

Stonehenge

Stonehenge is probably the most important prehistoric monument in the whole of Britain and it is composed of earthworks surrounding a circular setting of large standing stones. It has attracted visitors from earliest times and stands as enduring evidence to the people who built it, in several phases, between 3,000 and 1,600 BC. As an amazing achievement of engineering and probably the most sophisticated stone circle in the world, it remains a mystery. It is located in the English county of Wiltshire, South West England. In 1986, Stonehenge was added to the UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites.

The true meaning of this ancient, impressive creation has been lost over the years. Was it a temple for sun worship, a healing centre, a grave, or perhaps a huge calendar? How did our ancestors manage to carry the mighty stones from so far away and then, using only the most primitive of tools, build this amazing structure? Surrounded by mystery, Stonehenge never fails to impress.

A huge struggle and a lot of organisation was needed to carry the stones hundreds of miles by land and water, and then to shape and raise them. Only a highly-developed society could have found so many workers and produced the design and construction skills that were necessary to build Stonehenge and its surrounding monuments.

The orientation of Stonehenge in relation to the rising and setting sun has always been one of its most remarkable features. Up to now, experts don't know whether this was because its builders came from a sun-worshipping culture or because – as some have suggested – the circle was part of a huge astronomical calendar.

What cannot be denied is the ingenuity of the builders of Stonehenge. With only very basic tools – such as antler picks and bone shovels they managed to build this amazing construction.

The first monument at Stonehenge that was built around 3,000 BC consisted of a circular ditch about 100 metres wide, possibly with a ring of 56 wooden posts. The ditch is now called Aubrey Hole. It got its name by the antiquarian John Aubrey from Wiltshire in the 17th century.

Some 400-500 years later the first stones arrived. These bluestones – a special sort of volcanic stones – were transported over 240 kilometres from the Preseli Hills in Pembrokeshire, West Wales. The bluestones were positioned in pairs in a curve to the north east of the centre of the monument. Shortly afterwards, they were broken down and replaced by an arrangement of stones which included the much larger sarsen stones from the nearby Marlborough Downs. This sort of stone is especially hard.

The outer circle was composed of 30 upright sarsen stones with a similar number of horizontal stones on top of the others, arranged in the form of a horseshoe, with the open end towards midsummer sunrise.

Bluestones, which clearly had a special significance for the builders, were re-erected in a circle between the outer sarsen circle and the horseshoe, and inside the horseshoe. Some bluestones were later removed to leave the final setting, this is what you still can visit today.

The surrounding landscape of Stonehenge is also fascinating. It contains huge prehistoric monuments, stretching over several kilometres like the Stonehenge Avenue and the Cursus, massive surrounding walls like Durrington Walls and the North Kite, and hundreds of grave mounds. The whole World Heritage Site covers more than 2,600 hectares and includes 415 archaeological sites.