

Bodmin Moor monument turns out to be over 5,000 years old

Mystery solved - 'ancient and unfathomable' King Arthur's Hall is 4,000 years older than previously thought

BY LORNA HUGHES

06:00, 7 NOV 2024 | UPDATED 12:04, 7 NOV 2024



King Arthur's Hall in a remote area of Bodmin Moor (Image: Cornwall National Landscape)

A mysterious monument in Cornwall has been found to be 5,000 years old - 4,000 years older than previously thought. The rectangular bank of earth and stone - known as King Arthur's Hall - sits in a remote area of Bodmin Moor.

The site - classed as "at risk" by Historic England because of vegetation growth around it - has 56 standing stones which are either leaning, on the ground or partially buried. Archaeologists have now established that it was first constructed in the Middle Neolithic Period, some 5,000 to 5,500 years ago - making it as old as Stonehenge.

An excavation was carried out at the site as part of Cornwall National Landscape's "A Monumental Improvement" project. It commissioned the Cornwall Archaeological Unit (CAU) to carry out archaeological investigations to determine its age, use and longer-term conservation needs.

Historic England's listing for the site denotes it as a Medieval animal pound but experts have speculated the monument could be prehistoric - pointing to its standing stones, north-south orientation and its position in a part of Bodmin Moor with many other early sites.

Phil McMahan, inspector of ancient monuments at Historic England, said: "We have supported the investigations at King Arthur's Hall with grant funding and specialist advice to ensure that the cutting-edge scientific methods used to analyse the monument had the best chance of producing results. Because King Arthur's Hall is on our Heritage at Risk Register, our overall aim was to better understand the date and nature of the monument so that its condition could be improved and its future management tailored to its needs.

"The news that King Arthur's Hall is Neolithic in origin is exciting and adds significant time depth to this enigmatic site, which has few parallels in England. It enriches the story of the monument and adds an intriguing dimension to the wider prehistory of Bodmin Moor."



Dr Tim Kinnaird from the University of St Andrews taking samples at King Arthur's Hall on Bodmin Moor during excavation work (Image: Cornwall National Landscape)

The excavation was undertaken with help from local volunteers. The dating for the excavation was carried out by specialist teams from the Universities of Reading, St Andrews and Newcastle, who examined material from a section dug through the bank and into soils buried beneath it.

Dating from their Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL) analysis indicates the structure was constructed in the later fourth millennium BC (Neolithic Period).

Dr Tim Kinnaird, from the University of St Andrews, added: "It's extremely exciting that we've finally been able to date construction of this enigmatic monument, previously grounded in myths and

legends. To have a definite date for King Arthur's Hall in the later fourth millennium BC is a major revelation – we now have to re-appraise our understanding of the prehistoric landscape of Bodmin Moor."

Samples were also taken from the interior of the monument to establish the presence of fossil plant and animal remains such as pollen, seeds, insects, and parasite eggs. They were radiocarbon dated and revealed that the infilling of the monument began in the Later Prehistoric (2,000 – 2,500 years ago) and medieval dates (500 – 1000 years ago) for monument activities that affected the marshy interior of the enclosure.

Experts say these activities, which might have included use as a pound and then as a reservoir used in tin streamworking, were probably quite different from those intended by the enclosure's first builders thousands of years before.



Volunteers excavating the main trench of King Arthur's Hall on Bodmin Moor (Image: Cornwall National Landscape)

Dr Rob Batchelor, director of Quest, an archaeological science focused unit at the University of Reading, said: "The wild, remote landscape of Bodmin Moor has inspired centuries of legends, but this extraordinary new finding shows how science can help deliver stories that are just as intriguing. Our part of this work analysing sediment cores, has helped us to understand the shape of the interior of the monument.

"And our analysis of past plant and animal remains also offer clues about the former local landscape and past human activities that might have taken place there. Further analysis of these sediment cores may yet reveal more about what our Cornish ancestors were doing there and their impact on the local environment."

Geological examination of the standing stones suggests that they came from within 250m of the site and were possibly dug out from the interior rather than from a distant tor. But while rectangular monuments do exist - and possible uses may have included gatherings of local communities for ceremonies and rituals - there is still uncertainty about the original purpose of the site.

James Gossip, senior archaeologist from Cornwall Archaeological Unit (CAU) and fieldwork director for the project, said: "The King Arthur's Hall project provided a once in a lifetime opportunity, using

scientific dating to understand more about this unique and enigmatic monument - the main question being, when was King Arthur's Hall built?

"Knowing when King Arthur's Hall was built will help us understand this unique monument form better, how it might have originally been used and how it could have been used over time. It gives us a framework for further questions – for instance were the stones placed there at the time of building or later in prehistory, how was it used as part of the surrounding landscape, and can we find evidence for later uses such as an animal pound or reservoir?"

'Ancient and unfathomable'

Pete Herring, president of the Cornwall Archaeological Society, said: "The romantic sounding 16th century name King Arthur's Hall tells us that here is a place regarded by the moorland community as something ancient and unfathomable, like other sites attributed to Arthur. Science has responded to that name's challenge, providing a very early date of origin, and two other dates, later prehistoric and medieval, when there was activity at the enclosure.

"The monument retains its mystery: there are no Neolithic parallels for a stone-lined sunken and embanked rectangular enclosure, possibly watery. We may presume it was a sacred site, a place for gatherings, for rituals or ceremonies, but perhaps Neolithic people made and used it for very different purposes.

"Its later prehistoric and medieval dates for reuse may relate to two of Cornwall's great sources of wealth, supporting the sustainable summer grazing of extensive commons, and then serving as a reservoir for water used in tin stream working.

"These dates, remarkable as they are, encourage further research into King Arthur's Hall."



