
Case Study 2.1: Stonehenge World Heritage Site, United Kingdom

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Presentation and analysis of the site

Geographical position: County of Wiltshire, England, United Kingdom.

Location (Stonehenge): Latitude 51° 10′ 44″ N, longitude 1° 49′ 34″ W. Elevation 103m above mean sea level.

General description: The Stonehenge World Heritage Site (WHS), one half of the “Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites” WHS (no. 373) inscribed in 1986, comprises an area of 2,665 ha (26.6 km²) with Stonehenge stone circle approximately at its centre. Stonehenge is the most architecturally sophisticated prehistoric stone circle in the world and, in addition, the WHS around it contains many hundreds of archaeological sites and monuments, many of which are also prehistoric. These monuments and their associated landscapes help us to understand Neolithic and Bronze Age ceremonial and mortuary practices in England and indeed in north-west Europe. They demonstrate around 2,000 years of continuous use and monument building between c. 3700 and c. 1600 BC.

One of the most important features of Stonehenge is that it is aligned along the midwinter sunset-midsummer sunrise solstitial axis (approximately SW–NE). We now know that a number of other prehistoric sites in the Stonehenge WHS also have astronomical significance, with a number of monuments aligned along this same solstitial axis and others along the opposite midsummer sunset-midwinter sunrise solstitial axis (approximately NW–SE).

Brief inventory: The Stonehenge WHS contains more than 700 archaeological features, including more than 350 burial mounds, and a number of key monuments such as the Cursus (c. 3600–3400 BC); Woodhenge (c. 2300 BC), Durrington Walls henge (c. 2500 BC) and the Stonehenge Avenue (c. 2500–1700 BC). A new henge has recently been discovered at West Amesbury (c. 2400 BC) at the end of the Stonehenge Avenue.

A number of these monuments appear to have been deliberately aligned along the midwinter sunset-midsummer sunrise solstitial axis: Stonehenge stone circle, the ‘final approach’ of the Stonehenge Avenue, Coneybury henge, and Woodhenge. By contrast, a number of other monuments appear to have been aligned along the midsummer sunset-midwinter sunrise solstitial axis, including the timber circle known as Durrington Walls 68 and possibly the timber Northern Circle at Durrington Walls. There are also two further definite examples on significantly sloping ground, thus permitting us to identify their directionality: these are the recently discovered Durrington Walls Avenue, which is aligned on the midsummer sunset, and the Durrington Walls Southern Circle (another timber circle), which is aligned on the midwinter sunrise.

History of the site: The first ‘monument’ at Stonehenge comprised an alignment of three Mesolithic pits (c. 8000 BC), which apparently contained huge timber posts. But the area became more heavily used from the early and middle Neolithic onwards (c. 4000–3000 BC), with the construction of a number of funerary and ceremonial monuments such as long barrows (communal burial mounds) and two long earthwork enclosures known as Cursuses.

The lengthy history of Stonehenge itself started around 3000 BC with the construction of a circular enclosure formed by a bank and ditch, and containing 56 pits known as the Aubrey Holes. Later, stones—‘bluestones’ dragged from distances up to 240km away and ‘sarsens’ weighing up to 40 tonnes—were added to the monument, culminating in the construction of the stone circle in c. 2500 BC. After the stone circle was built, many burial mounds known as round barrows were constructed, particularly on the tops of the ridge-lines overlooking Stonehenge.

