

Stonehenge: Magnificent, Magical And Mysterious

By: Karen Dabrowska

Stonehenge is probably the most visited historical site in Britain. But a quiet stroll among the ancient stones (with an audio guide in ten languages that provides a comprehensive overview of the site) is a deeply personal and unforgettable experience.



Stonehenge at sunset

The giant stones, magnificent, there: It may have been an magical and mysterious have observatory or it may have been been on Salisbury Plain for over used for sacred rituals linked to 4000 years but no one is quite the sun, successful crops or sure why they were brought even the dead.

Druids at Stonehenge



Just like the question of why it was built, the question who built it also remains unanswered. The monument's construction has been attributed to many ancient peoples throughout the years, but the most captivating and enduring attribution has been to the Druids. This erroneous connection was first made around three centuries ago by the antiquary, John Aubrey. Julius Caesar and other Roman writers told of a Celtic priesthood who flourished around the time of their first

conquest (55 BC). By this time, though, the stones had been standing for 2,000 years, and were, perhaps, already in a ruined condition. Besides, the Druids worshipped in forest temples and had no need for stone structures.

The best guess seems to be that the Stonehenge site was begun by the people of the late Neolithic period (around 3000 BC) and carried forward by people from a new economy which was arising at this time.

These "new" people, called Beaker Folk because of their use of pottery drinking vessels, began to use metal implements and to live in a more communal fashion than their ancestors. Some think that they may have been immigrants from the continent, but that contention is not supported by archaeological evidence. It is likely that they were indigenous people doing the same old things in new ways.

Stonehenge has changed ownership several times since King Henry VIII acquired Amesbury Abbey and its surrounding lands. In 1540 Henry gave the estate to the Earl of Hertford. It subsequently passed to Lord Carleton and then the Marquis of Queensbury. The Antrobus family of Cheshire bought the estate in 1824.

During World War I an aerodrome had been built on the downs just to the west of the circle and, in the dry valley at Stonehenge Bottom, a main road junction had been built,

along with several cottages and a cafe. The Antrobus family sold the site after their last heir was killed serving in France during the First World War. The auction by Knight Frank & Rutley estate agents in Salisbury was held on 21 September 1915 and included "Lot 15. Stonehenge with about 30 acres, 2 rods, 37 perches of adjoining downland." Cecil Chubb bought the site for £6,600 and gave it to the nation three years later. Although it has been speculated that he purchased it at the suggestion of — or even as a present for — his wife, he, in fact, bought it on a

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whim as he believed a local man should be the new owner.

In the late 1920s a nation-wide appeal was launched to save Stonehenge from the encroachment of the modern buildings that had begun to appear around it. In 1928 the land around the monument was purchased with the appeal donations, and given to the National Trust in order to preserve it. The buildings were removed (although the roads were not), and the land returned to agriculture. More recently the land has been part of a grassland reversion scheme, returning the surrounding fields to native chalk grassland.

In 2002 a public poll voted Stonehenge as one of the Seven Wonders of Britain, alongside Big Ben, the Eden Project, Hadrian's Wall, the London Eye, Windsor Castle, and York Minster.

The stonehenge that we see today is the final stage that was

completed about 3500 years ago. The first Stonehenge was a large earthwork or Henge, comprising a ditch, bank, and the Aubrey holes, all probably built around 3100 BC. Shortly after this stage Stonehenge was abandoned, left untouched for over 1000 years.

The second and most dramatic stage of Stonehenge started around 2150 BC. Some 82 bluestones from the Preseli mountains, in south-west Wales were transported to the site. It is thought these stones, some weighing 4 tonnes each were dragged on rollers and sledges to the headwaters on Milford Haven and then loaded onto rafts. They were carried by water along the south coast of Wales and up the rivers Avon and Frome, before being dragged overland again to near Warminster in Wiltshire. The final stage of the journey was mainly by water, down the river Wylve to Salisbury, then the Salisbury Avon to west Amesbury.

Mystery and magic



This astonishing journey covers nearly 240 miles. Once at the site, these stones were set up in the centre to form an incomplete double circle. (During the same period the original entrance of the circular earthwork was widened and a pair of Heel Stones were erected. Also the nearer part of the Avenue was built, aligned with the midsummer sunrise.)

The third stage of Stonehenge,

about 2000 BC, saw the arrival of the Sarsen stones, which were almost certainly brought from the Marlborough Downs near Avebury, in north Wiltshire, about 25 miles north of Stonehenge. The largest of the Sarsen stones transported to Stonehenge weigh 50 tonnes and transportation by water would have been impossible, the stones could only have been moved using sledges and ropes.

Modern calculations show that it would have taken 500 men using leather ropes to pull one stone, with an extra 100 men needed to lay the huge rollers in front of the sledge.

The final stage took place soon after 1500 BC when the bluestones were rearranged in the horseshoe and circle that we see today. The original number of stones in the bluestone circle was probably around 60, these have long since been removed or broken up. Some remain only as stumps below ground level.

Stonehenge is easily accessible by public transport. Just take the train to Salisbury. The Stonehenge tour bus is waiting just outside the station to take visitors to the site.