

A Sermon in stone



“Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
And this our life, exempt from human haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running
brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.
I would not change it.”

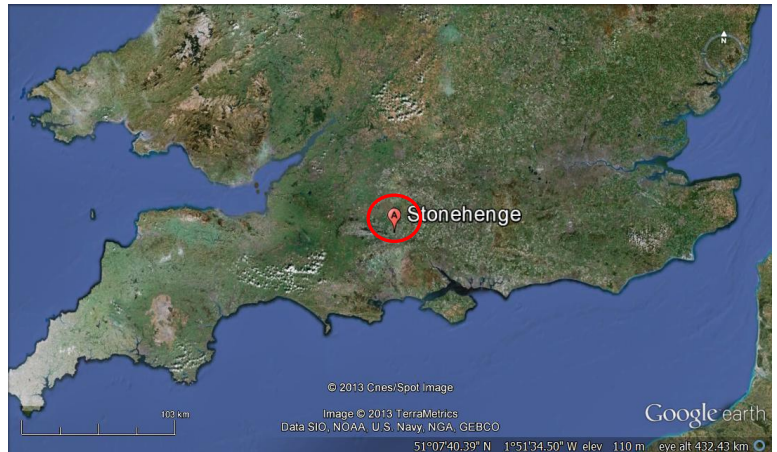
William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616)

From 'As You Like It'

At the same time the fellahin were toiling to erect the Pharaohs' pyramids, people were erecting the stones of Stonehenge, about 5,500 years ago. This was only 3,000 years since man domesticated wheat!

Stonehenge is built on **Salisbury Plain** which is an undulating tract of chalky downland covering an area some twenty miles long and sixteen miles wide in the south-east corner of Wiltshire between Salisbury and Devizes.

It is a country of limey soil spread thinly over a thousand feet of pure soft white limestone consisting almost entirely of the fossils of minute animals and sea-plants, which lived between seventy and one hundred million years ago when the Plain formed the bed of a comparatively shallow sea.



To the archaeologist, it is the country of Stonehenge, a country of barrow, tumuli, earthworks, hill forts and field systems through which can be traced man's progress and achievements in pre-historic and early historic times, a country which is probably the finest open-air museum in the British Isles.

When we visited the site I was struck by two things:

