

Stonehenge transformed

16/12/2013

This is the first phase of English Heritage's £27million project to transform the visitor experience of the iconic site, made possible by a £10m grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and substantial gifts from the Garfield Weston Foundation, The Linbury Trust and the Wolfson Foundation.

Visitors will be able to see original objects used in its construction and those connected with Neolithic and Bronze Age men and women, their lives, their rituals and daily struggles. The reconstructed face of a 5,500 year-old man buried in a long barrow 1.5 miles from Stonehenge – the most advanced reconstruction of a Neolithic man's face to date - is a highlight.

A special exhibition will display important objects, never seen together before, that tell the story of the changing understanding of Stonehenge over centuries. These include two rare 14th-century manuscripts which are among the earliest known drawings of the monument, Roman coins and jewellery, and early surveying equipment.

A 360-degree virtual experience will let visitors 'stand in the stones' before they enter the gallery. This three-minute film, based on state-of-the-art laser scan images of the stone circle, will transport the viewer back in time through the millennia and enable them to experience the summer and winter solstices.

Dr Simon Thurley, Chief Executive, English Heritage, said: "At last, visitors to Stonehenge will be able to get a sense of the people who built this monument, of their lives, their deaths and their ceremonies. Visitors will, for the first time, learn the astonishing history of the stones and will see objects, many never seen before, that will bring the stones to life.

"Instead of just a stopover or a quick photo opportunity, we want our visitors to step back in time and into the shoes of those who created and used this extraordinary place, to marvel at original everyday objects they used, to walk the surrounding landscape as they did, and to sit in the dwellings that they would have built. It makes the real encounter with the stones themselves so much more exciting."

Culture Secretary Maria Miller said: "Stonehenge is one of the UK's most iconic sites, undeniably worthy of its UNESCO World Heritage status attracting one million tourists every year from the UK and all over the world. So it's only right that, after decades of indecision, we can now offer them the visitor experience and exhibition centre they deserve. A huge amount of work has gone into getting this right and making sure people can see the stones and their story in a whole new light."

Bettany Hughes, award-winning author, historian and broadcaster, said: "I have no doubt that those who first constructed Stonehenge did so with awe and with a profound appreciation of the beauty and power of the world around. For millennia men and women have travelled to the site to try to share that experience. Now in the 21st century with the help of these developments, we can

appreciate both the intriguing story of the site - and its mystery.”

Early Neolithic man - ancestor of Stonehenge creators

The reconstruction of the early Neolithic face, using forensic evidence derived from skeletal analysis, is the face of a man 25 – 40 years old, of slender build, born about 5,500 years ago - about 500 years before the circular ditch and banks, the first monument at Stonehenge, was built.

He was among those people who were active on Salisbury Plain in early Neolithic Britain and helped to explain why people chose this area to erect the stones a thousand years later: the area already held significance. His presence emphasises the fact that Stonehenge is part of a remarkable landscape of prehistoric monuments which visitors can now explore on foot as part of their visit.

Specially trained volunteers will embark on building a group of Neolithic houses in January, complete with furniture and fittings. These will be the highlight of an outdoor gallery, to open at Easter 2014, and are based on evidence of houses excavated at nearby Durrington Walls where the builders of Stonehenge most probably lived.

Experience Stonehenge in a more dignified setting

Visitors will have a heightened sense of anticipation when they arrive at the visitor building as Stonehenge is not visible - it will only emerge slowly on the horizon during the ten-minute shuttle ride to the monument.

At the stone circle, there will be opportunities to walk and explore the surroundings of the monument including the Avenue, Stonehenge’s ancient processional approach, guided by new interpretation panels specially developed with the National Trust.

The Avenue has been reconnected to the stone circle after being severed by the A344 road for centuries. The whole area is now free of traffic, and newly sown grass is establishing on the former route of the road.

A sensitively designed modern building

Designed by leading practice Denton Corker Marshall, the exhibition and visitor centre appears light and unimposing, sensitive to its surroundings and deferential to the stones. The galleries, café, shop and toilets are housed in a pair of single-storey 'pods', sitting beneath an undulating canopy that evokes the gentle rolling plains nearby. Locally sourced, pre-weathered sweet chestnut and Salisbury limestone are among the materials used.

Improvements to visitor facilities include

- full disability access;
- dedicated education space;
- a bright and spacious café with indoor and outdoor seating for up to 260;
- a bigger shop with a wide range of specially commissioned merchandise;
- a visitors’ carpark with space for 500 vehicles and 30 coaches;
- ample toilets;
- a pre-booked timed ticket system to help minimise queues and avoid over-crowdedness at peak times; and

- new, downloadable and hand held free audio guides in 10 languages

Carole Souter, Chief Executive of HLF, said: “This is a wonderful opportunity to tell the full story of Stonehenge’s past, its present and how it will be understood by future generations. The Heritage Lottery Fund has been working in close partnership with English Heritage and a myriad of other funders and donors to make these imaginative plans a reality. We’re proud to have invested £10m in the exhibition and visitor centre and hope it will capture people’s imaginations and inspire them to learn more about life in both Neolithic and Bronze Age times.”

Dame Helen Ghosh, Director General, the National Trust, said: “As owners of much of the surrounding land, we have supported English Heritage in bringing the Stonehenge landscape together and developing visitors’ understanding of the World Heritage Site as a whole. The removal of the A344 reconnects the monument with the landscape, giving visitors an opportunity to once again appreciate the ancient processional approach up to the stones. The new centre, with its fresh interpretation and displays, will help visitors understand the stones and the Neolithic world of ancient Britain from a different perspective.”

Loraine Knowles, Stonehenge Director, English Heritage, said: “This is a major milestone in a long journey to make the experience of Stonehenge worthy of its iconic world heritage status. When the restoration of the landscape is complete by summer 2014, visitors will be able to enjoy the special atmosphere of this place with far fewer distractions from modern-day sights and sounds. I’d like to thank our partners and the many individuals and organisations who have shared our vision and helped us to achieve this historic event.”

Notes to editors

All the permanent exhibits are on loan from Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, Wiltshire Museum in Devizes, and the Duckworth Laboratory, University of Cambridge. All were found within the World Heritage Site. Temporary loans come from many sources including the British Museum, the British Library, Society of Antiquaries of London, and the Museum of the History of Science at Oxford University.

The Stonehenge Environmental Improvements Project is the largest capital project ever undertaken by English Heritage. It is financed almost entirely by the HLF, English Heritage commercial income and philanthropic donations.

The building is sited 1.5 miles away from Stonehenge to enable the immediate area around the monument to be free of modern structures. Work to demolish the existing facilities and car park and return the area to grass will begin imminently. The restoration of the landscape around Stonehenge will be completed in summer 2014.

Stonehenge exhibition and visitor centre, 1.5 miles from Stonehenge, Wiltshire, SP3 4DX. From 18th December, entrance will be managed through timed tickets and advance booking is strongly recommended. Adult £13.90, Concession £12.50 and Child £8.30 when pre-booked; and Adult £14.90, Concession £13.40 and Child £8.90 when bought at the door. For opening hours and online booking, please [visit the Stonehenge website](#).

About English Heritage

[English Heritage](#) is the government's statutory advisor on the historic environment. It is the custodian of over 400 historic monuments, buildings and sites through which we bring the story of England to life for over 10 million visitors each year.

Further information

For press information please contact English Heritage Press Office on +44 207 973 3250, communication.team@english-heritage.org.uk.

For HLF press office please contact Katie Owen, on 020 7591 6036, out of hours mobile 07973 613 820.