

The West Middleton Standing Stones of Parracombe

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A Prehistoric Landscape in North Devon

Prehistoric Timeline c. 2500-1500 BCE—Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age

Grid Reference S S 64869 45896
Near Voley Lane, Parracombe
North Devon, England, EX31 4PG, UK
Nearest Postcode: EX31 4PG

Introduction

Nestled within the rolling terrain of Exmoor National Park, [the West Middleton standing stones](#)—near Parracombe—are a compelling legacy of Britain’s prehistoric heritage.

Designated as a Scheduled Monument by [Historic England](#), and listed by Exmoor National Park Authority: the West Middleton stones offer insight into Bronze Age ritual, landscape use, and the enduring mystery of megalithic alignments.

We might consider three interpretations for the function of prehistoric standing stones and stone rows—especially those like West Middleton near Parracombe.

Some standing stones might be aligned with solar, lunar, or stellar events:

- Solstice alignments: Stones may mark sunrise or sunset points on the summer or winter solstice.
- Lunar cycles: Certain rows or circles align with moonrise or moonset during major lunar standstills.
- Seasonal markers: Communities may have used these alignments to track agricultural cycles or ritual calendars.

Example: Stonehenge’s alignment with the midsummer sunrise is the most famous, while Devon’s stone rows—like those on Dartmoor—also show potential solar orientations.

Theoretically, in upland landscapes like Exmoor, stones may have served as:

- Boundary indicators between tribal or clan territories
- Route markers for seasonal movement, trade, or pilgrimage
- Land claims asserting presence or control over grazing or ritual grounds

These interpretations are supported by their placement on ridge lines or near natural passes, as seen with [the Challacombe Common Longstone](#).

Note:

For in-depth research or academic work, further verification from primary sources and archaeological studies will be necessary.

Archaeologists believe these sites were focal points for:

- Community rituals—perhaps linked to burial, fertility, or seasonal festivals
- Social cohesion—spaces where dispersed groups gathered for shared rites
- Memory and identity—marking ancestral presence or mythic events

The lack of domestic debris and the prominence of the stones suggest symbolic rather than utilitarian use.

Description and Layout

The West Middleton stones site comprises multiple stone rows and individual standing stones, arranged across a prepared terrace. The stones are upright monoliths, commonly with lichen and moss. According to the [Historic England listing](#), the monument includes:

- Two parallel stone rows
- Several free-standing stones
- A spatial configuration suggesting ceremonial or territorial significance

The [Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Record](#) notes that the layout may reflect agricultural or ritual use, though the precise function remains undated and speculative.

Archaeological Context

Standing stones are part of a broader prehistoric landscape that includes:

- Neolithic enclosures and Bronze Age barrows across Exmoor
- Other megalithic features such as [the Challacombe Common Longstone](#) (MDE1280)
- [Brendon Two Gates Stones](#) (MDE1257) Neolithic Menhir, Lynton
- Evidence of long-term human engagement with the upland terrain

The [Megalithic Portal](#) categorises the Parracombe site as a “Multiple Stone Rows / Avenue.” The stones’ layout resembles other ceremonial stone rows found across Devon

Possible Functions and Cultural Significance

While definitive dating remains elusive, the Parracombe stones likely date from the late Neolithic to early Bronze Age (c. 2500-1500 BCE). Their alignment and positioning suggest:

- Possible astronomical or calendrical functions
- Territorial markers or way-finding aids
- Ceremonial gathering points for local communities

The ambiguity surrounding their purpose invites interdisciplinary exploration—from landscape archaeology to archaeoastronomy and heritage interpretation.

West Middleton Standing Stones Legal and Conservation Status

- **Scheduled Monument ID:** 1002568
- **Listed Since:** 24 October 1968
- **Managing Authority:** Historic England, in collaboration with Exmoor National Park

The Parracombe site is protected under [the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979](#), ensuring its preservation for educational and cultural engagement.

Educational Potential

For educators and curriculum designers, the West Middleton stones offer rich opportunities to explore:

- Prehistoric belief systems and landscape use
- Archaeological methods and interpretation
- The role of heritage in shaping local identity

References accessed October 18, 2025

Photographs are included with the sources.

1. [Ancient Monuments UK: West Middleton](#) [Ancient Monuments UK](#)
2. Devon in Focus (2025) *Historic Sites in Devon: Megaliths, Menhirs and Stone Circles in North Devon*. Available at:
<https://devoninfocus.co.uk/history/ancientsites.php?r=N>
3. [Exmoor HER: MDE1039 - Parallel Stone Rows](#) [The Historic Environment Record for Exmoor National Park](#)
4. [Historic England Listing: West Middleton Standing Stones](#) [Historic England](#)
5. [Megalithic Portal: West Middleton Stone Rows](#) [The Megalithic Portal and Megalith Map](#)

A Note on Interpretation and Access

The interpretations presented regarding the function of [the West Middleton Standing Stones](#) (e.g., astronomical, ceremonial, territorial) are based on current archaeological theories and comparative evidence from similar sites.

