



Historic England

Prehistoric Henges and Circles

Introductions to Heritage Assets



Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to prehistoric henges and circles. Henges (or henge monuments) are enclosures where, unlike those with a defensive purpose, the ditch lies inside the bank. Timber circles comprise one or more concentric rings of post-holes marking where wooden posts once stood. Pit circles are similar in present-day appearance but comprise rings of pits which can be shown by excavation never to have held posts, though they often contain other types of deposit. Stone circles are among the most familiar of prehistoric monuments but also among the least well understood. Descriptions of henges and circles and their development along with a brief chronology are included. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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Front cover

Thornborough henge complex, North Yorkshire, from the air

Introduction

In the 3rd and early 2nd millennia BC a remarkable series of circular monuments was built across Britain, comprising varying combinations of earthwork banks and ditches, timber posts and standing stones. Although archaeologists have traditionally classified these monuments into different categories of henges, stone circles and timber circles, the types cannot always be clearly differentiated and may occur as components of the same site; it seems to be their shared circular form that is most significant. They represent a new type of arena for ritual practices and social gatherings.

Unlike earlier causewayed enclosures and chambered tombs, or later round barrows, henges (Figure 1) and circles (Figure 2) are almost entirely an insular phenomenon of Britain and

Ireland; superficially henge-like circular ditched enclosures from central Europe are now known to be much older and unrelated to the British sites.



Figure 1
Arbor Low henge, Derbyshire, from the air; note the circle of fallen stones inside the henge ditch.

The origins of henges are much debated, but a small number of circular and penannular enclosures from the period around 3000 BC, often with segmented ditches in the style of causewayed enclosures, must have played a role. The best-known of these is the first-phase ditch and bank at Stonehenge in Wiltshire, which predates the familiar sarsen stone settings; the three henges at Thornborough in Yorkshire also have outer ditches of segmented form which may be early in date. The atypical henge A at Llandegai in north Wales and the stone circle-henges of Stenness and Brodgar in Orkney seem to be part of this formative milieu as well. Meanwhile, megalithic features known as coves (box-like

arrangements of three or four stones resembling unroofed megalithic chambers) are a possible link between chambered tombs and stone circles, though their chronology is very uncertain.

Henges (or henge monuments) are enclosures where, unlike those with a defensive purpose, the ditch lies inside the bank (although this is not the case at early sites like Stonehenge I – even though it gives its name to the type – or Llandegai A). Some of them enclosed circles of upright timbers or stones, though most such circles are not associated with henge earthworks. Timber circles comprise one or more rings of post-holes marking where wooden posts once stood (Figure 2).



Figure 2
This modern reconstruction of a timber circle from Durrington Walls, Wiltshire, shows how the posts would have obscured views into the monument.

Pit circles are similar in present-day appearance but comprise rings of pits which can be shown by excavation never to have held posts, though they often contain other types of deposit. Stone circles are among the most familiar of prehistoric monuments but also among the least well understood; nevertheless, they have been categorised into various sub-types, reflecting considerable variation in their size, shape and layout.

Standing stones, whether single or paired, may be better discussed with stone alignments, but they can be considered here because they are broadly of the same period, demonstrate the same upright principle, and some are directly associated with stone circles.

Distributions of stone circles and henges are largely distinct, which in part reflects the availability of different building materials (Figure 3). Stone circles are concentrated in the uplands of the north and west, especially Cumbria, the

