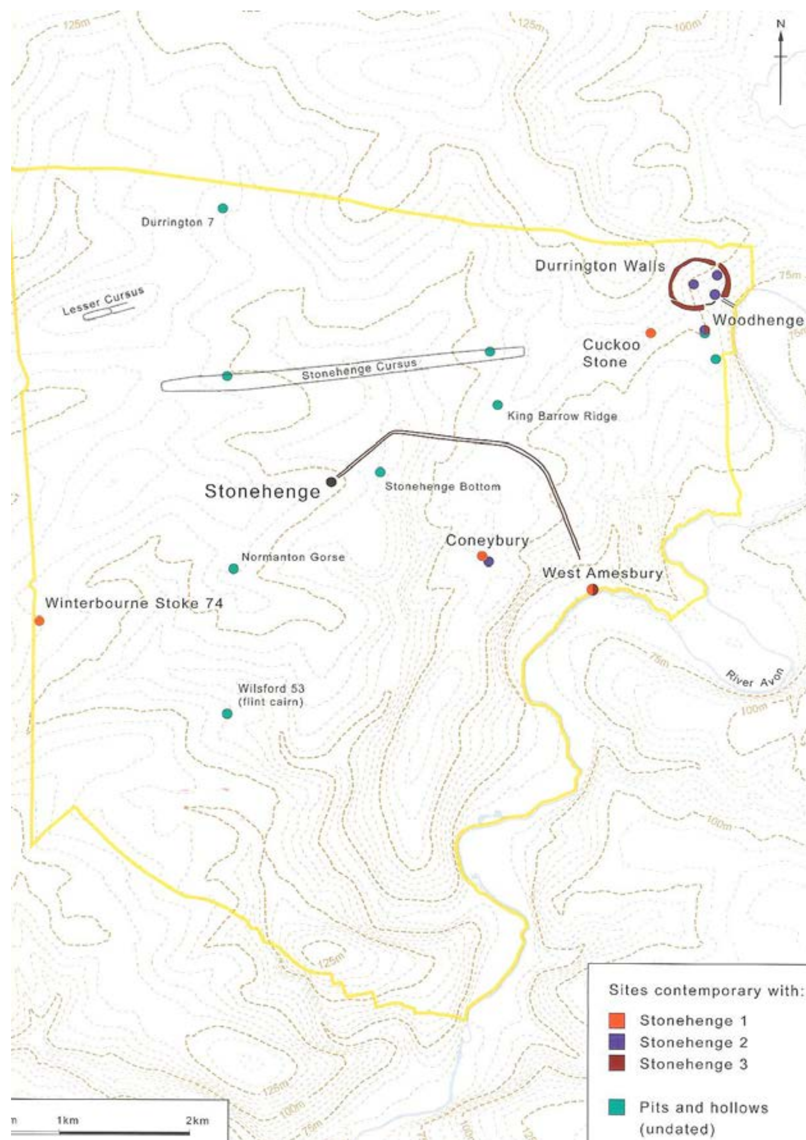
Stonehenge, Wiltshire: archaeology and history (Notes for visitors, prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

The stones at Stonehenge are probably the most famous and most visited archaeological monument in the world, but it is within a wide area of the chalk downland which was used for several millennia as a focus for ritual activities; some have left traces that can be seen, others have been revealed by excavations. Some of the sites cannot be visited – the earliest is the Neolithic causewayed camp known as Robin Hood's Ball, well to the north-west of the stones and in the army's restricted access zone. Another such monument was discovered at Larkhill as recently as 2016. The literature is huge, and for more detail the bibliography at the end should be consulted.

THE STONEHENGE LANDSCAPE. By Tim Darvill

The landscape around Stonehenge contains the largest and richest prehistoric ceremonial centre known in Britain. In 1986 it was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, part of the Stonehenge and Avebury and Associated Monuments Site, because of its outstanding universal value. The area has been subject to a great deal of archaeological investigation over the last two decades or so, and this has greatly enhanced understanding of the monuments and their connections.

