup>

This confession is confusingly contradictory. At first the anonymous poet suggests local tradition ‘rarely rest on matters of fact’, yet they go on to state that most traditions have a foundation of truth. Was the ‘Blow Stone tale’ passed ‘from sire to son’ around the White Horse Vale for a thousand years?

Other poems in the publication are about other features of the Vale landscape such as the White Horse, the Seven Barrows, the Ridgeway, and Wayland’s Smithy; although the author clearly did not take themselves too seriously as other compositions include a drinking song and one called ‘Saxon Sauce’ which details an odd recipe. Nonetheless, the mysterious poet is clearly knowledgeable on the history and folklore of the area as detailed notes attached to the poems attest.

In one note on the legend of Wayland the smith the author mentions Sir Walter Scott and the Revd Dr Hughes.<sup>36</sup> Scott popularised the myth of Wayland and that of Wayland’s Smithy in his novel *Kenilworth*, while the Revd Dr Hughes was none other than Thomas Hughes’ grandfather. The Revd Dr Thomas Hughes, who was deputy clerk of the closet to George III and George IV, married Mary Anne daughter and co-heir of George Watts, vicar of Uffington.<sup>37</sup> The Watts family had been vicars of Uffington for several generations.<sup>38</sup> Thomas eventually moved to Uffington and succeeded his father-in-law as vicar. His son John married secondly Margaret Elizabeth Wilkinson a close friend of the author Sir Walter Scott, such that the author became godfather to Thomas’s brother Walter.<sup>39</sup> This connection between Scott and Hughes is an interesting one; both are novelists who used the landscape of the Vale in their works and both propagated certain associated folkloric tales.<sup>40</sup> It seems just as the monuments of the Vale landscape are linked so too are its chroniclers. Moreover, it seems whoever wrote the anonymous work of 1855 was also entangled. Was the author known to the Hughes family? (It is possible the work is the unknown juvenilia of Thomas, or even that of his father John.)<sup>41</sup>

Another family whose members counted among the *dramatis personae* of the Vale was that of Atkins (later Martin-Atkins), mentioned in the second verse of the poem, who were

<sup>34</sup> See A. Williams, *Villages of the White Horse* (1913) and A.L. Humphreys, *Berkshire Book of Song, Rhyme, and Steeple Chime* (1939).

<sup>35</sup> Anon., *A Day on the Downs* (1855), p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> W.W. Wroth, ‘Hughes, John’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [online].

<sup>38</sup> There are numerous monuments to members of the family in Uffington church.

<sup>39</sup> B. Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Landed Gentry of Great Britain & Ireland*, vol. 1 (1847), p. 612.

<sup>40</sup> During archaeological excavations of a Bronze-Age barrow on White Horse in 1993, Walter Scott’s *Book Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1831) was discovered. The inside cover was inscribed ‘Demon de Uffing’ in antique lettering daubed with red ink resembling blood. The book may have been placed there in 1857 during an archaeological excavation conducted by Edwin Martin-Atkins. See Miles et al., *Uffington White Horse and its landscape: Investigations at White Horse Hill, Uffington 1989–95, and Tower Hill, Ashbury, 1993–4* (2003), p. 52. See also P. Schwyzer, *Archaeologies of English Renaissance Literature* (2007), pp. 10–16.

<sup>41</sup> Aside from passing references, all I have been able to find on the 1855 poem is a short contemporary review. It provides no hint who the mystery minstrel might be: *The Athenaeum*, 1468 (Dec. 15 1855), p. 1463.