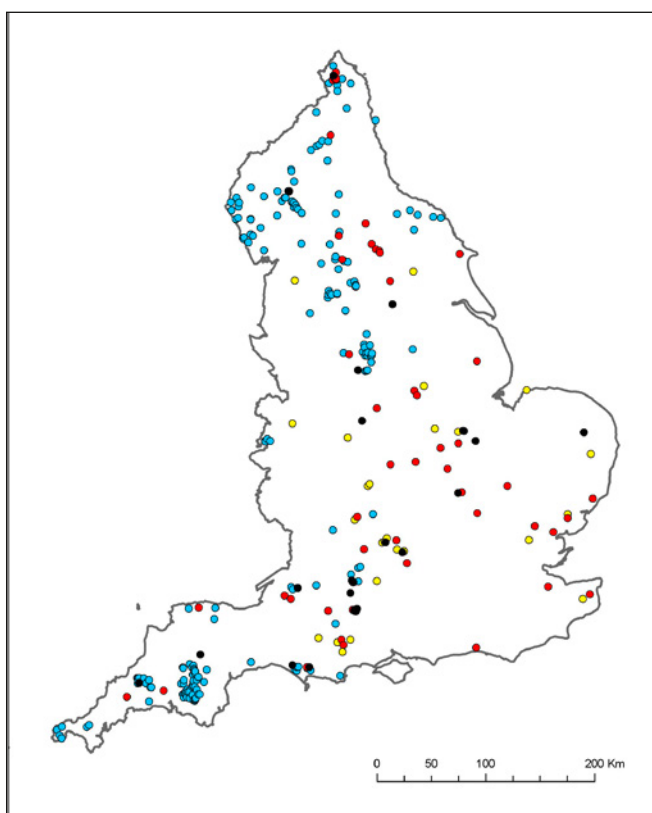


Figure 3
Distribution map of henges, stone circles and timber circles (red = henge; blue = stone circle; yellow = timber circle; black = combination).



Figure 4
A stone circle in its landscape: Scorhill on Dartmoor, Devon.

Peak District, Devon (Figure 4) and Cornwall. Standing stones (Figure 4) have a similar distribution but their main concentration is in the south-west; a few eastern outliers include the huge monolith at Rudston in Yorkshire

In contrast, henges, timber circles and pit circles are generally found in the downland and river valleys of the south and the Midlands, they are rare in parts of the south-east but new discoveries are starting to fill some of the gaps. With odd exceptions, such as the Stripples Stones in Cornwall and Dyffryn Lane in Powys, combined stone circle-henges generally occur along the boundary between the two zones, in central southern England and the Peak District.

Stone circles are the most common type of monument in this category, with at least 176 known in England, out of up to 1,300 from Britain and Ireland as a whole (the number of confirmed and extant stone circles in England from John Barnatt's survey; the higher figure is from Aubrey Burl's synthesis – see [Further Reading](#)). The number of prehistoric sites with standing stones is estimated at 160 (from Olaf Swarbrick's survey – see [Further Reading](#)), but probably of a similar order. The most recent national surveys list about 50 more-or-less certain henges in England and 60 timber and pit circles (numbers from Anthony Harding's and Alex Gibson's surveys respectively – see [Further Reading](#)). New discoveries have since augmented both lists and more sites no doubt await detection.

1 Description

Although based on simple and related principles, henges and circles show great variations in size, the materials used and the arrangement of their components. These combined to produce monuments of very different appearance. The extent to which discrete sub-types can or should be identified remains a matter of debate: for some, detailed classifications aid interpretation; for others, they may become a substitute for it. Within each type there are also apparently unique sites, such as the ring of deep shafts cut through the henge ditch at Maumbury Rings in Dorset, or the 'sunburst' pit circle at Catholme, Staffordshire.

Each individual monument is best understood as the result of people drawing selectively on a broad architectural tradition to produce a site that fitted its surroundings; thus all are somewhat alike but no two are precisely the same. Archaeological investigations can inform us about sequences, chronology and the types of activities that took place. Some sites, perhaps including the sarsen circle at Stonehenge, may never have been finished and perhaps the activity of building could have been an end in itself.



Figure 5
Long Meg standing stone, Cumbria; the cup-and-ring mark can just be made out.

Most henges have one or (more commonly) two entrances and are up to 110 m in diameter. A few, however, are much larger, irregular in shape and may have several entrances: the four largest such ‘henge enclosures’ are all in Wessex – Avebury (Figure 7), Durrington Walls, Marden and Mount Pleasant. The profiles of henge ditches sometimes show evidence that they were gang-excavated in sections.

