

AVEBURY HENGE & WEST KENNET AVENUE



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Information for teachers

A henge is a circular area enclosed by a bank or ditch, used for religious ceremonies in prehistoric times. Avebury is one of the largest henges in the British Isles. Even today the bank of the henge is 5m above the modern ground level and it measures over one kilometre all the way round. The stone circle inside the bank and ditch is the largest in Europe.

Four or five thousand years ago there were as many as 200-300 henges in use. They were mostly constructed with a ditch inside a bank and some of them had stone or wooden structures inside them. Avebury has four entrances, whereas most of the others have only one or two.



A reconstruction of Avebury Henge

© Alan Sorrell

How are the stones arranged?

The outer circle of standing stones closely follows the circuit of the ditch. There were originally about 100 stones in this circle, of which 30 are still visible today. The positions of another 16 are marked with concrete pillars.

Inside the northern and southern halves of the outer circle are two more stone circles, each about 100m in diameter. Only a small number of their original stones have survived. There were other stone settings inside these circles, including a three-sided group within the southern circle, known as 'the Cove'. The largest stone that remains from this group weighs about 100 tonnes and is one of the largest megaliths in Britain.

What is sarsen stone?

Sarsen is a type of sandstone and is found all over the chalk downland of the Marlborough Downs. The stones at Avebury are sarsens. They have not been shaped or modified and they vary in shape, size and colour. Many of them weigh up to 60 tonnes - or the same as six double-decker buses.

How old is Avebury?

Avebury was not built all at once. The first phase was probably the construction of a bank, which was later modified and enlarged by a second bank and ditch. The stone settings came after the earthworks. Recent work suggests that the first bank was begun soon after 3000 BC, while the second phase was probably two or three hundred years later; and the stones erected sometime after that.

How was it built?

The original bank was about 9m wide and 2.5m high. The second bank and ditch probably followed the same course as the first. This time the bank was double the height of the original and the ditch as much as 9m deep - deep enough to fit a two storey house! The distance from the top of the bank to the bottom of the ditch was over 16m.

Moving the stones was no mean feat. It would have needed 500 men with oxen to drag the largest of them. They were probably pulled over wooden rollers, and dragged by long lengths of rope. Holes were dug into the ground for the stones to rest in – quite an achievement in itself with only antler picks, antler 'rakes' and shoulder blades of animals as tools.

Why was it built?

Prehistoric standing stones are found all over Europe. There are many theories about them and what they might have symbolised. One idea is that stone and wood represented the dead and the living, so this stone monument was for the ancestors while not far away a huge, contemporary wooden structure, the West Kennet Palisaded Enclosure, would be for the living.

Another theory is that the stones symbolise male and female, and that is why diamond and pillar shaped stones are sometimes set in pairs. Archaeologists have found phallic symbols and chalk balls at henges, which suggests that they may have been used for fertility rites, or been associated with birth, death and regeneration.

The inner circles have been explained in various ways. Perhaps they were for men and women to worship separately or perhaps they represented winter and summer; or sun and moon. Whatever theory is right, the place was deeply significant for people at the time. The impressive chalk banks of the henge would have shown up dramatically in the surrounding landscape.



Avebury Henge under construction



What was the West Kennet Avenue for?

Two avenues of standing stones extend from Avebury Henge. The one leading to the Sanctuary is called the West Kennet Avenue.

Archaeologists think that the two avenues may have followed the line of much older paths. Perhaps the paths linked clearings in the forest, and these clearings later became the places where the monuments Avebury Henge and the Sanctuary were built. If this is right, then perhaps the huge sarsen stones were put up along the avenues to make the approach to the monuments more imposing.

Both Avebury Henge and the Sanctuary must have been very special or sacred places, so it is likely that the avenue between them was either a processional route or a way of marking forbidden territory where only priests or the privileged could go.

What did the West Kennet Avenue look like?

The West Kennet Avenue is 2.5km long. When completed, there were about 100 stones along its route. The stones are a little smaller than the ones used in the henge itself. They were evenly spaced, and arranged in pairs on either side of the path.

What happened later at Avebury Henge?