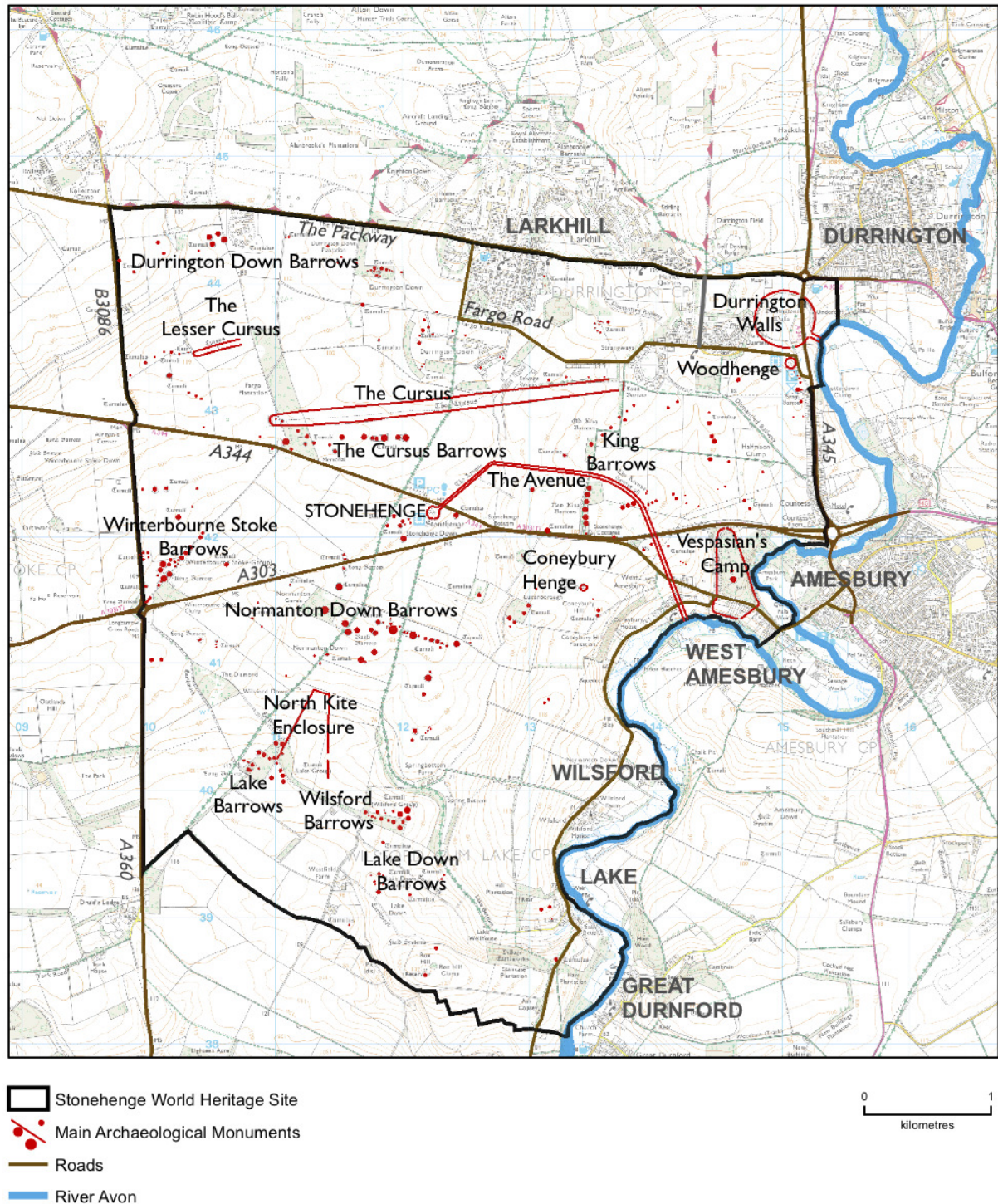


Fig. 2.1.1. Map of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site. Based on scheduled monument information from the English Heritage GIS combined with features drawn from Ordnance Survey mapping data. © English Heritage.



Fig. 2.1.2. The midwinter sunset at Stonehenge taken from the Stonehenge Avenue, and showing the solstitial axis through the monument. Photograph by James O Davies, © English Heritage (Photo Library N030018).

Stonehenge and many of other monuments remained conspicuous in the landscape during the ensuing centuries and millennia, and could hardly have gone unnoticed or ignored during all this time. However, it was only in the 18th century that the antiquarian William Stukeley (re)discovered the axial alignment of Stonehenge upon midsummer sunrise. It subsequently became, and remains, the main focus for modern celebrations at the site.

Cultural and symbolic dimension of the site: Stonehenge is one of the most famous prehistoric monuments in the world, revered and marvelled even today. It is an icon of our prehistoric past and a testament to the skills of ancient peoples. Since the 12th century, when Stonehenge was considered one of the wonders of the world by chroniclers such as Henry of Huntington and Geoffrey of Monmouth, it has excited curiosity and speculation. It has influenced generations of antiquarians, archaeologists, artists, authors, architects, historians and others, and today is an icon of ancient astronomy.

