

DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Friday 10 May 2024

Present: A Cooper, W Dracup, G Hill, M Jeffery, J McInnes, S Morgan, C Mott, M Owen, G Pannell, M Renders, L Samuel, P Sanders, P Smerdon, D Thomas, M Williams, P Woods

Apologies: P Harper, J Nutley

Formal leave of absence: G Gribble

Officers: K Bishop, Chief Executive (National Park Officer)
A Stirland, Head of Business Support
L Bray, Archaeologist

3572 Declarations of Interest

None.

3573 Minutes of the Authority meeting held on 5 April 2024

The Minutes of the meeting held on Friday 5 April 2024 were AGREED and signed as a true record.

3574 Chair's Report

The Chair reported the following:

- She had attended the Team Devon meeting, which includes Devon County Council, District and Borough Councils etc. The main topic of conversation was the devolution deal. She reminded Members that, should Team Devon become the wider consultative body, the Authority, plus Exmoor NPA would both have a seat on the Board.
- She had attended a recent National Parks England (NPE) Board meeting. The meeting mainly provided operational updates and discussions regarding the funding settlement. DNPA was formally thanked for its work in securing additional revenue.
- Mr Will Dracup has been re-appointed as a Secretary of State Member for another four years.
- Members were reminded to complete the papers recently distributed which will inform the Annual meeting.
- Members were reminded to advise whether they would be attending the Team Dartmoor Day, to be held on Wednesday 5 June 2024.

At the invitation of the Chair, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) advised Members that Ms Woods, Chair, had been offered, and had accepted, an extension of two years to her term of office. In addition, he reported that Mr Cooper was coming to the end of his eight year term of office as a Secretary of State Member.

3575 Items Requiring Urgent Attention

None.

3576 Public Participation

None.

3577 Potential Archaeological Excavation on Dartmoor

Members received the report of the Archaeologist (NPA/24/023).

Members were asked to view the report and recommendations in the context of the discoveries made in 2011 at Whitehorse Hill (WHH). A Cist was identified eroding from the peat in the 1990s when attempts to halt the erosion were made. The works ultimately failed and excavations were undertaken in 2011. Dartmoor has approximately 150 cists but none, prior to WHH, had yielded any finds. WHH was very different, containing an assortment of grave goods, including organic material. The preservative qualities of waterlogged peat were the reasons for the unprecedented finds. The site was of international importance, providing a glimpse early Bronze Age life at around 1800 BC.

In 2021, a new site was brought to the Authority's attention, consisting of a non-natural stone structure, exposed by eroding peat; the visible parts looked like a cist – a stone box. It was determined that the structure might be like that discovered at WHH and was covered with cut turf for protection from both the elements and potential interference. During 2022 and 2023 investigations of the surroundings have been conducted, making recordings, paleoenvironmental sampling and acquiring dates. Peat covering the feature has been dated to the Iron Age, indicating that the structure was already concealed in prehistory which increases the chance of it being undisturbed. Its orientation is NW / SE which supported the interpretation of this being a cist. Pollen in the peat indicated that it was constructed on a hilltop in blanket bog but surrounded by tree cover on lower ground.

With regard to next steps, three options have been identified:

1. Do nothing
 - + Low cost – occasional visits to record and assess.
 - Potential loss of internationally significant archaeology; reputationally not best archaeological practice and would not conserve or enhance Dartmoor's cultural heritage.
2. Attempt to halt erosion
 - + Reasonably low cost;
Possible preservation *in situ*.
 - Uncertainty of success (this was attempted on WHH and failed)
Landscape impact;
Potential loss of internationally significant archaeology due to air intervention;
Reputation – not conserving or enhancing Dartmoor's cultural heritage.

3. Excavation

- + Recovery and conservation of potentially significant international archaeology;
Publicity – promotion of Dartmoor’s cultural heritage;
Would highlight the importance of peatlands for archaeology.
Reputation – the National Park would be pursuing and fulfilling its purposes, plus working with partners and stakeholders.
- Potential high cost;
Possibility of finding nothing of major significance.

With regard to excavation, three work phases are anticipated.

Phase 1 : Initial excavation – this would entail undertaking a pre-excavation survey which would assess the feature and assist decision making. Terrestrial Laser Scanning (TLS) will provide a record of the area and extremely accurate measurements. This will help determine whether the contents of the nature need to be removed and excavated under laboratory controlled conditions.

Phase 2 : Block Lifting – If it is identified in Phase 1 that the feature contains delicate, preserved organic material, the whole feature would be cut out like a slice of cake and removed to a conservation lab. A helicopter lift would be the best form of transport.

Phase 3 : Conservation and Publication

The Archaeologist’s recommendation is that Members approve Option 3. Once the excavation is complete, fund raising and publicity can take place. Funding will be sought from stakeholders and crown funding. He advised that ‘Digging for Britain’ and the BBC’s National News Team have expressed interest in the project.

Some Member comments:

- ‘no pain, no gain’, advising that whilst he understood the hesitation regarding potential risks, the Authority now knows the positive impacts of the White Horse Hill excavations, both nationally and internationally.
- White Horse Hill set down a marker for future excavations and suggested a film be made of the works, finds etc to promote the work of the Authority.
- An exciting venture – even if the works did not reveal a lot, it would be exciting to get to that point.
- The proposed excavations were ‘too exciting not to do’.
- This would be the perfect project to take out to schools on Dartmoor – get the younger generation excited and help them to understand our past – pre-history is part of the national curriculum.

In response to questions from Members, the Archaeologist responded as follows:

- White Horse Hill excavations were not carried out on site; the complete cist was lifted and taken to a secure location; this is the preferred method with regard to the new discovery.
- The new discovery sits above one metre of undisturbed peat – there is no natural process for this.
- Security could be an issue, hence the recommendation for Option 3.

- With regard to potential costs, these would not be huge to begin with. Once more was known, crowd funding could commence.

With regard to funding, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) confirmed that the Authority's Reserve levels would be maintained at the required levels. The amounts detailed within the report were based on the scenario that a large number of artefacts were discovered. Costings are a moving feast; he recommended that an amendment be made to the recommendation: '*that £90k be authorised from reserves to underwrite the works identified*'; this would provide an element of contingency.

Ms Woods proposed that recommendations, including the amendment to recommendation (i) to reflect the sum of £90,000 to be allocated from the Authority's reserves, which was seconded by Mr Cooper and agreed by all Members.

RESOLVED: Members:

- (i) Authorised the allocation of £90,000 from the Authority's reserves to 'underwrite' the archaeological works identified within the report and subsequent analysis and conservation of any artefacts recovered from the site and authorised the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) to use these reserves as costs are incurred; and
- (ii) Noted that all efforts would be made to offset costs through partner contributions and donations should the excavation proceed.

The Chair and Chief Executive (National Park Officer) suggested that a trip to see the White Horse Hill exhibition be included in the Annual Member Workshop in the Autumn.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 10:52.