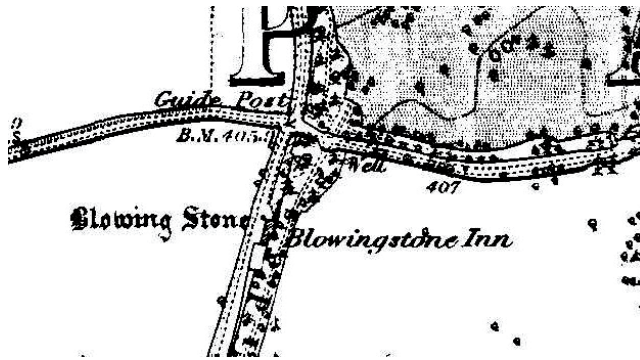


Fig. 6. Detail from the OS map of 1876 showing the stone and the inn.

the local squires and owners of Kingston Lisle Park. The Atkins family came to Kingston Lisle when Abraham Atkins purchased the estate in 1747 or 1748 from the Hyde family.<sup>42</sup> The Atkins most likely referred to in the poem is Edwin Martin-Atkins (1808–1859)<sup>43</sup> who was not only the inspiration for Thomas Hughes' character of 'The Squire' in *Tom Brown's School Days*,<sup>44</sup> but also a keen local antiquary and amateur archaeologist – he was integral in organising the last 'scouring' festival at the nearby White Horse in addition to undertaking excavations there and at Seven Barrows.<sup>45</sup> Martin-Atkins was also a member of the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture, the predecessor of the OAHS.<sup>46</sup> (Although, if Martin-Atkins was indeed the caring protector of the stone that the poem mentions, it seems he was not much endeared to its music.<sup>47</sup>)

One possibility is that it was the Atkins family who 'discovered' the stone and created the Alfredian myth.<sup>48</sup> Particularly in an age where it was *de rigueur* for gentleman landowners to have antiquarian ambitions, it is easy to imagine an Atkins 'unearthing' some folklore about the Blowing Stone and thereby transforming a geological oddity into a genuine archaeological artefact. And being the *nouveau riche*, they would have even more of a motive to put on such airs.<sup>49</sup> Add to this the fact that the first mention of the stone on Roque's map is very soon after the Atkins purchased Kingston Lisle Park.

Another intriguing thing the poem mentions is that the stone used to sit on White Horse Hill. Many of the post 1855 accounts mention this too, with some explicitly stating that it was an Atkins who moved the stone down to its present position.<sup>50</sup> Two commentators further

<sup>42</sup> W.N. Clarke, *Parochial Topography of the Hundred of Wanting, with Other Miscellaneous Records relating to the County of Berks.* (1824), pp. 168–9; see also N. Kingsley, 'Atkins (later Martin-Atkins) of Kingston Lisle' *Landed Families of Great Britain and Ireland* (2016) [online]. Available at: <http://landedfamilies.blogspot.com/2016/10/232-atkins-later-martin-atkins-of.html>

<sup>43</sup> Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Landed Gentry* (1879 edn), p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> Like Hughes, Atkins studied at Rugby, although he was a few years older.

<sup>45</sup> J. Loudon, 'Burials at Kingston Lisle, 1883', *Oxoniensia*, 71 (2006), p. 500; D. Miles et al., *Uffington White Horse*.

<sup>46</sup> Anon., *The Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture: The Rules, List of the Members, and Catalogue of the Library, Drawings, and Engravings* (1846), p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> '[the Blowing Stone] do so tease the Squire at Kingston Hall': Palmer and Crowquill, *The Wanderings of a Pen and Pencil*, p. 270.

<sup>48</sup> Grinsell, *The Blowing Stone*, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Abraham Atkins was the son of a successful South Sea speculator: Clarke, *Parochial Topography of the Hundred of Wanting*, pp. 168–9.

<sup>50</sup> For example, J.E.L. 'England's First-Known Siren Alarm?', *Cycling* (3 March 1943), p. 170; R.P. Bekinsale, *Companion into Berkshire* (1951), p. 55; A. Mee, *The King's England* (1964), pp. 112–13; C.A. Spinage, *King Alfred* (1997), p. 27. One author suggests it may have been once situated at Wayland's Smithy: Vincent, *Highways and Byways in Berkshire* (1906), p. 238.