Iron Age and Roman Period

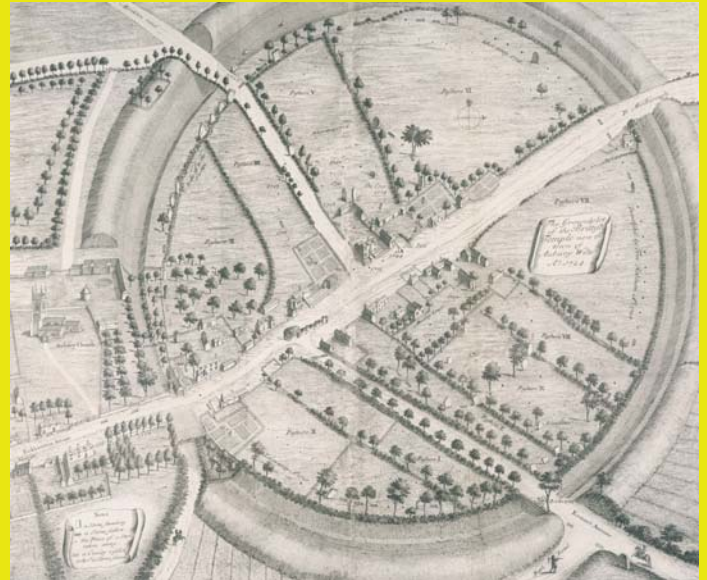
The henge fell out of use, but must still have been considered a special place because nobody lived there and the land was not farmed.

Saxon and Viking Period 410 – 1066 AD

In the Saxon period a village grew up just outside the henge. Much of the present village still follows the Saxon pattern of plots and the High Street follows the Saxon 'herepath' or army road. It became a small defended town, or burh. Avebury means 'fortified place by the Avon' (water or stream).

Medieval and Tudor Period 1066 – 1603

In the medieval period the village extended into the henge itself. There was a small monastery at Avebury. It is around this time that many of the stones were toppled over and buried, probably because they were seen as symbols of a Pagan religion. One fallen stone revealed a terrible secret to archaeologists. Beneath it were the bones of man who had died around 1320. He may have been helping to bury the stone and become trapped beneath it. He has been called the Barber-Surgeon because of the scissors and probe-like instrument he was carrying.



Stukeley's plan of Avebury

1603 – 1800

In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries people became fascinated with ruins and the picturesque. Two antiquarians in particular took a great interest in Avebury.

John Aubrey, was a Wiltshire man. He discovered the stones in 1649 and in 1663 completed his first plan and record of the site.

William Stukeley (1687 – 1765) devoted many years to studying and publishing books about ancient sites in the county, particularly Stonehenge and Avebury.

1800 – 2000

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries various archaeologists excavated at the henge. The most famous of these was Alexander Keiller. In the 1930s he dug up and re-erected the buried stones and created the museum. He bought the manor of Avebury, much of the henge and land. He had plans to restore the henge by removing the houses but his plans were brought to an end in 1943 by the war.

Recently there have been excavations at Beckhampton Avenue which have helped to date the Avebury Henge.

Investigate Avebury

Supporting notes

The Investigate Avebury Henge sheet follows a circular route around the henge. From the car park, follow the footpath to the road. Turn right and go through the small gate into the henge.

Most of the questions are open ended, to encourage discussion. Answers to some of the questions:

1. Stonehenge is the most famous henge. There are many other examples, such as Stanton Drew, Thornborough and Arbor Low.
2. It is most likely that the stones were moved by pulling them with long ropes over a series of logs.
5. When you stand inside the circle and face the stones the Devil's Chair is the one on the right.



7. The ditch was once more than 16m deep from the top of the bank. In places it is still 5m deep.
8. Archaeologists cannot be sure exactly what happened inside the henge because so few objects have been found, but the large stones in this part of the monument (the Cove) suggest it was a focal point for activity.
9. 20 elephants would weigh as much as this stone. It is the largest one at Avebury.
10. The Swindon Stone is on the road to Swindon.
11. There are many theories but no clear answers as to what the henge was for.
12. Stone was used for weapons like arrowheads and spearheads, for tools such as axes and knives. It was made into lamps, used for querns to grind grain and carved into significant shapes.
13. Pottery was used to store food and to cook it (rounded bases reduced the likelihood of a pot breaking in the heat of the fire). Small beaker shaped pots were for drinking and dishes for eating. Burial pots were filled and buried with the cremated bones of the dead.

Suggestions for Follow-up activities

English

- On the visit ask your pupils to collect words that describe what they see, hear and feel at different points. Back in school ask pupils to produce either creative writing such as a poem or a story about one of the prehistoric builders of Avebury. Or it could be a piece of informative work, such as a guide book or an inspector's report on the condition of the site.

