

The Leyline Enigma

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I grew up near Salisbury, in a part of England that is full of all manner of wondrous sites, and so from an early age I found myself fascinated by the mystery of man's earliest creations. Stonehenge was just a short bike ride away, Old Sarum, an ancient hill fort, made a magnificent playground for my brother and I, and whilst at school, during particularly fascinating maths' classes I would stare out the window at the cathedral spire and marvel at its majesty.

Recently, I discovered that all of these places that had so fascinated me as a child, as well as many others in the nearby vicinity are aligned in a perfect straight line into what is termed a ley. Could it be that this alignment of places with such spiritual significance is just a coincidence or is there more to it than that?

The story of ley lines starts in 1922, when whilst sitting on a hill in Herefordshire, England, it suddenly struck Alfred Watkins, a businessman, trader and amateur archaeologist, that sites of historical or spiritual significance, churches, earth burial mounds and standing stones like Stonehenge for example, were aligned in perfect straight lines. After experiencing this revelation, "The whole thing came to me in a flash" he told his son, Alfred Watkins set about finding more leys and published his findings in his book "The Old Straight Track". In this book Watkins adopted the Saxon word 'ley' meaning 'a cleared glade' to describe his discovery, a word also closely linked to 'lea' meaning 'a track of open land'.

Watkins, perhaps because of his own profession, believed that these lines were evidence of prehistoric trade routes that had been cleared in a land previously covered in forest. Since the publication of "The Old Straight Track" however, many more theories have been suggested; some claim that they are evidence of the earth's invisible energy lines, others believe that they are navigational markers for UFOs and some have come to the conclusion that they are evidence of beliefs, that are found in cultures around the world, in the paths of the dead. Of course there is also a strong school of thought that dismisses the very existence of leys as mere statistical coincidences.

The Ley Rules

To determine the existence of a ley Watkins put together a set of rules that have formed the basis of all subsequent ley line discoveries. To be assigned the tag of ley line, according to these rules, three or more sites must be aligned in an exact line (measurements are made on maps); the greater the number of sites is stronger proof of the existence of a ley.

Watkins listed sites that he felt were not only prehistoric, including mounds and standing stones, but also included sites that he felt were linked to or based on prehistoric sites. To

explain his inclusion of churches for example, he referred to a letter from Pope Gregory to one of his missionaries working in England which said that the "Temples of the English should not be destroyed but their idols should be smashed and their temples blessed with holy water with an altar setup in them". Circular moats, castles, churches, traditional wells, beacons, crossroads with names, bridges, fords and other sites were also included in his list for various other reasons.

Since the publication of his book 'The Old Straight Track' Ley Hunters (people who study maps and the landscape for evidence of leys) have found countless leys across Britain, France, Germany and even as far a field as Peru (Nasca lines).

Statistical Coincidence?

The existence of ley lines has been challenged ever since Watkins published his seminal work. One of the strongest criticisms is of Watkins' own methods of determining the existence of the lines. Ley Hunters, following his methods, find leys on maps drawing lines between any of the listed sites that can be used, if any three such sites fall along the same line it can be called a ley.

The most obvious problem with this method is that on a map with a given number of such sites the statistical probability is that an alignment will take place out of chance.

When determining his rules Watkins himself observed the occurrence of random leys. He marked 51 crosses at random on a sheet of paper and found no five-point, 1 four-point and 33 three-point leys. From this he concluded that studying a map with fifty sites that only a five-point ley was ironclad proof of deliberate alignment. Of course the sceptical statistician will still point out that this could still be chance and is therefore not proof.

Paul Devereux, who was editor of the Ley Hunter Journal for 20 years and is one of the leading authorities on the ley phenomenon, undertook a two year study of leys to prove or disprove their existence. He realised that;

"A lot of the alignments that Watkins had lined up were really just chance alignments of points on maps. This can be demonstrated quite conclusively; it's not just opinion. As I went on, I said, 'Bloody hell, there's nothing here' -- and that's a bit awkward when you're editing a magazine on the subject."

This revelation led Devereux to start a new research project to determine what explanations there could be for alignments that he referred to as being "actually physically there, archaeologically real, that are linear and unexplained". This research is still going on after 15 years and has taken Devereux all around the world.