assert that it was Edwin Martin-Atkins who moved it from a site near Uffington camp.<sup>51</sup> Because of Roque's map we know the stone was in place by 1761. The Edwin Martin-Atkins (1741–1799) who roughly fits with this time frame (the grandfather of the aforementioned Edwin) did not inherit the estate until the death of his uncle Abraham Atkins in 1791 (whereupon he assumed the additional surname). We might also note that the Blowing Stone used to stand next to an old elm; the earliest illustration shows it to be of substantial growth (see Fig. 4). Being no expert on elms I cannot confidently assert that the tree illustrated was of more than a hundred years growth. Nonetheless, the scenario of the stone being moved by an Atkins seems highly improbable and by an Edwin Martin-Atkins nigh on impossible; still, this intriguing supposition has been repeated to me by a number of locals which suggests it is now embedded in the stone's folklore.

Another fact that stands against this scenario is that the stone lies without Kingston Lisle Park, instead gently resting beside some small roadside cottages. These cottages used to comprise an eponymous tavern. The early reference to the stone in 1811 mentions as much.<sup>52</sup> Does this hint at a more commercial motive behind the perpetuation of the Alfred myth? Perhaps a savvy publican was keen to attract a more cultured and antiquarian species of tourist. Indeed, there are records of the visits of the Bath Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club in 1865 and the Newbury District Field Club in 1871.<sup>53</sup>

An historical event lends some credence to a commercial motive behind the mythology. Wantage celebrated the millenary of King Alfred in 1849 with much hullabaloo. As well as a great influx of tourists this celebration involved the creation of many spurious tales about the Saxon monarch.<sup>54</sup> Visiting tourists often took day trips to White Horse Hill. The Blowing Stone is conveniently situated on the road to the hill at about halfway point. A shrewd landlord would be foolish not to capitalise on these Alfredian pilgrims. Indeed, such a way to capitalise the stone was found.

Until quite recently the Blowing Stone was secured with a padlocked lid covering the aperture. A fee had to be paid for the pleasure of playing the stone. This device is depicted in the early illustrations. The most recent written reference to a fee having to be paid to unlock the lid dates from 1943.<sup>55</sup> However, the padlock device is still clearly present in a photograph dating from c.1969.<sup>56</sup>

The locking mechanism kept the 'sixpences rolling in'<sup>57</sup> till the inn shut sometime in the early twentieth century. Alfred Williams, the Swindon railway worker and self-taught poet, records the site in his work *The Villages of the White Horse* (1913). He recounts that the inn's closure was due to some effort on the part of the police; the pub having become a place of disrepute, being the favoured haunt of local poachers and home to an unscrupulous landlord. In Williams' time the fee went towards maintaining the village nurse and for the pleasure of inscribing one's name in a book of blowers.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>51</sup> A. Gibbons and E.C. Davey, *Wantage Past & Present* (1901), p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> 'The Blowing-Stone is placed in front of a little public-house, to which it gives its name.' Sowerby, 'Nov. 7, 1809, Extracts from the Minute-Book of the Linnean Society of London', *Transactions of the Linnean Society*, 10 (1811), p. 405.

<sup>53</sup> 'Summary of the Proceedings of the Bath Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club 1865–6', *The Proceedings of the Bath Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club*, 1:1 (1884), p. 1; 'Excursion to the Lambourne Downs and White Horse Hill', *Transactions of the Newbury District Field Club 1870–1871* (1871), p. 148.

<sup>54</sup> S. Keynes, 'The Cult of King Alfred the Great', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 28 (1999), pp. 327–8; see also J. Parker, *England's Darling: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great* (2007).

<sup>55</sup> J.E.L., 'England's First-Known Siren Alarm?'; see also Prioleau 'The Blowing Stone'. Both accounts mention that one needs to pay a few pence to the owner of the adjacent cottage – the Blowing Stone inn having closed down by this point – for the courtesy of playing the stone and the custodian wiping the mouthpiece clean.

<sup>56</sup> See 'Bugle-Horn' of King Alfred; a Huge Sarsen' *Reading Mercury*, 19 April 1969, p. 10.

