THE BOX

KS2 HISTORY RESOURCE

# PREHISTORY

# WHITEHORSE HILL IMAGE BANK

# INTRODUCTION TO WHITEHORSE HILL

In 2011, an excavation at Whitehorse Hill on northern Dartmoor uncovered an undisturbed cremation burial.

Radiocarbon dating suggests an Early Bronze Age date for this burial, around 1900 - 1500 BC.

This discovery is now considered to be the most important assemblage of prehistoric grave goods ever recovered from Dartmoor, and indeed from the whole of the South West. These are unique organic artefacts, making them of international importance.

This individual, whose cremated remains were placed in a cist on this remote spot on Northern Dartmoor nearly four thousand years ago, was apparently of some importance to the local community.

Along with the cremated remains, a textile artefact, a woven basket and an animal pelt, beads and wooden studs were all found, along with the first tin artefacts found in a prehistoric context in Dartmoor.

These finds are of national importance, and are a significant addition to the already rich archaeology collections at **The Box**, Plymouth.

# BEAR PELT

Analysis carried out by a number of specialists has identified the pelt as being from a bear, an incredibly important find. It is probable that this was a native brown bear; the indigenous bear population in Britain became extinct by the Early Medieval period, around AD 1000.

Given the other evidence from the burial for trading and possible exchange of exotic items, there is also the possibility that this was a traded item.

The bear pelt was folded around the cremated remains. The quantity and mixture of hair came from the rear end of one animal. It included guard hair, which protected the rest of the pelt from abrasion and moisture, and under hair which provided insulation. It seems that the skin was prepared carefully and used to ensure as little waste as possible.

# NETTLE AND LEATHER OBJECT

Analysis of the skilfully made textile and animal skin object has revealed that this is a band of textile made from finely woven nettle fibre. Stitched to the outer edges of this are two rows of leather binding with a fringe of outward pointing leather triangles made from thin calf skin.

This object is unique in North Western Europe. Its fine decorative work suggests it was an item to be worn, possibly as a sash or belt.

# WRIST OR ARM BAND

The carefully woven strands of fibre used to craft this delicate band are made from cattle hair.

The circular domed rivets placed at regular intervals along it are made from tin. Originally these numbered 35 but only 32 survive. The tin has now oxidised but originally would have been silvery and very striking in appearance.

The use of tin for decorative objects is exceptionally rare within prehistoric burial contexts in Britain and despite tin being a locally available resource, this is the first time it has been found within a prehistoric archaeological context on Dartmoor.

# BASKETRY OBJECT

The basket, made of lime bast contained most of the beads, the wooden studs, the armband and a flint flake. It comprises two woven circular discs, forming a flat base and a lid, joined together by a tube made by a coiled basketry technique with coarse stitching around the edges. The stitching was made using cattle hair.

The bast is the inner bark of the tree; it was retted (soaked in water to help the removal of the fibre from the woody tissue) to render the fibres suitable for basketry.

# BEADS

A large group of over 200 beads was discovered partly within the basket and spread out around it. This is by far the largest number of beads found from a single early Bronze Age context in South West England. Although no definite stringing has been identified, the number of beads is sufficient to have formed a spectacular necklace. Amber, shale and ceramic beads were found, along with a single surviving tin bead.

Amber is a resin from the Baltic, associated with supernatural powers, and used as an amulet to ward off evil, harm or illness; the presence of 7 amber beads strongly suggest that this was a high status burial.

92 individually perforated disc or sphere-shaped shale beads were also found. The shale has been identified as coming from Kimmeridge in Dorset.

# WOODEN STUDS

Two pairs of wooden discs with grooves along their edges were also discovered within the basket. The discs were almost perfectly round, each having one side slightly more domed than the other, suggesting they had a specific orientation when in use. One of the discs has been identified as being made from spindle wood - a hard, fine grained tree traditionally used to make small ornamental items. Spindle trees still grow on the lower slopes of Dartmoor.

Likely uses of the studs could be for piercings in ears or elsewhere on the body, or set into leather belts or clothing.

The studs are unique in British prehistory; they also represent the earliest evidence for wood turning in the UK. The discovery of prehistoric worked wood in an upland peat context is also extremely rare.

# TEACHER AMBASSADORS

The Learning and Engagement Team at The Box, Plymouth are busy preparing a brand new schools service ready for when we open in 2020, and we'd love you to be involved. We're working to develop three main strands of our new service:

- A set of curriculum-linked **facilitated sessions** for all key stages, that use our new galleries to explore history, science and art topics
- Brand new **online resources** – including games, quizzes, films and activity ideas
- A set of **loan boxes** of artefacts and resources that you can use in your classroom

We want to ensure that this new schools service meets your needs as a teacher, so we are setting up a consultant group of Teacher Ambassadors for The Box.

Being a Teacher Ambassador will support your professional development through the chance to develop new skills in how to use objects to enhance curriculum learning, and you will also be proud in the knowledge that you've made a real difference to how school students experience The Box when it opens in 2020.

If you'd like to become one of our Ambassadors, please email:

**museumvisits@plymouth.gov.uk**

PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL

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