The term ‘hengiform’ was originally applied to small monuments of similar type but has since become a catch-all name for almost any small prehistoric enclosure and has therefore ceased to be useful; henges with a diameter of less than 15-20 m should be termed ‘mini-henges’. Henges tend to take different forms in different regions, while unusual sites may reflect inter-regional contacts, e.g. the ditchless henge of Irish type at Mayburgh in Cumbria.

Stone circles have traditionally been divided into at least five types: small; large irregular (for instance, Figure 5, Long Meg and Her Daughters, Cumbria); large regular (for instance, The Hurlers on Bodmin Moor); concentric (for instance, The Druid’s Temple, Cumbria); and four-poster (a specialised type mostly found in Scotland and rare in England; they may be a development from recumbent stone circles, which are restricted to north-east Scotland and south-west Ireland). There is also considerable variability in the size of the stones (some are very low) and their spacing. These variations probably reflect a combination of regional traditions and the properties of the available stone (of the English circles only Stonehenge has stones that were brought from a distance).

Timber circles can be divided into single (for instance, Ferrybridge, Yorkshire) and multiple concentric types (for instance, Durrington Walls, Wiltshire), or those with wide-spaced (for instance, Boscombe Down, Wiltshire) and close-spaced posts (for instance, Abingdon, Oxfordshire).

While concentric stone circles have up to four rings, timber circles had as many as nine (at Stanton Drew, Somerset). Unlike standing stones, the wooden posts would have decayed over time, though in some cases they may have been

deliberately removed or burnt. In the absence of surviving structural elements reconstructions remain speculative but the timbers are usually interpreted as free-standing; the idea that some sites, such as the Sanctuary near Avebury, represent the remains of roofed buildings has fallen out of favour, although the stone settings at Stonehenge imply that timber circles could also have supported lintels.

Too little is known about pit circles to classify them in a meaningful way, but the pits can be widely spaced, like the ring around a large central pit at Monkton-up-Wimborne, or contiguous and forming something like a henge ditch, as at Wyke Down, both in Dorset.

Variations in the shape and size of standing stones have yet to be systematically assessed but some are closely related to henges or circles as ‘portal’ stones or outliers, such as Long Meg (Figure 5) while others are apparently isolated or associated with other types of monument. Single free-standing timber posts probably existed too but there is no defined monument class for these.

Where different types of circle form components of the same site the most common sequence was for an original timber monument to be replaced or added to in stone, as at the Sanctuary: at least 40% of stone circles were preceded by timber structures.

Where timber circles and henges occur together, the henge bank and ditch is always later, as at Arminghall, Norfolk. For most (stone) circle-henges, such as Arbor Low in Derbyshire (Figure 1), the sequence is harder to determine. These are usually large monuments: three of the four largest stone circles in England (Avebury, Stanton Drew in Somerset, and the Devil’s Quoits in Oxfordshire) are associated with henges.

Although summed up here as ‘circles’, not all of these monuments are truly circular and archaeologists continue to debate the extent to which minor deviations in shape were deliberate or the unintentional result of setting out by eye.

About a quarter of British stone circles are flattened rings or ellipses, such as Castlerigg in Cumbria, while two-entrance henges are often oval in plan (Figure 1), as are the timber rings at Woodhenge, near Stonehenge. These variations, along with differences in the heights of uprights or the presence of internal features, would have served to set up orientations at each site, which may have been linked to or augmented by visual relationships to other sites or landscape features, astronomical alignments or physical structures such as avenues.

The considerable variations in size between monuments in all three main categories probably reflect both their function and the size of the group that assembled to build or use them; the fact that 3rd millennium monuments tend to be larger than those of the 2nd millennium might therefore indicate changes in social organisation. An alternative idea is that large sites served as regional centres and small ones as local monuments.

