



stonehenge

For over 5000 years this mysterious collection of stones has stood silent and alone on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire. It took almost unimaginable effort to create Stonehenge - but no-one really knows why this amazing structure was built.

Stonehenge gets its name from the Anglo-Saxon period of English history – the old English word ‘henge’ means hanging or gibbet (a place where people were killed by being hung from ropes). So the translation is literally ‘the hanging stones’. This refers to the lintels that lie across the tops of the huge upright trilithons (the large, standing stones).

Long before the Anglo-Saxons named Stonehenge, the whole of Salisbury Plain was a forest of

conifers and hazel woodland. As the climate of Britain changed the forests started to disappear, and as the population increased more of the forests were cleared. Eventually all that remained was the open chalk landscape that can be seen today.

Believe it or not the Stonehenge of the 21st Century is about half the size of the original construction. It was built in three phases. The first stage was a circle of timbers surrounded by a ditch and bank built by the Windmill people. Excavations

have found digging tools made from deer antlers and animal bones, and by using radio carbon dating we can be certain that this first stage was built about 3,100 BC.

Stage 2 was built about 4,500 years ago by the First Wessex culture of people. The ‘old’ Stonehenge was rebuilt using bluestones from South Wales, so-called because when they get wet the stones have a blueish colour. These enormous stones were brought 245 miles (390km), floated across the Bristol Channel and,



because of the higher sea-level in those days, were able to be brought a long way inland before being unloaded and dragged to the site by teams of men.

For the next 200 years the site remained unchanged, then in 2,300 BC the bluestones were dug up and re-positioned by the Beaker people. Giant sandstones or Sarsen stones were brought 20 miles (34km) from Marlborough Downs.

Each stone weighed more than 45 tons so would have taken hundreds of men to move them, once the stones had been stood up on their ends they were linked on the top by lintel stones. Though there are larger stone circles in the world Stonehenge is the only one that has lintels around the top, making it unique.

No-body can really say what Stonehenge was used for; it is possible that its use has changed over the years. Some say that it is an enormous astronomical clock used by ancient people to calculate the passing of time and the seasons of the year. Others think it was a temple where human sacrifice was carried out.

Stonehenge is still an important

religious site for the druids of Britain and those who wish to experience the mystery of the stones. On Midsummer's morning they meet and watch the first rays of the Sun shine between the largest pair of standing stones, and in certain years they can watch the Full Moon set directly behind them.



In 1986 it was made a World Heritage Site and is now looked after by English Heritage, who have put a fence around the stones to protect them from modern-day vandalism and erosion from thousands of people walking around them.

Despite many stones having fallen down over the centuries and many taken away to be used in the building of local towns and cities, it is without doubt one of the finest prehistoric monuments in the world.

the stones

The ancient builders of Stonehenge dragged up to 240 stones to the site over the centuries. The effort needed to bring stones hundreds of miles across land and water with only the most simple transport is incredible, and no-one knows for sure how it was done.



The builders of Stonehenge were remarkably careful. The top stones (lintels) are curved to make a perfect circle. The upright stones are wider at the top than at the bottom so they appear straight when you stand beside them. Stones were fixed together using the same joints as were used in woodwork.



The 'trilithons' - sets of two standing stones with a third stone across the top - in the middle of the circles are the largest stones on the site. The stones were 7.5m (27 feet) tall, and weighed up to 50 tons. Each stone was about 2.1m (7'6") wide and 1.1m (3'8") thick.

visit stonehenge

LAL runs regular tours to Stonehenge. The next easiest way to visit is to go by train to Salisbury and then take a direct Wilts&Dorset bus No 3 to Stonehenge. Cheapest available fares are from £11.50 for a single ticket and £33 for a day return. However, we recommend going to the Railway station in Paignton for detailed information on ticket prices. Bus ticket costs £7.50. Admission to Stonehenge is £6.30.