

THE SECRETS OF

STONEHENGE

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



DID YOU KNOW...?

On 20–21 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!



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 a new find may provide more information about the builders of Stonehenge, and could help explain why the monument was constructed in this region.



Some stones are over six metres tall

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 auroch 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 31,000 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." One of the flints was made from a type of rock found 120km to the west. "This means people may have travelled from all over to hunt here," he says.

The animal bones and tools date back to 7500 B.C. The age of the artefacts has made David conclude that people

moved to the region around 9,500 years ago – 4,500 years *earlier* than some had thought – to hunt auroch. And he thinks that descendants of these auroch hunters assembled the mysterious stone ring.



An illustration of the massive bull-like auroch

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.

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 mysteries of Stonehenge once and for all, for now its story isn't written in stone...

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!