

Yorkshire Dales: Bronze Age Auroch Remains Unearthed

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Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of an extinct Bronze Age cattle species in a remote cave system in the Yorkshire Dales, offering new insight into prehistoric farming and burial practices in northern England.

The discovery was made near Ingleborough by researchers collaborating with experienced cavers as part of a broader archaeological survey of underground features, including

sinkholes and caverns. Among the most significant finds was the partial skeleton of an auroch, an extinct wild ancestor of modern cattle that once roamed across Europe before being hunted to extinction in the 17th century.

Alongside the cattle remains, evidence of Neolithic human burial activity was also found, indicating the caves had been in use for both practical and ceremonial purposes over several millennia.

The work is part of the Ingleborough Cave Archaeology Project, a £3 million initiative funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The wider scheme is focused on preserving upland commons in traditional rural regions, including the Yorkshire Dales, Dartmoor, the Lake District, and the Shropshire Hills.

Caving archaeologist Rick Peterson of the University of Central Lancashire explained the vital role of recreational cavers in uncovering such finds: “It’s often experienced local cavers who make initial discoveries, as they are among the few able to access these remote underground sites. This project ensures that those findings are properly recorded and studied.”

The project not only explores the region’s prehistoric past but also connects it to current land use practices. Ingleborough remains one of the last areas in England where traditional “commoning” still takes place, with a small number of farmers continuing to graze sheep on the fells under ancient rights dating back to the Magna Carta.

Claire Braeburn, project officer, noted the significance of linking the area’s deep history with its present-day agricultural identity: “We wanted to investigate whether there was evidence of long-standing human farming activity in these caves. The findings demonstrate just how embedded these practices are in the landscape’s history.”

Only around 3% of England’s land remains under common rights, a steep decline from more than half in previous centuries. The discoveries at Ingleborough reinforce the cultural and historical value of preserving traditional rural ways of life.