

Scientists find huge ring of ancient shafts near Stonehenge

June 22 2020



In this Sunday, June 21, 2015 file photo, the sun rises as thousands of revellers gather at the ancient stone circle Stonehenge to celebrate the Summer Solstice, the longest day of the year, near Salisbury, England. Archaeologists said Monday June 22, 2020, they have discovered a major new prehistoric monument under the earth near Stonehenge that could shed new light on the origins of the mystic stone circle that is the subject of continued scientific research and venue for modern day pagan celebrations. (AP Photo/Tim Ireland, File)

Archaeologists said Monday that they have discovered a major prehistoric monument under the earth near Stonehenge that could shed new light on the origins of the mystical stone circle in southwestern England.

Experts from a group of British universities led by the University of Bradford say the site consists of at least 20 huge shafts, more than 10 meters (32 feet) in diameter and 5 meters (16 feet) deep, forming a circle more than 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) in diameter.

The new find is at Durrington Walls, the site of a Neolithic village about 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) from Stonehenge,

Researchers say the shafts appear to have been dug around 4,500 years ago, and could mark the boundary of a sacred area or precinct around a circular monument known as the Durrington Walls henge.

Richard Bates, of the University of St. Andrews School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, said the findings—made with [remote sensing](#) and sampling—provided "an insight to the past that shows an even more complex society than we could ever imagine."

University of Bradford archaeologist Vince Gaffney said it was "remarkable" that Stonehenge, one of the most studied archaeological landscapes in the world, could yield such a major new discovery.

"When these pits were first noted it was thought they might be natural features—solution hollows in the chalk," he said. But geophysical surveys allowed scientists to "join the dots and see there was a pattern on a [massive scale](#)."

Britain is dotted with stone circles build thousands of years ago for reasons that remain mysterious.

The most famous is Stonehenge, a huge monument built between 3000 B.C. and 1600 B.C. that is one of Britain's most popular tourist attractions.

It's also a spiritual home for thousands of druids and mystics who visit at the summer and winter solstices—though this weekend's summer solstice celebrations were scuttled by a ban on mass gatherings because of the coronavirus pandemic.

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Citation: Scientists find huge ring of ancient shafts near Stonehenge (2020, June 22) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-06-scientists-huge-ancient-shafts-stonehenge.html>

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