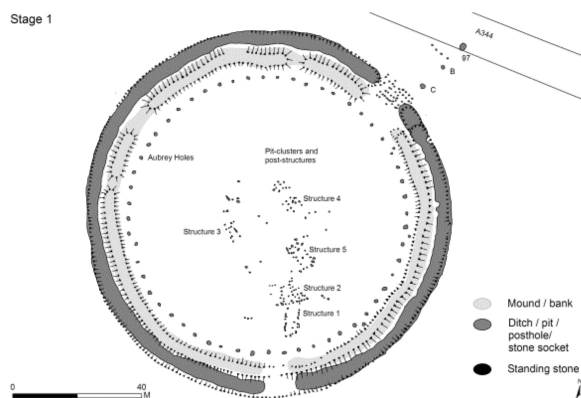


The Stonehenge area was already a focus of attention in early post-glacial times. Simple monuments in the form of timber posts stood 150m north-west of what later became Stonehenge during the seventh and sixth millennia B.C., while there is evidence for extensive occupation in the sixth and fifth millennia beside the River Avon near Amesbury at Blick Mead

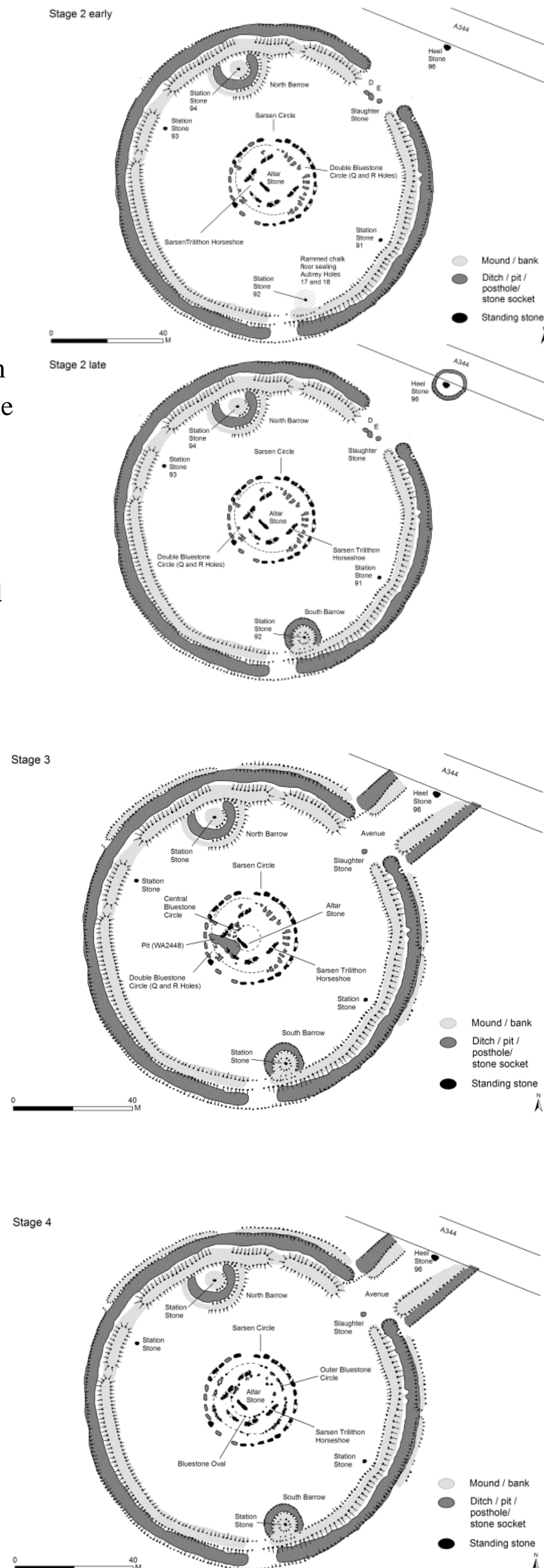
(see Amesbury on-line entry: on private property). A shaft containing feasting debris dated to about 3900 B.C. was found on Coneybury Hill. Long barrows were built at Winterbourne Stoke and on King Barrow Ridge in the early fourth millennium B.C. The first major ceremonial monument in the area was the **Stonehenge Cursus**, an elongated enclosure roughly 3km in length, orientated east-west, between King Barrow Ridge in the east with Fargo in the west (plan: Bowden et al. 2015, 29, by courtesy of Historic England). Built around 3500 BC this is sometimes seen as a ceremonial pathway linking the Avon Valley with the Till Valley to the west, symbolically representing the passage of life. Other elongated enclosures include the **Lesser Cursus**, also constructed about 3500 B.C., and the **Normanton Down Long Mortuary Enclosure** built around 3200 B.C.

