

Stonehenge

Begun 5,000 years ago, and remodelled several times in the centuries that followed, Stonehenge represents one of the most remarkable achievements of prehistoric society. Yet its purpose remains a mystery. As its major axis is aligned with mid-summer sunrise and mid-winter sunset, the stone circle has long been thought to have had a function related to the yearly calendar, but we may never know precisely how it was used, or what ceremonies took place there.

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HISTORICAL DESCRIPTION

The Stonehenge we see today represents the end result of a long period of development spanning from the early Neolithic to the Bronze Age. The monument began in about 3,000 BC with the construction of a circular bank and ditch measuring 110 metres in diameter. This bank and ditch had two entrances, and just inside the bank was a ring of 56 pits, which may have contained standing posts. From the beginning, Stonehenge was used as a cemetery. Current estimates suggest that the cremated remains of 240 men, women and children were buried here in the ditch and pits.

500 years later, around 2,500 BC, the first stones were erected inside the earthwork. These famous 'bluestones' were brought from the Preseli hills in Wales: nearly 100 of them, weighing about four tons each. The stones transformed the layout of the monument so that it was aligned on the sunrise on the longest day of the year; and sunset on the shortest day. The bluestones were rearranged at least four times over the next 500 years. It was in this period that the Stonehenge avenue was added, leading 3km from the site to the River Avon.

As part of this rearrangement, the bluestones were incorporated into a much grander plan using enormous local sarsen stones. Within an outer circle of uprights and lintels, five great trilithons (two upright

stones with a third lying in top) were erected forming a giant horse-shoe. The outer stones weigh about 25 tons each; the inner stones up to 50 tons. Each stone was dressed and fitted with mortice and tenon (wood-working) joints to fit the stones together – an enormous building project using only basic tools and human strength.

The final stages in the building of Stonehenge, in about 2,000 BC involved re-using some of the old blue stones to form smaller circles and horse-shoe arrangements within the larger structure. By perhaps 1600 BC, after more than a thousand years of construction and alteration, the monument had achieved the shape that we can see today. For how long it continued in use we do not know.

Stonehenge is just one part of a unique ceremonial landscape containing over 400 other important monuments. These include Neolithic monuments such as the cursus, the henge at Durrington Walls and several long barrows. Later in the Bronze Age, Stonehenge became the focus of a large Bronze Age barrow cemetery, with barrows situated on the ridges and hillsides around the monument.

The monument we see today still inspires awe and admiration. Stonehenge attracts 800,000 visitors a year and on the summer Solstice, thousands of people gather to watch the sunrise.



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Although thousands of years older than the Druids, the stone circle witnessed many druidic ceremonies, especially during the 19th century, when it was thought that the stone circle had been built by the Druids.

Today, much work goes on behind the scenes to ensure that Stonehenge and its unique prehistoric landscape are protected for future generations. English Heritage and the National Trust play a key role in this respect.

The site has also acquired a wealth of pseudoscientific and mystical associations which both distort and diminish its significance. A first stage in preparing for a visit is to strip away some of this mental clutter so that the pupils can see the monument within its true historical context.

As Stonehenge is such an exceptional structure, it is tempting to assume that it came into existence as a result of an important and widespread change – possibly the rise of some kind of universal authority amongst the later Neolithic communities of Southern Britain. However, it must be kept in mind that Stonehenge only achieved its final pre-eminence as the result of a long history of development: its earlier stages had a local, rather than a regional or national importance. The effort that went into its successive reconstructions may suggest that a person or elite group had been given the task of carrying out ceremonies and rituals on behalf of the whole population and were thus able to command resources over a wide area.

The monument's abandonment by around 1600 BC indicates the eventual end of this system. In the absence of any written records we cannot identify the individuals who were responsible for the different phases of building at Stonehenge; nor can we name the gods they worshiped, or describe the ceremonies which took place. The so-called 'altar stone' is in fact a fallen stone made of sandstone from the innermost horse-shoe. However, archaeology can tell us a good deal about the way in which Stonehenge was built, and the changes which took place over time. These aspects need to be covered before a visit, and there are excellent resources available to help you do this.

