

Just a pile of stones? Exploring the Rollright Stones as part of your Stone Age to Iron Age study

Timeline – Stone Age to Iron Age

Please repeat the timeline from PH81 (Alf Wilkinson Article).

Remove the following from the timeline:

- Horton House
- Mold Cape
- Amesbury Archer

Add the following to the timeline:

- The Whispering Knights 3800-3500 BCE
- The King's Men 2500 BCE
- The King Stone 1500 BCE

If possible, please make these a different font colour so they stand out

'In the region of Oxfordshire there are great stones disposed as if by the hand of man. But at what time, or by what people, or for what memorial or significance this was done is not known. However that place is called Rollendrich by the local people.'

(Historia Brittonum, 9th century)

The Rollright Stones

The Rollright Stones are located in England, on the border between Oxfordshire and Warwickshire. The name 'Rollright' is believed to derive from the Old English 'Hrolla-landrih', the land or property of Hrolla. There are three ancient stone sites: The Whispering Knights (c3800 -3500 BCE), the King's Men stone circle (c2500 BCE) and the King Stone (c1500 BCE). The National Curriculum for history asks pupils to note connections, contrasts and trends over time. When studying 'Stone age to Iron age', the timescales necessarily cover a long duration. The Rollright Stones are an excellent example of how one small setting was used by communities over a period lasting more than two thousand years.

Unlike Stonehenge, where some of the stones are thought to have been transported from as far away as south Wales, all the limestone used for the Rollright Stones is thought to have been sourced locally. It came from the surrounding Cotswold hills, as close as 500 metres from the site. There are questions you could explore with children here, such as: how were the stones moved? What tools or ropes were used? And what were they made of? How were the stones erected into position? How many people were involved in this process? Why was this site or location chosen?

Because we know very little about the origins of stone sites, we may never know exactly why they were erected. Most show no evidence of human dwelling, which suggests that their purpose was ceremonial rather than functional. It is important for pupils to consider the limitations (as well as the opportunities) presented by the evidence available to us, and to explore questions which may not

reveal any easy or straightforward answers. Thinking about what we do not know about a place or period in the past is a key way for children to learn about the processes of historical enquiry.

The Whispering Knights



Alamy Image ID: ECXJT3

***Caption:* The Whispering Knights**

The Whispering Knights are the oldest stones and are over 5,000 years old. Dating from 3800-3500 BCE, they are thought to be the remains of an early Neolithic long barrow – a burial chamber. A collection of five stones, they are so called because it is said that they lean in towards each other as if plotting against the king.

The King's Men stone circle



Alamy Image ID: 2A8HMF1

***Caption:* The King's Men**

This late Neolithic stone circle was erected around 2500 BCE, and is likely to have been a gathering place. The stones are close-set and there is evidence of a portal entrance. It shares similar characteristics with other stone circles such as those located in the Lake District and the East of Ireland. It is therefore likely that those who built the stone circle may have originally come from these areas. Today, the stone circle consists of about seventy different stones. It is believed to be impossible to count the number of stones of the King's Men because you will get a different total each time. However, according to legend, if you do count the same number three times, you will gain your heart's desire.

The King Stone



Alamy Image ID: KMJP19

Caption: The King Stone

The King Stone was erected around 1500 BCE, so approximately a thousand years after the stone circle. It is believed to be a memorial to an early to middle Bronze Age burial ground. The strange shape of the stone is not a result of weathering, but rather cattle drovers – many centuries later – who apparently broke off small pieces of the stone as lucky charms to ward off the devil. In the nineteenth century, souvenir hunters also chipped away at the stones.