After about 3000 B.C. the Stonehenge ceremonial centre expanded rapidly. The landscape appears to have been fairly open by this time, and extensive geophysical surveys reveal an absence of permanent settlement in the area. The River Avon was probably the main route in and out of the landscape, perhaps connecting with more densely occupied areas on the agriculturally rich lands to the south of the chalk downlands. Initially, the expansion of the ceremonial centre was associated with communities using Grooved Ware pottery whose roots lay in northern Britain and whose cosmology represented in the design of their monuments often featured a square within a circle and an interest in the movements of the sun. Later, the influence of Beaker traditions continued the focus on solar activity, but put greater stress on circular and oval forms.

Stonehenge itself was initially a circular earthwork enclosure bounded by a bank and ditch around 90m across, built in the centre of a bowl-shaped landform north-west of the River Avon (plan sequence by Timothy Darvill). It had two entrances, one to the north-east, the other to the south, replicating the course of the river through the wider landscape. A line of sarsen stones probably stood outside the north-eastern entrance. Postholes in the entranceway suggest some kind of structure or screen. A ring of 56 pits, the Aubrey Holes, lay just inside the toe of the internal bank. Much debate surrounds the purpose and function of these pits, and whether not they held posts, stones, or a mixture of the two. Certainly some contained cremation burials, and deposits of cremated human bone were also found in excavated sections of the adjacent bank and ditch. Pits and postholes representing several structures lay inside the enclosure.



Four or five centuries later burials ceased and a series of stone structures was built in the centre of the enclosure. The earliest were the five sarsen trilithons, followed soon after by the sarsen circle of thirty uprights linked by lintels. These were all made of sarsen stones derived from surface scatters on Salisbury Plain or the Marlborough Downs. Once set up they remained in position and provided the essential structure of the site, a stone version of structures built elsewhere in timber. At the focus of the monument was a pillar of Old Red Sandstone known as the Altar Stone. Embedded in this structure is the principal axis of the monument fixing the position of the midsummer sunrise to the north-east and the midwinter sunset to the south-west.



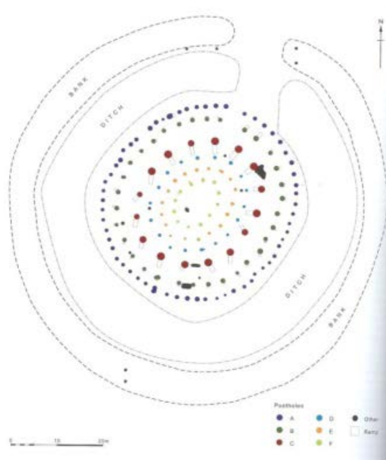
After 2400 B.C. around eighty Bluestone pillars were added to the central setting, initially as a double ring between the Trilithons and the Sarsen Circle. The Bluestones were rearranged three or four times, the latest configuration being that still visible today: an outer circle between the Sarsen Trilithons and the Sarsen Circle and an oval or horseshoe within the space defined by the Sarsen Trilithons. The Bluestones comprise a range of dolerites, rhyolites, and tuffs, all of which derive from a series of outcrops within and around the Preseli Mountains of north Pembrokeshire some 250km to the north-west of Stonehenge. Parallel with the various rearrangements of the internal stone settings, the stones in the north-eastern entrance were moved around, and about 2300 B.C. the A**venue** delimited by a bank and ditch was created. It ran directly north-east from Stonehenge for a distance of 530m into Stonehenge Bottom before turning eastwards and then

southwards to join the River Avon nearly 2km away near Amesbury.

Stonehenge outer circle, with the tenon on one of the inner trilithons clearly visible

(photograph by courtesy of Historic England)

