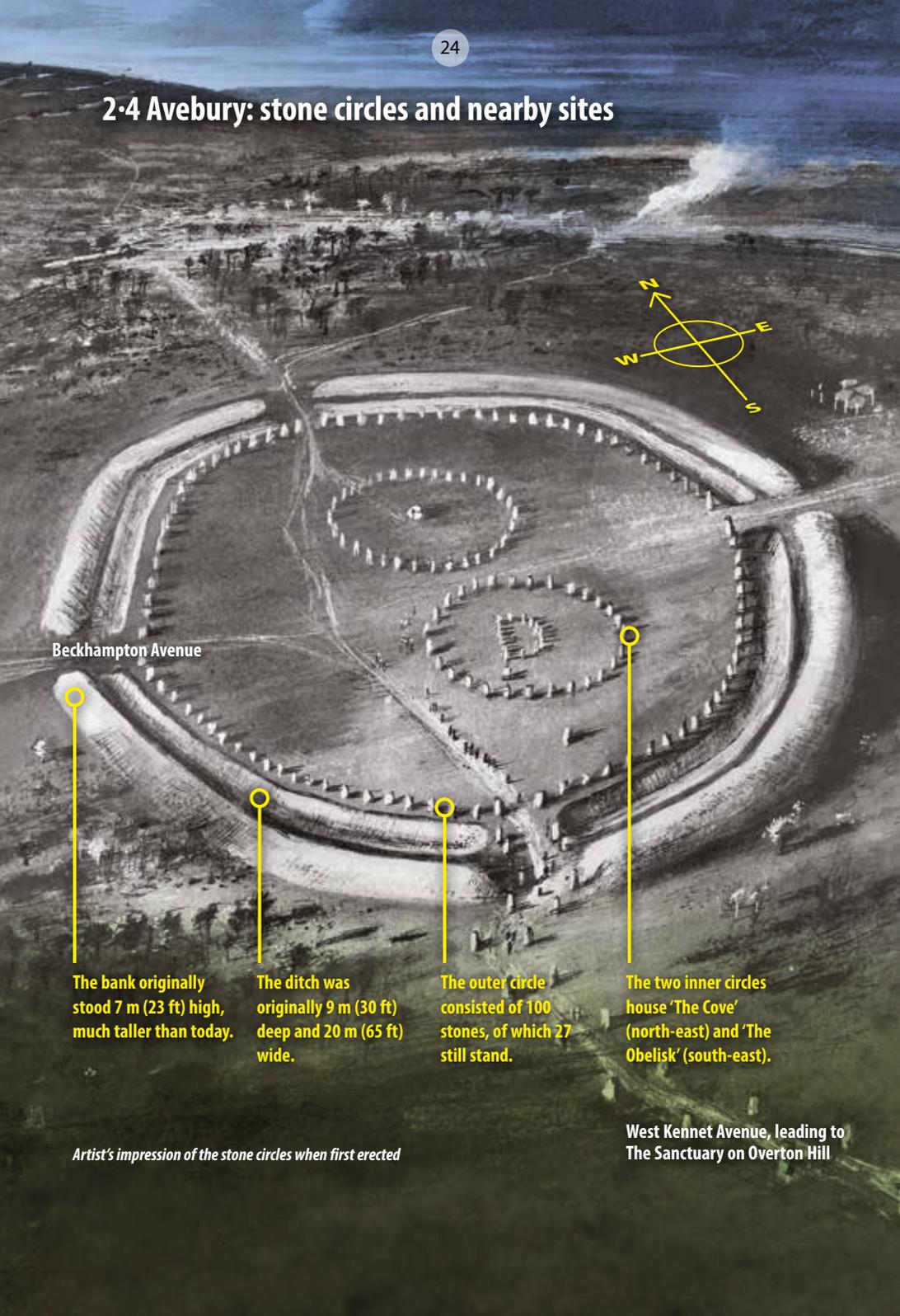


2·4 Avebury: stone circles and nearby sites



Beckhampton Avenue

The bank originally stood 7 m (23 ft) high, much taller than today.

The ditch was originally 9 m (30 ft) deep and 20 m (65 ft) wide.

The outer circle consisted of 100 stones, of which 27 still stand.

The two inner circles house 'The Cove' (north-east) and 'The Obelisk' (south-east).