Another important aspect of preparation is to help pupils understand the methods of archaeologists, which represent a specialised application of general scientific principles. There are lines of probability in History (e.g. it is almost certain that Richard III murdered the Princes in the Tower, though there is no proof) and lines of improbability (e.g. it is very unlikely that Napoleon ever invaded England, though it may have been a well-kept secret). Much of the value of a visit to a site like Stonehenge lies in helping pupils to understand how these lines are established. Working within the constraints of the historically feasible actually improves the writing and drawing which results from a visit. If the pupils end their projects with a series of questions to which the answers are still 'we don't know', this may be more valuable than the usual list of 'facts'.



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LOCATION

Stonehenge, Wiltshire SP4 7DE
2 miles west of Amesbury on junction of the A303 and A344/A360
OS Map 184, Ref SU 123422



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HOW TO GET THERE

Bus Stonehenge Tour bus goes every 30 minutes from Salisbury train and bus station
Train Salisbury 9½ miles.

FACILITIES

Parking Large car park adjacent to the monument.

Shop Guidebooks, souvenirs etc.
(Level access.)

Refreshments Light refreshments are available from the Stonehenge Kitchen snack bar.

Toilets WC adapted for wheelchair users in large toilet block at far end of car park.

LEARNERS GO FREE

Educational visits are free to English Heritage properties and should be booked at least 14 days in advance via the South West Office:

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www.english-heritage.org.uk/onlinebooking

Limit on party number 150
Required teacher/adult helper to pupil ratio 1:6 for school years 1–3 and 1:15 for all other groups aged under 18. Pupils must be supervised at all times.

Please remember you are responsible for your own risk assessment. Hazard information available when booking.

NEARBY AND RELATED SITES

Alexander Keiller Museum, Avebury

The museum contains the Keiller collection of finds from Avebury and surrounding sites. Owned by English Heritage but managed by the National Trust.
T 01672 539250

Avebury

One of Europe's largest stone circles.

Woodhenge

1½ miles north of Amesbury, a wooden circle within Durrington Walls henge on a similar alignment to Stonehenge.

Other sites are listed in the English Heritage guidebook (see below).

A GUIDE TO RESOURCES

Richards J, 1991,
Stonehenge, Batsford/English Heritage,
ISBN 1-7134-6142-X

Richards J, 2005,
The Amazing Pop-Up Stonehenge,
English Heritage

Richards J, 2008,
Stonehenge, English Heritage Guidebooks.

All English Heritage resources are available from:

English Heritage c/o Gillards,
Trident Works, Temple Cloud,
Bristol BS39 5AZ
T 01761 452966
F 01761 453408
ehsales@gillards.com

ENGLISH HERITAGE EDUCATION

English Heritage is proud of its commitment to heritage education. We aim to help teachers and those involved in heritage education – at all levels – to use the historic environment as a resource, right across the curriculum.

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education@english-heritage.org.uk
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A World Heritage Site, the great and ancient stone circle of Stonehenge is one of the wonders of the world. But what visitors see today are only the substantial remnants of the last in a sequence of monuments erected between c.3000 BC and 1600 BC, all of them aligned on the midwinter setting sun and the midsummer sunrise.



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There is currently a consultation process about the learning programme and visitor facilities at Stonehenge, and we are working to provide some new activities.

For the moment, to provide practical support with your Stonehenge project, we have created an adapted, QCA-approved, Scheme of Work entitled "What was our

area like in prehistoric times?", which has been especially developed by English Heritage in partnership with Wessex Archaeology and local schools. Designed for use with year 3 and 4 pupils, this unit encourages learning both within and outside the classroom. It's available from our website: www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.16469

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Other useful online materials which could be used as part of a lesson, or on interactive whiteboards include:

A Stonehenge interactive map:

<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/stonehengeinteractivemap/>

A Stonehenge timeline:

<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/stonehengeinteractivemap/timeline/index.html>

Although prehistory doesn't figure massively in the curriculum, you can teach Stonehenge through linking into chronological understanding.

Stonehenge Images:

www.heritageexplorer.org.uk

Choose from a range of images and resources to create your own learning experience.

To find out about our proposals for a new visitor centre and for transport and access to Stonehenge go to

www.stonehengevisitorcentre.org/#/home

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One of the five great sarsen trilithons. Unlike most other prehistoric stone monuments, many of the sarsens at Stonehenge were trimmed and shaped into neat rectangular blocks. Sarsen is a type of very hard sandstone and shaping the stones would have been difficult and laborious. The horizontal lintel stone is fixed to the two uprights with a carved mortise and tenon joint, like a ball and socket.

