

# STONEHENGE

Walk in the footsteps of your Neolithic ancestors at Stonehenge – one of the wonders of the world and the best-known prehistoric monument in Europe. Explore the ancient landscape on foot and step inside the Neolithic Houses to discover the tools and objects of everyday Neolithic life. Visit the world-class exhibition and visitor centre with 250 ancient objects and come face to face with a 5,500 year-old man.

## HISTORY OF STONEHENGE

Stonehenge is perhaps the world's most famous prehistoric monument. It was built in several stages: the first monument was an early henge monument, built about 5,000 years ago, and the unique stone circle was erected in the late Neolithic period about 2500 BC. In the early Bronze Age many burial mounds were built nearby. Today, along with Avebury, it forms the heart of a World Heritage Site, with a unique concentration of prehistoric monuments.

## BUILDING STONEHENGE

Stonehenge is a masterpiece of engineering. How did Neolithic people build it using only the simple tools and technologies available to them?

### THE FIRST MONUMENT

The first monument at Stonehenge was a circular earthwork enclosure, built in about 3000 BC. A ditch was dug with simple antler tools, and the chalk piled up to make an inner and an outer bank. Within the ditch was a ring of 56 timber or stone posts. The monument was used as a cremation cemetery for several hundred years.

In about 2500 BC the site was transformed by the construction of the central stone settings. Enormous sarsen stones and smaller bluestones were raised to form a unique monument.

Building Stonehenge took huge effort from hundreds of well-organised people.

### TRANSPORTING THE STONES

There are two types of stone at Stonehenge - the larger sarsen stones and the smaller 'bluestones'.

The sarsen stones are a type of sandstone, which is found scattered naturally across southern England. Most archaeologists believe that these stones were brought from the Marlborough Downs, 20 miles (32km) away. There great quantities of sarsens still lie across in the landscape, although their exact origin is not known. On average the sarsens weigh 25 tons, with the largest stone, the Heel Stone, weighing about 30 tons.

Bluestone is the term used to refer to the smaller stones at Stonehenge. These are of varied geology but all came from the Preseli Hills in south-west Wales. Although they may not appear blue, they do have a bluish tinge when freshly broken or when wet. They weigh between 2 and 5 tons each.



This low-level aerial photograph clearly shows the earlier circular earthwork that surrounds the stone monument

Some people believe that the bluestones could have been brought to Salisbury Plain by the movement of glaciers, but most archaeologists think that they were transported by human effort. How this was done over a distance of more than 250 kilometres remains unknown, but it is probable the stones were both carried via water networks and hauled over land.



The two main types of stone at Stonehenge were brought over very long distances to the site

## DESCRIPTION OF STONEHENGE

The Stonehenge we see today is the end result of several episodes of construction, after an intervening 4,000 years of destruction and decay. Various stones are fallen or missing, making the original plan difficult to understand. This page briefly describes the different elements of the monument.

## ALIGNMENTS AT STONEHENGE

The main axis of the stones is aligned upon the solstitial axis. At midsummer, the sun rises over the horizon to the north-east, close to the Heel Stone. At midwinter, the sun sets in the south-west, in the gap between the two tallest trilithons, one of which has now fallen.

These times in the seasonal cycle were obviously important to the prehistoric people who built and used Stonehenge.



Sarsen stones lying on the Marlborough Down

## SIGNIFICANCE OF STONEHENGE

Stonehenge is a unique prehistoric monument, lying at the centre of an outstandingly rich archaeological landscape. An extraordinary source for the study of prehistory, it holds a pivotal place in the development of archaeology. Many different theories have been put forward about who built it, when, and why.

In 2016 Stonehenge celebrates its 30th year as a World Heritage site – in 1986, together with Avebury, it was one of the very first sites in the UK to be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

## A WORLD HERITAGE SITE

The World Heritage Site Management Plan summarises the significance, or outstanding universal value, of the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site as follows:

*The Stonehenge, Avebury, and Associated Sites World Heritage Site is internationally important for its complexes of outstanding prehistoric monuments. Stonehenge is the most architecturally sophisticated prehistoric stone circle in the world, while Avebury is the largest in the world. Together with inter-related monuments and their associated landscapes, they help us to understand Neolithic and Bronze Age ceremonial and mortuary practices. They demonstrate around 2000 years of continuous use and monument building between c. 3700 and 1600 BC. As such they represent a unique embodiment of our collective heritage.*

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND MEANING

Stonehenge has often been at the forefront of the development of archaeology (see [Research on Stonehenge](#)).

It has also perhaps been the focus of more theories about its origin and purpose than any other prehistoric monument. These have included a coronation place for Danish kings, a Druid temple, an astronomical computer for predicting eclipses and solar events, a place where ancestors were worshipped or a cult centre for healing.

Today, the interpretation of Stonehenge which is most generally accepted is that of a prehistoric temple aligned with the movements of the sun.

## ICON AND INSPIRATION

Finally, Stonehenge is an icon of the past and a powerful image of ancient achievement. It has been the subject of many paintings and poems and featured in books, music and films.

Stonehenge continues to have a role as a sacred place of special religious and cultural significance for many, and inspires a strong sense of awe and humility for thousands of visitors who are drawn to the site every year.



The crowd celebrating the midsummer solstice in 2010