Artist's impression of the stone circles when first erected

West Kennet Avenue, leading to
The Sanctuary on Overton Hill

Avebury is only 2.5 km (1.6 mi) from Overton Hill, and packed with interest – mainly prehistoric but also more recent. Allow at least half a day to visit it, longer if possible, and ideally aim to overnight there or nearby. It is a place of great beauty and tranquillity, especially at dawn and dusk.

Avebury has the largest stone circle in the world – about 16 times the size of its more famous cousin, Stonehenge. Unlike the latter, Avebury is a true henge – its stones are encircled by a massive ditch with an outer bank beyond. Jointly with Stonehenge and other local antiquities, it was recognised as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1986.

Overview

Britain's Neolithic period (New Stone Age) started 6000 years ago when primitive tribes made the transition from hunting and gathering to settlement and agriculture. This led to faster population growth, and also to more organised forms of society. Wielding merely tools that they created from animal bones, antlers, timber and flint, these people built vast monuments – especially across south-west Britain. Many such sites are in or near Avebury, providing a timeline of the area's development. All are accessible day and night, and there are directions to several on page 28.

4000 BC Windmill Hill is the site of one of Britain's earliest settlements. Here Alexander Keiller and his team found 1300 clay pots, and 95,000 flint tools and associated chippings – although little is visible there to today's casual observer.

3700 BC West Kennet Long Barrow is one of the most impressive chambered Neolithic tombs in Britain. You can walk right into its atmospheric bays and speculate about who had been buried there. It is one of 14 burial mounds that lie within 5 km (3 mi) of Avebury.

2600 BC Avebury's great henge (ditch and bank) is constructed: see below. At about this time Stonehenge, which stands about 32 km (20 mi) south of Avebury, was also started, but not completed until about 1500 BC.

2500 BC The Sanctuary at Overton Hill originally comprised concentric circles of timber posts. The posts were later replaced by stones, now indicated by concrete blocks. It may have served funerary purposes.

2400 BC Silbury Hill is the largest man-made prehistoric mound in Europe – 40 m (130 ft) high and 165 m (540 ft) in diameter, with a volume of nearly 250,000 cubic metres. Archaeologists estimate that it would have taken a team of 500 people working for 15 years to build it. No burial has been discovered inside it, and its purpose remains a mystery.

2200 BC Avebury stone circles are completed, long before those at Stonehenge. The transition to the Bronze Age is marked by rounded burial mounds. The Ridgeway passes many such mounds, including several near Overton Hill.

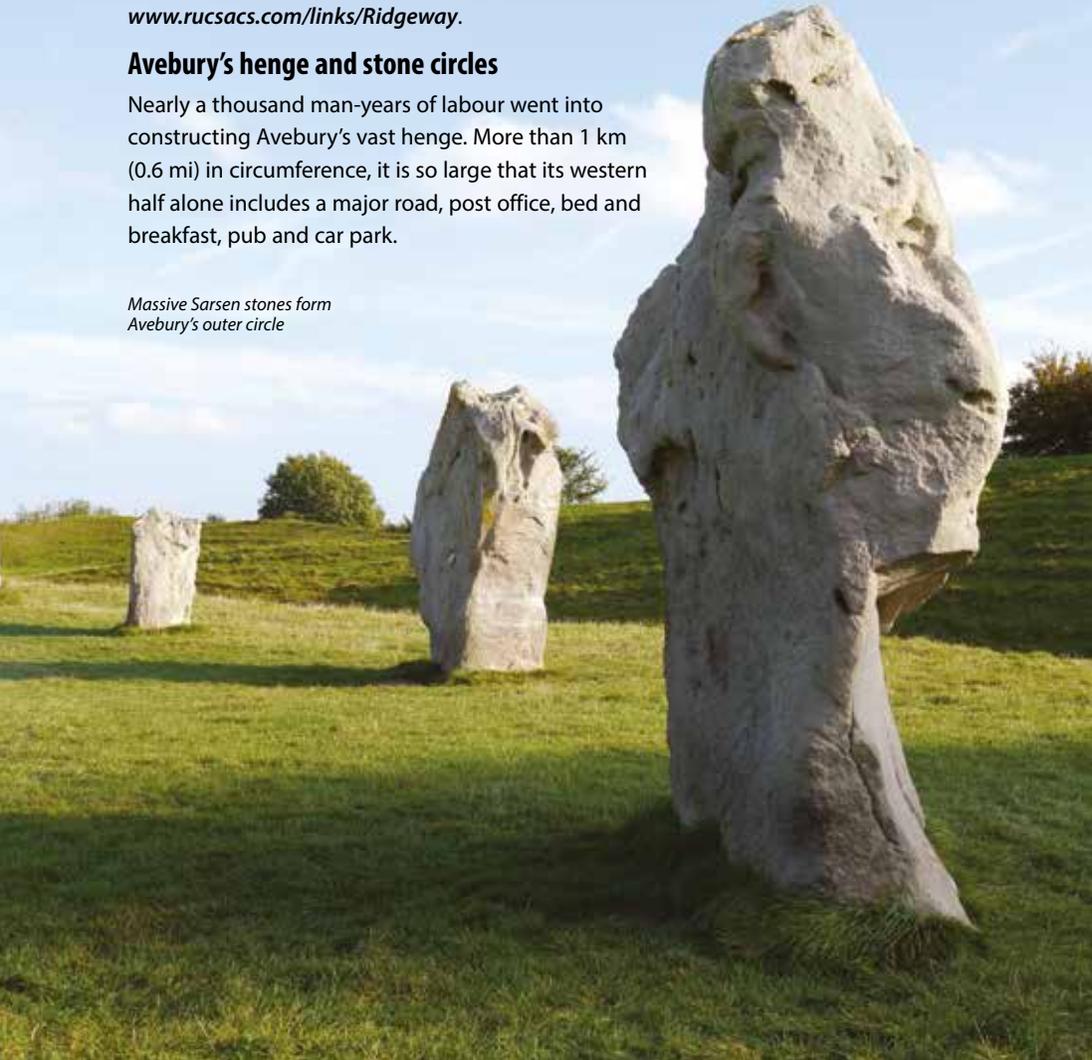
Avebury's occupation continued to the modern era, and is well chronicled in the National Trust museum. Visit the barn for admission tickets to the museum (housed in the barn and stables) and also for tickets for Avebury Manor and its garden. The manor house was built in the 16th century on the site of a Benedictine priory, and its restoration brings to life the stories of its many owners, including archaeologist Alexander Keiller. The manor benefited from a major restoration project which the National Trust and BBC undertook jointly in 2011.

