

The Dorchester Henge

When Waitrose supermarket was built here in 1984, archaeologists found signs of huge wooden posts and a curving ditch.

Each post was about a metre across and had been cut from a mature oak tree. They were regularly spaced about a metre apart. Twenty one post holes were found in an arc shape and some had also been found earlier in Church Street. Archaeologists worked out that the posts and the ditch must have been part of a huge circular monument - about 380 metres across. It is one of the largest Neolithic monuments in Britain.

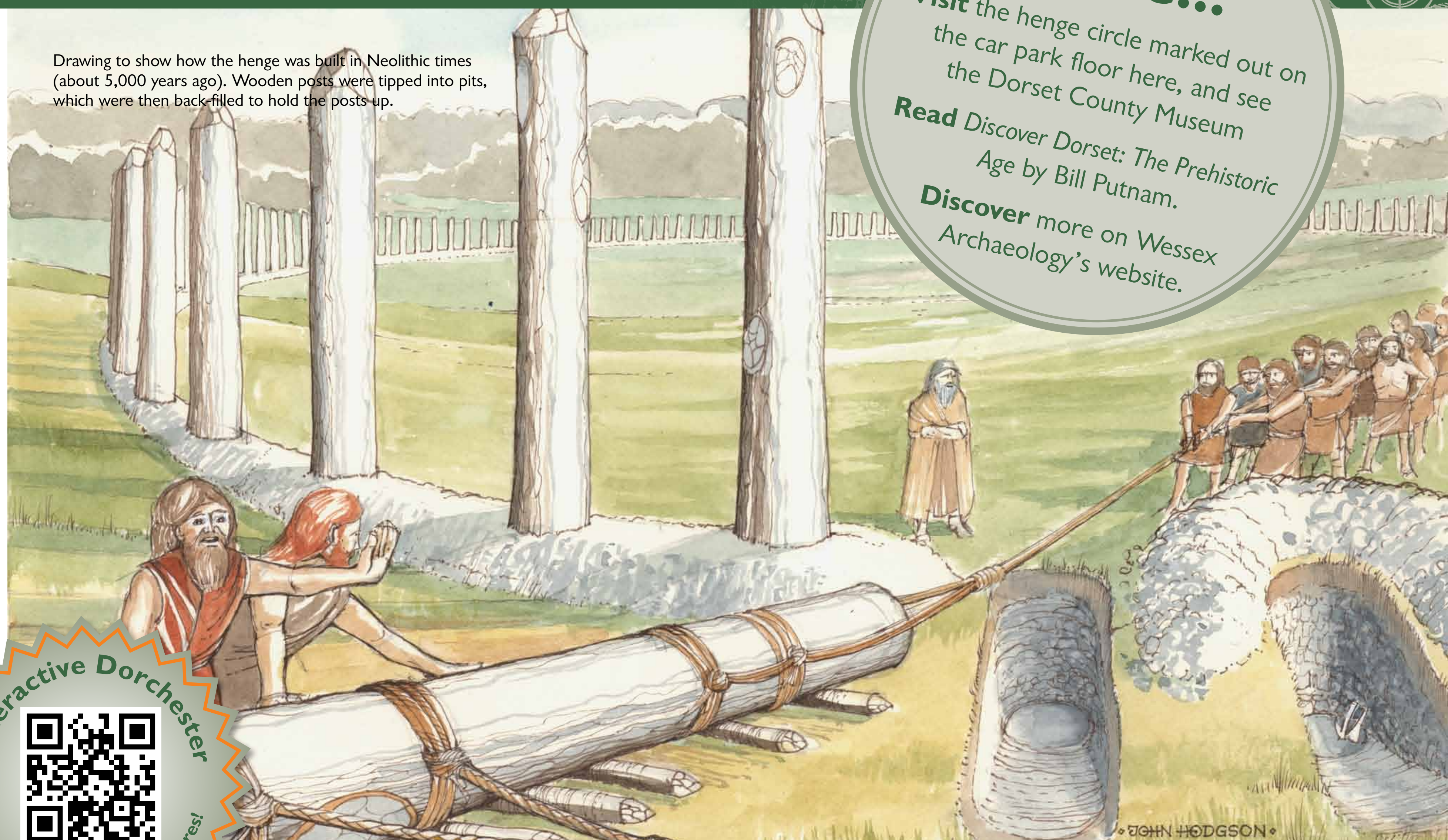
Large circular monuments like this are known as henges, named after Stonehenge. The Dorchester henge was about three times the size of Stonehenge, although it was never a stone structure. It wasn't the only one in the neighbourhood; there were also henges at Maumbury Rings and Mount Pleasant, just outside Dorchester.

The three large local henges were built about 5,000 years ago in the Neolithic period. This henge appears to have fallen out of use in the Early Bronze Age, the wooden posts rotted and the site returned to grassland. Mount Pleasant also fell out of use, but Maumbury Rings remained and the Romans converted it into an amphitheatre.

Stonehenge has been thought to be a religious centre, an astronomical observatory, a calendar for ensuring crops are planted at the right time and to have many other uses. Nobody knows what Dorchester's henges were for, but they are part of a very rich archaeological landscape.

