

What was the purpose of Stonehenge?

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Stonehenge.html>

Stonehenge is a stone monument situated in the south of England. The name comes from two Old English words, stan, meaning “stone,” and hencg, meaning “hinge,” because the stone lintels “hinge” on the upright stones. Archaeologists define a henge as earthworks consisting of a circular banked enclosure with an internal ditch. Stonehenge is not truly a henge because its bank is inside its ditch. The bank and ditch comprise the earliest phase of Stonehenge and are thought to date to around 3000 B.C.

At some point, the northeast entrance of Stonehenge was widened so that it precisely matched the direction of the midsummer sunrise and the midwinter sunset of that period of history. Later, enormous sarsen stones (a type of sandstone) were fashioned with mortise and tenon joints before being erected in a 108-foot-diameter circle with a ring of thirty lintel stones resting on top. The lintels were fitted to the “posts” using tongue-and-groove joints. Within this circle stood five trilithons (ten uprights and five lintels) of dressed sarsen stone, each stone weighing up to 50 tons. They were arranged symmetrically and linked using complex jointing.

A large timber circle and avenue are located two miles away from Stonehenge at Durrington Walls overlooking the River Avon. This timber circle was orientated toward the rising sun on the midwinter solstice, opposing the solar alignments at Stonehenge, while the avenue was aligned with the setting sun on the summer solstice. Evidence of huge fires on the banks of the River Avon between the two avenues suggests that both circles were linked and were perhaps used as a procession route.

The most recent findings (from 2012) indicate that Stonehenge was a place of burial.

Professor Mike Parker Pearson of Sheffield University and his team of archaeologists have excavated a large number of cremated human bones. Fragments of unburnt human bone have also been found in the ditch-fill. All of this suggests that Stonehenge was an enclosed cremation cemetery. Professor Pearson suggests that the wooden circle at Durrington Walls was the center of a “land of the living,” while the stone circle at Stonehenge represented a “land of the dead.” A journey along the banks of the Avon to reach Stonehenge was part of a ritual passage from life to death.

Other theories about the purpose of Stonehenge: some say it was designed as a celestial observatory to allow the prediction of eclipses, solstices, equinoxes, and other celestial events that were significant to the ancient people of that place. Speculations abound regarding mystical religious significance, human sacrifices, and Druids. (The Druids, however, didn’t turn up in Britain till long after Stonehenge had come into being.) Professor Pearson suggests that the monument was intended to unify the different people of the British Island, theorizing that the massive amount of labor involved in the construction of Stonehenge demanded inter-regional cooperation on a grand scale.

During the 20th century, Stonehenge attracted the attention of adherents of neo-pagan and New Age beliefs, particularly the neo-druids. In August 1905 the Ancient Order of Druids conducted a mass initiation ceremony at Stonehenge. Later, between 1972 and 1984, the Stonehenge Free Festival was established, but that came to an end in 1985, and ritual use of Stonehenge is now heavily restricted. The site is currently a place of pagan religious significance and pilgrimage for neo-druids.

One thing is clear. Stonehenge is the biggest Neolithic settlement in Northern Europe, and the surrounding landscape was turned into a complex ceremonial route for the remains

of the dead. It is also undisputed that Stonehenge was used as a burial ground.

Other henges and stone circles have been discovered throughout the British Isles. Avebury in Wiltshire in southwest England is one of the best-known prehistoric sites in Britain. In the northwest of England, in Cumbria (close to the Scottish border) is a Bronze Age stone circle called “Long Meg and Her Daughters.” The Ring of Brodgar, a Neolithic henge and stone circle, exists in Orkney in the far north of Scotland. Whatever religious significance those places had, the sites eventually fell into disuse with the arrival of Christianity.