Avebury Manor and the museum have separate opening times and ticket prices. Admission to the Manor is by timed ticket (bookable online). The museum, shop and café are open daily but both Manor House and garden are closed on Wednesdays. You may also want to visit St James' Church, parts of which date from Saxon times (1000 AD): the church usually stands open from dawn to dusk. For details of all opening times, please visit our Ridgeway Links page at www.rucsacs.com/links/Ridgeway.

Avebury's henge and stone circles

Nearly a thousand man-years of labour went into constructing Avebury's vast henge. More than 1 km (0.6 mi) in circumference, it is so large that its western half alone includes a major road, post office, bed and breakfast, pub and car park.

Massive Sarsen stones form Avebury's outer circle



You need to use your imagination at Avebury: the original ditch was very much deeper than today's, and the bank much higher. The vertical drop from top to bottom was originally about 16 m (52 feet) – the height of a five-storey house. To Neolithic eyes, the sight would have been truly staggering, with the chalk gleaming white.

Centuries later, people dragged huge Sarsen stones from nearby hillsides to form the huge outer circle, inner circles and two stone avenues:

see page 24. The outer circle alone had 100 stones, and Avebury's stones are gigantic, weighing up to 100 tonnes, twice the size of Stonehenge's largest. Hauling them over rough, hilly ground must have needed hundreds of people to work closely together.

Theories differ as to why the circles were constructed. The original ditch and bank may have served defensive purposes. The stone circles may have worked as an astronomical reckoner, or they may have been memorials to house the dead. The circle may have been used as an arena, and the avenues for processions. Archaeologists are still debating the answer, and Avebury still guards its enigma.

The site was probably used through to Saxon times, when a small village grew up there. In the 14th century it was partly demolished because locals associated it with the devil. It was rediscovered in 1648 by John Aubrey while out fox-hunting. Many of its prehistoric stones were plundered in the late 17th century and broken up for building material. Fortunately, between 1719 and 1724 William Stukeley had studied and documented their original positions.

Much later, in the 1930s, Alexander Keiller leased the site and carried out a huge programme of restoration. He was heir to the Keiller marmalade business in Dundee, and a keen archaeologist with a passion for Avebury. His role in researching and conserving this site was crucial. He lived at Avebury Manor and in 1938 he opened a museum in its stable building to display his finds. After his death in 1955, his widow gave his collections to the National Trust.