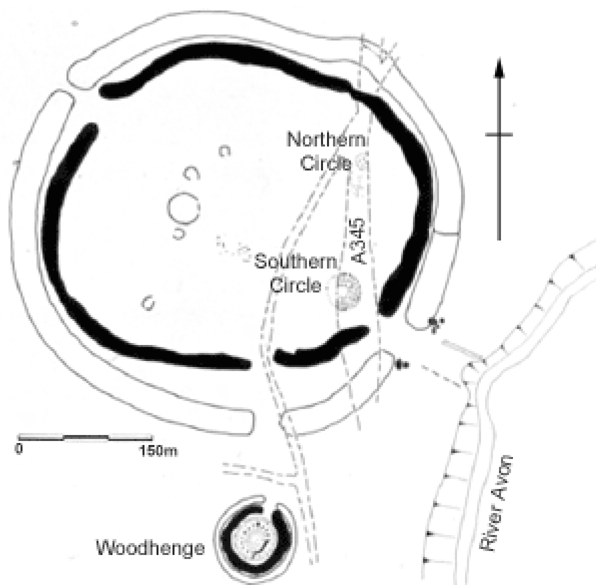
Much has been said in recent years about the purpose and meaning of Stonehenge and its stone settings. Michael Parker Pearson and colleagues see the stone structures as memorials to the ancestors of those using the site. Tim Darvill and Geoffrey Wainwright prefer to see a more nuanced pattern with the sarsen trilithons representing deities, the sarsen circle as a calendrical device to indicate when the deities were in residence, and the Bluestones as powerful stones believed to have healing properties. The two views are not incompatible, and it is widely accepted that the site was the centre of pilgrimage and a destination for visitors from near and far.



Broadly contemporary with Stonehenge are a number of other monuments. A small henge with a central timber structure was built *c*.2900 B.C. on **Coneybury Hill**, while a classic henge at **Woodhenge** was built *c*.2300 B.C. and contained a setting for six concentric rings of posts (plan Bowden et al. 2015, 46, by courtesy of Historic England; photograph by Gotham Nurse, reproduced under common licence CC BY-SA 2.0, accessed from Wikimedia). Concrete stumps have been set into the excavated holes, to show the location and scale of this henge.

Other timber circles are known in the landscape at Airman's Corner and on Boscombe Down. A stone circle is known beside the River Avon in the terminal of the Avenue. The **Cuckoo Stone**, a standing stone set up west of Woodhenge *c*.2900 B.C., is probably one of several such features originally scattered through the landscape. Pit clusters and post settings are also well represented in the area.

The largest monument in the complex is **Durrington Walls**. Here excavations and surveys as part of the Stonehenge Riverside Project have clarified the way it developed (photograph by Dietrich Krieger, as above; plan by courtesy of Historic England). The site



occupies a dry valley leading west from the main Avon Valley and the earliest activity seems to have been towards the head of the valley where a series of five penannular enclosures were built. At the centre of those excavated was a square structure rather like a house but without evidence of occupation. These may be shrines and perhaps somehow relate to the five trilithons inside Stonehenge. East of the enclosures is the Northern Circle, a classic square in circle construction, that may be a ceremonial building or an unroofed freestanding post setting. The Southern Circle is a timber structure with six concentric rings of different-sized posts and is again variously interpreted as a roofed structure or a set of free-standing posts. Beside the Southern Circle was an area originally described as a midden but recently reinterpreted as an oval structure. An embanked avenue 15m wide linked all these structures with the River Avon to the east. Either side of this avenue was a series of small domestic dwellings suggestive of short-lived seasonal occupation dated to *c*.2500 B.C. Whether the central area was originally enclosed is not clear, but the massive earthworks comprising a bank and an internal ditch 10m wide and 5m deep that are still visible today seem to be the last element of the site to be built, *c*.2400 B.C. Originally, four entrances pierced the earthworks, but two were blocked up during the life of the site. The remaining two formalized an axis on the rising mid-winter sun to the south-east and the setting mid-summer sun to the north-west (the opposite of Stonehenge). A line of post-sockets was noted beneath the bank on the south side of the monument during excavations in 1966-68 and these may be part of the same arrangement as two post-sockets examined in August 2016, thereby

disproving claims, based om geophysical surveys, that a line of fallen stones underlies the bank.

As the use of Stonehenge for burials declined in the mid third millennium B.C. so the surrounding landscape was increasingly populated with round barrows and pit-graves. These were often placed on the low ridges overlooking Stonehenge as if the occupants of the graves were overlooking the sacred precinct for eternity. More than 650 round barrows have been recorded, many in linear cemeteries such as New King Barrows, Old King Barrows, Winterbourne Stoke Cemetery, and the Cursus Group, or in nucleated cemeteries such as Normanton Down, Wilsford Down, and Lake Down. Round-barrow building in this part of Wessex ended around 1500 B.C., more or less coincident with the final episodes of activity at Stonehenge. From about 1600 B.C. the area was transformed into agricultural use with field systems set out over earlier monuments and wholly different patterns of landscape organization.

