

Neolithic Site Near Stonehenge Yields an ‘Astonishing Discovery’

The finding of a circle of trenches at a nearby ancient village also makes the site the largest prehistoric structure in Britain and possibly in Europe, one archaeologist said.

By Megan Specia [The New York Times](#) June 22, 2020



Many experts say that Stonehenge, in the English countryside, was probably a sacred site that people visited for significant ceremonies. Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

LONDON — A new archaeological discovery at the site of an ancient village near Stonehenge promises to offer significant clues about life more than 4,500 years ago in the Neolithic period, and could even “write a whole new chapter in the story” of the celebrated structure’s landscape, experts say. The find also makes the site the largest prehistoric structure in Britain and possibly in Europe, according to Vincent Gaffney, of the University of Bradford, an archaeologist involved in the analysis. “It has completely transformed how we understand this landscape — there is no doubt about it,” he said.

Stonehenge, [a UNESCO World Heritage site](#) in the English countryside, has long drawn visitors to admire its looming stone slabs, even as its origins and purpose are still being explored. The study, [published online](#) on Sunday, outlines the discovery of a large circle of shafts surrounding the ancient village — known as [the Durrington Walls henge monument](#) — about two miles from Stonehenge. The trenches, each of which is around 30 feet wide and 15 feet deep, are thought to have been part of a ritual boundary area between the two sites.

Uncovered through remote sensing technology and ground sampling, the discovery could amount to one of the most significant finds ever made at the site, archaeologists and experts said. “As the place where the builders of Stonehenge lived and feasted, Durrington Walls is key to unlocking the story of the wider Stonehenge landscape,” Nick Snashall, the National Trust archaeologist for the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site, said in a statement. Calling the finding an “astonishing discovery,” she said it would “write a whole new chapter in the story of the Stonehenge landscape.”



Revelers gathered near Stonehenge on Saturday before the summer solstice. The site remains closed because of coronavirus restrictions. Credit...Finnbarr Webster/Getty Images

Over the past decade, the ancient site at Stonehenge [has been slowly revealing its secrets](#) — as well as details about the lives of those who built it — thanks largely to the Stonehenge Hidden Landscapes Project, a partnership among several universities and research institutions that was behind the latest discovery.

Stonehenge is positioned to align with the sunrise and sunset on the winter and summer solstices. And while the biggest questions about the structure — why was it built, and what purpose did it serve? — have yet to be definitively answered, many experts say it was probably a sacred site that people visited for significant ceremonies, including burials.

The latest discovery was made using new techniques including a magnetic remote sensing survey of the area — technology that has both revolutionized experts’ understanding of the site and led to vast changes in archaeology in general, Dr. Gaffney said. “People have been studying Stonehenge forever, and you shouldn’t be able to discover something this large still,” he said. “But its been made possible

by the technology.” Magnetometers allowed the archaeologists to peer into the ground without digging and to survey tracts of land by attaching the devices to A.T.V.s driven over miles of countryside. Whereas much archaeology in decades past relied on excavation to understand a site, these sensors allow a [greater understanding of features that are unseen on the surface of the landscape](#), Dr. Gaffney said.

The result has been a growing insight into daily life experienced by people several millennia ago. “Stonehenge was for the dead, Durrington was for the living,” Dr. Gaffney said. “But now, what we are probably looking at was this great big boundary around them probably warning people of what they are approaching.” He said that the pits had been set at a deliberate distance and that their locations would have had to be paced out from a central point. That is a significant clue about people living in the area at the time, he said, because it “means they could count” — making it among the earliest evidence for counting in what is now Britain.

Experts in English historical sites greeted the discovery with excitement but said that further exploration was required in order to fully grasp its significance. Susan Greaney, a historian at English Heritage, which manages Stonehenge and hundreds of other historic sites, welcomed further investigation. She said in a statement that the research had “uncovered tantalizing hints of yet another new archaeological feature in the Stonehenge landscape, this time on an extraordinary scale.” Dr. Gaffney said that exploration would continue, but that there would be no rush to excavate. “Remote sensing has taken us a long way,” he said, “and I think its going to take us further still.”