What was Stonehenge for? A lecture given by Dr Matt Leivers on 12 March 2024

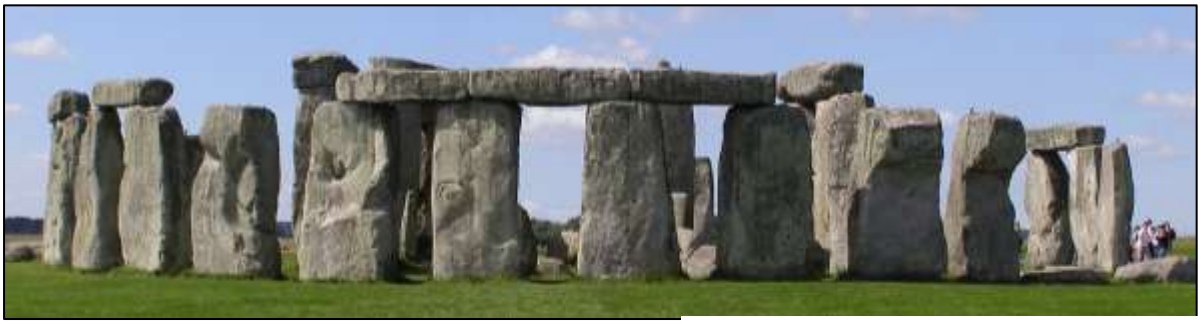

Image of Stonehenge. Credit: Wessex Archaeology

Matt Leivers is Stonehenge Consultant Archaeologist at Wessex Archaeology, and the author of several research papers about this landscape. He opened his lecture by referring to the document *Stonehenge & Avebury World Heritage Site Research Framework,* which provides a combined historic environment research agenda and strategy for the WHS – available at: (https://www.stonehengeandaveburywhs.org/management-of-whs/world-heritage-site-research-framework/)

Matt addressed the outcomes of excavation in the area surrounding Stonehenge which he believes is providing convincing evidence of its purpose. It works as part of a landscape which is mysterious and enigmatic, a place of spiritual significance. In his view the explanation would not be found by standing in the circle and looking outwards: the monument stands in a constructed landscape and therefore it is better to look at the structures in that context – "outside looking in". You have to look outside Stonehenge to understand how the monuments connect and where they fit in the landscape.

His examination of the landscape began with a discussion of Larkhill Causewayed Enclosure. It is dated 3650 to 3750 BC, pre-dating Stonehenge by ~600 years. Until recently it was believed that Robin Hoods Ball was the only causewayed enclosure in the Stonehenge landscape, but the recent discovery at Larkhill changes this. And they clearly relate to each other, located in each other's 'viewsheds', i.e. the area visible from each location. These enclosures are the first physical manifestations in the British Isles of the human need to enclose special spaces, and with only seventy known examples they are comparatively rare. At Larkhill causewayed enclosure a line of posts was erected that seems to point to the midwinter sunset. The entrance to the enclosure aligns with the sunrise on mid-summer day. There was also a line of natural sinkholes in the landscape which align to the entrance, possibly associated with a dry valley. When excavated they were 25m across with a view of the sunrise over Silbury Hill.

Associated Monuments

Matt went on to discuss the Stonehenge Cursus, roughly 3 kilometres long and between 100 and 150 metres wide. Excavations in 2007 dated the construction of the earthwork to between 3630 and 3375 BCE, several hundred years before the earliest phase of

Stonehenge in 3000 BC. It lies to the North of the current monument and is formed of three sections. Along the Stonehenge Cursus, you reach the Cuckoo Stone, a sarsen and finally Woodhenge, a Neolithic Class II henge and timber circle. Stonehenge is aligned via the Cuckoo Stone with Woodhenge. Across the River Avon, its northern line ends at Bulford and a circular Neolithic pit, containing a burial.

Bulford Barrows lie to the South of Stonehenge, where two loose clusters of Late Neolithic pits (*c.* 2850–2200 BC) have been recorded, containing a remarkable series of special deposits. These include a Cornish Greenstone axe, two notable stone objects made of chalk – a small spherical 'ball' and large concave 'bowl', both of which still exhibit the marks of scoring by which they had been carved and shaped. The chalk ball was not of local origin. The pits also contained decorated Late Neolithic pottery known as Grooved Ware, in the Woodlands style, distinct from the style of Durrington Walls. There was also a bone pin from an arctic fox, native to Norway, which possibly arrived in Wiltshire via Orkney. The culture appears to be similar to and linked to that in Orkney of the same era, although similar cultures do not seem to have existed in the lands between.

Stonehenge was first constructed around 3000BC as a bank and a ditch structure containing burials, among which females predominate. A number of these remains appear to have originated in Wales. It is also possible that the central area of Stonehenge at that point was a cremation cemetery.

The Stonehenge Avenue was discovered in the 18th century: measuring nearly 3 kilometres, it connects Stonehenge with the River Avon and continues through to the stone circle. The Avenue was built during the "Stonehenge 3" period, 2600 to 1700 BCE. Along some of its length, the Avenue is aligned with the sunrise of the summer solstice, suggesting a time of most frequent use. Stonehenge sits in a location aligned with a set of natural ice age grooves called 'periglacial stripes', which are present in the ground beneath the Avenue. It is believed that the Avenue was inspired by, and built over, this existing natural formation which had a significant astronomical alignment. The presence of ridges and gullies that happened to line up with the solstice may have been venerated, and possibly led the Neolithic people to later build Stonehenge at this particular site.

Left: Mid-summer sunrise from Stonehenge.
Credit: Wessex Archaeology

Another pointer to why this landscape acquired its significance is that it is now understood that the region was probably not fully forested. It was more like park land with large areas

of open grassland, which would have enabled the people living there to perceive details of the underlying geology.

Durrington Walls is the site of a large Neolithic settlement and later henge enclosure, located two miles to the east of Stonehenge, the second-largest Late Neolithic palisaded enclosure known in the British Isles. The stupendous size of the of the palisade would have required a supply of trees larger than would have been available in the area – and then it was taken down after about 15 years! Archaeologists have also found a series of Neolithic shafts that date from around 2500 BC and stretch for 2km around the Durrington Walls and Woodhenge monuments. These shafts are around 10 metres in diameter and reach a depth of 5 metres. It is believed they were used along with an internal post line to mark a boundary and to guide worshippers to the monuments in the landscape.

Thus, Stonehenge sits at the heart of these relationships and aligns with the sun. Anything that can help pastoralists or hunter gatherers understand where the sun will rise and set or help predict this would be a benefit. Stonehenge was at the centre of a sacred architecture, planned and constructed over centuries, reflecting a relationship between people, the earth, crops and the sun. Matt ended his talk with the conclusion: "Stonehenge is the cog that turns the wheel."

John Langran