

A pair of perfectly-intact 'mystery beetles' discovered to be almost 4,000 years old

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Credit: Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London

Natural History Museum Senior Curator of Insects Max Barclay has discovered that a pair of perfectly preserved beetles, donated to its collection in the 1970s, are almost 4,000 years old—and a species never known to have existed in the UK.

This brand-new discovery features in the next episode of the Channel 5 series "[Natural History Museum: World of Wonder](#)," which airs on Thursday, 28th January at 8pm.

The Oak Capricorn Beetles (*Cerambyx*) were found in a piece of ancient oak wood that had been submerged in a peat bog. The farmer had been splitting the wood only to discover the three-inch-long [beetles](#) which have distinctive curved long, threadlike antennae. He suspected, because they were in such good condition, they may have been an invasive species. He donated them to the Natural History Museum for further research.

The pair remained a natural history mystery until now. Tiny samples of both the beetles and wood were sent off for radiocarbon dating which placed their age at 3,785 years old. So, rather than a species new to the UK, these beetles may once have been once endemic in the British Isles but have been extinct for thousands of years.

"These beetles are older than the Tudors, older than the Roman occupation of Britain, even older than the Roman empire, these beetles were alive and chewing the inside of that piece of wood when the pharaohs were building the pyramids in Egypt. It is tremendously exciting," says Max.

He believes Oak Capricorn Beetles which exist today in Southern and Central Europe may have died out in Britain due to [climate](#) change.

"This is a beetle that is associated with [warmer climates](#), and possibly it existed in Britain 4,000 years ago because the climate was warmer and as the climate cooled and the habitats destroyed, it became extinct. Now with [global warming](#), there are indications that it could return to Britain in the future.

It is quite extraordinary to hold something in your hand that looks like it was collected yesterday but is actually several millennia old can provide new insight into the weather and forest conditions in the late Bronze age. This pair of beetles provide a window into the ancient past and the changes [climate change](#) holds for the future."

This [scientific breakthrough](#) can be seen in the next episode of the primetime Channel 5 series which documents the work of some of the Museum's 300 scientists as well taking a behind-the-scenes look at preparation for its exhibitions. It explores almost every inch of the Museum from the spectacular public galleries, labs and scanning suites to the collection spaces housing tens of thousands of specimens, dissection rooms and the wildlife garden.

Provided by Natural History Museum

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