

Stonehenge Audio Guide Transcript Stone Circle Tour

Make your way to the monument through landscape or on the shuttle bus. Once you see the sign for Stop 1 you are ready to begin the tour.

Stone Circle Map



1 Introduction

Welcome to Stonehenge, a unique prehistoric temple, aligned with the movements of the sun. Built in stages between 3000 and 2200 BC, it's the only stone circle in the world to have lintels – the horizontal stones sitting on top of the uprights. Its architecture reveals the sophisticated minds and engineering ability of those who built it – the late Neolithic people of Britain.

As we explore the monument, we'll not only find out about Stonehenge but also the history of the area around it.

Stonehenge stands within a landscape that includes prehistoric monuments and burial mounds dating from before, during and after Stonehenge was built.

While our visit will take you close to the stones, unfortunately we won't be entering the circle itself. That's because the archaeology below the grass is very fragile and too much foot traffic causes erosion and damage. Please don't step over any of the ropes along the edges of the path that circle Stonehenge.

Now, let's step into the story of Stonehenge. Make your way towards the stone circle and keep to the left when the path divides. Watch out for sign number 2.

You can follow your route using the map.

2 Earthwork Enclosure

Stonehenge wasn't all built at the same time. Instead, the monument was built and re-arranged over a period of about a thousand years. Can you see a ditch and bank visible as low earthworks in the grass? You'll see that they run in a complete circle around Stonehenge that is 100 metres or about 300 feet in diameter. This was the first part of Stonehenge to be built, about 5,000 years ago, in around 3000 BC, before the stone circle in the middle was built.

Together, this bank and ditch form an early type of henge. This is a term, from the name of Stonehenge, used by archaeologists to describe a circular earthwork monument, surrounded by a bank and ditch.

Now, keep following the path while you hear how it was made.

The ditch was dug using picks made from deer antlers. Originally, the entire circle would have been chalk-white. When the builders finished the enclosure, they placed animal bones, flint tools, and carved chalk objects into the ditch – perhaps as offerings. Inside the ditch was a ring of 56 pits which probably held timber posts or standing stones. Many of these holes contained cremated human remains, which were also found in the ditch and on the bank. An estimated 150 people were buried here between about 3000 and 2800 BC. So in its earliest phase, one of the functions of Stonehenge was a cemetery.



Domain of the Ancestors?

Professor Mike Parker Pearson, who has studied Stonehenge for over 40 years and led excavations in the wider landscape, has a theory about Stonehenge's role as a memorial – and its link to another prehistoric site, Durrington Walls, about three kilometres, or two miles, away:

“We think that Durrington Walls and Stonehenge were part of one complex in the third millennium BC and the link was basically that each of them has an avenue leading to the River Avon.”

At Durrington Walls, archaeologists discovered the remains of houses. You might have seen reconstructions of them outside the visitor centre. Durrington was a settlement where hundreds of people lived for a time, perhaps when they were building Stonehenge. Among the houses stood circles aligned with the movements of the sun – but these circles were made from timber. It gave Parker Pearson a clue as to Stonehenge's purpose:

“The breakthrough came from inviting a colleague from Madagascar in the Indian Ocean to look at Stonehenge. And he said, ‘What do you mean, you don't know what it's for, it's obvious'. Because for him in Madagascar, you build in stone for the ancestors because they are permanent, but you build in timber for the living.”

Parker Pearson believes that Durrington Walls, with its houses and wood structures, was the domain of the living, whereas Stonehenge, with its cremations and stones, functioned as the domain of the dead. It's one of several theories about Stonehenge that keeps archaeologists exploring and debating, what do you think?

→ The Stonehenge Archer

In 1978, archaeologists were excavating a small section of the ditch. Unexpectedly, they discovered the skeleton of a man.

