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Archaeologists sink their teeth into Ice Age dig

Teeth and bones from late Ice Age animals, including hyenas, deer and woolly rhinos, have been discovered in a Devon cave by a University of Sheffield archaeologist.

The two-week dig at Kent's Cavern in Torquay, which was completed on Friday, has also unearthed a unique 15,000-year-old 'sagaie' - a spearpoint of reindeer antler dating to the late Ice Age. Although fragments of sagaie have been gathered in the UK before, this is the first complete discovery.

The dig, which is being co-directed by Dr Paul Pettitt, Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Sheffield, and Dr Mark White from the Department of Archaeology at the University of Durham, forms part of a bid to answer major questions such as when and why Neanderthals became extinct. The archaeologists also hope to discover when our own species first spread to the UK, whether this and the death of the Neanderthal Man were connected, and the nature of later Ice Age occupation in the cave.

Dr Pettitt suspects the teeth and bones from the hyena and woolly rhino could date back earlier than 25,000 years. Once found, all material is carefully removed from the site, cleaned and then certain items will be sent away for radiocarbon dating to accurately check their age.

Kent's Cavern is world-famous for its role in the development of archaeology, as it has already helped excavators discover that humans have been on earth a lot longer than the previously estimated time of 6,000 years, and yielded rich Neanderthal and Homo Sapiens archaeology during Victorian excavations. Both doctors also discovered three illustrations from early excavations in the cave in the archives of the Geological Society in London. One of the images forms the earliest known illustration pertinent to the demonstration that humans were existing with extinct animals, and their findings were published this month in the journal 'Antiquity'.

The team had to apply for Government permission for the new dig because Kent's Cavern is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and the oldest recognisable human dwelling in Britain. Dr Pettitt and Dr White may return for a further dig after evaluating their finds.

Dr Paul Pettitt, Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Sheffield's Department of Archaeology, said: "It is a great privilege to obtain permission from the Government to excavate in such an iconic site.

"Our excavation is still in its early days but has already unearthed excellently-preserved fossils and a spearpoint of antler from the Ice Age. Our research will dramatically improve our understanding of life between 10,000 and 50,000 years ago."

Notes for Editors: The dig, which ties in with the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, has been privately funded.

Dr Pettitt has worked in other European caves and is also currently directing excavations at Creswell Crags on the Derbyshire and Nottingham border. It was in these caves in 2003 that he discovered the only examples known of British Ice Age cave art.

Dr Pettitt and Dr White, who previously conducted a search in Kent's Cavern last Easter, are also digging a small cave just outside Plymouth.

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