

La Cotte de Saint-Brélade: a new beginning: excavations July-August 2019

Matthew Pope

This summer saw a new beginning in the history of research and excavation at La Cotte de Saint-Brélade. In July we undertook a short, two-week excavation at the site involving our six-person team from the La Manche Prehistoric research group¹. The excavations were small in scale and produced only a small number of Middle Palaeolithic artefacts, but their significance was considerable. They represent the end of eight years of planning and investment in La Cotte and have opened the way to a new phase of concerted investigation and on-going constructive management and stabilisation of this internationally important and iconic Neanderthal locale. This season also represents the latest in a long history of interventions at the site which have balanced discovery, stabilisation and safety and which, from the beginning have been undertaken or facilitated by the Société Jersiaise.

While a full account of how the site was made safe and these excavations were planned will have to wait, it is important to stress that the starting point for this project was the need for a response to significant sea erosion taking place at the site. In 2011 our NERC funded survey of the site established that the cliff which had formed in the West Ravine of the site comprised a near vertical 10m section of scientifically important Ice Age sediments with archaeology. These sediments were further exposed to winter storms in 2013 and 2014 and had begun to slump significantly. These deposits date to the last cold stage and span the period when Neanderthal people were occupying the cave, leaving behind thousands

1 The La Manche Prehistoric research group (LaMP) is a collaboration between archaeologists from institutions including UCL, the British Museum, Wessex Archaeology and the University of Rennes. LaMP excavations are managed by Archaeology South East at the UCL Institute of Archaeology.



Figure 2: Foreground: Kamil Sweich of Geomarine. Back ground: Dr Andy Shaw from La Manche Prehistoric research Group on-site at La Cotte de Saint-Brélade. *LaMP*

Figure 3: Dr Ed Blinkhorn of La Manche Prehistoric research Group on-site at La Cotte de Saint-Brélade. *LaMP*

of stone artefacts, animal bones, hearths and their own fossilised remains. The entire bulk of these sediments was also preserved under the arch of the North Ravine, but it had been removed from here between 1905 and 1939, with the war interrupting the reduction of remaining deposits in the West Ravine which were then left to weather over the next 70 years.

Appreciation of both the severity of the threat and the importance of the site lead to a coordinated response by the Société Jersiaise and Jersey Heritage to bring in the expertise needed to make the site safe, protect it from the sea and enable archaeological excavation to resume. In the meetings and consultations that followed the expertise of the Société's own Dr John Renouf was brought to bear alongside those of engineers from Geodesign, Geomarine and the States of Jersey Transport and Technical Services department. Planning and environmental issues were carefully discussed and the challenges of making the site safe and building a substantial sea wall were overcome through constructive discussion and strong leadership from Jon Carter at Jersey Heritage. Jersey Heritage committed to invest over £1M to enable the project to go ahead.

By the spring of 2019 everything was in place and we were instructed to start making our own preparations for the first seasons. La Cotte was still owned by the Société Jersiaise but had now been leased by Jersey Heritage with the project managed by Chris O'Connor. The fieldwork was implemented by a unique partnership between our archaeological team working under the protective management of rope access experts from Geomarine. For me personally the recognition from an early stage that access was only going to be possible by rope from the top of the headland was quite disconcerting. I suffer from crippling vertigo and so there was a very great chance that fear might prevent me from even accessing the site. I was not alone in the team in having these worries, but we put our trust in Geomarine and, after some training, found ourselves on a bright sunny day being clipped into state-of-art rope access and fall arrest equipment. Then, under the watchful eye and expertise of Marc Stirrup, Kamil Sweich and Jamie Kearns, we were able to make our first descents into the ravine and safely return to the top via ladders which had been attached to the cliff face.

Over the next two weeks, losing only a day to high winds, we carried out all the works we deemed necessary to initiate this project. We relocated and cleaned sections left by Paul Callow during the last phase of work at the site in the early 1980s. These sections were recorded in detail by Dr Martin Bates, Dr Andy Shaw and Letty Ingrey, working at all times connected to safety lines and wearing quite bulky harnesses, helmets and gloves. We were able to obtain dating samples from boulder rubble which we suspect is covering deposits which date to an earlier, warmer period of the last cold stage. We undertook a detailed photogrammetric

survey which involved team member Dr Ed Blinkhorn establishing survey points tied into the Jersey national grid and then capturing hundreds of photographs which were modelled by Dr Sarah Duffy into an accurate 3D model of the site.

Off-site we worked with the Société Jersiaise Archaeology Section to establish some space, methods and systems for sieving sediment from the site. When full excavation is underway, we will be producing many bags of sediment annually which could contain anything from small stone artefacts, to lumps of charcoal and bone through to more fossil teeth. These sediments will have to be processed in Jersey and so we wanted to explore if there was any area of the project where we could work with the Société. While the sediments this year were sterile we are very grateful to Perry Mesney and the Archaeology Section team who assisted us in processing loess sediments from the site and at least demonstrating that there is the capacity at La Hougue Bie to carry out this important work.

The short 2019 season represented the culmination of considerable commitment to the site of La Cotte and the early prehistory of Jersey; it saw the cooperation between multiple agencies and organisations in coming together to secure a significant heritage and scientific asset from the effects of climate change and initiating a new phase of research. My co-lead Dr Beccy Scott and myself now know we have the data we need to design an archaeological project which, over the next three to five years, will both stabilise the West Ravine cliff and unlock the archaeological and scientific knowledge it holds. Beyond this it will open the way for considering the protection of the North Ravine, an area with even greater challenges in terms of access and safety. We feel proud to have completed this work successfully; in developing a hybrid team of stabilisation experts and archaeologists working to high safety standards, we felt part of something bigger: the global challenge of using engineering skills and heritage expertise to protect our fragile human past from an unpredictable planetary future.