



NPA/24/023

## Dartmoor National Park Authority

10 May 2024

# Potential Archaeological Excavation on Dartmoor

Report by the Archaeologist

Recommendations: **That Members:**

- (i) **Allocate £80,000 from the Authority's reserves to 'underwrite' the archaeological works identified in this paper and subsequent analysis and conservation of any artefacts recovered from the site. Authorise the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) to use these reserves as costs are incurred; and**
- (ii) **Note that all efforts will be made to offset costs through partner contributions and donations should the excavation proceed.**

## 1 Background

- 1.1 Around two years ago, the Authority's (DNPA) archaeology team were made aware of a feature eroding out of the peat. Since then, a variety of work has been undertaken which suggests that the feature is likely to be a cist, certainly of prehistoric date and probably of Early Bronze Age date (between 2,300 and 1,700 BC).
- 1.2 The rarity of such finds (unique in south-west Britain) is such that the find is considered to be of potential international significance. Due to this, the site has been treated with a degree of secrecy in an attempt to minimize curious visitors and reduce the risk of interference. The exact location of the site is not given in this report for these reasons.

## 2 Conservation

- 2.1 Due to the presence of potentially internationally significant archaeology on the site (on a par with that recorded at Whitehorse Hill) it is necessary to undertake conservation to preserve it for the future. There are two options available in this case:

### **Option 1: *In situ* preservation**

- 2.2 As the feature is in an eroding peat face this option would necessitate halting peat deterioration. Such measures were attempted at Whitehorse Hill in the form of

constructing a stone wall across the peat face and ultimately failed. In addition, air currently has access to the interior of the feature and has significant potential to cause deterioration of any surviving contents. Accordingly, the risks to any sensitive archaeology associated with this option are felt to be too great and it must be concluded that it is not viable as an effective course of action. There has also been signs of recent human disturbance and this would likely increase the longer it is in situ.

## **Option 2: Excavation**

- 2.3 This option involves the full archaeological excavation of the site, its preservation by record and the conservation of any artefactual material it contains. It is strongly felt that this is the most appropriate course of action. The parameters and requirements of this work are listed in sections 3 and 4. If Members agree to the recommendations in this report, then it is anticipated that the excavation will take place in August 2024.

## **3 Site Constraints**

- 3.1 The location of the site, the character of the archaeology and the most effective methodology for dealing with it present a number of challenges and costs for an excavation.
- 3.2 The site is remote and difficult to access so transporting personnel and equipment to and from it each day will require a specialist all-terrain vehicle(s) which must be hired. Training in their operation will also likely be necessary.
- 3.3 Waterlogged, preserved organic finds are fragile and deteriorate very rapidly when disturbed and exposed to the air. Therefore, if these are present, it will possibly be necessary to block lift the cist and its contents and remove them from the site for micro excavation, under controlled conditions in a conservation laboratory, as rapidly as possible.
- 3.4 The weight of such a block of, consisting of waterlogged peaty material and stone, is likely to be significant; in the order of two to three hundred kilogrammes. This, combined with its fragility, presents a challenge in moving it from the site, across rough terrain, to a point where it can be transported to a conservation laboratory for excavation and analysis. Officers consider that the most viable solution is to transport via helicopter to a waiting vehicle but this has cost implications (see below).

## **4 Potential Financial Implications**

- 4.1 There is significant uncertainty around what might be entailed in investigating the feature that has been discovered. Whilst evidence points to it being a cist, this is not certain and other possibilities are possible. Furthermore, the greatest 'known, unknown' is the nature of the contents of the feature, if any. At present the feature is occupied by a mass of waterlogged peaty material which may contain preserved organic material, but this will only be ascertained once excavation is underway. Accordingly, the financial liability is difficult to predict but it should be noted that this report assumes a worst-case financial scenario.

- 4.2 The project has been separated into two linked parts: part 1 relates to fieldwork associated with the excavation; part 2 relates to post excavation analysis and conservation. The costs associated with part 2 are extremely difficult to estimate as it depends on what (if anything) is found as a result of the excavation detailed in part 1.

