

STONEHENGE, WILTSHIRE

Begun 5000 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 been used for calendar setting, but we may never know precisely how it was used, or what ceremonies took place there.

Historical Description

The Stonehenge we see today represents the climax of a long period of development which began about 2900 BC with the construction of a circular bank and ditch about 300 feet in diameter, with two entrances – one of which may have been marked by a pair of small stones; just inside the bank was a ring of post-sockets. Later, the empty post-sockets were filled with cremated human bone and a large wooden building was erected at the centre of the ring. Similar sites exist elsewhere in Britain, dating from the Neolithic period, the age of the earliest farmers.

About 2500 BC the famous “blue stones” from the Preseli mountains were brought to the site: nearly 100 of them, weighing about four tons each. The builders apparently began setting them up in a double circle but this was never finished. Instead a grander plan using local sarsen stones was adopted. 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 final stages in the building of Stonehenge involved re-using some of the old blue stones to form smaller circles and horse-shoe arrangements within the larger structure. By 2000 BC, after at thousand years of development, the monument had achieved the shape whose ruins now remain. For how long it continued in use we do not know.

Learning Opportunities

For many pupils their first sight of Stonehenge may come as a disappointment. Clamped between two busy roads, it often seems smaller than they have been led to believe. The site has also acquired a wealth of pseudo-scientific 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 1500 BC indicates the eventual failure 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 they developed to please these gods. Some form of gift invariably precedes the asking of a favour, but there is no evidence that this involved human sacrifice. The so-called altar stone is in fact a fallen blues stone 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'.

Location

2 miles west of Avebury on junction of the A303 and A344/A360.
OS Map 184, Ref SU 123422.

How to Get There

Bus: Wilts & Dorset 3 Salisbury to Stonehenge. Tel: 01722 336855.

Train: Salisbury 9½ miles.

Opening Hours

For current opening hours visit www.english-heritage.org.uk or contact Customer Services on 0870 333 1181.

Facilities

Parking: Large car park adjacent to the monument.

Shop: Guidebooks, souvenirs etc.

Refreshments: Snack bar on site.

Toilets: on site.

Exhibition: Display panels at intervals around site.

Access for the Disabled: Steep but short drive to admission point, otherwise full access to the site.

Free Educational Visits

Educational visits are free to English Heritage properties if booked at least fourteen days in advance via the South West Office:

29 Queen Square, Bristol, BS1 4ND

Tel: 0117 9750688

Limit on Party Number: 100

Required Teacher/Pupil Ratio: 1:15

Contacts

Booking and Site Information: South West Office, address as above.

Regional Education Officer: Harriet Attwood, Tel: 0117 9750729.

Nearby and Related Sites

Avebury Museum: The museum contains the Keiller collection of finds from Avebury and surrounding sites. EH but managed by the National Trust, Tel: 01672 539250.

Woodhenge: 1½ miles north of Avebury, on a similar alignment to Stonehenge.

Other sites are listed in the souvenir guidebook (see below) EH.

A Guide to Resources

Atkinson R, 1990, Stonehenge and Neighbouring Monuments, Souvenir Guide, English Heritage, ISBN 1-85074-172-7.

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

Videos

1994, Archaeology at Work: 1 – Looking for the Past; 2. Uncovering the Past, English Heritage. 58 minutes.

Two videos which examine the work of archaeologists. Suitability: Key Stages 2 & 3.

All English Heritage resources are available from English Heritage c/o Gillards, Trident Works, Temple Cloud, Bristol, BS39 5AZ.

Tel: 01761 452966, Fax: 01761 453408.

E-mail: ehsales@gillards.com

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Free Educational Visits contains details of all English Heritage properties and a booking form, and is packed with ideas and activities for National Curriculum study and work on site. Our **Resources** catalogue lists all our educational books, videos, posters and software.

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