BELTANE – THE WICKER MAN BURNS AGAIN



Beltane at Butser Ancient Farm, UK

It is May 1 – Beltane.

Beltain is the spring festival of the Celtic religion and, like other major Celtic events, was a fire festival: the ‘good fire’ was burnt for purification, for healing, for light, for growth. According to Caesar, the Iron Age Britons would construct huge wicker containers in human form which were filled with men and animals, and then set alight as a sacrifice.

What we produce this evening is not a religious ceremony, nor does it have any significance apart from being a piece of theatre. Elements of the evening might bear some resemblance to Beltain as it was celebrated 2,000 years ago.

The evening starts at 6.30pm with an entertainment at 7pm. The Wicker Man will be fired at 8pm-ish. There will be a licensed bar and refreshments will be on sale. Tickets – £5 per adult, £3 per child – available from Butser Ancient Farm, Nexus House, Gravel Hill, Waterlooville, Hants. PO8 0QE. Please make cheques payable to ‘Butser Ancient Farm’ and include a stamped self-addressed envelope.

I look forward to seeing the pictures. Here is last year.



Wickerman was a classic 1970s cult horror movie – Robin Hardy directed 1973, British Lion Films, recently rereleased as a collectors double DVD – [Link – IMDb]

Police Sgt. Howie (Edward Woodward), of the Scottish mainland, receives an anonymous letter from the offshore community of Summerisle, asking him to investigate the disappearance of a young girl there. He travels to the remote isle and discovers a secretive, tightly knit neo-pagan society. Being a devout (and rather self-righteous) Christian, he is shocked by the islanders' open sexuality and ritualistic devotion to the "old gods." As the mystery of the missing girl unravels, he begins to suspect that she is a victim of human sacrifice. In the film's chilling final sequence,

the truth is revealed when Sgt. Howie meets the “wicker man.



A theme of deep cultural continuity again – see my recent post on the uncanny.

The movie was filmed at Plockton – a picturesque nineteenth century Laird’s village in the west highlands of Scotland – hardly a deep history – but it looks appropriately remote.

Beltane is one of the festivals connected with the vernal and midsummer (summer solstice) equinoxes. Euan Mackie, a senior curator at the Hunterian in Glasgow, now retired, once told me of an excavation of his of a Scottish stone circle (early bronze age date – second millennium BC). He proposed the circle was aligned on astronomical events associated with the equinoxes, and duly found two previously unknown outlying stones used for sighting. More than 3500 years of calendrical continuity.