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THE NEOLITHIC PERIOD

Modern-day Wiltshire boasts some of the most well-known monuments of the Neolithic period (4000-2000 BC) in Britain. Throughout the twentieth century these were often considered type-sites, but it is now recognized that while some certainly represent widespread traditions most reflect regional styles.

Changes to the lifeways of communities along the Atlantic fringe of northwestern Europe around 4000 BC have long been recognized: the adoption of domesticated plants and animals (wheat, barley, cattle, pigs and sheep/goats); novel material culture and technologies (pottery and new types of flint and stone artefacts); and social changes linked to shifting views of the world and people's place within it. Much debate surrounds the relative role of population movements as against innovations by indigenous groups in these changes, but it is widely accepted that interactions took place along the Atlantic seaways, across the English Channel, and across the North Sea. Evidence for what Humphrey Case once described as 'Pioneer Farmers' is represented by a scatter of sites whose material culture often includes distinctive round-bottomed carinated ceramic bowls. The rock-cut shaft at Coneybury, for example, dates to c.3900 BC and contains the remains of domestic and wild animals resulting from a feast nearby. A timber mortuary house at Fussell's Lodge near Salisbury built c.3800 BC contained the disarticulated remains of over a dozen adults and children.

These early farming communities were remarkably successful. Between 3750 and 3300 BC they spread widely, adapting to local environments and making clearances in the Wildwood. Settlements and the remains of their characteristic long houses are rare in Wiltshire, although well known in surrounding areas. A clear indicator of the extent of settlement is represented by the distribution of long barrows: large rectangular monuments representing the houses of the dead of which around 100 are known across the county. In north Wiltshire they tend to have stone chambers, as at West Kennet built around 3670 BC and used for the burial of around 35 men, women, and children over one or two generations. These long barrows connect northwards to those of the Cotswold-Severn tradition. In south Wiltshire long barrows generally have simple wooden chambers in the style of Wessex long barrows. Some, such as Fussell's Lodge built around 3630 BC, elaborated earlier mortuary structures. Flint was probably mined on the chalk downlands around Avebury.

Causewayed enclosures, named because of their distinctive segmented boundary ditches, were built at intervals across the landscape as meeting places and seasonal settlements for dispersed populations. One of the largest is Windmill Hill near Avebury, constructed around 3700 BC. Debris from the ditches and internal pits suggests feasting, and trading with far-flung parts of Britain. Scattered across the wider landscape are small intimate ceremonial sites marked by pits containing placed deposits. On a far larger scale elongated earthwork enclosures known as 'long mortuary enclosures' and 'cursuses' also served as ceremonial places. The Stonehenge Cursus, built around 3500 BC, is the largest in Wiltshire at nearly 3km long.

After c.3300 BC long barrows were blocked-up, causewayed enclosures no longer refurbished, and many established occupation areas abandoned. Chris Stevens and Dorian Fuller suggest a decline in arable agriculture at this time across southern Britain. Heavily decorated Peterborough Ware pottery, including the Ebbsfleet, Mortlake, and Fengate substyles, was used by these communities but no settlements are known and burials are few.

The appearance of a Grooved Ware pottery around 3000 BC marks a change in fortunes and the re-emergence of an active and vibrant society widely dispersed across the landscape. Houses were small, square-shaped, with a central hearth. Cremation was the preferred burial rite, and some were deposited within circular earthwork enclosures such as that built at Stonehenge around 2950 BC. Stone circles such as Avebury, and timber circles such as Woodhenge, were built as ceremonial sites. From about 2500 BC the great sarsen trilithons and sarsen circle were built in the centre of the earthwork enclosure at Stonehenge, and Bluestones transported from west Wales were added soon after. Stonehenge lay at the centre of a ceremonial complex that started life with the Stonehenge Cursus but expanded with the addition of henges such as Woodhenge and Coneybury, the great henge-enclosure at Durrington Walls, and a scatter of stone and timber circles. Such ceremonial centres appear at intervals right across the British Isles, including Marden and Avebury in north Wiltshire, and Knowlton (Dorset) and Dorchester-on-Thames (Oxfordshire) in adjacent counties. Feasting and the display of finely made flint and stone implements were part of the ceremonies at these centres. Flint mining is known at Durrington.

A new veneer was added to Grooved Ware using society after 2400 BC as a result of social changes across Europe represented archaeologically by the appearance of Beaker pottery. Stuart Needham has argued that these finely made vessels were initially part of an exclusive elite culture. The earliest examples known in Britain are seven vessels from the collective grave of five adult males known as the Boscombe Bowmen who died 2500-2340 BC. Nearly as early is the burial of the 'Amesbury Archer' deposited around 2300 BC, the richest Beaker grave in northwest Europe. Copper, gold, and bronze were integral components of Beaker Culture material wealth and first circulate in Britain in the centuries before 2000 BC. As the use of Beakers became more widespread after 2200 BC they become part of everyday life. Houses followed continental styles, oval in plan, as at Easton Down. Traditional ceremonial monuments were refurbished, including the rearrangement of the Bluestones at Stonehenge and the addition of the Avenue to link the stone circles to the River Avon. Inhumation became the favoured burial rite, often in rock-cut graves beneath round barrows. Cemeteries develop, especially around earlier ceremonial centres which retained their importance even when the significance of the earlier monuments was lost.

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