



Archaeology
Data Service



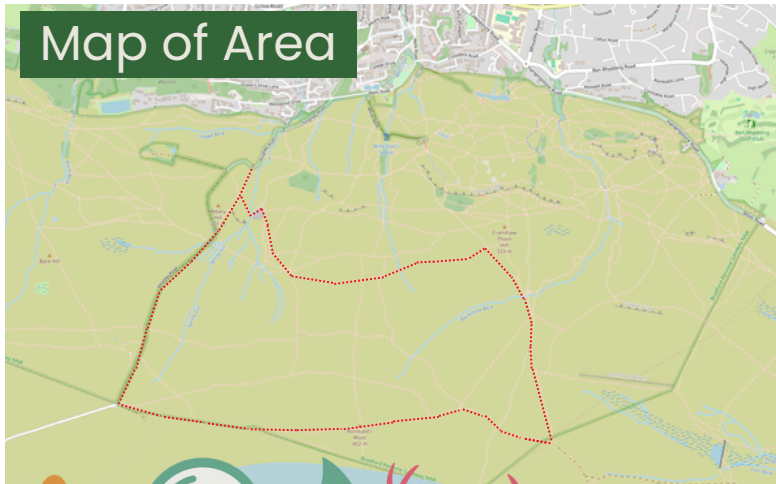
Ilkley Moor

England's Rock Art
Archive Walking Route

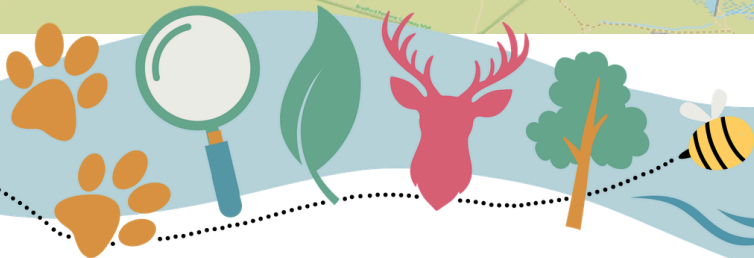


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ARCHAEOLOGY
2026



Background

Archaeology Data Service

Founded in 1996, the [Archaeology Data Service](#) is the leading accredited digital repository for archaeology and heritage data generated in the UK. The core activity of the ADS is the long-term digital preservation of the data entrusted to our care.

Archaeology is in a unique position in that much of the creation of its data results from destruction of primary evidence, making access to data all the more critical in order to test, assess, and subsequently reanalyse and reinterpret both data and the hypotheses arising from them.

The ADS works with national and local agencies and research councils to secure preservation of data. Our collections policy is broad and includes all aspects of material culture, including archaeology and architecture, material aspects of anthropology, history and history of art, and heritage science.

All resources archived with the ADS are Open Access, and delivered through our website to facilitate re-use by the heritage sector and wider community.

The Festival of Archaeology

Taking place across the whole of the UK, the Festival of Archaeology is a fortnight long festival organised by the Council for British Archaeology.

With events held locally and nationally, the aim of the festival is to widen participation in archaeology by encouraging people to visit sites, excavations, and places of historical interest such as museums or resource centres.

In 2026, the theme of the festival was announced as *Archaeology and Nature*. Thinking about archaeology and nature together reveals how humans have lived with, shaped, and been shaped by the environment around them. By exploring the past using the climate, geology, animals, plants, landscapes and the effect of nature on archaeological sites and buildings today, we can understand how places and communities evolve and develop.



Englands Rock Art Project

Across northern England thousands of carved symbols can be found on rocks and boulders. Their shapes range from simple circular hollows to complex combinations of cups, rings, spirals, grooves, spirals, and chevrons.

Created by Neolithic and Bronze age people who occupied the lands over four thousand years ago, their original purpose is still debated, making them one of the most interesting features of the landscape to study.

While carved in stone, rock art across the UK is deteriorating due to both human and natural threats. Therefore the accurate recording of these features is key to better understand our prehistoric past.

