

Archaeologists find huge Neolithic village near Stonehenge



Tue Jan 30, 6:20 PM ET

Archaeologists have unearthed a Neolithic village near Stonehenge where the people who built Britain's ancient stone circle apparently lived, according to a study.

Hundreds of people once lived in the enormous ancient settlement in the Stonehenge World Heritage site, said the team of archaeologists, partly financed by the National Geographic Society of the United States and English Heritage of Britain.

"English Heritage's magnetometry survey had detected dozens of hearths -- the whole valley appears full of houses," said Mike Parker Pearson of Britain's Sheffield University, an archaeologist in the project.

"In what were houses, we have excavated the outlines on the floors of box beds and wooden dressers or cupboards," he said in a statement.

The houses were found at Durrington Walls, the world's largest known henge, or enclosure with a bank on the outside and a ditch inside. They have been radiocarbon dated to 2600-2500 BC, the archaeologists said.

Those dates coincide with the construction of the legendary Stonehenge, leading researchers to conclude that the people who lived in the houses were responsible for arranging the megaliths, they said.

"We think we are looking at the village of the actual builders of Stonehenge," Pearson said in a telephone press conference.

The discovery supports the theory that Stonehenge was not erected in isolation but was instead part of a much bigger religious complex used for funerary rituals, the archeologists said.

"We think our discovery is very significant to understanding the purpose of Stonehenge," Pearson added.

"What we've revealed is that Stonehenge was just one half of a larger complex and was the largest cemetery in Britain at the time."

He said Stonehenge and Durrington Walls, less than two miles (3.2 kilometers) apart, were closely linked, with the village receiving and preparing bodies for burial, some of which would be taken to the Stonehenge memorial.

"The village was also occupied by people who visited for festivals in the succeeded decades and possibly centuries," Pearson said.

Only a small area of Durrington Walls has been investigated. The archaeological digs are expected to continue until 2010.

The vestiges of eight homes were unearthed in September 2006 in the Stonehenge Riverside Project, led by Pearson and five other archaeologists from Britain.

Six of the houses unearthed had well preserved floors made of clay, with each room made of wood measuring 25 square meters (270 square feet) with a hearth at the center.

A few similar Neolithic houses have been found in the Orkney Islands off Scotland.

A large number of 4,600-year-old fragments of objects were also found strewn about the floors, where postholes and slots for wooden furniture had once been anchored.

"It's the richest site, by that I mean the filthiest site, of this period known in Britain," said Pearson. "We have never seen such

quantities of pottery and animal bone and flint."

Thousands of tourists visit Stonehenge at the summer solstice, June 21, every year. In 2006, the site was declared a candidate for the world's seven modern wonders.

Copyright © 2007 [Agence France Presse](#). All rights reserved. The information contained in the AFP News report may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without the prior written authority of Agence France Presse.

Copyright © 2007 Yahoo! Inc. All Rights Reserved. [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Send Feedback](#) | [Help](#)