STONEHENGE VISITOR CENTRE. By Susan Greaney

The Visitor Centre at Stonehenge, which has been open to the public for two and a half years, was the culmination of many previous projects, road schemes, planning permissions and public enquiries since the facilities at the site were branded a ‘national disgrace’ in 1975. The Stonehenge Environmental Improvements Project set out not only to provide the facilities that the 1.3 million annual visitors would expect, including an indoor café, toilets, dedicated education room and extensive exhibition, but also to restore the setting and dignity of this world-famous monument. Closing the A 344 which ran close to the site, severing the monument from its processional approach, the Avenue, made possible the location of these visitor facilities to the far west side of the World Heritage Site, well out of sight of the iconic stones. Grassing over the section of road adjacent to the monument has restored the link between it and its Avenue and the landscape to the north, and has allowed English Heritage and the National trust to open up the landscape to visitors. To reach the stones, visitors can either take the shuttle buses or walk across the landscape, accompanied by an audio tour, guidebook or walkers’ map.

The Visitor Centre itself, by architects Denton Corker Marshall, is designed to sit lightly in

the undulating chalk landscape, and has impressive green energy and water systems (photographs by James Davies, by courtesy of Historic England). It consists of two buildings, one glass and one clad in sweet chestnut, with an open ‘gateway’ in the centre leading to the prehistoric landscape beyond. Within the exhibition space, archaeological objects from recent excavations at Durrington Walls as part of the Stonehenge Riverside Project are for the first time on display within the World Heritage Site.

Collections on loan from Salisbury Museum and the Wiltshire Museum in Devizes form the permanent display, as well as films and large models to introduce visitors to the site and its surrounding landscape. A temporary exhibition space allows for a changing series of displays about lesser-known aspects of the history and archaeology of the Stonehenge area. Outside are reconstructions of the Neolithic buildings found at Durrington Walls, filled with replica objects, which aim to give an impression of the life and technology of the people who built Stonehenge.

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The monuments in the Stonehenge landscape are now much better presented, following the closure of the A 344, the road that ran immediately past the stones; the first view of them for those who use the shuttle bus service makes them awe-inspiring despite the crowds. A similar impression can be gained by walkers from Durrington Walls and King Barrow Ridge, who first see the stones from a distance, but then go down into a dip so that the monument seems quite suddenly to loom over them when they come up to it. As this joins the route of the Avenue from the River Avon up to the stones, it was probably the effect intended by the builders.

The closure of the A344 past the stones was an unexpected victory for the monument’s presentation. It was not anticipated by most campaigners that it would be effected before decisions were made about the major road from London to the West Country, the A303. This still runs intrusively through the World Heritage Site. Plans were announced in 2016 for a tunnel to be dug, starting in the east near the King Barrow Ridge and emerging to the west of the stones. Details are awaited, but vigorous debate has been started, with some considering that any work within the WHS should not be allowed, others thinking that the proposal may not be perfect but can be made acceptable, and will enhance the surroundings. Stonehenge has been controversial since people began to take a serious interest in it, in the

seventeenth century, with discussions about its date and its function, and then with proposals to re-erect fallen stones, to prevent public access, to set up a car park, and to build a new Visitor Centre within the WHS. The tunnel debate is merely the latest of many heated arguments.

Further reading

Bowden, M. Soutar, S., Field, D. and Barber, M. *The Stonehenge Landscape. Analysing the Stonehenge World Heritage Site*, Swindon: Historic England, 2015, is an outstanding contribution to the study of the whole area, including Amesbury. Darvill, T. *Stonehenge: the Biography of a Landscape*, Stroud, Tempus, 2016, is a useful overview, as is Richards, J. *Stonehenge*, London: English Heritage, 2013 – both authors have carried out some of the modern excavations in the WHS. As it takes a long time to prepare full reports on such work, the Stonehenge Environs Project, which included outstanding research at Durrington Walls, awaits publication, but interim statements can be found in the magazines *British Archaeology* and *Current Archaeology*.

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These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute held in July 2016; see www.royalarchinst.org for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The two principal authors, Timothy Darvill and Susan Greaney, also acted as guides during the RAI's visit, and the Institute is very grateful to them for their efforts. The other notes were prepared by David A. Hinton. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.