The world of Stonehenge

Transcription of interviews that feature in the film Seahenge, by Rose Ferraby

Francis Pryor: I think one of the things that Seahenge did, is make it, for those of us who were involved, so much easier to relate ancient sites to the present day.

Maisie Taylor: So we dug a slot, and that was a bit astonishing because of course what was showing was fantastically eroded, and you didn’t have to go down very far and realise that the timbers were pretty huge, and pretty fantastically well-preserved.

Rose Ferraby: In the late spring or early summer of 2049 BC, a circle of oak timbers was built in the saltmarshes of north Norfolk. At its centre was a great upturned stump of oak, percussed with axe marks. It holds stories of life and death, stories that weave together the past and the present, and it’s a reflection of how we’ve tried to understand the world around us, in so many intriguing ways.

John Lorimer: So I went crabbing amongst the peat scarps, and as I was crabbing I came across this lump of metal [laughs]. And I said to my brother-in-law “I think I’ve found an axe head!” So that’s how it all came about.

I went to the scarp and there was some timbers coming out from round this tree trunk. I realised that the central stump that I was crabbing under wasn’t a washed-in tree, it was actually dead centre of an egg-shaped circle.

So these timbers were sticking out the water, and you could see the ends were all sort of weathered, as it were.

Maisie: I’ve never completely got used to how Mark got his head round that site and worked out how to excavate it.

Charly French: It was like digging a really clayey site in the wet and in the rain, pouring rain. And because you could hardly stand up because everything was wet, and obviously limited windows of time to do any of it, or four-hour stints, kind of thing. And often for every spade-depth or trowel-depth or chunk you took out, the water would just ooze out into it.

David Robertson: Salt water and mud and pumps and buckets – it was hard, hard work. And it brought them close together.

Maisie: Everybody ended the day soaked to the skin, caked in mud.

John: And that mud... your clothes, if they were white, would never be white again.
Charly: You just had to really work fast and record straight away in that four-hour window or it would be gone, or half-ruined. The people they were in and out having to change your lifestyle with the tide each day – it was extremely difficult.

So you were sort of half digging blind all the time, because it was all basically different tones of grey.

Maisie: Fran Green, who was working as a digger, was also a soil scientist. And she felt that there was a trench, but you couldn’t see it. Wonderfully, Charly French when he came to do his soil analysis, he did actually find that there had been disturbance, there had been trenches.

All these people with their own expertise, slotted everything together and got this incredible, detailed story.

David: It’s unusual to see timber surviving on archaeological sites. There’s something very tangible about seeing wood in the ground.

Maisie: It just seemed so, so vast when it came up.

David: It just seemed very, very strange. Why is a tree, or part of a tree, upside down?

Maisie: It came out with the most phenomenal, clear surfaces. They were so sharp and well-preserved, and similarly the marks where the axes had gone in and been pulled out again were literally exactly as they had been when they had gone into the ground.

And then each individual timber had its own little story of whether it was half of another timber they used, whether it was the right way up, how it had been cut down, whether it had side branches. Each timber had this list of things you knew about it.

Francis: That’s the first and only time it gave us a reasonably accurate estimate of the number of people that were involved. Most of the posts were actually split in half, and they were arranged so that the bark, mostly, was on the outside. So it might have represented a symbolic, huge tree trunk.

David: The saltmarsh must have meant something to them, whether it was an important landscape because it was wide, open, quite stark looking at times.

Francis: Rough, salty grasses, mud, little sort of creekly streams.

So it would actually have been in the sort of boundary zone between dry land and sea. The other way of looking at it, is they were located in parts of the countryside that were between the world of living people, and the world of the ancestors.

Maisie: Nothing. Nothing sort of stays the same on that beach.
Through time, all these people had seen the landscape as their landscape, but totally different to the people who were there earlier and the people who came later.

**David:** I think for me it’s a special place. I’m going to keep looking out for new archaeological remains.

**John:** The whole of the Norfolk coast, as it’s eroding away is bring stuff up from, you know, thousands of years ago. There’ll be stuff coming off that beach for years to come.