The distribution of sites is also significant at a number of spatial scales. At a national scale, henges have rather clustered distributions, with concentrations in the Milfield Basin, the Swale/Ure catchment, the Upper Thames and Wessex (Figure 3). However, networks of regularly spaced henges and stone circles in some areas may reflect exchange (especially of stone axes) or pilgrimage routes. At a local scale many form parts of monument complexes, for example at Dorchester-on-Thames in Oxfordshire, where timber circles, pit circles and a henge were sited around an existing cursus, or Ferrybridge in Yorkshire, where several timber circles and ring-ditches were built in the vicinity of a large henge.

An important distinction is between open circles which displayed the outside world to those inside, and closed circles or embanked henges which physically separated them from it (perhaps drawing attention instead to celestial features above). While stone circles are rarely closed – the King's Men (Rollright Stones) in Oxfordshire has contiguous stones but they are too short to hide people inside – the banks of the larger henges prevented views out but may have served to accommodate spectators looking in. Complex timber circles would have obscured views in both

directions, as well as constraining movement within (Figure 2). The different acoustic effects of these sites were no doubt also important.

The location and setting of a monument (or monument complex) often seem to have influenced its form. Many sites show specific relationships to natural features: henges are generally situated in low-lying river valleys and their physical associations with water may have had symbolic resonance (at Marden in Wiltshire the river Avon actually forms part of the henge's perimeter), while upland stone circles draw attention to the surrounding hills, most spectacularly at Castlerigg. Henges too may have reproduced aspects of the surrounding landscape architecturally: the enclosure and bank at Avebury, for example, may reflect the bowl in which the monument sits and the chalk ridge beyond.

Human burials are found at some henges and circles but this never seems to have been their primary purpose (though there is an association in some areas between standing stones and Beaker burials). They are better interpreted as places where communities who lived rather mobile lives gathered periodically for meetings and ceremonies of various kinds. Formal deposits of artefacts or animal bone are found at some sites, such as the numerous pottery deposits at Llandegai henge B; timber circles tend to yield larger quantities of material than stone circles. However, it is important not to think of rituals occurring at these sites as distinct from 'practical' activities: the same values and logic were applied in daily life, for instance in pit deposits at settlements. Prehistoric people had different ways of looking at the world and we cannot clearly separate secular/domestic from religious/ritual practice.

We do not know whether the posts of timber circles were carved or decorated but stones were almost never dressed (again Stonehenge provides an exception; Figure 6), although there is evidence for careful selection of unworked stones: different shapes may well have had particular meanings, such as the narrower and broader forms at Avebury, which are frequently interpreted as symbolically 'male' and 'female'.



Figure 6
Stonehenge, Wiltshire, showing the uprights and lintels of the unique sarsen circle, with the smaller bluestones in front.

A few standing stones, such as Long Meg, bear cup-and-ring carvings of the same type found on British rock art (Figure 5). Moreover, the different substances used in these monuments probably had different symbolic resonances: in particular, it has been suggested that timber and stone were respectively associated with the living and the dead, which might explain why stone circles tend to have less evidence of communal activities like feasting than timber circles, and rather more burials (over 50% of stone circles where there have been extensive excavations have produced human remains). The shift from timber to stone at some sites may therefore indicate a change in meaning.