Visit www.heritage-explorer.org.uk for more copyright-cleared images

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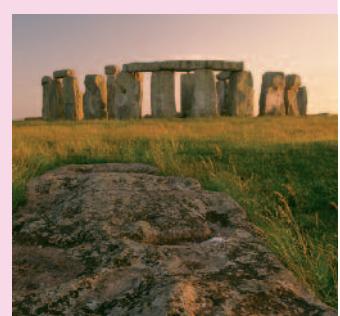
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THE DEVELOPMENT OF STONEHENGE

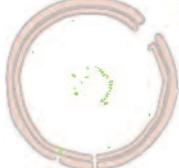
The first Stonehenge, about 3000–2920 BC



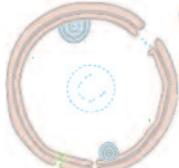
The timber phase, about 2900–2600 BC



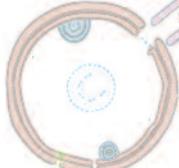
The early stone phase, about 2550 BC



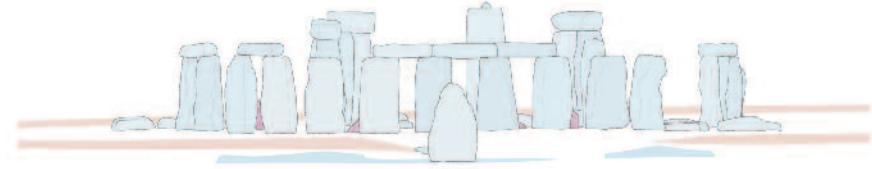
The late stone phase, about 2300 BC



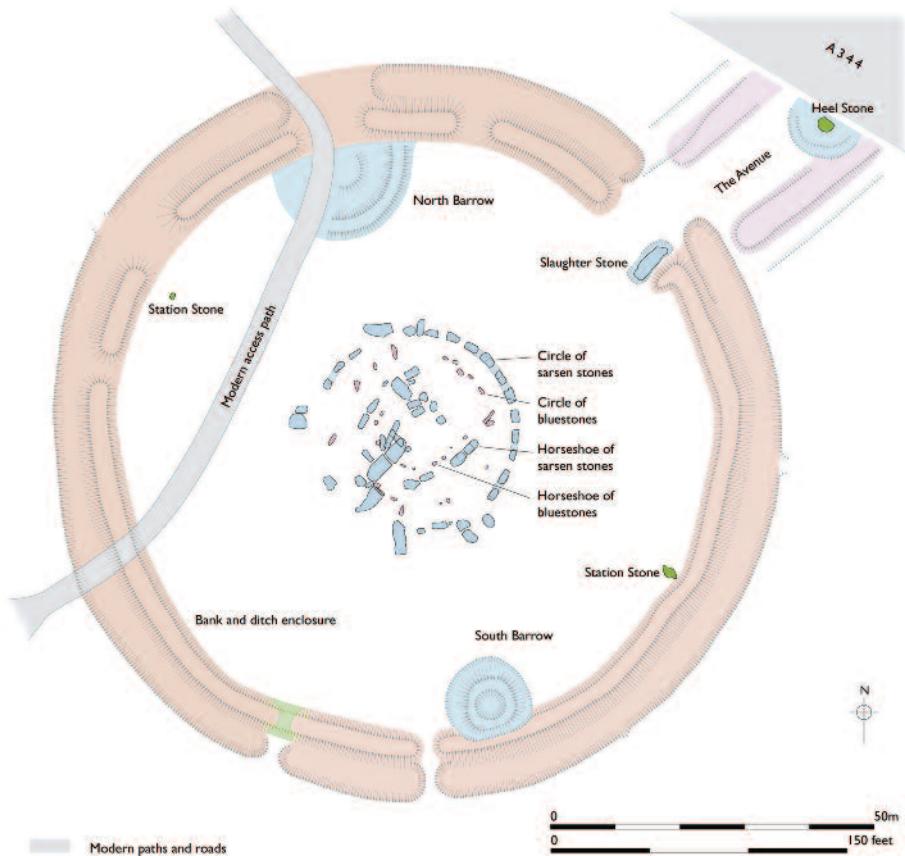
The final stone phase, between 2280 and 1930 BC



THE STONES VIEWED FROM THE AVENUE



PRESENT DAY STONEHENGE



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Aerial view of Stonehenge. In the centre is the great Stone Circle. The bank and ditch of the first henge can clearly be seen 5,000 years after it was originally dug. The two Station Stones stand near the outer circle and the Slaughter Stone lies at the entrance to the henge (bottom right). Beyond it, by the side of the road, is the Heel Stone.



