

# What Lies Beneath Stonehenge?



**Vince  
Gaffney**

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**G**AFFNEY'S LATEST RESEARCH EFFORT, the Stonehenge Hidden Landscapes Project, is a four-year collaboration between a British team and the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Archaeological Prospection and Virtual Archaeology in Austria that has produced the first detailed underground survey of the area surrounding Stonehenge, totalling more than four square miles. The results are astonishing. The researchers have found buried evidence of more than 15 previously unknown or poorly understood late Neolithic monuments: henges, barrows, segmented ditches, pits.

To Gaffney, these findings suggest a scale of activity around Stonehenge far beyond what was previously suspected. “There was sort of this idea that Stonehenge sat in the middle and around it was effectively an area where people were probably excluded,” Gaffney told me, “a ring of the dead around a special area—to which few people might ever have been admitted— Perhaps there were priests, big men, whatever they were, inside Stonehenge having processions up the Avenue, doing—something extremely mysterious. Of course that sort of analysis depends on not

knowing what's actually in the area around Stonehenge itself. It was terra incognita, really.”



**A full map of the project's findings is to be presented September 9 at the British Science Festival in Birmingham, England. (David Preiss)**

This is a really interesting read! I don't have anything to add right now, but I figured several folks would be interested in this. It will be interesting to hear what is revealed of this study on September 9th.

I figure there are many ATSers who have studied Stonehenge throughout the years that might be willing to share some interesting factoids about it. There's been so much doom and gloom lately, I think this is a refreshing little break for a moment.

We walked the Avenue, the ancient route along which the stones were first dragged from the River Avon. For centuries, this was the formal path to the great henge, but now the only hint of its existence was an indentation or two in the tall grass. It was a fine English summer's day, with thin, fast clouds above, and as we passed through fields dotted with buttercups and daisies, cows and sheep, we could have been hikers anywhere, were it not for the ghostly monument in the near distance.

Faint as the Avenue was, Vince Gaffney hustled along as if it were illuminated by runway lights. A short, sprightly archaeologist of 56, from Newcastle upon Tyne in northeast England, he knows this landscape as well as anyone alive: has walked it, breathed it, studied it for uncounted hours. He has not lost his sense of wonder. Stopping to fix the monument in his eyeline, and reaching out toward the stones on the horizon, he said, “Look, it becomes *cathedralesque*.”

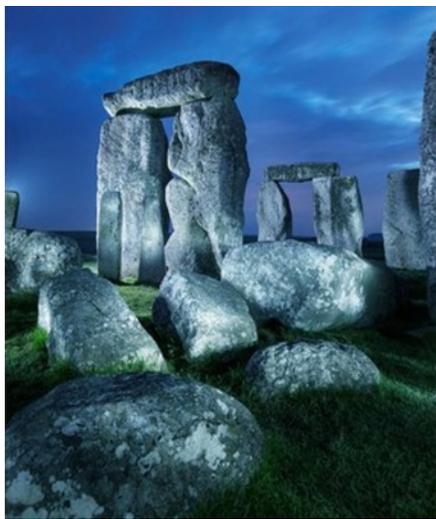
Gaffney’s latest research effort, the Stonehenge Hidden Landscapes Project, is a four-year collaboration between a British team and the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Archaeological Prospection and Virtual Archaeology in Austria that has produced the first detailed underground survey of the area surrounding Stonehenge, totalling more than four square miles. The results are astonishing.

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Nobody has yet put a spade in the ground to verify the new findings, which were painstakingly gathered by geophysicists and others wielding magnetometers and ground-penetrating radars that scan the ground to detect structures and objects several yards below the surface. But Gaffney has no doubt of the work’s value. “This is among the most important landscapes, and probably the most studied landscape, in the world,” he says. “And the area has been absolutely transformed by this survey. Won’t be the same again.”

The joys and frustrations of all archaeological study—perhaps all historical inquiry—come into particularly sharp relief at Stonehenge. Even to the most casual observer, the monument is deeply significant. Those vast stones, standing in concentric rings in the middle of a basin on Salisbury Plain, carefully placed by who-knows-who thousands of years ago, must mean *something*. But nobody can tell us what. Not exactly.

The clues that remain will always prove insufficient to our curiosity. Each archaeological advance yields more questions, and more theories to be tested. Our ignorance shrinks by fractions. What we know is always dwarfed by what we can never know.



**The huge bluestones each weigh between four and eight tons and were brought to the site from North Wales, 170 miles away. (Photo by Henrik Knudsen, with thanks to English Heritage)**

Take the big question: Was Stonehenge predominantly a temple, a parliament or a graveyard? Was it a healing ground? We don't know, for sure. We know that people were buried there, and that the stones are aligned in astronomically important ways. We also understand, because of the chemical composition of animal bones found nearby and the provenance of the stones, that people travelled hundreds of miles to visit Stonehenge. But we cannot say, with certainty, why.

Try a simpler question: How did the bluestones, which weigh between four and eight tons apiece, arrive at the site, nearly 5,000 years ago, from 170 miles away in West Wales? Land or sea? Both alternatives explode

with possibilities, and nobody has an impregnable theory. Mike Parker Pearson of University College London is working on a new idea that the bluestones might have been lifted onto huge wooden lattices and carried by dozens of men to the site. But it's just a theory. We can't know, definitively. We can only have better-informed questions.



**Cursus Outlined in Special Effects. (© October Films  
for Smithsonian Channel)**

The ineffability of Stonehenge has not dulled our appetite. The site has long proved irresistible to diggers. In 1620, the Duke of Buckingham had his men excavate right in the centre of the monument. Although they did not know it at the time, they dug on the site of a prehistoric pit. Buckingham's men found skulls of cattle “and other beasts” and large quantities of “burnt coals or charcoals”—but no treasure, as they had hoped.

In the 19th century, “barrow-digging,” or the excavation of prehistoric monuments and burial hills, was a popular pastime among the landed gentry. In 1839, a naval officer named Captain Beamish dug out an estimated 400 cubic feet of soil from the northeast of the Altar Stone at Stonehenge. As Parker Pearson notes in his book *Stonehenge*, Beamish's “big hole was probably the final blow for any prehistoric features—that once lay at Stonehenge's centre.”

Work at Stonehenge became less invasive. In 1952, Willard Libby—the American chemist and later a Nobel Prize winner—used his new radiocarbon dating technique on a piece of charcoal from a pit within Stonehenge to date the monument to 1848 B.C., give or take 275 years. That date has since been refined several times. The prevailing opinion is that the first stones were erected on the site around 2600 B.C. (although the building of Stonehenge was carried out over a millennium, and there were centuries of ritual activity at the site before the stones were in place).

In 2003, Parker Pearson conducted his own survey, concentrating on the nearby settlement at Durrington Walls and the area between there and the River Avon. Based on huts, tools and animal bones he uncovered, he concluded that Durrington Walls likely housed the workers who built Stonehenge. Based on an analysis of human remains he later excavated from Stonehenge, he also surmised that, far from being a site of quotidian religious activity, Stonehenge served as a cemetery—a “place for the dead.”



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