It is a **Cathedral!**

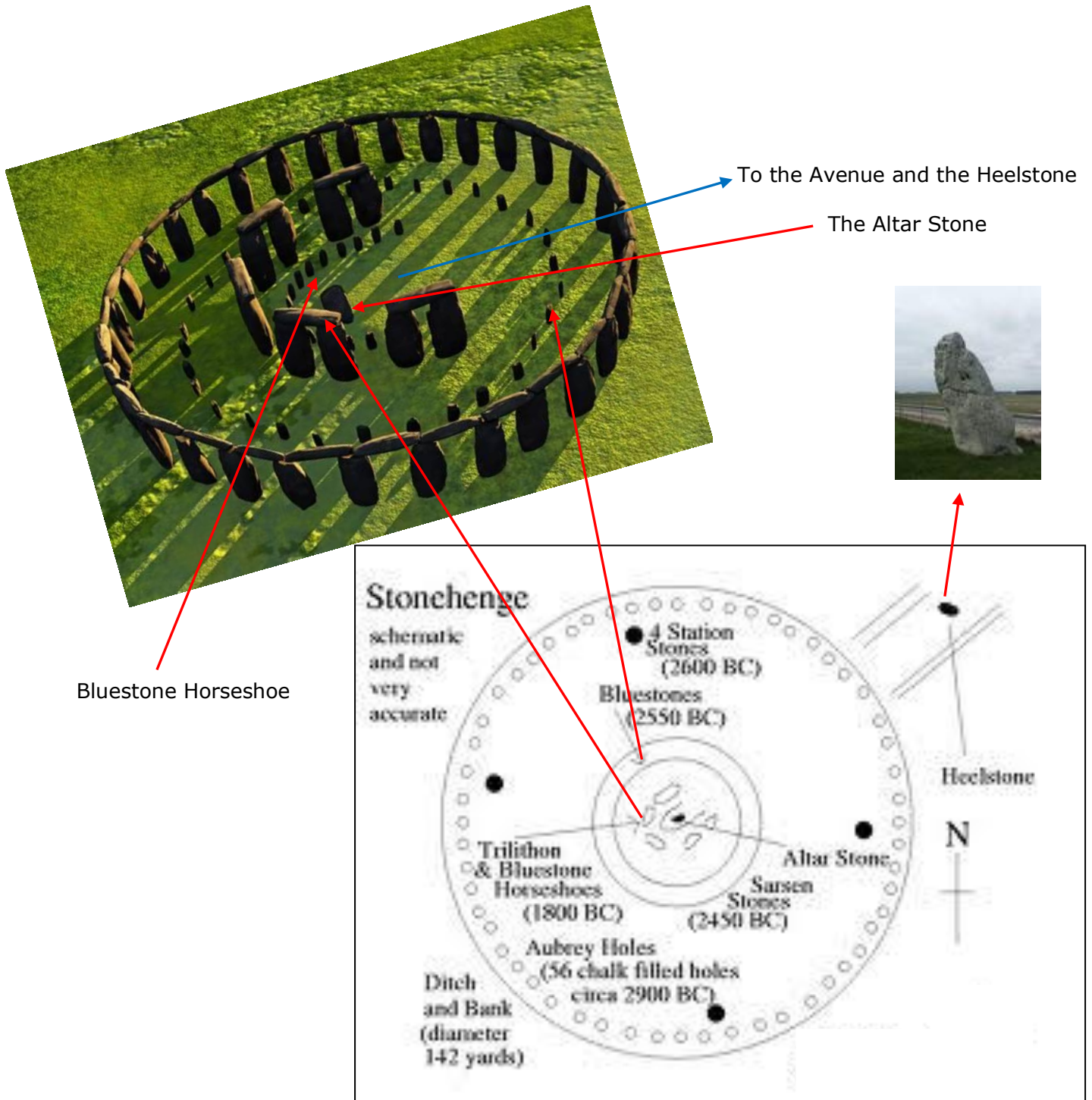
But why build it **here?**



DESIGN

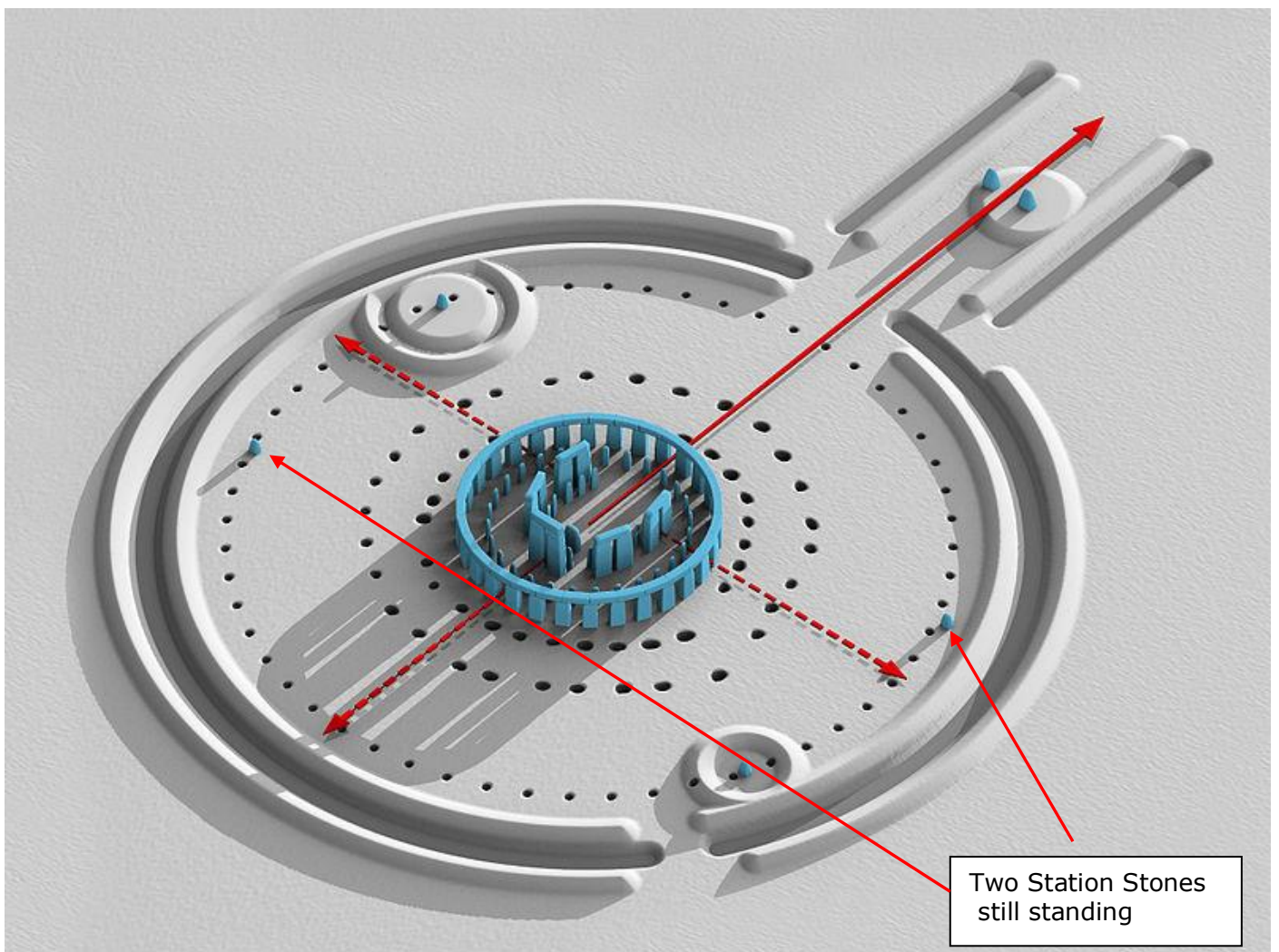
The stones are aligned almost perfectly with the sunrise on the summer solstice, and it is almost unquestioned that Stonehenge was built as a spectacular place of worship.

