

Life in last Ice Age captured in soundscape at famous archaeological site

August 24 2017



Creswell Crags contains an Ice Age cave system. Credit: University of York

Archaeologists and composers at the University of York have come together to capture the sounds of the famous limestone gorge, Creswell Crags, to explore its dramatically changing sonic environment.

Creswell Crags, on the border of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, is a series of cliffs and ravines that contain a cave system once occupied

during the Ice Age, between 50,000 and 10,000 years ago.

There have been significant archaeological finds in the caves, including Britain's only known Ice Age rock art.

The two-year Leverhulme funded research project, called SoundTracks, focuses on exploring existing data collected from archaeological excavations at Creswell over the last 100 years to understand the acoustic environment in both the present and the past.

The team, in collaboration with the British Library and Creswell Heritage Trust, looked at geological, palaeoenvironmental, archaeological, and historical records to piece together the human activities, birds, animals and environmental conditions which have sound tracked the landscape at various points in time.

Composition

They brought the findings together in a musical composition that will be played for the first time at a live public event at Creswell Crags on Saturday, 26th August 2017.

Dr Ben Elliott, Post-Doctoral Research at the University's Department of Archaeology, said: "Archaeologists traditionally look at the physical evidence left behind from the distant past, and use this to determine the behaviour of humans at a particular site.

"What we don't, and often can't, consider is what a site would have sounded like. Sound is massively important in the way people characterise and understand particular places. It can have a huge effect on how people behave, and the kinds of activities that they engage in.

"By piecing together lots of different types of data from the site, we

have been able to work with colleagues in music to consider what this landscape would have sounded like.

"The composition really helps bring both the deep past and the present together, and gives it an immediacy that we have never experienced before."

3-D surround-sound

The soundscape will be played from different points across the site to create a 3-D surround-sound environment. A specially commissioned live choral performance by Stonegate Singers, will interweave with the sound effects to fill the natural auditorium created by the twin cliffs of the gorge.

Dr Elliott said: "During the course of the project, it has been really interesting to think about how dominant environmental elements, such as wind for example, would have been through the woolly mammoth-inhabited grasslands of the last Ice Age.

"We also looked at how nesting birds would have transformed the way sheltered places like Creswell Crags sounded like during the warmer periods of the Ice Age. They would have been deafening and very different to the open grassland areas, where they would have had few opportunities to nest in such large numbers."

Provided by University of York

Citation: Life in last Ice Age captured in soundscape at famous archaeological site (2017, August 24) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-08-life-ice-age-captured-soundscape.html>

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