<sup>57</sup> Vincent, *Highways and Byways in Berkshire*, p. 239.

<sup>58</sup> A. Williams, *The Villages of the White Horse* (2007 [1913]), p. 230. In more recent times, the other pub in Kingston Lisle, The Plough, has changed its name to become The Blowing Stone.



Fig. 7. The aperture through which one blows.

At this point it is perhaps worth dispelling some etymological folklore. Namely, that Kingston Lisle is named for Alfred's stone: that is, the King's Stone. This is, however, a 'folk etymology'. The land formed part of royal demesne of Edward the Confessor, passing to William the Conqueror and his heirs.<sup>59</sup> And the suffix 'ton' or 'tun' – which will be familiar to most – is of Old English derivation and refers to an enclosure and by extension an estate or manor.<sup>60</sup> Thus, Kingston means literally 'the king's enclosure'.<sup>61</sup>

Still on the topic of Old English and linguistics, two authors have a very intriguing theory about the Blowing Stone; although I have not been able to investigate, I think it worth relating:

Some have supposed that this curious stone is referred to in a charter of King Athelstan, under the name of Tædduces stone or the *dyrne stan* (Ab. Chron. I. 71). But the context mentions "rushy bed" and "mill stream" in connection with the *dyrne stan*, showing it was *below* the hill range in the meadows. (*Dyrn* means secret, hidden, perhaps mysterious. The word *derne* occurs in *Piers Plowman*, ii. 175, and in Chaucer, *Miller's Tale*, l. 14).<sup>62</sup>

I want to conclude this section by stating an obvious point. Namely, that the Blowing Stone lies in a landscape charged with rich and deep mythology. The Vale and Downs are full of curious folkloric monuments. Much has been written about these. Take, for instance, the

<sup>59</sup> 'Sparsholt', *VCH Berks.* 4, pp. 311–19.

<sup>60</sup> A.D. Mills, *A Dictionary of British Place Names* (2011); E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Place Names* (1960).

<sup>61</sup> The epithet of 'Lisle' refers to the Norman family of de l'Isle who inherited the lands in the thirteenth century.

<sup>62</sup> Gibbons and Davey, *Wantage Past and Present*, p. 8.





Fig. 8. *The stone c.1900. Cook, England, Picturesque, and Descriptive (1900), p. 148.*

White Horse, the most iconic of the region's monuments. It has a deep folklore and much literature written about it, from Henry Pye's *Alfred: An Epic Poem* (1801), Thomas Hughes' *Scouring of the White Horse* (1859), Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859–85) and G.K. Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse* (1911), to many more recent literary mentions. Alongside this there is an equally large body of archaeological literature.<sup>63</sup> However, these two bodies of literature are not discrete. They influence each other. From a legendary memorial to St George's triumph, King Alfred's Victory over the Danes, to an ancient Bronze-Age glyph, the Horse's archaeological narratives have shaped literary narratives. And, crucially, vice versa.<sup>64</sup> For the same is true of the Blowing Stone. One can of course argue that the Alfredian myth was in all probability created at some point in the eighteenth or nineteenth century; but this is to miss the point.

## THE BLOWING STONE: AN ARCHAEOLOGY

'Sounds of Roman Egypt' was a recent exhibition (22 January–8 June 2019) at UCL's Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology. The exhibition aimed to explore what life in Roman Egypt would have sounded like. In addition to recordings, it featured 3D-printed replicas of musical instruments which visitors could play. This is of course nothing new – museums have tried to appeal to many senses for as long as they have existed. Nonetheless, the exhibition serves to demonstrate that archaeologists are paying greater attention to the more intangible qualities of sites and artefacts. Moreover, it is not just archaeology which has witnessed a turn to the 'intangible'; disciplines such as philosophy, geography and history have too.<sup>65</sup>

Cynics will of course draw attention to the fact that archaeology has always been sensitive to materiality. It is archaeology's very nature that it derives its data and insight from material. However, while archaeology may have always been sensitive to the material finds and the like, it is a relatively recent shift that has seen archaeologists study immaterial subjects such as the