The original construction has suffered a great deal from both weather damage and human pillage of its rock over the millennia.



Stonehenge was a place of burial from its beginning to its zenith in the mid third millennium B.C.

The cremation burial dating to Stonehenge's Sarsen stones phase is just one of many from this later period of the monument's use and demonstrates that it was still very much a domain of the dead.



PHASES of CONSTRUCTION

As early as 10,500 years ago three large pine posts, which were totem poles of sorts, were erected at the site. Then around 5,500 years ago two earthworks known as Cursus monuments were erected, the longest of which ran for 1.8 miles (3 km). The purpose of these structures is unknown.

Archaeologists believe the construction of the site was carried out in three main stages, which have been labelled Stonehenge I, Stonehenge II and Stonehenge III.

The building of Stonehenge I started about 5,000 years ago with the creation of an earthwork circular ditch using deer antlers as picks. The circle is 98 meters in diameter, and the ditch itself was 6 meters wide and 2 meters deep.

In addition, archaeologists have found numerous cremation burials dating to this time and the centuries that followed. Recent research suggests that up to 240 people were buried in total, making Stonehenge the large Neolithic burial site in Britain. This supports the religious reason for the site.

Next, they used the chalky rubble taken from the ditch to build a steep bank circle just inside the outer circle. Inside the bank circle, they dug 56 shallow holes known as the Aubrey holes (named after their discoverer, 17th century scholar **John Aubrey**).

Finally, two parallel stones were erected at the entrance to the circle, one of which, the Slaughter Stone, still survives.

Also surviving are two positioned across from each other on opposite sides of the circle, which may also have been erected during this time. Stonehenge I seems to have been used for about 500 years and then abandoned.



Around 4,600 years ago construction ramped up with the erection of dozens of **bluestones** in a double circle at the site (Stonehenge II, within the original bank and ditch circles. This monument was not to last and by 4,400 years ago it had been replaced by something far grander.

The bluestones come from the **Preseli Mountains** in South Wales, **257 kilometers** away.



Bluestone outcrops at Craig Rhos-y-Felin in Wales.

Stonehenge



There were about 80 of them, weighing up to 4 tons each. How they were transported is not known, although scholars don't regard the feat as impossible and various theories have been presented.

It is intriguing to wonder, what makes the Stonehenge site so special, that so much effort would be expended to drag the giant stones 250 kilometers instead of constructing the monument near a quarry.

The entranceway to the semicircle of bluestones is aligned with the midsummer sunrise.

The alignment was continued by the clearing of a new approach to the site, 'The Avenue', which has ditches and banks on either side like the original outer circle.

Two Heel Stones (so-named from the shape of the one that remains) were placed on the Avenue a short distance from the circle (and, today, very close to Highway A344).

During phase III, which was started in about **2000 BC**, the builders constructed a circle of upright **Sarsen Stones**, each pair of which was topped with a **stone lintel** (horizontal capstone). The lintels are curved giving the appearance of a giant interconnected stone circle surrounding the horseshoe.



There were originally 30 upright stones; 17 of these still stand. These stones came from the Marlborough Downs, 20 miles to the north, are 2 meters tall and weigh 45,000 Kg each.

The **outside surfaces** of all these stones were pounded smooth with hammers, and dovetail joints fasten the lintels to their uprights.

Within this stone ring was erected a horseshoe formation of the same construction, using 10 upright stones.

Here the **Trilithons** (set of two uprights plus the lintel) stand separated from one another, in 5 pairs. Eight of the original ten stones remain.

They are considerably larger than the Sarsen Stones, but I have been unable to find any measurements.

The horseshoe shape opens directly towards the Slaughter Stone and down the Avenue, aligned with the summer solstice sunrise.