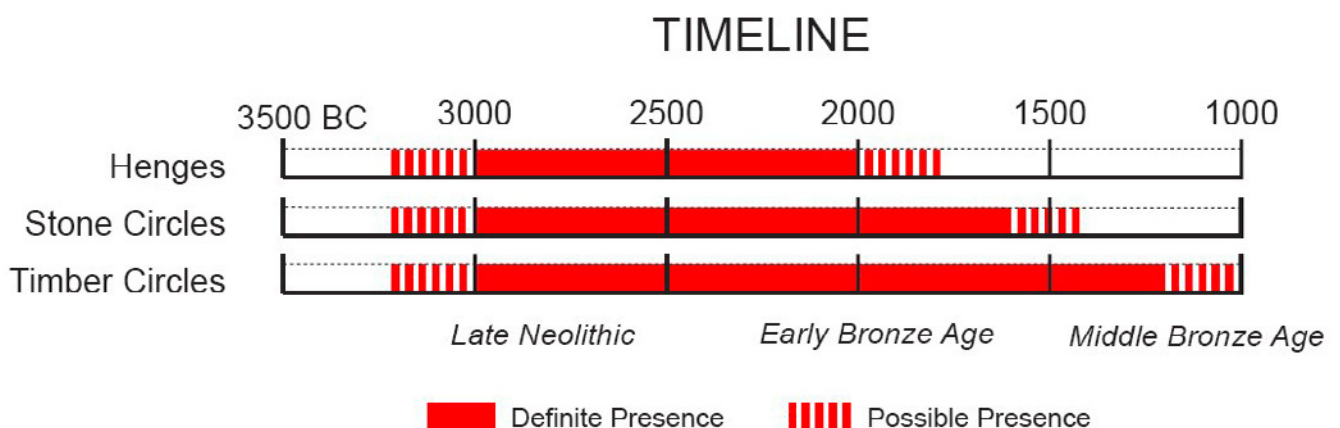
Henges have more varied patterns of activity: while the large henge enclosures were often busy places (with rare evidence of Late Neolithic houses preserved below or within henge banks at Durrington Walls and Marden), finds are usually rather sparse at regular sites. At Thornborough (cover image), for instance, occupation in the surrounding landscape is concentrated at some distance from the henge complex and avoids the monuments themselves, while excavations at the Dorchester-on-Thames Big Rings produced only small finds assemblages from the ditch and hardly any features in the interior. However, the lack of extensive excavation at most henges and stone circles makes it hard to generalise about the scale and nature of activity in and around them.

2 Chronology

Whilst there has been much literature on the type and location of henges and circles, most henges and circles (especially stone circles) remain difficult to precisely date. The earliest sites of each type appear around 3000 BC but most of the larger examples were probably built during the currency of Late Neolithic Grooved Ware pottery, between about 2800 and 2200 BC. Activity at many sites was particularly intense in the third quarter of the 3rd millennium, a time when a new pottery style called Beaker began to appear, perhaps representing a challenge to the established order. Henges and circles of all types continued to be built and used through the period of Beaker currency into the Early Bronze Age, though many of the larger sites had gone out of use by this time.

Circles of the earlier 2nd millennium BC were generally small, of a similar scale to the round barrows of this period. They were still occasionally being constructed in the later 2nd millennium; for example, the timber circles and avenue at Ogden Down, Dorset, date to around 1100 BC. Care is needed to avoid confusing small timber circles with later prehistoric roundhouses.

Standing stones are even more poorly dated but some could be older than the Late Neolithic, especially since the earliest timber uprights appear to go back as far as the Mesolithic period (for example, three large post-holes near Stonehenge may be as old as 8000 BC).



3 Development of the Asset Type

Despite the fact that many key sites, such as Knowlton in Dorset or Arbor Low, have seen only very limited excavation, henges and stone circles have a long history of study. Standing stones and large earthworks would not have gone unnoticed by people living or working nearby and have

been documented since medieval times, often with folk-tales attached, but sites like Avebury and Stanton Drew were first brought to scholarly attention – and suggested to be prehistoric – by antiquarians of the 17th and 18th centuries, notably John Aubrey and William Stukeley.