Thomas Hardy went to school near here between 1850 and 1853. Other schoolboys often stole his school cap, throwing it into the shop of Sally Warren – a fierce old lady who Hardy had to brave to get his cap back!

Drawing to show how the henge was built in Neolithic times (about 5,000 years ago). Wooden posts were tipped into pits, which were then back-filled to hold the posts up.



Interactive Dorchester



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The Dorchester Dormouse trail

In the main picture, how are the people moving the tree trunk?

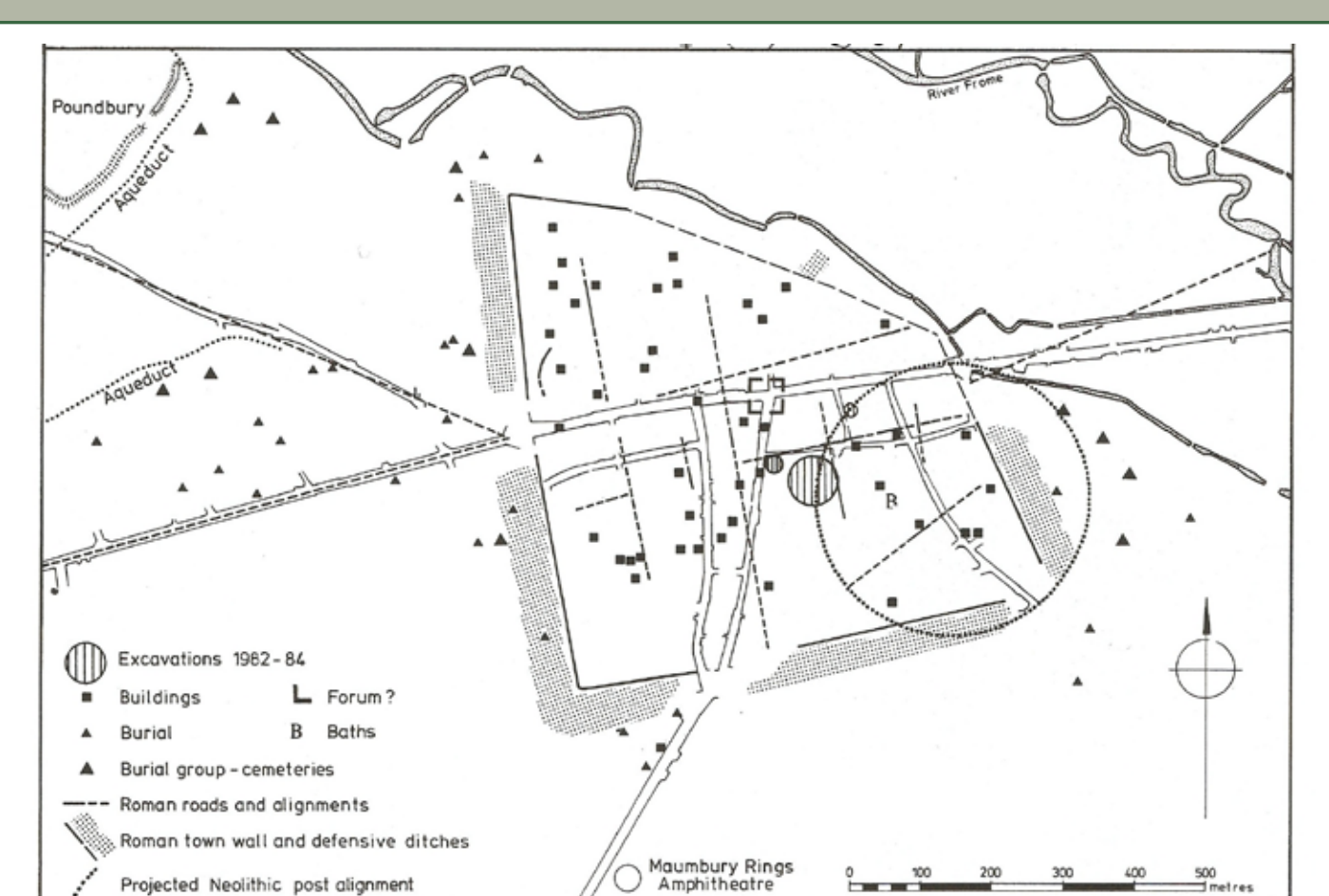


The excavations on the Greyhound Yard site in 1984.

The remains of the wooden posts show up very dark against the soil and chalk surrounding them.



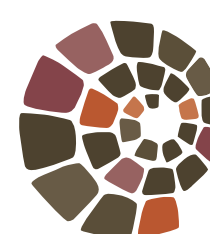
Evidence of later buildings was also found here. One of the most interesting was a dovecote. It was a round building with ledges for the birds to nest. In the centre was a pit for the bird droppings. These were used to tan leather and to make gunpowder.



Plan showing the possible extent of the circle of posts



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Visit the henge circle marked out on the car park floor here, and see the Dorset County Museum

Read Discover Dorset: The Prehistoric Age by Bill Putnam.

Discover more on Wessex Archaeology's website.