



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

UNRAVELLING THE MYSTERY OF THE STONEHENGE
BLUESTONES

Two-Week Dig Begins at Stonehenge

Work begins today (31st March, 2008) on a major research excavation to investigate the bluestones at Stonehenge, the smaller stones that made up part of the famous prehistoric monument alongside the sarsen stones. English Heritage has agreed to facilitate this excavation following the granting of Scheduled Monument Consent by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. The last time an excavation was allowed inside the stone circle was in 1964.

The excavation at Stonehenge will last for two weeks until 11 April. During this time Stonehenge will be open as normal and visitors will be able to observe up close the excavation as it happens on plasma screens inside a special marquee. For visitor information please call 0870 333 118. Daily video updates of the dig are also viewable on www.english-heritage.org.uk

The excavation, led by renowned Stonehenge academics Professor Tim Darvill of University of Bournemouth and Professor Geoffrey Wainwright, President of the Society of Antiquaries, aims to provide a more precise dating of the Double Bluestone Circle, the first stone structure that was built on the site. There is now no visible trace of the original setting of this Circle. What visitors see now are freestanding bluestones re-erected later. Archaeologists tried to date the Circle in the 1990s and estimated that it was first erected at around 2,550BC. But no precise dating has yet been found nor the date of its dismantling. Much of the extant materials from earlier excavations were poorly recorded and cannot be attributed with any certainty to specific features and deposits.

A trench measuring around 3.5 metres by 2.5 metres will be dug in a previously excavated area on the south-eastern quadrant of the Double Stone Circle with the hope of retrieving fragments of the original bluestone pillars.

The dig will also investigate the “Stonehenge Layer”, a significant and varied layer of debris and stone chippings spreading across the whole extent of the stone circle and comprising a high proportion of bluestone fragments. This is the first time that the nature, content and structure of this layer has been properly studied, crucially to determine whether this deposit was derived mainly from the construction or destruction of the Double Bluestone Circle and of Stonehenge as a whole.

Samples obtained from this excavation will be tested using more advanced technology such as radiocarbon dating and will throw light on how long the Circle was in use for, when it was dismantled and reused in later stages of Stonehenge’s construction. This will also allow the professors to compare the new bluestone sample with those that they had obtained in the last few years around the source: in the Preseli Hills in southwest Wales. This will help to illuminate the mystery as to when and how at least 80 such stones were brought to Salisbury Plain 250 km away nearly 4,500 years ago.

Dr Simon Thurley, Chief Executive of English Heritage, said: “The bluestones hold the key to understanding the purpose and meaning of Stonehenge. Their arrival marked a turning point in the history of Stonehenge, changing the site from being a fairly standard formative henge with timber structures and occasional use for burial, to the complex stone structure whose remains dominate the site today.

“English Heritage has a duty to encourage the best research on historic properties under our care. This is a tremendously exciting piece of research that will help us find out considerably more about the important questions concerning the bluestones and I look forward to the results of their work.”

Professor Darvill said: “It is an incredibly exciting moment and a great privilege to be able to excavate inside Stonehenge. This excavation is the first opportunity in nearly half a century to bring the power of modern scientific archaeology to bear on a problem that has taxed the minds of travellers, antiquaries, and archaeologists since medieval times: just why were the bluestones so important and powerful to have warranted our ancestors to make the gargantuan journey to bring them to Salisbury Plain?”

Professor Wainwright added: “This small excavation of a bluestone is the culmination of six years’ of research which Tim and I have conducted in the Preseli Hills of North Pembrokeshire and which has shed new light on the eternal question as to why Stonehenge was built. The excavation will date the arrival of the bluestones following their 250 km journey from Preseli to Salisbury Plain and contribute to our definition of the society which undertook such an ambitious project. We will be able to say not only why but when the first stone monument was built.”

The need for well-defined research within World Heritage Sites is recognised through UNESCO guidance; for Stonehenge in particular it is articulated through the World Heritage Site Management Plan and in the Stonehenge Research Framework, published by English Heritage in 2005.

BBC Timewatch in association with Smithsonian Networks™ will fund the excavation and post excavation analysis and will also film it for broadcast on Smithsonian Channel and BBC 2 in the autumn.

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Notes to editors:

The Bluestone Project: Archaeological investigations by Timothy Darvill, Professor of Archaeology at Bournemouth University, and Geoff Wainwright, President of the Society of Antiquaries, in the Preseli Hills of North Pembrokeshire have shed new light on one of the world's most famous monuments. The bluestones are what makes Stonehenge special. They are natural columns of white spotted dolerite and occur only in the Carn Menyn region of the Preseli Hills from whence they were taken 250 Km to Stonehenge. Why were these particular stones chosen and taken such a long way and at such cost in communal effort? The answer to this question lies at the heart of why Stonehenge was built.

The project has shown that the Preseli Hills were a centre for ceremonial and burial comparable to the Stonehenge area where there are many prehistoric burials. The crags in the Preseli Hills from which the stones were taken are

littered with discarded columns and the springs that well up below them were regarded as medicinal until comparatively recent times. They are associated with rock art and burial cairns which show that these springs had a special significance in early prehistory and hold the key to understanding Stonehenge. Some of the burials around Stonehenge have been excavated and amongst them are a good proportion of people who had undergone operations to the skull, or had walked with a limp, or had broken bones – just the sort of thing that would have pressurised them to seek supernatural help. Darvill and Wainwright therefore conclude that Stonehenge was a source and centre for healing. Folklore accounts in the fourteenth century AD refer to a magician – Merlin – bringing stones from the west of the British Isles to Salisbury Plain, claiming that these stones possessed healing powers when used in conjunction with water.

The excavation at Stonehenge will date the arrival of the bluestones at the monument so that it will be possible to determine not only why but when the first stone monument was built.

For more information about the Bluestone Project please contact the professors directly.