Stonehenge at sunrise

Figsbury Ring

A Walk Through ANCIENT WILTSHIRE

Steve Melia walks the Sarsen Way between Stonehenge and Salisbury, taking in a range of historic landmarks

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IN a country packed with ancient sites there is one English county, and one site, which generates more interest and controversy than any other. Last year, Stonehenge attracted 1.3 million visitors, mainly from overseas, to Wiltshire. A quick glance at the Ordnance Survey map shows the World Heritage Site and surrounding area covered with prehistoric places of interest. To explore what makes this area so interesting, I set out on a two-day walk, starting at Stonehenge and following the Sarsen Way, via three other ancient sites, to finish in Salisbury.

The last time I visited Stonehenge, the visitor centre was a cabin with an underpass leading under an A-road to the site – a "national disgrace" according to MPs at the time. In 2013 that road was closed and a new visitor centre opened, a mile and a half from the site. There is a modest car park but most visitors arrive by coach or bus, as I did from Salisbury station. One reason for Stonehenge's enduring fascination is that we are still not sure why it was built. We do know that it happened in several stages. The circular ditch and banks were built around 5,000 years ago, when the site was used as a graveyard. Then 500 years later, the big "sarsen" sandstones were quarried and dragged from the Marlborough Downs, 15 miles to the north. Stonehenge is also a graveyard for theories and speculation. In the café I met Heather Sebire, curator for English Heritage, who manages Stonehenge. They have a duty to explain the site to the public, she says, but experience has made her wary of journalists. "I'm sorry, but we have to put up with all sorts of crazy headlines. One woman was convinced it had an upper storey and a thatched roof. There's no evidence for that."

In 2002 a grave discovered in nearby Amesbury led to speculation, now discounted, that the stone circle was built later, in the Bronze Age. The skeleton was nicknamed "the Amesbury Archer" and "the King of Stonehenge" – I would meet up with him later. A BBC documentary, first screened in 2021, claimed that some of Stonehenge's stones originally stood in a circle in Wales, a tentative conclusion presented as a proven fact. "The geologists have disproved that theory," Heather says. "The archaeologists they interviewed have acknowledged as much but they haven't made a second documentary saying the first one was wrong!"

Stonehenge remains special, she says, because of the huge effort it took to build. It's the only stone circle in the world with lintels and they fit together in a unique way, like the mortise and tenon joints used by carpenters. She tells me to look out for a lump on top of one of the standing stones, designed to fit a corresponding hole in a lintel. I asked her why this area has such a dense concentration of archaeological sites. "Archaeology is everywhere. A lot of it has survived around here because of the military on Salisbury Plain. Also, in the early 1920s, the National Trust bought a lot of the surrounding land which has protected it."

There is no evidence of people living at Stonehenge. The original builders probably lived at Durrington Walls, two miles away. Reconstructions of the roundhouses discovered there stand beside the visitor centre. Shuttle buses run between there and the stones, but I joined a trickle of people walking beside the old road. The first stone you reach, the Heel Stone, stands alone, aligned with the setting sun in midwinter. The celestial alignment of Stonehenge has stimulated many speculative theories. It was clearly intentional, probably related to agriculture and pagan beliefs about the changing seasons, but we don't know for sure. Many people are drawn to Stonehenge for spiritual reasons, but it was difficult to feel spiritual whilst dodging people taking silly selfies. In a concession to contemporary fads, English Heritage has put up boards encouraging people to photograph themselves propping up the Heel Stone or flying over the sarsens.

You can walk across fields from Stonehenge to Durrington Walls but >


An artist's impression of the construction of Stonehenge


Woodhenge


Inside Old Sarum

> they get rather wet in winter. A slightly longer route follows harder tracks for most of the way. A few cars were parked there but it was much quieter than Stonehenge. A smaller circular monument, Woodhenge, stands beside Durrington Walls. It contains 168 wooden posts, recreated in concrete after its discovery in 1925. A woman was standing alone, contemplating the circle. She comes here to meditate. "It's a special place. God hears us better here. I think ancient people understood these things better than we do."

An interpretation board shows how the neolithic village of Durrington Walls might have looked, surrounded on two sides by the curving bank you can still see today. It is a natural feature, accentuated by the ancient builders. I walked through the big wet field which covers the remains of the village today. From the top of the bank, I looked across the landscape as far as Amesbury, where I was staying that night. Here, for the first time, I felt that connection to the land and the ancestors, real or imagined but unmistakable. Amesbury feels like a village recently expanded into a town. The famous neolithic grave was discovered when building a new housing estate, on a site which became the Amesbury Archer Primary School. I stayed in an old hotel, which looked dilapidated from the outside but was comfortable enough inside. I would have liked to visit the history centre, which opened here in 2018, but it was closed by the time I arrived.

