

LES FOUAILLAGES in Guernsey



What is it?

Les Fouaillages is a prehistoric burial mound in the Vale Parish of Guernsey. It is one of the oldest stone monuments in Europe.

When did we find out about it?

The discovery of Les Fouaillages was helped by an accidental fire. In the hot summer of 1976, the gorse around the area caught fire and burnt. This revealed some stones, which appeared to be arranged in a pattern. Two years later, archaeologists began to excavate the site and discovered new evidence about our ancestors in Guernsey.

What did they find?

Archaeologists found a large burial mound, pieces of pottery, stone tools and flint. The site was remarkably well-preserved, which suggests that nobody had disturbed it before. By the end of the excavation over 35,000 finds had been made.

How old is it?

The first phase of the monument structure dates from about 4,500 BC. Archaeologists believe that the site was originally covered by a forest in ancient times. This was cleared by early farmers and they used the area as a burial ground.

What was it used for?

There is evidence to suggest that the site was used for different purposes during its long history. There are eight key stages or phases starting in 6000BC and continuing through to the present day.

Phase 1 –Primeval (ancient) forest and hunters - 6000-5000 BC -

Tree holes were found, which suggests there was a forest in the area. Flint tools were also discovered, probably made by people who lived on fishing and hunting.

Phase 2a – A Tomb for the first farmers – 4500-4000 BC

The forest was cleared and the site was chosen to be a unique burial ground, with the construction of the first phase of the monument.

Phase 2b – Closure of the Tomb – 4000 BC

For reasons not known, the tomb went out of use. Archaeologists believe it had been in use for a long time because some repairs to the walls are visible. Some reasons why it might have gone out of use are that an important person might have died, the community might have moved away, or set up another tomb elsewhere.

Phase 3a – A New Cult Centre - 3000 – 2000 BC

During this period, a shrine or mortuary house was built. It was not a 'house' as we understand it but perhaps a place to worship. A large collection of stone tools were found from this time, as well as 'polissoirs' (these are stones to polish axes on). Two of these polishing stones weighed more than a quarter of a ton!

Phase 3b – Final Closure – 2000 BC

This structure was also sealed. The people at the time left behind 8 spectacular flint arrowheads. Some are a high-quality honey-coloured flint from France. The whole structure was then covered by an enormous pile of earth. This mound proved to be very useful; it preserved the site extremely well and protected it from damage.

Phase 4 – a village and its tomb – 2000-1800 BC

In the area to the south of the mound, archaeologists found evidence of timber-framed buildings, hearths, pottery and flintwork. This suggests that there was a settlement in the area. Archaeologists assume that Les Fouaillages was a small farming settlement during this time.

Phase 5 – Continuity or change? 1800 – 50 BC

No evidence from the Bronze and Early Iron Ages were recorded. As the area is fertile, the land was probably used for farming during this period.

Phase 6 – An organised landscape 50BC – 1000 AD

The mound which covers the site took on a new purpose; it was used as a boundary-marker. Shallow ditches were cut along the sides and these may have marked the outline of a property or field. These boundary-markers were used in Britain but only one other example is known in the Channel Islands.

Phase 7 – the end of farming and settlement- 1000-1200 AD

After 5 and a half thousand years of development, Les Fouaillages was covered by a blanket of sand (a 'sand-blow'). This meant that farming was no longer possible but bracken and gorse began to grow. It was by removing the gorse that archaeologists began to excavate this fascinating site.



Phase 8 – Mediaeval and recent times 1200-2010

Les Fouaillages has been surrounded by development and action during its history but, fortunately, appears to be undamaged by it. The absence of agricultural activity preserved Les Fouaillages and other sites on the Common from destruction. The blanketing sand dune had a further advantage for modern archaeology since it was undisturbed by earlier archaeologists such as the Lukis family who excavated at La Platte Mare, a stone's throw away.

The monument was spared during the German Occupation (1940-1945) even though there was sand-quarrying over much of the common. On the north side of the excavated area an exploratory trench had been cut through the dune, but fortunately it had stopped short of the mound itself. Along the south side scoops made by the toothed bucket of a steam-shovel were seen, but again, little damage had occurred. Visitors to the site will notice graphic and enduring evidence of this narrow escape in the parallel claw-marks across the top of the southern marker-slab.

Discarded cartridges from a machine gun have been found in the area. This suggests that it was used for military practice. Les Fouaillages is also surrounded by a golf course but this has not damaged it. It's possible to visit Les Fouaillages site on L'Ancrese common. If you head towards along Les Amarreurs Road, heading towards the kiosk, it is signposted.

Over 35,000 finds were discovered at Les Fouaillages and some are on display at Guernsey Museum. Les Fouaillages has been identified as a site of great archaeological importance; it's a remarkable and impressive monument of its time.

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