Using folktales to learn about the past

Throughout our past, many communities have ascribed mystical or sacred properties to ancient stones. These have been passed down through generations in the form of traditional stories and sayings. Some places have come to be associated with good or bad fortune. The Rollright stones are a good example of how a specific setting has become associated with a particular legend:

A King with ambitions to conquer all of England had got as far as the Rollright Stones when up popped a witch. She challenged the King with these words, *“Seven long strides shalt thou take and if Long Compton thou canst see, King of England thou shalt be.”* Off went the King, shouting, *“Stick, stock, stone, as King of England I shall be known.”* On his seventh stride the ground rose up before him in a long mound hiding the view. The witch laughed and declared, *“as Long Compton thou canst not see, King of England thou shalt not be. Rise up stick and stand still stone for King of England thou shalt be none. Thou and thy men hoar stones shall be, And I myself an eldern tree.”* (source: www.rollrightstones.co.uk)

Hence, the king was turned into the King Stone, his knights - the Whispering Knights, and his army - the King’s Men stone circle. And the witch turned into an elder tree.

Explore with your class the reasons why certain stories may have developed over time, and how they might reflect the beliefs or culture of people who lived in later periods. You could ask pupils to come up with their own folktales, proverbs and riddles based on the shapes or sizes of the stones that you study. What do the stones remind you of? Why? What do you think would be a good name for the stones?

Investigating the folktales associated with different places is also an effective way to cover the statutory requirements of the National Curriculum for English in Key Stage 2. This specifies that pupils should be able to recognise themes (such as the use of magical devices) in traditional stories, myths and legends.

Finding your nearest prehistoric site

There are estimated to be around 1300 stone circles in Britain, and over 10,000 barrows. Locating your nearest one can provide an excellent focus for making links between prehistory, local history and learning outside the classroom. One of the best features of these smaller sites is that – like the Rollright Stones – they are often free to visit. The website <http://www.stone-circles.org.uk/stone/> has a child-friendly interactive map where pupils can search for their nearest site.

Using maps also helps pupils to investigate why communities might have chosen to erect stones in particular locations. For example, many are situated in elevated positions or have open vistas. There are opportunities here to look at the contours shown on topographic maps and to make some meaningful links to the Key Stage 2 geography curriculum.

Making connections across periods of history

There is archaeological evidence to suggest that many of the later settlers to Britain chose to live near ancient stone circles, barrows or henges. For example, these sites were often considered to be special places by Saxon communities who settled in Britain from the middle of the fifth century.

Close to the Rollright stones is evidence of an Iron Age farm (400-100BC), a Roman settlement (100-300AD) and a Saxon graveyard (700AD). Pupils could locate these later settlements using maps and then plot them on to a timeline. This will help to develop their knowledge and understanding of chronology and to make connections across different historical periods within the same locality.

In conclusion, 'a pile of stones' can provide an excellent focus as part of your Stone Age to Iron Age study. It shows how archaeological evidence can be used to stimulate historical enquiry. And it can raise interesting questions about the skills used, and the beliefs held, by the people of Britain over five thousand thousand years ago.

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Resources relating to the Rollright Stones

www.rollrightstones.co.uk

This is an excellent resource which offers guidance for planning a visit to the stones, teaching resources and further information about the history of the stones

Manwaring, K. (2012). 'On Holy Ground – the Rollright Stones' in *Oxfordshire Folk Tales*. The History Press – This is an example of a retelling of a folktale based on the Rollright Stones that could be used with Key Stage 2 pupils

Useful websites

<http://www.stone-circles.org.uk/stone/>

<https://www.megalithic.co.uk/index.php>

<https://www.schoolsprehistory.co.uk/> This website provides links to experts in your local area.

Further reading

Historical Association Scheme of work (2020) – Changes in Britain from the Stone Age to the Iron Age

Pickford, T. (2018) The Standing Stone in *Primary History* 78 pp.34-39

Pryor, F. Morris, H and Wessex Archaeology 'Stone Age to Iron Age - Overview and Depth' *Primary History* 66 20-31

Skates, E. (2017). Teaching pre-history outside the classroom. *Primary History* 75 34-38

Taylor, J (2016) The Stone Age Conundrum: making use of a local site to develop historical knowledge of and enthusiasm for the Stone Age. *Primary History* 73 26-32