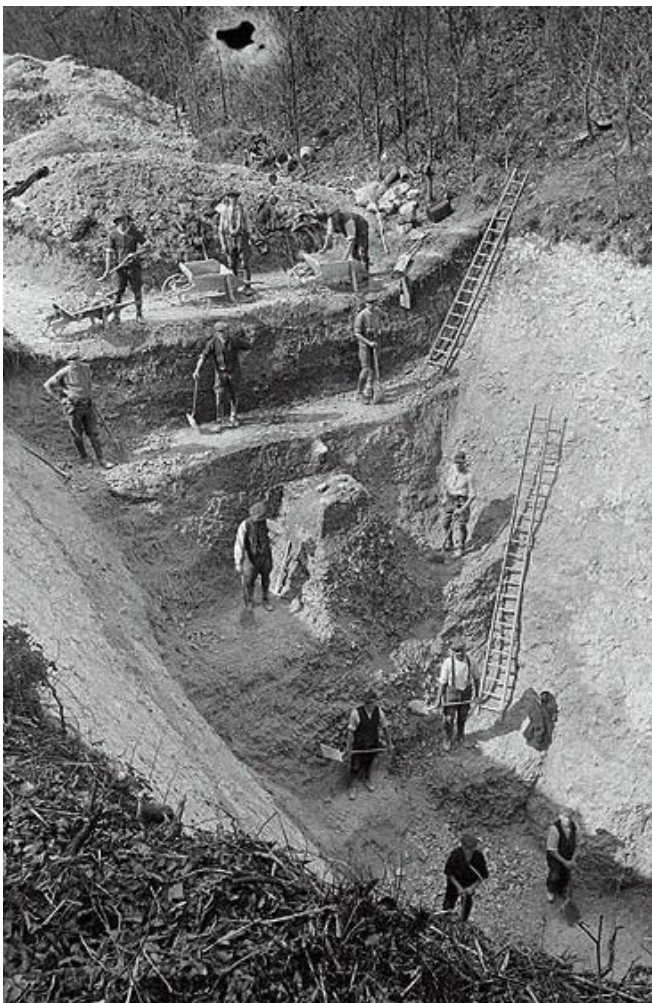


Figure 7
A section excavated through the massive ditch of the henge monument at Avebury, Wiltshire, by Harold St George Gray in 1922.

Interest in henges and circles continued during the 19th century, although digging at that time mainly focussed on barrows. The turn of the 20th century saw major excavation projects at Stonehenge and Avebury (Figure 7) and a new interest in the astronomical alignments of stone circles, which was revived in the 1950s through the influential, if now largely discredited, work of Alexander Thom. Between these periods of archaeological activity at stone circles the development of aerial photography led to the recognition of timber circles as cropmarks (Figure 8), the first excavation of such a site taking place at Woodhenge in the late 1920s.

Excavations and surveys in recent decades have focussed on lowland sites. One key monument is Durrington Walls near Stonehenge, which was investigated in the 1960s and again in the 2000s, both projects having a profound influence on our understanding of henge enclosures and timber circles. A rare example of the latter with surviving posts was discovered at Holme-next-the-Sea in Norfolk in 1998; it is an unusual site, however, since the posts stood in a continuous trench, and is perhaps best interpreted as a palisaded round barrow.

Stone circles in England have seen little recent excavation, though influential work has taken place at Machrie Moor on Arran, Stenness and



Figure 8
Timber circles and pit circles are sometimes seen as cropmarks, as here at West Kennet, near Avebury, Wiltshire.

Brodgar on Orkney, and among the recumbent stone circles of north-east Scotland.

New discoveries will no doubt be made (Figure 8) and new issues emerge, but current research questions need to focus particularly on chronology. Only with a better chronological basis can the development and inter-relationships of the different types of monument be more completely understood. Given their intimate connection with the surrounding landscape, more work on the environs of these sites would also be productive, as exemplified by the recent project at Thornborough.

4 Associations

As a group, henges and circles can be distinguished from various types of linear monuments (long barrows, so-called long mortuary enclosures, cursus monuments and bank barrows) which are generally Early-Middle Neolithic in date (4th millennium BC). The 'circular world' of the 3rd millennium was in many ways a profound break with the past, even though there are some overlaps: oval or near-circular causewayed enclosures are found in the Early Neolithic along with a number of smaller ring-ditches, while henges and circles may be associated with linear avenues or stone alignments. The circles can also be distinguished from broadly contemporary monuments of less regular form, such as palisaded enclosures.

At the other end of their time-span, the smaller circles may be hard to distinguish from a plethora of Bronze Age monument types including round barrows, ring-ditches, ring-cairns (and other 'variant circles' in south-west and northern England) and enclosed cremation cemeteries. While not invalidating archaeological classifications, these links and overlaps show the difficulties of establishing hard-and-fast categories for societies which drew differentially on local traditions and exotic influences, and periodically added to or remodelled monuments.