Due to copyright and licensing restrictions associated with the official sources (Historic England, Exmoor HER, Megalithic Portal, etc.), this document does not contain any photographic illustrations of the West Middleton Standing Stones.

Definitive proof of the stones' function remains elusive, and theories should be regarded as scholarly hypotheses, not established fact.

Further scholarly research or archaeological findings may provide more definitive insights in the future.

Article Summary

West Middleton Standing Stones Site Overview

- **Location:** Near Voley Lane, Parracombe, North Devon (Grid Ref: SS 64869 45896)
- **Period:** Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age (c. 3000-1500 BCE)
- **Designation:** Scheduled Monument (ID: 1002568)

Chronological Context

Period	Characteristics
Late Neolithic	c. 3000-2500 BCE: Communal monuments like henges and long barrows dominate. Stone circles and alignments begin to appear.
Early Bronze Age	c. 2500-1500 BCE: Shift to individual burials. Continued use of standing stones with increased emphasis on solar/lunar alignments.

References:

- Parker Pearson, M. (2012). *Stonehenge: Exploring the Greatest Stone Age Mystery*. Simon & Schuster.
- Bradley, R. (1998). *The Significance of Monuments: On the Shaping of Human Experience in Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe*. Routledge.
- Burl, A. (2000). *The Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany*. Yale University Press.

Key Themes

Theme	Description
Astronomical Alignment	Potential solstice and lunar standstill orientations; calendrical functions.
Territorial Marking	Stones may delineate clan boundaries or seasonal routes.
Ceremonial Use	Gathering sites for ritual, burial, or seasonal

Theme	Description
	festivals.
Memory & Myth	Embodied ancestral presence; mythic landscape encoding.
Non-utilitarian Design	Absence of domestic debris suggests symbolic rather than practical use.

What We Don't Know

Forms	Implication
Function vs. Symbolism	Are the stones practical markers or ritual signifiers?
Linear vs. Nonlinear Layout	Does the spatial arrangement imply procession, territory, or cosmology?
Absence vs. Presence of Evidence	Lack of dating and artifacts invites speculative, interdisciplinary inquiry.
Fixed vs. Fluid Meaning	Interpretations shift across archaeological, astronomical, and cultural lenses.

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Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Standing Stone	A vertically placed stone, often prehistoric, used in ceremonial, territorial, or astronomical contexts.
Stone Row	A linear arrangement of standing stones, potentially aligned with celestial events or landscape features.
Solstice Alignment	The positioning of stones to mark sunrise or sunset on the summer or winter solstice.
Lunar Standstill	A rare astronomical event where the moon reaches its extreme northern or southern rising/setting points—some stone rows may align with these.
Territorial Marker	A stone or monument used to delineate boundaries between groups or regions.
Ceremonial Use	The use of a site for ritual gatherings, possibly linked to burial, fertility, or seasonal festivals.
Non-utilitarian Design	A layout or structure that lacks domestic or practical function, suggesting symbolic or ritual intent.
Mythic Landscape Encoding	The embedding of ancestral memory or myth into physical geography through monuments.
Scheduled Monument	A legally protected archaeological site designated by Historic England for its national importance.
Exmoor HER	The Historic Environment Record for Exmoor National Park, cataloguing archaeological and historic sites.
Megalithic Portal	A public database and community resource documenting megalithic sites worldwide.
Interpretive Ambiguity	The deliberate or inherent openness of meaning in archaeological interpretation, allowing multiple plausible readings.
Linear vs. Nonlinear Layout	A spatial design that may suggest procession or order (linear) versus symbolic or cosmological mapping (nonlinear).
Function vs. Symbolism	The tension between practical use and symbolic meaning in interpreting prehistoric structures.

Further Reading

Bradley, R. (1998). *The Significance of Monuments: On the Shaping of Human Experience in Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe*. Routledge.

Burl, A. (2000). *The Stone Circles of Britain, Ireland and Brittany*. Yale University Press.

Exmoor National Park. (2025). Historic Environment Record (HER).

Higginbottom, G. (2020). "Bronze Age Megalithic Monuments in Western Scotland." *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*.

Historic England (1968-2025). West Middleton Standing Stones Listing.

Megalithic Portal (2025). West Middleton Stone Rows.

Parker Pearson, M. (2012). *Stonehenge: Exploring the Greatest Stone Age Mystery*. Simon & Schuster.

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