Radiocarbon dating of his bones tells us that he died around 2300 BC, after the sarsen stones had been raised. The man was about 30 years old when he died. He was buried with a wristguard – a small rectangle of stone that was probably strapped to his lower arm – and several flint arrowheads. He was therefore named the 'Stonehenge Archer'. But the arrowheads didn't all belong to him. Several of them were embedded in his ribs and sternum, or breast bone, suggesting that he had met a violent death. We don't know if he was a sacrifice or a victim of an attack, but the fact that he was buried at Stonehenge suggests that his life, or perhaps his death, was very important.

The Stonehenge Archer burial is on display at the Salisbury Museum – a short drive from here and well worth a visit.

3 The Heel Stone and the Avenue

The large leaning stone close to the path is called the Heel Stone. Like all the large stones, it's a type of stone called sarsen. But unlike the stones you'll see in the circle, it hasn't been shaped and remains in its natural state. It may have been a stone that was lying here before people set it upright. Have a good look at it, but remember not to touch the stone or step over the rope.

If the grass isn't too high, you might be able to make out raised parallel banks and ditches on either side of the Heel Stone. They form a corridor running towards Stonehenge about 20 metres wide. You may also be able to see that it continues behind you into the field. This is the final section of what's called The Avenue. The Avenue is nearly three kilometres or about two miles long, linking Stonehenge to the banks of the River Avon. The Avenue was probably built in about 2300 BC, after the stones were raised and may have been some form of processional routeway.

The people who constructed Stonehenge aligned the earthwork entrance and later, the Avenue, with the movements of the sun. You may notice a bronze arrow in the ground marking this solstice axis. If you were standing inside the stone circle on Midsummer's Day, you'd see the sun rise over the Heel Stone, in this direction. Similarly, if you were standing here on Midwinter's Day, you'd watch the sun set in the opposite direction. The setting sun would have been framed between the

two uprights of the tallest trilithon on the far side of the stone circle. The one upright still standing is easy to spot because it has a bump – or tenon – on top.

Stonehenge's alignment shows that its builders had a sophisticated understanding of the sky. The seasons would have been very important to them. The winter would have been a difficult time; they needed the return of longer days and warmth to grow their crops and feed their animals. Perhaps Stonehenge was a sort of calendar, or a place where the seasons were celebrated. We think people may have gathered here at midwinter and midsummer to celebrate and conduct rituals.

You may have noticed a large flat stone lying in the grass in front of you – this is the Slaughter Stone.

The Slaughter Stone

This fallen stone once stood upright. It was one of two or three stones placed across the entrance causeway to the henge, replacing an earlier arrangement of lines of wooden stakes.

The name Slaughter Stone was given to this stone in the 19th century, when visitors interpreted the fallen stone as an altar for sacrifices. Perhaps they were inspired by the red colour of the rainwater that gathers in hollows on the surface, a result of the iron content of the stone. At this time, people thought that

Stonehenge had been built by the Druids, priests who lived in pre-Roman Britain, who were thought to practice human sacrifice. In fact, we have no evidence that sacrifices took place at Stonehenge. And the idea that Stonehenge was built by the Druids has long been dismissed – it is much older.

→ Who built Stonehenge

The stones were raised into place in about 2500 BC, during a time we call the late Neolithic period. People at this time probably led somewhat nomadic lifestyles, moving with the seasons, herding pigs and cattle and returning regularly to the same places. English Heritage archaeologist Susan Greaney tells us how their pottery gives us insight into their culture:

“We know that the people who built Stonehenge were farmers and pastoralists, but they may have travelled some distances to take part in the project. Some of the bluestones are even thought to have previously stood in a stone circle in Wales. These people were using a type of pottery called Grooved Ware, a flat-based pottery which is usually decorated with geometric lines and shapes. It’s a type of pottery found in large parts of Britain and Ireland at this time, and it seems to emerge first in Orkney, in the far north of Scotland. So we know that the people who built Stonehenge had connections to other parts of these islands, and shared ideas and styles of pottery.”

