

Neolithic Britain revealed

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The new dating technique shows that Windmill Hill, a large Neolithic causewayed enclosure in Avebury, was built in 3700-3640 BC. It was previously thought to have been built in 3700-3100 BC.

A new dating technique has given the first detailed picture of life in Stone Age Britain, more than 5000 years ago.

Professor Alasdair Whittle and Dr. Frances Healy, of the School of History, Archaeology and Religion, along with Dr Alex Bayliss of [English Heritage](#) cross referenced [radio carbon](#) dating with statistical analysis and other archaeological dating techniques to give a clearer picture of events that occurred during the Neolithic period in Britain (4000 - 2000BC).

The researchers used their new technique to examine artefacts recovered from 40 causewayed enclosures - rings or arcs of ditches and banks that can span up to 300 metres and were among the first monuments built in Britain.

Previously it had been thought that causewayed enclosures spread slowly across the country over five centuries, between 3700-3000BC. However the research team was able to show that these enclosures actually spread within around 75 years.

The research revealed that the Neolithic period had a slow start followed by a rapid growth in commerce, trade and technology. [Farming practices](#) that took 200 years to move from Kent to Gloucestershire, took only 50 years to get from Cheltenham to Aberdeen. By 3700-3800BC, early Britons had developed pottery with regional styles of decorations and long-distance trading networks were also being established in stone axes and certain other types of pottery. Collective violence was also more common once the enclosures were built and several were attacked by large numbers of people.

"Until now, we have had only a rather coarse picture of the chronology of events during this eventful period in our history," said Professor Alasdair Whittle. "This research fundamentally challenges the notion that little happened among our [Stone Age](#) farmers.

"We can now think about the Neolithic period in terms of more rapid changes, constant movement of people and fast diffusion of ideas. With more accurate dating, the [Neolithic period](#) is no longer the sleepy, hazy swathe of time where it is the default position to lump everything together."

Dr. Alex Bayliss, a scientific dating expert at English Heritage added: "By dating these enclosures more accurately, we now know that something happened quite specifically some 5,700 years ago; the speed with which it took place has completely overturned our perception of prehistory."

The research started in 2003 and was funded by English Heritage and the

Arts and Humanities Research Council. The project and its findings are detailed in the book *Gathering Time: dating the early Neolithic enclosures of southern Britain and Ireland*, published by Oxbow Books at the end of June.

Provided by Cardiff University

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