The Sarsen Way follows the Avon Valley for seven miles from Amesbury to my next stop, Old Sarum, through woodland and picturesque villages. I detoured across the river to eat at the pub, the Wheatsheaf in Lower Woodford. Then over the last brow the ancient hill fort of Old Sarum appeared like a thin three-tiered cake, sculpted from a wide hill topped by a plateau. The two outer banks, which you can walk around free of charge, were built in the Iron Age. As you peer into the deep ditch between them it is difficult to believe they were dug with deer-antler picks.

The inner banks were raised by the Normans, forming the motte of a new castle. English Heritage's podcast explains how they needed a smaller, more defensible, site for their garrison. That prompted my first question to site manager Simon Ball: if the Normans found the hillfort too large, why did Iron Age people think they could defend it? Hillforts weren't necessarily defensible, he explained. Some of them were used as markets, for livestock or just for living. It was difficult to say how Old Sarum was used because the Iron Age level lies buried beneath Roman, Saxon and Norman earthworks and the site has not been extensively excavated, but there may have been some habitation here.

On a clear day you can make out Figsbury Ring, another Iron Age hillfort four miles away. This area was clearly as important in the Iron Age as it was in earlier times. We are joined by archaeologist Steve Guy-Gibbens. I ask him the same question I put to Heather: why are there so many archaeological sites in Wiltshire? He talks about "collection bias" linked to Stonehenge. "Archaeologists have picked up more here because they were looking, but there is something different about Wiltshire, with these big monuments. People come back to the most visible places in the landscape."

The inner ramparts of Old Sarum give the best view of the ruined cathedral in the outer grounds. The first cathedral was built six years after the castle, attracting many other people to settle here, but relations between the church and civil authorities soon deteriorated. In 1139, King Stephen ordered the arrest of Bishop Roger, who was mistreated and died shortly afterwards. By 1220, the clergy had become so dissatisfied with the harsh conditions of life at Old Sarum that they began work on a new Salisbury cathedral, whose spire you can see from the ramparts on the opposite side. Six years later they carried the tombs of the founding bishops down the hill to the new town of Salisbury. They were followed by stones from the old cathedral and a copy of the Magna Carta, the original English bill of rights.


An aerial view of Old Sarum

From Old Sarum, the Sarsen Way descends across grassland to cross and then follow the River Avon into Salisbury. The first part is wet and muddy in winter, until you reach a boardwalk, raised over the wet ground. A wetland re-creation scheme has extended the boardwalks beside the river as you enter the city.

I had walked 12 miles and felt I deserved a beer or three, which gave me a good excuse to sample three historic pubs in the city centre. The King's Head, beside the river, was a 15th century coaching inn. On the opposite side of the road stands the 18th Century Bishop's Mill. The oldest pub in Salisbury, the Haunch of Venison, is just around the corner. It dates back to 1320 when it housed builders working on the cathedral. Wooden panels divide it into small rooms heated by fires. A glass case beside one of them contains the skeletal hand of a man allegedly caught cheating at cards.

I had two more places to visit before leaving Salisbury: the cathedral and museum. The cathedral is famous for several reasons – Constable's painting, the tallest spire in England and the world's oldest working clock, but I came looking for something specific: the objects brought from Old Sarum. On your right as you enter the cathedral lie stone effigies of Bishops Roger and Jocelin. The unmarked tombs of Roger and Osmund are at the opposite end of the nave. The Magna Carta is held in the Chapter House, outside the main building. You queue to enter a darkened tent, heightening your anticipation, so the single sheet of plain text on display inside seemed something of an anti-climax.

The museum is opposite the cathedral's main entrance. Inside, I met director Adrian Green who led me to the Wessex Gallery, a treasure trove of finds from ancient Wiltshire. The display begins with carvings from Old Sarum Cathedral, then moves backwards through time. Two of the most spectacular collections were found by metal detectorists, legally in one case, illegally in the other. The brightest object in the room is a gold torque, smaller and older than the Celtic torques I have seen elsewhere across Europe; this one dates back to the Bronze Age. In a glass case in the far corner lies the museum's most famous occupant: the Amesbury Archer, surrounded by the objects found in his grave: arrowheads, pots and copper daggers. He grew up in central Europe and arrived on the cusp between the Neolithic and Bronze Age. Was the media justified in calling him the King of Stonehenge, I ask Adrian.

Haunch of Venison


Adrian Green with the Amesbury Archer

"No, that was ridiculous." So what was so important about this find?

"The array of objects found with him is very unusual for that time. He was clearly high-status and these are the earliest gold objects ever found in Britain."

He pointed to two tiny gold cylinders, believed to be hair braids, and a black polished stone.

"The trouble I have with the name 'Amesbury Archer' is that he was disabled. He could probably fire a bow, but he walked with a limp, so I doubt that he was pursuing prey. This stone is a clue to what he did. It was used in metal-working. He understood that magical process: turning solids into liquid and back again. Why was he drawn here? Stonehenge and Durrington Walls were gathering places – if he wanted to meet people, this would be a place to come."

I asked him why this area is so rich in archaeology. He agreed with the comments made by Heather and Steve, then added, "Perhaps to our ancestors there was something else about that landscape, something sacred, that's lost to us today."


Salisbury Cathedral