<sup>63</sup> A small sample: S. Piggott, 'The Uffington White Horse', *Antiquity*, 5 (1931), pp. 37–46; L.V. Grinsell, *White Horse Hill and the Surrounding Country* (1939); C. Gosden and G. Lock, 'Becoming Roman on the Berkshire Downs', *Britannia*, 34 (2003), pp. 65–80; Miles et al., *Uffington White Horse*; J. Pollard, 'The Uffington White Horse Geoglyph as Sun-Horse', *Antiquity*, 91 (2017), pp. 406–20.

<sup>64</sup> Schwyzer, *Archaeologies of English Renaissance Literature*, p. 10.

<sup>65</sup> G. Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* (2017); B. Anderson, 'Affective Atmospheres', *Emotion, Space, & Society*, 2 (2009), pp. 77–81; P. Adey, *Air* (2014); T.F. Sørensen 'More Than a Feeling: Towards an Archaeology of Atmosphere', *Emotion, Space, & Society*, 15 (2015) pp. 64–73; C. Papadopoulos and H. Moyes (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Light in Archaeology*, forthcoming.

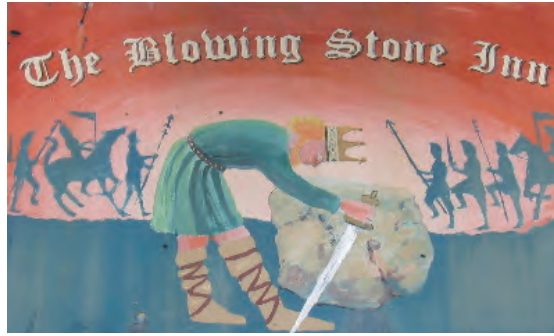


Fig. 9. The recently replaced pub sign of the Blowing Stone Inn, previously called the Plough, in Kingston Lisle.

‘atmosphere’ of a Neolithic chambered tomb.<sup>66</sup> Archaeologists explore immaterial subjects such as light and sound using established archaeological methods.<sup>67</sup> What is new is the subject of enquiry itself, that is, the immaterial.

What does all this mean for the Blowing Stone? For one, I think this is an academic discourse which the Blowing Stone may insert itself neatly into. It is a surprise that it has not already done so. This is even more surprising given there is a sub-discipline with an expanding volume of literature which could not be more relevant to the Blowing Stone; namely, archaeoacoustics.<sup>68</sup> There are also a number of other similar archaeoacoustic megaliths the Blowing Stone could be productively compared to like the Skiddaw Stones, the Ringing Stone of Tíree, or the Dartmoor Blowing Stone.

In relating the Blowing Stone to this ‘archaeology of the immaterial’, I want to draw attention to the fact that when considering the archaeology of landscape, we need to consider seemingly un-archaeological things like myth, memory, sound, and atmosphere. I argue the Blowing Stone should be seen alongside the suite of other archaeological/mythological monuments on the North Wessex Downs and integral part of the landscape. Grinsell documents in his pamphlet that the megalith is not an official ancient monument scheduled under the Ancient Monuments Act.<sup>69</sup> (As a result, the Blowing Stone lacks the Old English lettering on OS maps.)

To put it another way, I argue that the Blowing Stone is far more than a perforated lump of sandstone at OS reference SU3241287083. It goes beyond its physical confine, for the Blowing Stone is also its myths, its memories, its stories, even its sound. Heritage is seldom solely material. Sometimes it has no physical presence at all. UNESCO’s list of ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’ provides many examples.<sup>70</sup> We must ask ourselves, when we protect an ancient monument, what are we actually protecting: is it the physical elements of the site? Or its intangible elements, like folklore and myth?

Sometimes the tangible and intangible elements of protected ancient monuments come into conflict. The National Trust recently made the decision to remove coins that had been

<sup>66</sup> Sørensen, ‘Towards an Archaeology of Atmosphere.’

