

# UNCOVERING THE MYSTERIES OF A BRONZE AGE BURIAL

[July 26, 2013](#) [Helen Williams](#)[Bronze Age](#), [Conservation](#), [Day of Archaeology 2013](#), [Excavation](#), [Finds](#)  
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This is the second year Wiltshire Conservation Service has taken part in Day of Archaeology. This year I thought I'd blog about the work I've been doing on an amazing Bronze Age cist burial.

The burial cist was excavated in August 2011 and was located on Whitehorse Hill, northern Dartmoor, on land owned by the Duchy of Cornwall. The work was carried out by archaeologists from the Historic Environment Projects Team, Cornwall Council, led by Andrew Jones, with assistance from English Heritage (EH) and Plymouth University specialists.



The cist was first discovered over 10 years ago when what appeared to be its end stone fell out of the peat mound which had been concealing it. Since that time the peat has slowly eroded away from the sides and the top of the peat mound and after several attempts to protect the cist, a Scheduled Monument, the decision was taken by the Dartmoor National Park Authority and English Heritage to excavate it in order to recover any surviving archaeological and environmental information before the site and its context were lost. This was the first excavation of a Dartmoor cist for nearly one hundred years.

During the late afternoon, three days into the excavation, the stones of the cist were dismantled and the large cover stone (measuring 0.8 x 0.6m) removed. This revealed a burial deposit lying *in situ* on the base stone of the cist. Visible remains included bone fragments, a shale bead and what appeared to be hair or fur. Two sharpened wooden stakes were also discovered outside the cist, one lying horizontally against one of the side walls and the other still vertically placed into the peat against one of the end stones.

Located within peat at 600m altitude on one of Dartmoor's highest tors, the cist offered high potential for good preservation of any remaining contents. It was at this point that I was contacted to carry out a microexcavation of the cist – little did I know the extent of what would be found inside!

The level of preservation inside the cist has been fantastic and the objects I have found have far exceeded all our expectations. The occupant of the grave was cremated and the bone wrapped inside an animal pelt. Grave goods include a woven band with tin rivets, a basketry bag containing a flint, two sets of wooden studs and nearly 200 shale, amber and tin beads. There is also an object made from leather and woven plant material which is so far proving to be a bit of a mystery. The craftsmanship that has gone into making these objects is pretty mindblowing and it is clear that their owner was someone of importance.



The project team are gathering the results of analysis that has been carried out and we hope to be able to share the results later on this year. Of particular interest is DNA analysis of the pelt, which we hope will reveal the species of the animal skin used to wrap the cremation. Meanwhile, I have been working on the conservation of the objects which is still ongoing. Today I'll be working on cleaning and consolidating the woven band and checking on the pelt, which is being dried under controlled conditions.



The project has provided an opportunity not only to try and discover who the occupant of the grave might have been, but to also give a unique insight into life in the Early Bronze Age and I am extremely privileged to have been involved. The objects will be going on display at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery in 2014 so check their website for more details [www.plymouthmuseum.gov.uk](http://www.plymouthmuseum.gov.uk). I'll also be posting updates on Twitter @helenwcons and on our blog [www.wshc.eu/blog](http://www.wshc.eu/blog).

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