4 The Stones

What makes Stonehenge unique is the arrangement of its stones and the fact that they were brought from long distances. Feel free to continue on around this part of the monument field as you hear more about the stones.

There are two kinds of stones. The larger ones are sarsens, a type of hard stone, brought from the Marlborough Downs, 24 kilometres, or 15 miles, to the north. Sarsens can weigh over 30 tons. The tallest one here stands over seven metres high with another two and a half metres below ground.

The smaller stones inside the circle – still weighing up to three tons – are called bluestones. They're actually a variety of volcanic rocks, all with a blue-grey colour. They were brought from the Preseli Hills in southwest Wales, over 240 kilometres, or 156 miles away.

The stones were brought over land using sledges and ropes, and probably along rivers and around the coast by boat. It was a huge feat of organisation, as Susan Greaney explains:

“Each different successive stage of extracting the stones, transporting over long distances, shaping and working them, and then raising them into position would have taken hundreds of people. Those involved were not simply those doing those tasks, but also people supporting them – making the equipment such as ropes

and timber sledges or scaffolding, feeding the workers on a regular basis and looking after their children. There must have been quite a complex system where people came to take part in this vast project, perhaps travelling from their home for several months at a time. We don't know how society was organised at this time, there's no hint of hierarchy or particular people being an elite. But the project must have been well organised, and people must have had certain specialist roles in surveying, designing and organising the building of the monument.”

The sarsens on the outside of the monument are part of what was probably a complete circle of thirty upright stones and thirty connecting horizontal stones. Some of the uprights still have the lintels on top.

Inside you can see some even larger stones. These once formed a horseshoe of five trilithons. A trilithon – from the Greek for ‘three stones’ – is made of two upright stones and one horizontal lintel. Some of these have now fallen. As you continue round the circle, see if you can spot the smaller bluestones among the sarsens.

Shaping the Stones

At most other prehistoric stone circles, the stones were raised in their natural rough state. But here at Stonehenge, they were shaped to form smooth regular blocks. The people who built

Stonehenge lived before metal was used in Britain. They shaped the stones using hammerstones: lumps of sarsen that chipped off bits from the larger rocks.

Even though the builders' tools were rudimentary, their engineering was sophisticated. If you look at some of the large sarsens, you may see bumps on top. These are called tenons. A tenon fits into a hollow – or mortice – carved out of the underside of a horizontal lintel. Together, they lock the stones in place. Each horizontal lintel in the outer circle was slotted into the adjacent ones using tongue and groove joints. This type of construction is usually seen in woodworking. It hasn't been found in any other monuments, making Stonehenge unique.

To raise the stones, first a hole with a sloping side was dug into the chalk. The stones were then dragged to the edge of the hole and tipped in, perhaps using wooden levers or large stone weights. Only then could it be hauled upright using ropes and the hole then packed tightly with chalk, broken and discarded hammerstones and antler picks. The lintels were probably levered up to the top using timber platforms, with the joints then finished to make a good fit. Raising each stone would have been difficult and dangerous. The result is a masterpiece of architecture and engineering.

→ A place of Healing?

As you've heard, we aren't sure why Stonehenge was built. Archaeologist Professor Timothy Darvill, who has excavated at Stonehenge, shares his theory:

"I see Stonehenge as a great sanctuary, which is initially constructed with these big stones around the outside, but the really powerful bits are these bluestones which are inside the circle. There are about 80 of these and they get rearranged many times over."

The idea of powerful stones isn't a new one. In the early 12th century, medieval scholar Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote about how the stones of Stonehenge had special healing powers. There are oral traditions today in Wales that the Preseli Hills, where the bluestones come from, have magical properties. And at Stonehenge, people were breaking up and removing chunks of bluestone from an early date in the monument's history, perhaps taking them away like amulets.

"Seen as a healing centre, Stonehenge would undoubtedly have drawn pilgrims, perhaps from all over Europe, and indeed we do have burials in the area of people who have come a great distance, perhaps from central Europe. We also have people buried here who seem to have some extraordinary ailments.