A few henges and circles are directly associated with earlier sites, especially cursus monuments: these include Dorchester-on-Thames, Thornborough (cover image), Maxey in Cambridgeshire (a henge and pit circles) and Springfield in Essex (timber circle); the Rudston monolith also lies near a group of cursus monuments.

Occasionally avenues were added to henges and circles, including the 'droveway' through the Coupland henge at Milfield, Northumberland, the timber avenue attached to a henge at Boreham, Essex, and the stone avenues at Avebury and Stanton Drew. Some timber rings precede or embellish round barrows, though many of these may best be considered as part of the extended process of barrow construction rather than as separate monuments.

Henges and stone circles were frequently reused in later periods. Initially many attracted Bronze Age barrows and ring-ditches around or sometimes within them but in later prehistory evidence of activity waned, though some Iron Age features and finds are known, such as a decorated scabbard from the henge ditch at Ferrybridge.

Roman interest is evidenced in the remodelling of Maumbury Rings into an amphitheatre, and on a lesser scale the reuse of the King's Men stone circle. The presence of Anglo-Saxon burials at many sites and the construction of churches within a henge at Knowlton (Figure 9) and next to the Rudston monolith suggest that some of these monuments continued to be invested with sacred power. The well-documented medieval and post-medieval stone destruction at Avebury displays a mixture of superstitious and pragmatic motivations.



Figure 9
The Norman church inside a henge at Knowlton,
Dorset.

5 Further Reading

The last major survey of henges, focussing on the aerial photographic evidence, was undertaken by Anthony Harding with Graham Lee in the 1980s, published as *Henge Monuments and Related Sites of Great Britain* (1987), while an accessible recent introduction is Jan Harding's *Henge Monuments of the British Isles* (2003).

The typology and distribution of stone circles were extensively studied in the 1970s and 1980s by Aubrey Burl (*The Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany*, revised edn 2000) and John Barnatt, (*Stone Circles of Britain*, 1989).

More recently, the growing evidence for timber circles has been synthesised by Alex Gibson in *Stonehenge and Timber Circles* (revised edn 2005) and standing stones were the subject of a study by Olaf Swarbrick (*A Gazetteer of Prehistoric Standing Stones in Great Britain*, 2012).

The possible symbolism of timber and stone is considered by Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina in *Antiquity* 72 (1998), while the best academic discussion of henges and circles as a whole is in Part II of *The Significance of Monuments* (1998) by Richard Bradley, who has also considered the wider significance of circular structures across prehistoric Europe, in *The Idea of Order: The Circular Archetype in Prehistoric Europe* (2012).

For specific sites, the south of England is currently better served than the north with the exception of Harding's recent monograph on Thornborough (*Cult, Religion and Pilgrimage*, 2013).

There are accessible works on Avebury by Josh Pollard and Andrew Reynolds (*Avebury: The Biography of a Landscape*, 2002), and on Stonehenge by Tim Darvill, (*Stonehenge: The Biography of a Landscape*, 2006), by Chris Chippindale, who focusses on the history of

its interpretation and depiction in *Stonehenge Complete* (3rd edn 2004) and by Parker Pearson, who summarises the work of the Stonehenge Riverside Project at Durrington Walls and related sites in *Stonehenge: Exploring the Greatest Stone Age Mystery* (2012).

A briefer summary of the work of the Stonehenge Riverside Project at Durrington Walls and related sites can be found in *British Archaeology* 102 (Sept/Oct 2008).

The unusual sites around the Dorset Cursus are discussed in Martin Green's *A Landscape Revealed: 10,000 Years on a Chalkland Farm* (2006).

Finally, George Lambrick has written an insightful study of a stone circle in *The Rollright Stones: Megaliths, Monuments and Settlement in the Prehistoric Landscape* (1988).

6 Where to Get Advice

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