England's Rock Art Project (ERA) provides an important step towards this goal of ensuring rock art is preserved digitally for future generations to research, manage, and protect the landscape. The ERA dataset was originally created as part of the Northumberland and Durham Rock Art Pilot Project which was managed by Northumberland and Durham County Councils and funded by English Heritage. This dataset has now been made available through the Archaeology Data Service.



West Horton 2a ERA ID: 63



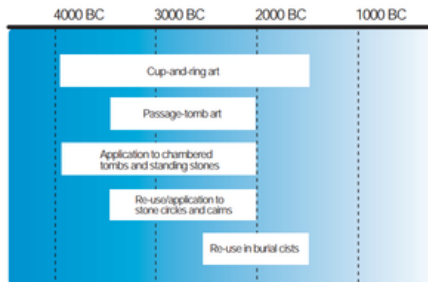
Morwick 1f ERA ID: 609

What is Rock Art?

There are around 2,500 examples of rock art across England, with further examples found in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. It is when considered in relation to the whole of the UK that England's rock art is best understood.

Most rock art is found in clusters, with high concentrations in Scotland, Yorkshire, Cumbria, Anglesey, and the Isle of Man. These concentrations are for the most part due to the geology of the area, as rock art is usually found in sedimentary rock such as sandstone. However there are examples of rock art being found in other rock types such as granite.

Rock art exists in different contexts. Some are found in 'open air' contexts such as boulders or other visible exposures of rock within the landscape. Rock art can also be found decorating prehistoric structures such as stone circles or burial cists. Rock art can also be found in later building structures, having once been part of the landscape and then being quarried to be re-used in another context.



The approximate chronology of British rock art. (The Prehistoric Rock Art of England: Recording, managing and enjoying our carved heritage, 2021, p. 5)

Due to their abstract design rock art is generally difficult to date, although overlapping design allows for the relative age of motifs. The degree of weathering and comparisons to other items with similar designs can also be used for approximate aging.

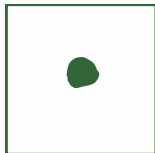
The meaning of rock art and the specific motifs is not fully understood, with several theories being suggested including maps of the landscape, ritual markings, astronomical alignments, as well as simply art for arts sake. While the meaning of rock art is unclear, researchers are able to explore the landscape rock art occupies more fully to understand associated use of the land, if there are regional differences, and if different motifs reflect distinct activities.

Identification

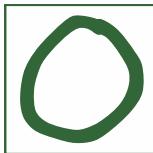
Within the UK the most common design is a cup mark, a circular motif around 2-3cm deep. These can often be accompanied by concentric 'rings' or 'grooves' which can be further intersected by linear grooves as can be seen below. Less common designs include keyhole and spiral motifs. All these designs can be combined in unique ways to create rock art.

It is likely that many of these designs were mapped out first, then created by striking the rock with stone tools known as peckers. 'Peck' marks remain visible on panels which have been protected from the elements, varying in size from less than 1 mm up to 4 mm in diameter, and perhaps indicating that a variety of tools was used. In some excavations such as Hunterheugh rock art site in Northumberland, fragments of red ochre was found although on a wider scale there is limited evidence that the designs were coloured.

Cups



Curved Grooves



Cups with
Curved Grooves



Cups with
Linear Grooves



Keyhole



Spirals



Goatscrag b, ERA ID: 10



Lartington, The Rigg 14
ERA ID: 943



Hare Law Crags 5
ERA ID: 15



Badger Stone
ERA ID: 2336



West Londershaw 2c
ERA ID: 1318



Morwick 1d
ERA ID: 607

Ilkley Moor



Friends of Ilkley Moor: white-wells-2-photographer-andy-savage



People have inhabited Ilkley Moor for thousands of years, with settlements made up of roundhouses within stone enclosures at Backstone Beck dating from the Late Bronze Age. Around AD79 Romans established a fort covering the River Wharfe, the remains of which became the first church in the area built by the Angles. In 1069 the area was destroyed by the Danes and Normans, after which the Moor was never repopulated in any significant way. Over the next millennium the Moor served the local areas as grazing for livestock and as a quarry for nearby buildings, while the streams were harnessed to power local corn mills.