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The best preserved section of the outer stone circle, originally built as a continuous circle of 30 upright sarsens, capped by horizontal lintels. The uprights sit in holes dug to varying depths, so that the tops of all the stones stand level. Small boulders of this stone are found near Stonehenge, but these massive sarsens were brought from the Marlborough Downs, more than 30km/19 miles away. The smaller stones, inside the circle, are bluestones brought from the Preseli Mountains in West Wales, a distance of 240km/150 miles.



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An artist's impression of the winter solstice celebration around 2000 BC, during the final phase of the monument. The crowd gathers outside the bank and ditch – in this interpretation, only the most privileged and important could approach the Stone Circle. It used to be thought that Stonehenge was designed around the summer solstice. More recently it has been argued that the winter solstice was more significant; marking the turning of the year and the gradual lengthening of daylight.



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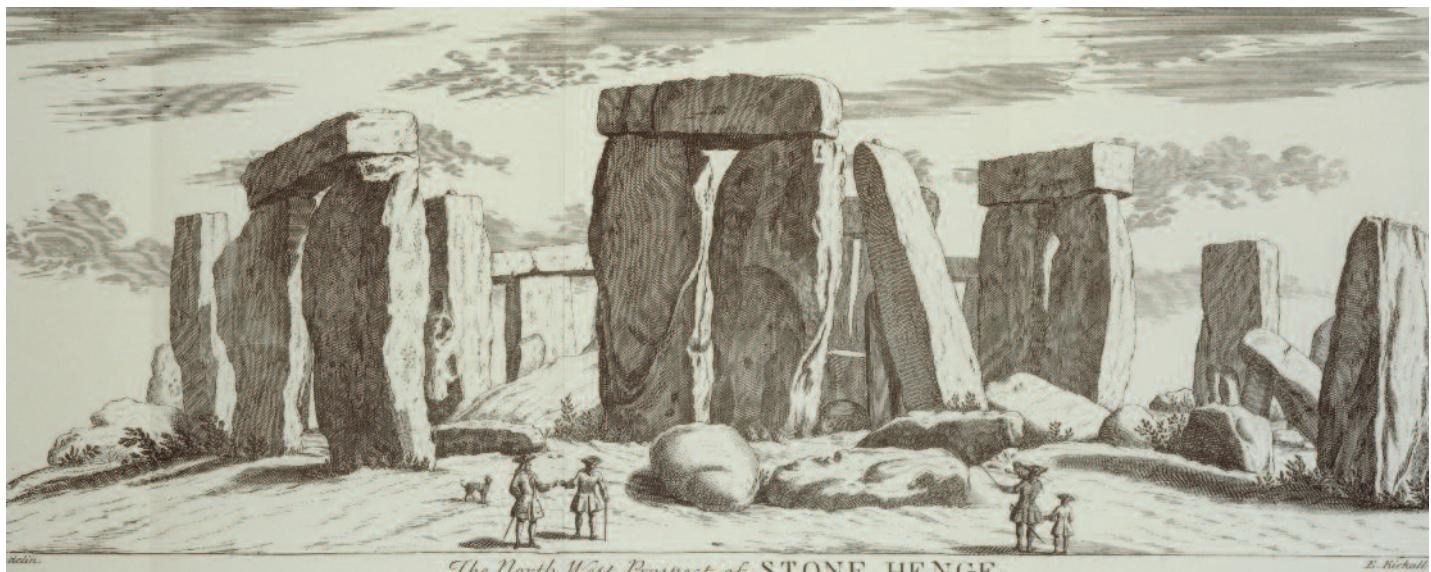
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top Stonehenge by Inigo Jones (1573-1652). The architect was commissioned by King James I to make a detailed study of the monument but did not believe the 'savage and barbarous' ancient Britons could have built Stonehenge.

below An artist's impression of a burial at Bush Barrow, south of Stonehenge, around 1800BC. There were once more than 300 round barrows (the burial place of someone rich and important) within 3km/2 miles of Stonehenge. When first built, the white, chalk mound would have made a highly visible statement in the sacred landscape.



