THE SECRETS OF STONEHENGE

A recent discovery sheds new light on an ancient puzzle...

DID YOU KNOW?...

On 21 June, 20,000 people will gather at Stonehenge to celebrate the Summer Solstice, when the Sun is at its highest point in the sky. Sunrise there can be spectacular!

Staggering stones

It’s too bad the early settlers didn’t have a wizard to help build Stonehenge. The smaller bluestone rocks weigh about 1,800kg each, while the bigger sarsen stones (the huge vertical ones in this picture) each weigh a whopping 22 tonnes – that’s as heavy as four African elephants! – so they certainly could have done with the help!

Archaeologist Mike Parker Pearson is studying where the stones originally came from and how people managed to move them to their current spot without wheeled vehicles. He says the sarsens were possibly hauled in on big wooden sledges from 32km away, but the bluestones were traced to rock outcrops 225km away in Wales! Mike thinks they could have been dragged on sledges to a waterway and then floated on rafts to the building site. He’s also investigating whether the bluestones were first set up as circular monuments in Wales, then dismantled and taken to Stonehenge. One thing’s for sure – the builders must have had rock-hard muscles by the time Stonehenge was finally finished!

The sun’s dazzling rays burst through a strange ring of stones set on a grassy field in Wiltshire. This huge monument, called Stonehenge, has stood on England’s Salisbury Plain for thousands of years - but it’s still one of the world’s biggest mysteries.

The unexplained

For hundreds of years, people have tried to work out how Stonehenge’s enormous stones got there and why. A legend from the 12th century claimed that giants placed the monument on a mountain in Ireland, before a wizard named Merlin magically moved the stone circle to England.

Other theories suggest that migrants (people who move from one country to another) from continental Europe built the site as an astronomical observatory or as a temple to their Sun and Moon gods. So far, no theories have been proven. But new finds may provide more information about the builders of Stonehenge, and could help explain why the monument was constructed in this region.

Digging for clues

Many scientists have guessed that the builders of Stonehenge were the first to settle in the area some 5,000 years ago, around 3000 B.C., when construction on the site began. But a recent excavation is making people rethink this idea. While digging around a spring about 2.4km away from Stonehenge, archaeologist David Jacques and his team uncovered hundreds of bones belonging to aurochs – a species of cattle twice the size of a modern-day bull that thrived in ancient times! In fact, the site, known as Vespasian’s Camp, held the largest collection of aurochs bones ever found in Europe. The discovery suggests that the spring was a pit-stop along an auroch migration route where the animals drank water. The team also unearthed 37,000 flints – stone tools used for hunting.

“We started to wonder if the area was a hunting ground and feasting site for ancient people,” David says. “Just one auroch could have fed a hundred people, so the place would have been a big draw. And he thinks that descendants of these auroch hunters assembled the mysterious stone ring."

At least 8,500 years old, the posts were found during the construction of a car park. He thinks the wooden monument may have been a tribute to the settlers’ ancestors. But while David and other scientists will keep digging for clues that might one day solve the ancient puzzle...

Dress rehearsal?

David thinks the first settlers may have had their own version of Stonehenge. He says they set up a group of wooden posts 200 metres from where Stonehenge now stands. The animal bones and tools date back to 7500 B.C. The age of the artefacts means people may have travelled from Ireland, or even further afield, to hunt here, “ he says. One of the flints was made from a type of rock found 120km to the west. “This suggests that the spring was a pit-stop along an auroch migration route where the animals drank water. The team also unearthed 37,000 flints – stone tools used for hunting.

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