Victorian England's enthusiasm for water cures and local tourism saw the Moor famed for its scenery, the splashing streams, the heather, the mysterious rocks and the pure, fresh air. This increased significantly with the arrival of the railways leading to the Urban District Council buying the land in 1893, allowing it to be enjoyed by the public for the foreseeable future.

Today people still use the moor for walking and horse riding but activities have widened. Each year begins with the New Year's Day dip at White Wells. After that comes the fell run and the spring flowers. The Summer is the great time for tourism and in Autumn comes the attraction of the heather, the Moor's great glory, and bilberries for gathering.

Points of Interest



[Click Here to Access Route Map](#)

The route

4.5 miles

607 Elev. gain

2-2.5 hr est. time

1 From the start point walk up Keighley Road. In about 20 minutes or 0.75 miles you will see a large stone cross, a little way off the road to the right. Keep on the road for another five minutes until you come to two radio masts and a gate across the road. Immediately before the gate take a well made path that leads east, parallel to the wall by the radio masts. After a short while the path becomes paved. This path crosses a very boggy area. Before the paving stones were laid it was extremely difficult to cross, especially in wet weather. Beware in frosty weather some of the stones may be icy and slippery.



Weary Hill 01 ERA ID: 2329

The effects of weathering, of human and animal impacts, and especially the presence of biological growths such as lichen may have resulted in motifs becoming obscured or, in some cases, revealed. Changes in lighting may also affect what is visible. Recent research also suggests that prehistoric people may have incorporated natural features into their carvings, sometimes enhancing them. This means that it is difficult to determine whether some features are natural or human made.

To view more resources about this rock art visit:

https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/collections/view/era_eh_2009/fullrecord.cfm?id=2344

2 About 15 minutes from the radio masts you come to the Thimble Stones. This is a very convenient place to sit, rest and have a drink and a snack. A few minutes beyond the Thimble Stones are two stones set in the ground with a poem written on them. These are 'stanza stones'. There are a series of stanza stones with poems by Simon Armitage along the Pennine watershed from Marsden to Ilkley connected by a long distance walk



The route



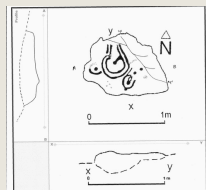
3 A little further on is an OS trig point. Stop here and admire the magnificent views in all directions. The trig point is believed to stand on a Neolithic burial mound. If it is a burial mound, then its location on the very highest point, with long distance views in all directions means that it will be the last resting place of a very important local chief or prince. Take a moment to celebrate, as from here it is downhill nearly all the way.

Due to the degradation of rock art, historical drawings offer a snapshot of what the landscape once looked like. When recording rock art we aim to cause as little harm as possible to the landscape and be as comprehensive and objective as possible. Visual recording can be described as either contact or non-contact. Contact methods such as wax rubbing, tracing, and the creation of replica moulds have traditionally been used to capture a visual record of carvings. All these methods impact on the rock surface and are not normally recommended.

Want to have a go? To access learning resources and drawing activities visit:
https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/collections/view/era_eh_2009/downloads.cfm



Weary Hill 01 ERA ID: 2329



4 The paved path carries on until you come to a boundary stone, the Lanshaw Lad marking the division between Ilkley and Burley Moor. The path joins a major north/south route, the Dick Hudson's path. Here, take a brief diversion; walk south for a short distance to the Twelve Apostles. The origin of this Bronze Age circle is uncertain. It may be the remains of a burial mound. In any event, most of the stones have fallen over and been repositioned several times over the last four millennia.

The route

5 Retrace your steps to the Lanshaw Lad. Carry on north, down the Dick Hudson's path (now paved), in the direction of Ilkley, to a small stream, where the paved path ends. Just before the paved path ends a path forks left, over the stream and towards a small cairn on the skyline. Take this path to a second, even smaller cairn. Here turn left, going west-north-west.