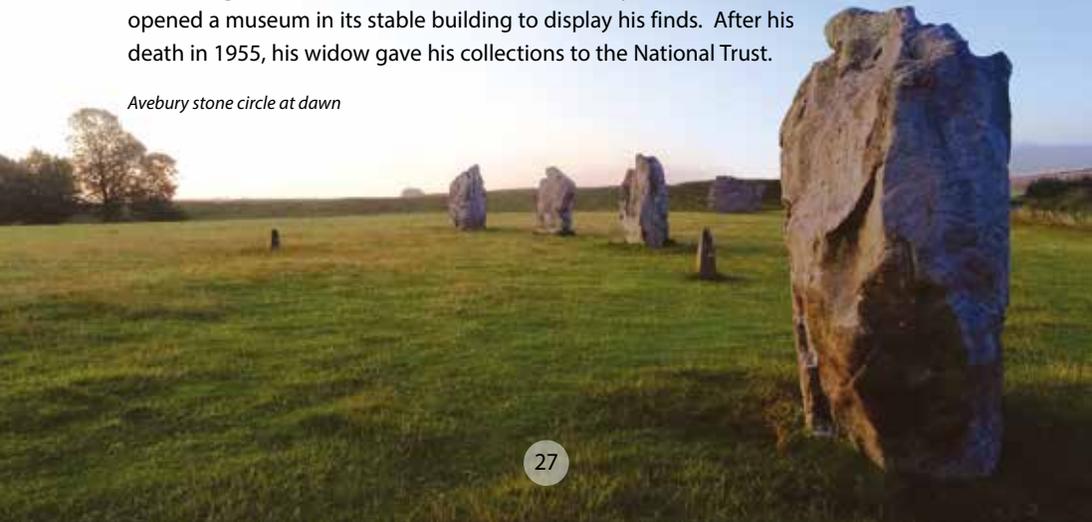
Avebury stone circle at dawn



Sarsen stones

Sarsen stones are blocks of sandstone bound by silica into a concrete.

They were crumbled by glaciers out of vast stretches of material. Locals believed them to be pagan and labelled them 'Saracen', later contracted to 'Sarsen'. The Avebury stones were dragged from nearby fields, and many more are still visible from the earlier parts of The Ridgeway. They are sometimes called 'grey wethers' because from a distance they look like sheep: a wether is a castrated ram.



Route and other sights

After your visit to Avebury there are several options for joining The Ridgeway. (If overnighiting in or near Avebury, you could complete the triangle Herepath → Ridgeway (southward) → Stone Avenue as a separate 8 km/5 mi walk or bike ride first.)

- 1 The shortest route involves skipping the first bit of The Ridgeway (3 km/1.9 mi) so it won't suit everybody. Start from the Red Lion pub at the centre of Avebury and go north-east along the obvious tarmac road past the tourist information office. This is marked as the Herepath or Green Street on some maps. Proceed for 2.5 km (1.6 mi) past cottages and then fields to join The Ridgeway at a sign for Fyfield Down.
- 2 To reach the official start via the prehistoric Stone Avenue, from the Red Lion head south-east on the A4361. After just 100 m, continue straight on through a gate into a field ahead of you and slightly to your right, parallel to the B4003 (West Kennet Avenue). After 1.2 km (0.7 mi) of the Stone Avenue, reach a junction with the A4 in West Kennett. Here, turn left and after 800 m reach the Sanctuary and the start of The Ridgeway at Overton Hill. The total distance from the Red Lion to Overton Hill is 2.6 km (1.6 mi).
- 3 In case you have time and are interested in Silbury Hill (and perhaps also West Kennet Long Barrow) here is a longer approach to the start of The Ridgeway. Follow the directions above along the Stone Avenue, but when the stones run out (750 m after entering the field), pass through a gate and then turn right and pass through a second gate. Then go south-west, gently uphill. After 300 m you reach the brow of a small hill with excellent views to Silbury Hill. Stay on the path for a further 300 m.

On reaching Silbury Hill, turn left to reach the A4 after 200 m. There turn left to pass a layby and reach Overton Hill after 1.5 km (0.9 mi). The total distance from Avebury is 3.7 km (2.3 mi) by this route.

If time allows, you could add another detour of 1.2 km (0.7 mi) to take in the impressive West Kennet Long Barrow. This out-and-back waymarked route starts from the layby mentioned above. The total distance from Avebury by this route is 4.9 km (3 mi).

West Kennet Long Barrow

