



HISTORY MYSTERIES

What was the point of Stonehenge?

Stone Age	Bronze Age	Iron Age	Romans	Anglo-Saxons	Medieval	Tudors	Stuarts	English Commonwealth	Stuarts (again)	Georgians	Victorians	Edwardians	World War I	Inter-War Period	World War II	Cold War	Modern
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Stonehenge is probably the most famous historical landmark in the UK. Thousands of tourists from across the world flock to visit these iconic stones every year.

Archaeologists now know that the stones were erected in several stages between 3100BCE and 1600BCE, during the late **Neolithic** period of the **Stone Age** in Britain. Stonehenge consists of an outer ring of standing stones (**sarsens**), each around 4 metres high and 2 metres wide and weighing 25 tons (about the same as 4 African elephants!), topped with horizontal stones (**lintels**). Inside, is a ring of smaller **bluestones**, and inside that is a horseshoe arrangement of more vertical stones topped with lintels. The bluestones were brought all the way from South Wales to Salisbury Plain, a journey of about 140 miles – no mean feat even in modern times!

So – why did Stone Age Britons drag these enormous stones across the country and balance them on top of each other in a circle? What exactly was the intended purpose of Stonehenge?

Source A



*Crowds gather at Stonehenge for the **Summer Solstice**.*

Source B



'Celebrating midwinter solstice at Stonehenge, about 2300BC.' Reconstructed image.

<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/history-and-stories/stonehenge-reconstructed/>

Source C

We can only speculate as to what Stonehenge's purpose was. But the fact that the sun rises over the Heel Stone on the longest day of the year (summer solstice) and sets over it on the shortest day (winter solstice) suggests that it was a prehistoric temple aligned with the sun's movements.

The people who built Stonehenge were farmers and herders. The changing seasons would have been of immense significance to them, both practically – the seasons dictated what they could grow and when – and also probably spiritually. So Stonehenge is likely to have been much more than a calendar. Midsummer and midwinter may have been important times of year to remember the dead or to worship a solar deity.

<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/history-and-stories/>

Source D

Archaeologists excavating the interior of the great earthen henge of Durrington Walls, two miles north-east of Stonehenge, found huge quantities of animal bones, primarily belonging to pigs. Examination of the animals' teeth revealed them to be generally rotten – evidence that the beasts had been deliberately fattened up prior to slaughter. Piglets are usually born in the spring and since the vast majority of the bones found at Durrington Walls were of animals that had been killed at around the age of nine months, all the evidence there points to feasting on a vast scale...in the depths of mid-winter.

Neil Oliver, A History of Ancient Britain (2011)

Source E



These pig's teeth excavated at Durrington Walls show signs of decay, suggesting that they were being fattened on some sort of sweet food, perhaps honey.

© Mr & Mrs SJ Rawlins and Mr & Mrs WH Rawlins (Photo English Heritage/Clare Kendall)

Source F

Stonehenge may have been built to unite the early people of Britain - according to a new study.

Recent research on Stonehenge's large altar stone, which lies on its side inside the circle, revealed more about the ancient monument and its origins. Analysis by a team from Aberystwyth University showed that the altar stone had actually come from Scotland and not Wales, as had been thought previously.

"The fact that all of its stones originated from distant regions, making it unique among more than 900 stone circles in Britain, suggests that the stone circle may have had a political as well as a religious purpose – as a monument of **unification** for the peoples of Britain," said Professor Parker Pearson.

The researchers of the study say hundreds, and possibly thousands, of people would have been involved in moving the stones over land, and the journey may have taken about eight months. The wheel hadn't been invented in Britain yet, and it's thought sledges may have been used to drag the large stones across the country.

"Travel by land would have provided much better opportunities for spectacle, pageantry, feasting and celebration that would have drawn people in (the) thousands to witness and take part in this extraordinary venture," the study says.

Stonehenge was also the largest burial ground of its time, which suggests that the site may have been used as a religious temple, as well as a solar calendar.

BBC Newsround, 20 December 2024

Source G

Scientific dating techniques and painstaking archaeological research undertaken around the monument over the last few decades have brought the timeline of the site into focus. It is not possible to talk about 'one' Stonehenge – the monument was built, altered, and revered for over 1,500 years. That is equivalent to around 100 generations – it is worth pausing to let the sheer length of time sink in!

At this time [5000 years ago], the monument served as a cremation cemetery and it is estimated that possibly 150–200 people were buried there. Analysis suggests that several lived and died in west Wales before their remains may have moved with bluestones to become part of the monument. Many objects from this period have been found buried with the dead.

Around 500 years later, the monument underwent a major transformation. The bluestones were rearranged, and the great sarsens were painstakingly moved, each requiring at least 1,000 people to transport them the 25 kilometres from their source. Each of the massive stones were pounded into shape and raised into the central setting of uprights and capping lintels – the familiar image we know today. This work required unprecedented co-operation, planning and patience in the name of social and religious service.

An Introduction to Stonehenge by Jennifer Wexler, 7 December 2021 –
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/introduction-stonehenge>



What do YOU think?

Glossary

archaeologist – a person who studies the past by digging up remains

Stone Age – the period of history roughly 15,000–2500BCE in Britain

Neolithic – ‘New Stone Age’; the last period of the Stone Age in Britain, lasting from around 4100–2500BCE

sarsens – the large, upright stones at Stonehenge

lintels – the horizontal stones balanced on top of the upright stones

bluestone – term used to describe the stones used at Stonehenge that were not local, the most common of which is an igneous rock called Preseli Spotted Dolerite from South Wales

Summer Solstice – the longest day of the year

Winter Solstice – the shortest day of the year

Unite/unification – bringing people together

Further Reading:

The Secrets of Stonehenge by Mick Manning and Brita Granstrom

The Amazing Pop-Up Stonehenge by Julian Richards

The Stone Age: Hunters, Gatherers and Woolly Mammoths by Marcia Williams

BBC Bitesize Page on Stonehenge:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zqd496f#zfsx6g8>