Gill Head 01 ERA ID: 2582

6 A little further on you pass a marked depression on your right. A path crosses the path you are on. Turn left on the crossing path and follow a faint but distinct moorland path. At first it seems to head directly for the radio masts on the skyline, then veers to the right and carries on across the Moor, crossing several very boggy patches. Ultimately, about 30 minutes from the stream you will see an incongruously placed park bench and to its side a large rock. This is the Badger Stone; one of the finest carved rocks on the moor. Its uphill side is covered with cups and rings. We do not know whether it was all carved at one time or whether succeeding generations added their marks, 4000 years ago. When it was carved, the whole area will have been covered by forest.

The search for meaning?

Defining territory? Route-markers? Sacred Spaces? Natural influences? Public versus private?

These decorated stones appear to have little archaeological context, yet the act of carving represents a permanent expression of a connection with the landscape – an indication that 'space' has become 'place'.

To find out about archaeological theories relating to rock art in more depth visit: https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Planning-and-Building/Conservation/Archaeology/ERA_Brochure.pdf



The route

7 From the Badger Stone the path veers slightly to the right, gently downhill. It joins another, more major path and continues on into a steep gully where it crosses several small streams that converge into an old quarry on your right. Scramble across the streams, up the steep slope opposite and carry on until the path meets the Keighley Road. There is a culvert under the road and on the stone entrance you can just see where someone carefully carved the inscription 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here'. Turn right and ten minutes walk, steeply downhill, brings you back to the starting point. There is a litterbin here for your rubbish. As you take off your boots you can remember with satisfaction that you have crossed the highest point on the Moor and (if the weather was favourable) you will have had wonderful views over most of urban West Yorkshire to the south and east, and over the Yorkshire Dales as far as the Three Peaks to the north and west.



Tips for photography

- *Try to photograph the carvings in low (morning or evening) sunlight, without the automated flash. The oblique light will throw deep shadows across carvings that are almost invisible at mid-day.*
- *The effect of oblique lighting is even more apparent when the carvings are wet. An ideal scenario would be low sunshine following a shower.*
- *Where there is little natural light (e.g. in woodland) a strong torch can be used to provide artificial oblique lighting to good effect.*

Please be aware that this route has a variety of walking surfaces, some of which is prone to light flooding. Please make sure you check the weather forecast and take the proper precautions prior to your journey.



Walking in Ilkley Moor

Before your walk

Before undertaking a walk take sensible precautions such as wearing suitable outdoor footwear, check the weather forecast and take suitable wet/poor weather clothing, make sure you can read a map and take a mobile phone.

Dogs

Dogs are allowed everywhere on Ilkley Moor, but you will be crossing breeding areas for endangered ground nesting species; so in the breeding season (especially March, April and May), keep dogs on a lead. Free running dogs will inadvertently scare ground-nesting birds and they will abandon their nests and the young birds will die. At other times there may be sheep present. Each year about eight sheep die on Ilkley Moor as a result of being chased by dogs. Farmers are allowed to shoot any dog chasing sheep. Responsible dog owners will want their dogs to enjoy a walk on the Moor, but they must be kept under control.

Archaeology

While it is encouraged to visit these ancient monuments, enjoy the view, and wonder what led our ancestors to leave their marks on this rock, these are scheduled ancient monument. Treat it with great respect. Defacing it in any way is a serious criminal matter.



Friends of Ilkley Moor: Crossmorton-photographer-colin-williams

Friends of Ilkley Moor

The Friends of Ilkley Moor (FoIM), founded in 2008, is a registered charity no. 1126733. The Friends work closely with Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council and other partner organisations such as Natural England to preserve and improve understanding and awareness of the Moor.

The aim of the group is to restore, protect and improve Ilkley Moor, for the benefit of the environment, all those who use Ilkley Moor and those who reside in the surrounding area. Since their inception the group has have developed a range of wildlife conservation and fundraising projects.





Want to know more?

There are currently over 1700 recordings of rock art
across England, available to view through the
Archaeology Data Service!

To learn more and find rock art near you visit: Newcastle University, Historic England, Northumberland County Council, Ilkley Archaeology Group, Durham County Council (2021) England's Rock Art [data-set]. York: Archaeology Data Service [distributor] <https://doi.org/10.5284/1138794>