



Fig. 1 View of the Stone Circle of Stonehenge, 2800-1100 BC.

The Stone Circle of Stonehenge

The *Stone Circle of Stonehenge* was executed in four phases between 2800 and 1100 BC. It had an external circular structure made up of a line of **30 monoliths (today only 16 remain)**. The vertical monoliths are 4 metres high and are topped by horizontal architraves called lintels. Composing a **continuous line of trilithons**, this ring marks a circumference which measures about 30 metres in diameter.

On the outside the stone circle is surrounded by a 6-metre wide ditch that measures a total diameter of about 98 metres. On the inside of the stone circle there is another horse-shoe-shaped structure which is probably what remains of an unfinished circle. There are still some traces of figures carved into the rocks. What is surprising here is **the complexity of construction** techniques and the massive means used during a period in which the wheel was still unknown in Great Britain. Just think – some of the monoliths, in bluestone of spotted dolerite, were brought to this site from Welsh quarries located over 230 kilometres away.

The Construction Phases

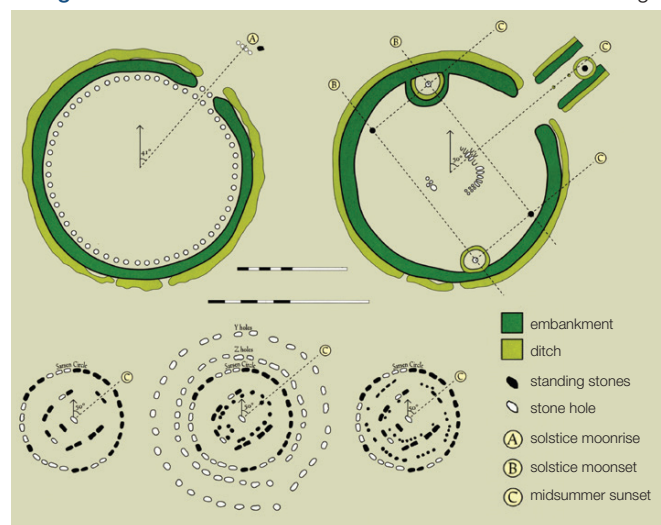
1. The first phase dates to about 2800 BC: the exterior ditch was dug and the entrance was arranged on the north-east side. A smaller circle, constituted by 56 holes, was made. Two entrance stones were erected on the north-east side of which only the **Heel Stone** remains today.
2. Around 2100 BC an access road of 510 metres in length was made towards the outside. Then the four Station Stones were placed within the boundaries of the external ditch. They were arranged to mark the corners of an ideal rectangle that had astronomical significance. Bluestones were placed in a dual concentric ring formation but were later moved.
3. Between 2000 and 1500 BC the trilithons that we see today were erected in a circle. Inside this ring there were other trilithons in a horseshoe arrangement. The pre-existing bluestones were repositioned first within the horseshoe and later between the horseshoe and the outer ring of trilithons.

4. Around 1000 BC the access road was lengthened almost another 2 kilometres probably to reach the River Avon. We do not know much about this enlargement because it was never completed.

A Debated Interpretation

According to Alexander Thom's mid-nineteenth century hypothesis, Stonehenge was used for two thousand years as an astronomical observatory that had been inserted inside an area for religious and ritual activity. His theory noted that the rows of monoliths, arranged in a double colonnade, correspond to the Sun's positions during the summer and winter solstices. The 56 holes in the outer ring might have been used to count the years (exactly 56) which cyclically separate one solar eclipse from the next one. However, there is much doubt about this interpretation of the complex because of the evidence uncovered during the many restorations begun in 1901, again in 1919 and then in the 1950s and 60s. In fact a number of photographs and records show that several monoliths were originally placed in a different arrangement.

Fig. 2 Phases in the evolution of the Stone Circle of Stonehenge.





Read and Recognise

1 Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F).

T F

- 1. Stonehenge is the product of different periods of that took place over some 1700 years.
- 2. Stonehenge was built using very simple techniques and stones found *in situ*.
- 3. The ancient Britons used carts and horses to bring the stones to the Stonehenge site.
- 4. The more external circle in Stonehenge measures about 98 metres in diameter.
- 5. The main architectural structure used in the Stonehenge complex is the trilithon.
- 6. Lintels were vertical monoliths decorated with sculpted reliefs.
- 7. In origin the Stonehenge complex was a collective cemetery.
- 8. Scientists have proven Thom's hypothesis that Stonehenge was used as an astronomical observatory.

Vocabulary

2 Match each architectural term below with its definition.

- ___ 1. complex
- ___ 2. monolith
- ___ 3. cromlech
- ___ 4. lintel
- ___ 5. ditch

- a. A single block of stone
- b. A horizontal timber or stone placed over a doorway or other aperture
- c. A construction made of composite parts
- d. A long narrow excavation of earth
- e. A circle of upright prehistoric stones

Follow-up

3 Look at the map of another important stone circle located about 45 km north of Stonehenge (<http://www.stone-circles.org.uk/stone/images/aveburymap2.jpg>).

Describe (maximum 4 sentences) the elements and configurations that Avebury shares with the Stonehenge site.

Fig. 3 View of the *Stone Circle of Avebury*, 3rd millennium BC.

