



ENGLISH HERITAGE

THE SANCTUARY

Information for teachers



When was the Sanctuary built?

1,000 years after the completion of the earthworks at Windmill Hill, in about 2500BC, a new monument was begun at Overton Hill. Today it is called the Sanctuary.

How was the Sanctuary constructed?

The Sanctuary began as a circle of six concentric settings of upright timber posts. Archaeologists have discovered that although the overall shape of the settings did not change over time, the timber posts were frequently replaced over the years. The posts had not rotted away, so it seems likely that removing a post and replacing it with a new one had a symbolic significance. This process must have taken a long time – perhaps several centuries.

The Sanctuary is much smaller than Avebury Henge (the outer circle of stones at the Sanctuary is 40m in diameter, compared to the 350m of Avebury's huge stone circle).

At around the same time as the sarsen stones were erected along the West Kennet Avenue, additional stone circles were

added to the timber monument of the Sanctuary.

What was the Sanctuary for?

One recent and interesting theory is that stone, because of its durability, represented the dead, the ancestors, and timber which grows, matures and decays, represented the living. Perhaps the Sanctuary was originally for the living and its significance changed when the stone circles were added.

The West Kennet Avenue runs between the Sanctuary and Avebury Henge and was clearly meant to link the two together. The Sanctuary – like Windmill Hill and Avebury Henge, must have been a focus for meetings, ceremonies or rituals of some kind.

In the 1930s archaeologists found fragments of human bone and the remains of food and pottery, so it looks as though the Sanctuary was a place used for feasts connected with death and burial.