

Stonehenge Audio Guide Transcript Landscape Tour

This optional tour starts at the information point in Fargo Woods.

The tour leads you on a walk across part of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site. You can use these stops to extend your walk from the visitor centre to Stonehenge or take the shuttle bus and get off at the Fargo Woods drop-off point.

Landscape Tour Map



A Introduction

Welcome to the Stonehenge landscape tour. The area in front of you might appear to be nothing more than a vast field. But it's actually a landscape filled with earthworks and monuments dating back more than five thousand years. At that time, this area would have looked much as it does today. Even though much of southern Britain was covered in forest, this landscape – with its chalky soil – didn't have many trees. Perhaps it was the openness of this place that attracted ancient people. It may have been easier to build monuments here – and it certainly would have been a good place to observe the sky.

Thousands of years before Stonehenge was constructed, this area was already peppered with monuments. On this walk, you'll see structures from before, during and after the time when Stonehenge was built. We'll be looking at the Stonehenge Cursus, a rectangular monument stretching nearly three kilometres or two miles; a group of burial mounds called the Cursus Barrows; and the original approach to Stonehenge, known as The Avenue. You can use the map on your orientation leaflet to help you find the monuments. They're covered with grass, so depending on the time of year, they might be easy or difficult to spot. If you follow all of the points on this tour, your walk will take about an hour.

Whilst English Heritage looks after Stonehenge, most of the fields around it are owned and cared for by the National Trust. Please follow the countryside code, closing gates behind you

and not approaching grazing animals too closely. Dogs should be kept on leads.

To find the next stop on this tour, go through one of the two gates in front of you, turn left and walk along the edge of the woodland, until you come to the end of the trees.

B The Stonehenge Cursus

If you're standing at the corner of the wooded area, with the trees behind you, the land in front of you contains the Greater, or Stonehenge Cursus. It's a huge rectangular earthwork enclosure more than 100 metres or about 300 feet wide, and 2.7 kilometres or more than one mile in length. You might spot it if you look for a dip in the land, followed by a slightly built-up bank. The Cursus runs from the gap between the trees where you're standing, all the way to the tree-topped ridge in the distance to the right. If you'd like help finding it, just walk to your left alongside the wood, until you reach an information panel. Or check the map on your orientation leaflet. It might be tricky to see at first, but that's because the earthworks are over 5,000 years old!

The Cursus was built in about 3500 BC, in the early Neolithic period, roughly 500 years before work started on the earliest stage of Stonehenge. The builders used picks made from deer antlers to dig the ditches and build up the banks. The Cursus

would have been white from the chalk when first constructed. Excavations have shown that people returned to the monument and dug pits into the chalk, much later, around the time that Stonehenge was built, probably to re-whiten the banks so that it remained visible against the landscape. Clearly, it was an important monument and remained so for a long time.

The Cursus was given its name by the 18th-century antiquary William Stukeley, who conducted early archaeological surveys around Stonehenge. He decided that the monument must have been Roman, built for racing chariots or horses. So he named it the Cursus, Latin for racetrack.

We don't know what the Cursus was for. It might have been a sacred ground for processions or a barrier that people had to cross. It might also have been a monument of a route travelled by their ancestors. These are all theories though, since archaeologists have found no objects here that might shed light onto the mystery.

Once you've finished exploring the Cursus, head towards the round barrows, or burial mounds, that you can see nearby. They are fenced off, but you can enter the area through one of the pedestrian gates.

Cursus Barrows

These grass-covered mounds are known as the Cursus Barrows and are some of the best-preserved round barrows anywhere in Britain. A barrow is a prehistoric burial mound covering one or more graves. The shapes of barrows vary: some are more bowl-like while others have a bell shape, with a gap (or 'berm') between the mound and its surrounding ditch. Still others aren't mounds at all but small circular earthwork rings. The barrows you're seeing were constructed in about 2200 BC – when Stonehenge had already been completed.

The barrows all overlook Stonehenge, suggesting that it was still an important monument and that the people interred in the barrows were prominent enough to be buried within view of it. These particular barrows form a row parallel to the Cursus, indicating that it too remained significant, even though it was over a thousand years old by the time the barrows were built.

The people inside these barrows were either buried or cremated, and they were often buried with objects. Inside three of these mounds, early antiquaries and archaeologists have uncovered bronze daggers, pottery urns, and beads of amber, shale and gold.

You might notice that one of the mounds is actually a pair of joined barrows. Often barrows were added to over time, with new burials inserted and the mounds enlarged or re-shaped.

The Stonehenge World Heritage Site contains more than 300 prehistoric burial mounds. Feel free to walk around them, but please don't walk on top of the barrows. Despite the fact that they've been around for thousands of years, they're fragile, and footsteps cause them to erode.

The next stop is about a ten minute walk from here, where you'll find a panel marking what's known as the Avenue. To find it just walk towards Stonehenge, crossing the track – or byway – using the pedestrian gates. On the other side, don't turn right up the track towards Stonehenge but walk straight across through another gate into the field, and head towards the gap in the trees on the ridge in front of you. At the bottom of the valley you should spot the information panel.

D The Avenue

If you're standing at the information panel at the bottom of the valley and facing towards Stonehenge, you'll be looking along where a set of parallel banks formed the original entrance to the monument. It's called The Avenue. Unfortunately, the banks aren't visible here, but you'll hopefully spot them later. The Avenue was built in about 2300 BC and may have served as a processional route. It began about a mile away at the River Avon, then crossed over King Barrow Ridge. That's the ridge you can see to your left, about a kilometre or two-thirds of a mile away. Along it, in a row at the base of the trees, are more

round barrows like the ones we've just explored. The Avenue continued from the gap in the trees to where you're standing, before turning nearly 90 degrees onto a straight path to Stonehenge. This final part is aligned along the solstice axis – that is, it lines up with sunrise on the longest day of the year and sunset on the shortest.

The Avenue seems to have been built on top of earlier ridges and fissures left by geological processes during the last Ice Age. These happened to line up along the alignment of the midwinter sunset and midsummer sunrise. It's possible that they were noticed by prehistoric people and that's why they built Stonehenge in this location. They might have considered the natural features as marking a place where the earth and the heavens were in harmony.

From here, it's difficult to see any of the parallel banks and ditches making up the Avenue. But if you walk up the rising ground in a straight line toward Stonehenge, you may be able to make out them out closer to the stones. They form a corridor about 20 metres wide.

The Avenue is positioned very deliberately – as you walk towards Stonehenge, you'll notice that the stones are hidden from view. As you progress up the hill, Stonehenge suddenly appears in a dramatic way! This intentional visual drama is the culmination of a walk people took thousands of years ago as they approached one of the most sacred places of the ancient world. Follow the course of the Avenue to reach Stonehenge.

We hope you've enjoyed your walk in this extraordinary landscape. The National Trust owns and cares for more than 800 hectares of the ancient landscape around Stonehenge. Thanks to their extensive programme of converting ploughed fields into pasture, much of this landscape has been returned to grass and has been made accessible to visitors. You can return to the visitor centre by turning right along the fenceline back to the shuttle bus stop. If you haven't already explored Stonehenge, just make your way in the same direction to the entrance.