About a century later, about 20 bluestones gathered from Stonehenge II were placed in a horseshoe shape inside the Sarsen horseshoe. Less than half of these remain. Some shuffling around of the bluestones and digging of holes (probably in preparation for placing the bluestones, which was not completed) occurred around 1500 BC.



The Altar Stone is the biggest of these newly-arranged bluestones that remains.

Around 1100 BC, the Avenue was extended all the way to the River Avon (over 9,000 feet from Stonehenge), indicating that the site was still in use at that time.

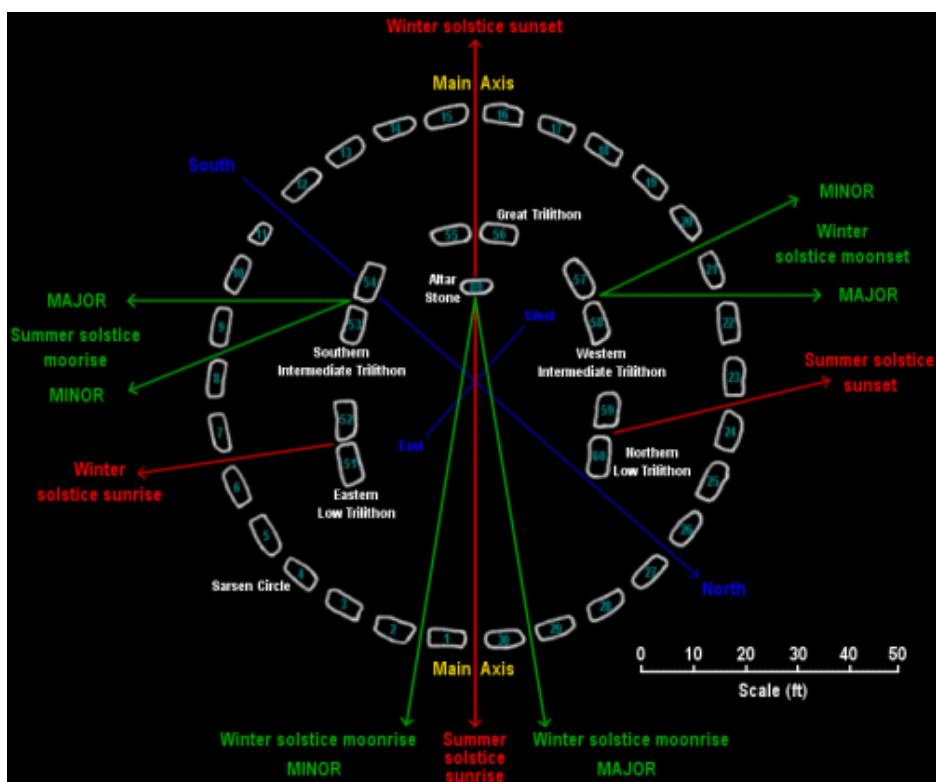
This would be the end of major construction at Stonehenge. As time went on the monument fell into neglect and disuse, some of its stones fell over while other were taken away. Stonehenge itself was a massive undertaking, requiring the labour of thousands to move stones from as far away as west Wales, shaping them and erecting them.

WHY?

The religious function of the monument is generally accepted.

There is still discussion as to its orientation, but association with the mid-summer solstice is also accepted.

Other alignments also seem deliberate, but the function of the Station Stones is less convincing.



The mythology about Stonehenge is voluminous and of interest, but space limits discussion.

HOW?

How did Neolithic people move all these massive stones over such large distances??

Easter islanders and others have performed similar feats.

Many have published pet theories, many have even demonstrated means, and speculation is rife.

There is no written record and no oral record.

We will never know.

Stonehehenge stands in a grassy field in the Wiltshire countryside, and must have been a highly atmospheric site over the millennia since its construction.

It is such a magnificent monument that it would impress no matter where it is

The astonishing scale and beauty of the stones, the great care and labour in construction, and the mystery that surrounds its original purpose are just some of the reasons Stonehenge is so remarkable.

And under stormy skies, a fresh snowfall, a rainbow, a full moon, or the rising sun on the summer solstice, it is a mystical site indeed.

BUT WHY HERE?

Of all the theorising and speculation surrounding these mysteries, none seem to address the question of why it was built in this particular spot.

The stones come from afar, no nearby river was acknowledged in the beginning,

Around 8,000 years ago, a warm and wet climate existed, dense climax woodland, consisting of lime and oak developed, covering much of the UK.

Was timber so important in the techniques used to construct the monument? No evidence remains.

We are left to wonder

**I wonder about the love you can't find
And I wonder about the loneliness that's mine
I wonder how much going you have got
And I wonder about your friends that are not
I wonder, I wonder, don't you?**

---Sixto Rodriques