Maths

- A variety of mathematical skills can be practised during and after a visit to Avebury, including the measurement of volume and weight. On site ask younger pupils to measure and estimate the size of one of the stones using standard and non-standard measurements (span, pace, thumb, cubit).
- Older pupils can estimate the weight of a standing stone by using this method:
Calculate the approximate volume of the standing stone (width x height x depth).
Back at school use a piece of local stone (not from the monument of course!) and measure its width, height and depth. Weigh it.
Divide the volume of the standing stone by the volume of the small stone. Multiply the answer by the weight of the small stone to find the weight of the standing stone.
- For a more accurate measure of volume, pupils could use the displacement method: lower the small stone into a bucket on a piece of string and measure the amount of water displaced by the stone. They could use this measurement in calculating the weight of the standing stone. Would this be a more accurate method?

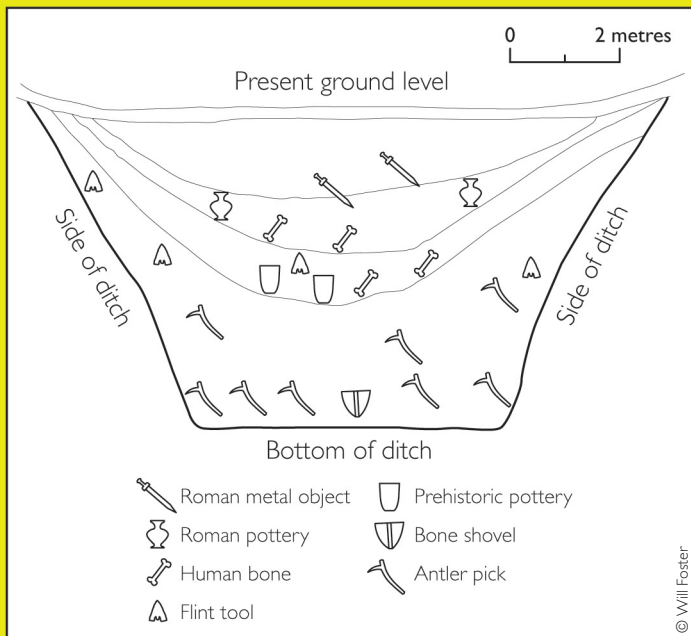
Science

- Use bricks to demonstrate the challenge of moving the stones. In groups, ask pupils to try to push a brick on a smooth flat surface, using only one finger. How many fingers are needed to move the brick? Is it easier to pull the brick using string? What happens when the brick is on a sloping surface? Now give pupils some pencils or pieces of dowel to put under the bricks. Ask them to try the experiments again and record their results.

Design Technology

- Design a unique souvenir for Avebury for example a letter rack or toast rack, made of 'sarsen stones', an item of jewellery or a chess set with pieces inspired by the stones.

History



Drawing of section of ditch

Look at this diagram. It shows a slice through the ditch at Avebury, drawn by the archaeologist who excavated it. The ditch has filled in over the years.

- What are the oldest things? Where are they?
(Antler picks at the base of the ditch)
- Do you think the original ditch was dug carefully?
(Yes - the sides are straight and even)
- Why do you think there are so many bits of antler at the bottom of the ditch?
(Antler picks were used for digging the ditch, some of them would have broken)
- What was the bone shovel used for?
(Removing the chalk from the ditch)
- How do we know that people visited Avebury in Roman times?
(There are Roman finds in the ditch)

Geography

- Pupils can use the 'Search for buried treasure' activity to practise using co-ordinates and map reading skills. The search takes pupils from Windmill Hill to Silbury Hill.

Art

- Pupils could try painting a Neolithic picture on a small piece of stone. They could mix their own prehistoric paints with different colour soils and sand. Alternatively they could make a sculpture of a sarsen using wire netting and papier-maché. When the pupils visit Avebury ask them to take digital photographs of the henge. Back in school they could design postcards using the best ones. They could also design new signposts for Avebury that fit the environment of the henge.

Citizenship

- Imagine there is a plan to build new houses close to Avebury Henge. Hold a class debate to discuss the issue and consider the importance of heritage today. Alternatively use the idea to stimulate work in drama. For example pupils could role play the parts of conservationists, developers, planners and visitors in a public meeting set up to consider the plans.