All of these things lead us to believe that Stonehenge must have been considered a pilgrimage centre which was well known across the ancient world. In that sense it would have acted like an ancient version of Lourdes or perhaps Santiago de Compostela.”

– **Timothy Darvill**

The bluestones must have been regarded as special to bring them all the way from south-west Wales. What do you think about the notion of stones with healing powers?

5 Barrows

If you turn away from Stonehenge and look out into the landscape in almost any direction, you'll see lots of grass-covered mounds. These are round barrows. A number of barrows can be seen on a ridge amongst trees called King Barrow Ridge. And there are more on the other side of the busy main road, in an area called Normanton Down.

Round barrows were built after construction activities at Stonehenge had finished – from about 2200 BC until about 1600 BC. Many of these mounds were placed along the ridges overlooking Stonehenge, indicating that the monument remained an important site long after building work was complete. There are more than 300 mounds in the Stonehenge landscape – one of the highest concentrations in Britain.

Each barrow covered the graves of what we assume were prominent people. The earliest barrows contain burials; later, some covered cremations. Often the person was buried with spectacular grave goods, including stone, bone and bronze tools, pottery, ceremonial battle axes and ornaments made from exotic materials, like jet, amber and gold. Some of these finds are on display in the visitor centre and more of these incredible finds can be seen at Wiltshire Museum in nearby Devizes.

Often, several burials could be located beneath a single barrow, as Susan Greaney explains:

“Under each of these round barrows might be a burial, for example, surrounded by a ring of posts. Later, people might have raised a mound over the burial, and perhaps added another person, a secondary burial. In another stage, the mound might have been enlarged and a ditch dug around it. So what we see today, when we look at the grass mounds is really the last stage in their history.”

When these barrows were first built, the chalk would have gleamed white against the grass.

The Stonehenge landscape forms one half of the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site, which covers an area of about 50 square kilometres or 19 square miles. It was inscribed by UNESCO in 1986 for its complexes of outstanding Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments which together form a landscape without parallel.

→ Antiquaries

For centuries, the barrows around Stonehenge remained untouched. But in the 18th and 19th centuries, they attracted the first archaeologists, called antiquaries. Antiquaries often dug straight down into a barrow's central burial to find the valuable items inside: pottery, jewellery and weapons. While they added these to their personal collections, they left the human remains behind, as these interested them less. In the early 19th century, antiquaries Sir Richard Colt Hoare and William Cunnington dug into more than 200 barrows in the landscape around Stonehenge.

Their most spectacular discovery was a rich burial inside a barrow known as Bush Barrow. If it's a clear day, look beyond the main road and see if you can spot a mound with a small bush growing on it. That is the Bush Barrow. Inside, Hoare and Cunnington found a man buried with many rich objects, including two lozenge-shaped sheets of gold, a gold belt plate and a fine bronze dagger decorated with gold pins.

Very few round barrows have been excavated in recent times, as we now understand that archaeology is a destructive process. These sites are not under any threat and archaeologists assume that their techniques will improve in the future. We therefore have to rely on the antiquaries' records to interpret and understand these early Bronze Age burials from 4,000 years ago. Today, many of the finds from barrows,

including those from Bush Barrow, are on display at Wiltshire Museum in Devizes.

→ The Station Stones

You might be able to see a small sarsen stone just inside the bank. It is known as a Station Stone. Originally, there were four Station Stones, marking the corners of a rectangle, but only two stand today. If you were to draw a line between opposite corners of this rectangle, they would meet at the exact centre of Stonehenge.

The Station Stones were probably put in place around the same time as the sarsens, around 2500 BC. Their meaning is still a mystery. They may have served as survey markers for Stonehenge's original builders. Or they may have marked particular phases and movements of the moon at various times during the year.