### Part 1: Fieldwork

<b>Part 1 Work components</b>	<b>Estimated cost (£)</b>
<p><b>Commission specialist archaeological support</b>            A team of four archaeologists will be necessary to undertake the excavation. Two of these will be drawn from the DNPA archaeology team and the remainder supplied by a suitable contractor. In this case the Cornwall Archaeological Unit (CAU) will be commissioned due to their expertise in this type of excavation. The excavation will be led by Dr Andy Jones who is a specialist in early bronze age archaeology. Cornwall Archaeological Unit undertook the excavation of the Whitehorse Hill cist.</p>	9,000
<p><b>Specialist equipment</b>            The unusual and specialist nature of the excavation may necessitate the purchase of equipment which DNPA or CAU do not currently possess. This will be determined as planning progresses and precise methodologies are employed.</p>	1,000
<p><b>Vehicle hire</b>            The inaccessibility of the site will require the hire of a suitable vehicle(s) - Softrac All-Terrain Vehicles, which will be used to transport the team and their equipment each day.</p>	3,000
<p><b>Commission Geomatic Survey</b>            Given the potential significance of the site, cutting edge techniques will be used to record the immediate vicinity of the site and the feature itself at several stages during excavation. Leicester University will be commissioned to undertake this work due to their status as a leading practitioner in the field, their access to equipment (unavailable elsewhere) and the synergy with other projects.</p>	6,000
<p><b>Helicopter Hire</b>            If block lifting of the contents of the feature proves necessary and it is determined that it likely contains preserved organic material, the fragility and weight of the block will make it difficult to transport off the moor without damaging it. The best solution is to transport the block by helicopter to the vehicles waiting to transport to the conservation laboratory.</p>	9,000
<b>Total estimated cost for part 1</b>	<b>28,000</b>

## Part 2: Post-Excavation

- 4.3 The precise requirements of this phase of the project are dependent on the results of the fieldwork phase. Part 2 costs will not be incurred if the feature does not contain preserved organic material.

<b>Part 2 Work components</b>	<b>Estimated cost (£)</b>
Vehicle Hire If block lifted the contents will need to be transported quickly to the conservation laboratory. A DNPA 4 x 4 may be suitable, but the weight of the block may necessitate a different vehicle.	400
Micro-excavation Wiltshire Conservation and Museum Advisory Service (CMAS) will be commissioned to undertake micro-excavation of any lifted block under controlled conditions and the conservation of any artefacts recovered. This will require a procurement exemption and is a choice driven first by the proximity of the laboratory in Chippenham (reducing the time during which the lifted block will be outside appropriately controlled conditions); and secondly, CMAS have relevant expertise and familiarity with Dartmoor's archaeology (they undertook the micro-excavation and conservation of Whitehorse Hill cist).	18,000
Artefact conservation Each stage is now subject to the finds within the feature and carry a degree of uncertainty.	10,000
Artefact analysis Subject to the number and type of artefacts recovered from the excavation. This process will likely involve multiple specialists who will be commissioned when the micro-excavation is complete.	8,000
Publication If the results prove to be of high significance, then it will likely be necessary to synthesise the work of a variety of specialists which will require an editor.	5,000
<b>Total estimated cost for part 2</b>	<b>41,400</b>

- 4.4 The total estimated cost for part 1 and part 2 is £69,400. As noted above these are estimated costs and there is scope for considerable variation (especially in the costs associated with works in part 2).

## 5 Fundraising

- 5.1 This project should be suitable for external funding but we are constrained by the need to keep the location secret until the excavation is underway and we can secure the site.

5.2 Fundraising to meet the costs of the proposed project is anticipated to target two main sources as follows:

### ***Stakeholder Contributions***

5.3 Various organisations with an interest in the conservation and archaeology of Dartmoor have been and will be approached for contributions to the project. These include, but are not restricted to:

- Dartmoor Preservation Association (DPA)
- Dartmoor Society (DS)
- Devon Archaeological Society (DAS)
- Historic England (HE)
- The landowner

### ***Public Contributions***

5.6 Funding through crowdfunding is also proposed although the details of this have yet to be determined. A crowdfunding campaign cannot be commenced until the excavation is underway or even completed which may limit the 'appeal.'

## **6 Conclusion**

6.1 The rarity and significance of this site means that doing nothing is not an option. It is therefore imperative that excavation is undertaken to ensure the feature's recording and survival. Any excavation will be subject to securing permission from the landowner and other regulatory bodies as required. Site visits by the team have shown that there is already some disturbance from visitors. Officers believe that it is essential to carry out initial excavation work this summer to avoid further deterioration and the unintended (or intended) consequences of people finding the site.

6.2 The recommendation is that Members allocate £80,000 from reserves to effectively underwrite the costs associated with the excavation, analysis and recording of any findings (see section 4 for details). The £80,000 provides a contingency of £10,600 given the uncertainty over costs. Further, the Chief Executive (National Park Officer), be authorised to bring forward these reserves as costs are incurred (up to the maximum of £80,000).

6.3 Officers will actively explore other fundraising sources as detailed in section 5 above as and when it is appropriate to do so, given the constraint of not wanting to publicise the location of the site. Officers are also in discussion with the BBC and the producers of 'Digging for Britain' about potential coverage of the excavation.

**Dr LEE BRAY**