<sup>67</sup> Although not always. Archaeologist Stuart Eve has combined GIS and virtual reality to create what he calls ‘dead men’s eyes’ (recent experiments have even led to the creation of a prototype known as the ‘dead men’s nose!’): <http://www.dead-mens-eyes.org/>.

<sup>68</sup> See, for instance, A. Watson and D. Keating, ‘Architecture and Sound: An Acoustic Analysis of Megalithic Monuments in Prehistoric Britain’, *Antiquity*, 73 (1999), pp. 325–36; P. Devereux, *Stone Age Soundtracks: The Acoustic Archaeology of Ancient Sites* (2001); C. Scarre and G. Lawson, *Archaeoacoustics* (2006); see also *Time and Mind: the Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* for articles concerning the ‘archaeology of the intangible’.

<sup>69</sup> Grinsell, *The Blowing Stone*, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> Incredibly, or perhaps worryingly, the United Kingdom has no presence on any of the lists: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists>.



Fig. 10. A woman playing the stone.

embedded in the beech trees that encircle Wayland's Smithy. The National Trust saw this practice as vandalism. However, many, even some of the National Trust rangers tasked with carrying out the duty, saw the National Trust's response as damaging to the intangible heritage of the site. The practice of leaving coins (or 'ritual litter' as the National Trust call it) is reference to the legend of Wayland.<sup>71</sup> Even though archaeological investigation has established the site is a Neolithic long barrow and not the secret entrance to a subterranean smith's workshop, it would be a real loss to erase its other stories and myths.

Is it because much of the Blowing Stone's interest is 'intangible' that it has so far eluded detailed archaeological treatment? And is this why Grinsell wrote that its interest is not 'archaeological'?<sup>72</sup> For many commentators the stone is 'antiquarian' at best. This view still pervades. On a field trip to the archaeological sites on the Downs with Oxford University's

<sup>71</sup> Houlbrook, 'The Penny's Dropped', pp. 173–89.

<sup>72</sup> Grinsell, *The Blowing Stone*, p. 1.



School of Archaeology I enquired why the Blowing Stone did not feature on our itinerary. I was met with the answer that it was merely 'antiquarian'.

One might note how 'antiquarian' has come to be used in some archaeological literature in a manner in which certain historians might use 'myth' – that is, something similar to their subject but something not worthy, false, or to be avoided. As a result, the antiquarian, like the mythical, gets thrown by the wayside in most academic discourse. However, these overlooked wayside subjects and their wayside monuments can teach us. The Blowing Stone clearly demonstrates how myth and history are entangled. And so too does it show how the 'archaeological' and 'antiquarian' are sometimes hard to separate.

## CONCLUSION

I first came across the Blowing Stone by chance. I was on a bicycle ride through the Vale on my way to the more renowned sites of the White Horse and Wayland's Smithy. I very nearly missed it, having hurtled down the hill from the Ridgeway. I found the stone a bit unprepossessing. It does not command awesome views like the White Horse, nor does it have the magical mystery of Wayland's Smithy in its beechen grove, nor does it roll across bucolic fields and bygone fortifications like the Ridgeway. The stone sits in a roadside enclosure which amounts to little more than a ditch or verge. When I first visited, the sign informing me what it was had ivy growing over it and the holes in the stone were full of water. And the fact I only managed to produce a tragic whimper from it gave it an air of bathos. It is also difficult to imagine the flatulent megalithic trumpet putting enough courage into the hearts of the Anglo-Saxon churls to fight off the fearsome Danes, let alone summon them from six miles off. But



*Fig. 11. The stone today.*

all this only served to endear me to the thing and make me more intrigued to discover more, ever being one attracted to the overlooked and misunderstood.

This brings me to the primary purpose of this piece. In a landscape full of monuments that have had many articles, poems and whole books penned on them, the Blowing Stone is only mentioned in passing, in brief, or as mere footnote. In fact, it more than deserves an article of its own. Let its story sound out through the Vale and beyond.