6 The 'Back View'

Stonehenge is a circular monument, so it may surprise you to hear that you're looking at the 'back.' Quite a lot of sarsens are missing from this side, and those that remain aren't as carefully shaped as the ones closer to the Avenue. Susan Greaney tells us why:

“This back side of the stone circle seems to have been built of more irregularly shaped stones than the other sides, and the stones were not so carefully dressed and shaped. There is even one stone which is much shorter and narrower than what was needed. This suggests that this side wasn’t so important for impressing people approaching the monument from the main entrance on the far side.”

Some archaeologists think that the stone circle may not have been completed, at all. Some of the stones seem too narrow or short to have supported lintels.

The stones on this side, which probably wasn’t built so well, were the first to fall over. Some must have been broken up and taken away.

“People were probably breaking up the stones and using the rubble as roadstone to lay early roads in the area, and to build a few of the farms and buildings around here – it was simply a useful source of building material.”

– **Susan Greaney**

An advantage to viewing Stonehenge from this less complete side is that you have a good view of the inner horseshoe and some of the smaller bluestones. Take a few moments to look for the various types of stone structures: the sarsen trilithons (two uprights supporting a lintel), the bumps called tenons that once slotted into holes in the lintels, and the smaller bluestones.

→ Archaeology

People have been investigating the archaeology of Stonehenge since the 17th century. One of the earliest surveys was undertaken by the antiquary John Aubrey, who discovered a ring of depressions inside the ditch. These are now named Aubrey Holes in his honour.

In the early 18th century, William Stukeley surveyed Stonehenge and other monuments in the landscape. He discovered the Avenue and realised that the monument was aligned with the midsummer sunrise.

In the 1870s, the renowned Egyptologist, William Flinders Petrie, made the first accurate plan of Stonehenge. He also created the numbering system for the stones that archaeologists still use today. The first scientific excavations took place in 1901, led by archaeologist William Gowland. He discovered hammerstones – round stones used to smash pieces off larger rocks – and antler picks, both of which suggested to him that Stonehenge was built before the arrival of metal tools in Britain.

Large-scale excavations were undertaken over two main periods in the 20th century – in the 1920s, and again in the 1950s and 60s. This work led to the idea that Stonehenge had been built in three stages, and enabled the first scientific dating of the site to take place.

Nearly half of Stonehenge has now been excavated and

work continues on analysing the results of the most recent excavations. We are constantly learning new things about this extraordinary place.

→ The Druids

Often, when people think of Stonehenge, they think of the Druids, ancient priests who were living in Britain at the time the Romans arrived in AD 43. From the Classical sources that described them, these Iron Age priests worshipped in sacred oak groves, practising a pagan religion that honoured nature but also involved sacrifices.

In the 17th century, the antiquary John Aubrey suggested that Stonehenge pre-dated the Roman period. At the time, the only known pre-Roman people were the Druids, so Aubrey logically concluded that Stonehenge was one of their temples. This idea was championed by 18th century antiquary William Stukeley and remained the accepted explanation until the end of the 19th century. People even named one of the stones 'the Slaughter Stone' in the mistaken belief that Druid priests used it during sacrifices. In actual fact, the Druids had nothing to do with Stonehenge – it was built over 2,000 years earlier than the Iron Age cultures described by the Classical authors.

Since the early 20th century, modern-day Druids have been coming to Stonehenge. They consider it a sacred place and gather here at different times each year to celebrate, including

the midsummer and midwinter solstices. They're not the only ones to feel a spiritual bond with Stonehenge, as Susan Greaney explains:

“Many people today have a spiritual connection to Stonehenge. They see it as a particularly special place where it is possible to communicate directly with those who lived in the distant past, with nature and as a place to experience the harmony of people and the world. Many attend winter and summer solstices, and also the equinoxes, when we open up the stone circle for these events. Some would refer to themselves as Druids, others as pagans or Wicca, others wouldn't name themselves anything but they're spiritually aware and find something in Stonehenge that is more meaningful than more formal aspects of other religions. Many people come to solstice celebrations simply to witness the sunrise and step outside their everyday lives.”