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top The first phase of Stonehenge c. 3000 BC. An outer ditch surrounds a broken, inner bank, with a second bank outside parts of the ditch. The north-east entrance (left) faced the midsummer sunrise. Within the enclosure are the 'Aubrey Holes', a circle of 50 holes which once held timber posts.

below The second phase c. 2550 BC. By now the wooden posts had disappeared. A small number of sarsen stones from the Marlborough Downs, and a larger number of bluestones from the Preseli Mountains were placed within the monument.



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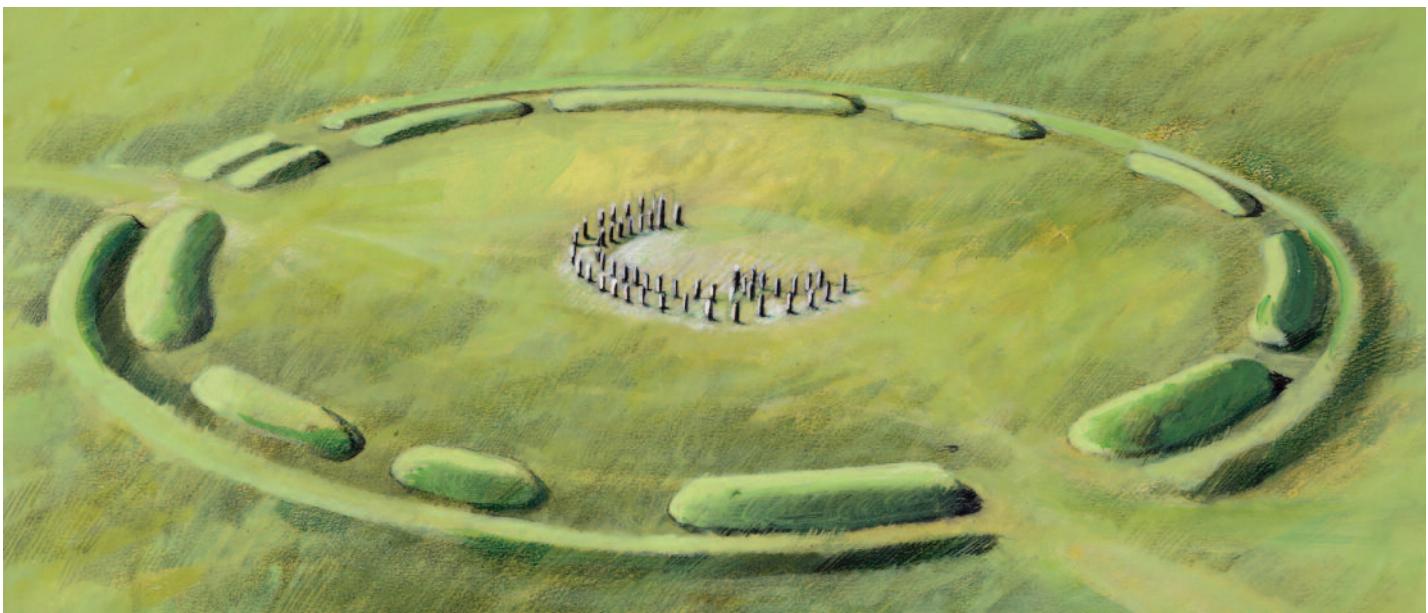
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top The third phase. The bluestones were set in two concentric arcs which may have been part of a larger circular structure, but no evidence of the rest of it has been found, and the date of this phase is unknown.



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left The final phase c. 2280 – 1930 BC. 75 massive sarsens were brought to Stonehenge to form the Stone Circle and within it the horseshoe of five massive trilithons. The tallest of these, the Great Trilithon, faces the entrance, with the sandstone Altar stone in front of it. A circle of 60 bluestones were raised outside the trilithons with an inner horseshoe of bluestone pillars. Large sarsens were placed at the entrance, and on the Avenue, now delineated by a bank and ditch.



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