Earth Energies

The idea that the earth is covered with lines of energy is not only found in Western Europe. In the aboriginal culture of Australia they are referred to as Song Lines, in Peru

they are called the Nasca lines and in the Chinese practise of Feng Shui the earth's energy plays a significant role.

In Western culture the theory that ley lines were an indication of earth energies began with the research of archaeology Professors Alexander Thom and Gerald Hawkins. These two professors' compelling evidence largely changed previously held beliefs that Neolithic man had a very primitive understanding of their place in the universe and introduced the idea that they had advanced astrological, mathematical and engineering knowledge. It is now widely accepted that Stonehenge accurately plots the and rise and setting of the sun and moon as well as the change in the seasons. Their discoveries paved the way for speculations into what other skills Neolithic man might have possessed.

The publication of the 1936 novel "The Goat-Foot God" by occultist Dion Fortune, was the first to suggest that ley lines were evidence of the earth's energy fields. By the 1950's claims were made by Guy Underwood, a pioneer in modern dowsing techniques, that he could detect complex webs of energy under monuments, hill figures, old roads, paths and churches. In 1978 Tom Graves, another dowser, claimed that he was able to find a dowsable link between two such sites and resulted in the popular belief that leys were indeed evidence of energy lines that surrounded the earth and that the builders of monuments such as Stonehenge were aware of this. It was also suggested that monuments such as these act like giant acupuncture needles that have the ability to focus the earth's energy.

To prove or disprove this theory the Ley Hunters Society, the leading organisation on the study of leys, started The Dragon Project. Extensive surveys were undertaken of Britain's prehistoric sites and leys using dowsing, electromagnetic detection and other scientific instruments. After ten years of work they found no conclusive evidence to suggest that these sites, or indeed leys, possess any energy fields. They did however find that the sites they studied often had up to five times the amount of background radiation that occurs naturally, and that some of the researchers had visionary episodes that although only lasted for just a few seconds, were very, very vivid, with some people finding themselves in a whole other scene.

Some people have suggested that the high levels of background radiation triggered the hallucinatory episodes; others believe that these sites trigger some form of clairvoyance, allowing sight into the past, present or future. Whatever the reason the jury is still out on whether or not these sites have some kind of mysterious power.

Leys and UFOs

In the 1950's French UFO enthusiasts noticed that sightings of UFOs occurred in straight lines. In 1958, ex RAF pilot and UFO enthusiast Tony Wedd brought the concept of ley lines and flying saucer sightings together. This led to ley hunter Jimmy Goddard's rather fanciful idea; "could it be that the intelligences behind flying saucers built the ley markers for navigational purposes?"

Paths of the Dead

Recent research by Devereux and others has suggested that leys are evidence of perceived paths of the dead and other spirits, a belief that is held by many cultures around the world. In Ireland Fairy paths follow straight lines - it is believed that building houses on these paths will bring bad luck. In China spirits were believed to travel along straight lines and, unless decreed by the Emperor, straight lines were avoided at all costs. The Nasca lines in Peru connected ancient burial sites and are still maintained, through sweeping, today. In the harsh terrain of the Bolivian mountains, where spirits are believed to reside, paths follow straight paths, despite the challenging landscape. In the prehistory of Britain evidence of spirit paths are the cursuses, mounds of earth only observable from the air, that connect known burial sites, again in straight lines.

It is perhaps interesting at this point to also observe the English phrase -- "dead straight". Could this phrase have evolved from the belief that the spirits of the dead travel in dead straight lines?

A Leap of Faith I'm sure that when Alfred Watkins first made the observation of alignment whilst sitting on his hilltop he had no idea that he had started such a controversial topic. For him leys were merely evidence of prehistoric trading routes, not UFO navigation points, earth energy lines or paths of the dead. It is not surprising though, considering the strong spiritual pull that sites like Stonehenge possess, that the idea of leys being evidence of earth energy has become such a popular belief.

If you do believe that leys are more than mere statistical coincidences then a certain leap of faith is needed but then that is the case with anything that modern science cannot currently prove.