7 Aubrey Holes

You should see a marker set into the path, and two more in the grass on either side. These show the position of three holes, dug about 5,000 years ago.

These holes were part of a ring of 56 pits that extends around Stonehenge which were dug 500 years before the central stone circle was built. Each pit probably held a pillar, although we're

not sure whether they were standing stones or wooden posts. Inside and around these holes, archaeologists have discovered the cremated remains of about 64 people and believe that there may have been as many as 150 people originally buried here: men, women and children. Burials of any kind are very rare from this period, so these were probably important people. Only a few other cremation cemeteries from this period are known in Britain – and Stonehenge is the largest.

This ring of holes are known as ‘Aubrey Holes’ after 17th century antiquary John Aubrey. He was the first person to notice some of these holes – which appeared as depressions – although they weren’t excavated for another 250 years. The holes remind us that Stonehenge was an important ritual site long before the stones arrived.

8 Conservation and Restoration

When we look at Stonehenge today, we’re seeing it as a ruin, altered by more than 4,000 years of weathering, erosion and decay. The large stones were put up around 2500 BC. It’s the only stone circle in the world to have lintels – the horizontal stones sitting on top of the uprights. From this position, have a look for the joints which connect the stones together, and look for the smaller bluestones that were brought from south Wales.

Take a close look at the bases of the standing stones in this area. You might see that one of them is infilled with concrete.

The repair has been intentionally left visible because it is part of the site's history. Actually, quite a few of the stones are set into concrete below the grass. This conservation work was carried out in the 1920s and again in the 1950s and 60s, making sure that the stones were secure and protected for the future.

For years all visitors were allowed to enter the stone circle, but access had to be restricted in 1978 due to vandalism and graffiti. Susan Greaney explains why that's still the case today:

“The challenge really for English Heritage, who look after Stonehenge, is to balance conserving and protecting this unique monument, the centrepiece of a World Heritage Site, with the wishes of the thousands of people who want to come and see it every year. And this is the reason why we can't let everybody who visits Stonehenge into the middle of the stone circle.

If we let the million people who visit every year inside, the fragile stone carvings and evidence on the stones would erode, and the ground would soon turn to mud, damaging the fragile archaeology under the ground. Only about half of Stonehenge has been excavated and so there's still a lot of archaeology there that is waiting with secrets to tell us in the future.”

Even if in the future, with new techniques and science, archaeologists uncover some of those secrets, some things about Stonehenge will always remain mysterious. But the

monument will always provide a direct link to the distant past, and to the prehistoric people we hope to better understand.

This is the end of the Stonehenge tour. Spend some time soaking up the atmosphere, take in the landscape around you and look again at Stonehenge. What message do you think the prehistoric people who built it were trying to convey, 4,500 years ago?

When you're ready you can either make your way back across the landscape or use the shuttle bus to return to the visitor centre where you can learn more about Stonehenge and the people who built it at the exhibition or the reconstructed Neolithic Houses.

Thank you for visiting Stonehenge today.

English Heritage cares for Stonehenge and over 400 other historic sites.

We are a charity, so all the money we raise helps to keep England's story alive for future generations to enjoy. You can support our work by making a donation, or by joining English Heritage as a Member. With English Heritage Membership you can enjoy free access to all our sites – from Roman fortresses to royal palaces, and from mighty medieval castles to grand country houses.

To find out more, speak to a member of staff or visit our website.

Enjoy the rest of your visit.

Find Out More

Now that you've visited Stonehenge, perhaps you'd like to find out more. To see more archaeological finds from the Stonehenge landscape, we recommend visiting Salisbury Museum and Wiltshire Museum in Devizes. Both museums have fantastic displays about prehistory, with stunning artefacts from the time of Stonehenge.