It is difficult to be precise about the uses of the WHS and the many monuments within it, particularly as they were sometimes in use for many hundreds of years. It is certainly the case that large numbers of monuments in the area have funerary associations—the long barrows and round barrows were places of burial and Stonehenge itself was used as a cremation cemetery, with the ashes of the dead placed in the Aubrey Holes. But the primary function of other monuments such as the Cursuses, timber circles and henges is more likely to have been as ceremonial centres or meeting places. Within this context, the astronomical alignments are likely to have had cosmological rather than practical significance.

Authenticity and integrity: Many of the astronomically significant monuments are now largely or wholly buried (e.g. Woodhenge). While their astronomical significance is not readily apparent on the ground, their remains are preserved underground and their authenticity is not affected. All the main elements of archaeological monuments that have astronomical significance (e.g. Stonehenge Stone Circle, Stonehenge Avenue) are well preserved given their great age, and therefore their integrity is good. The solstitial alignments have not been impaired by intrusive modern structures, with two exceptions: the relatively modern A344 road, which cuts the Stonehenge Avenue off from Stonehenge itself, and the A345 road, embanked in the 1960s, that cuts across Durrington Walls.

Documentation and archives: There are a number of important museum and archive collections relating to the WHS, most notably at Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum and at Wiltshire Heritage Museum in Devizes, where a number of antiquarian archives are housed, along with important finds from the WHS. There are also very important collections of data in the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre (including the Wiltshire Sites and Monuments Record), the National Monuments Record of English Heritage and The National Archives.

Present site management

Present use: The WHS is a living landscape under multiple ownership. Much of it is in private hands, and most of it is farmland. The National Trust, a national conservation body, owns 827 ha. Another part of the WHS forms part of Larkhill military garrison and is owned by the Ministry of Defence. There are also a number of private houses within the WHS at Amesbury, Durrington and the Woodford Valley.

Stonehenge itself is run by English Heritage, the UK government's statutory body for the historic environment in England, and is visited by over 900,000 paying visitors a year, not including those visiting free of charge at the summer solstice.

Protection: The Stonehenge WHS is protected as a 'material consideration' in UK planning law, and many individual elements within it are also protected. For example, there are 180 scheduled monuments which include over 415 archaeological sites and monuments within the scheduled areas, and there are also various listed buildings, registered parks and gardens, and conservation areas within the WHS.

State of conservation and main threats: The Stonehenge WHS is in a stable or improving condition. During the last decade, 520 ha of arable land (20% of the WHS) have been changed from arable land to pasture, with the help of government grants. This has directly benefited 105 archaeological monuments, which have been removed from the plough. The adverse impact of roads and traffic in the WHS remains a key issue, and does making adequate provision for managing the large number of visitors. These are being addressed by a new project, the Stonehenge Environmental Improvements Project, which aims by 2012 to close the A344 that runs beside Stonehenge, to build new visitor facilities, and to decommission the existing ones.

Context and environment: The Stonehenge WHS is surrounded to the north by the Army Training Estate Salisbury Plain (ATE SP), to the west and south by open countryside, and to the east by the town of Amesbury and Boscombe Down airfield. The ATE SP is heavily protected by its designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Area of Conservation, and there are strong planning laws protecting the open countryside to the south and west. The town of Amesbury has been growing fast in recent years, but planning policies prevent the WHS or its setting from being damaged. The Stonehenge WHS has no buffer zone, although this will be reviewed over the next few years.

Archaeological/historical/heritage research: Over the last decade, there has been a great deal of archaeological research at Stonehenge. Sustainable archaeological research is encouraged in the *Stonehenge WHS Management Plan 2009*, and the results of this have been very apparent. In recent years, the first Neolithic houses have been revealed by the Stonehenge Riverside Project (led by the University of Sheffield), and major new sites discovered at West Amesbury and Durrington Walls by the same team. The SPACES project (led by the University of Bournemouth) has discovered a major new Roman phase at Stonehenge, and has been researching the context of the Stonehenge bluestones. Other major research projects are also under way.

Management, interpretation and outreach: The WHS is managed by its owners and no single body has overall responsibility for the whole WHS. The *Stonehenge WHS Management Plan 2009* sets out main, agreed overall goals for managing the WHS and a Stonehenge World Heritage Committee (comprising key stakeholders) oversees this management framework. At present, there is very limited interpretation, although English Heritage is planning to build a new visitor centre at the edge of the WHS by 2012, where new interpretation and education facilities are planned.

Additional bibliography

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