

Jane Marchand

The prehistoric landscape and monuments.

Here we are at Merrivale, probably one of the best known of the archaeological sites on Dartmoor, and also probably one of the most visited. The first thing you really need to notice about Merrivale is how the monuments stand on a very level plateau, which is actually quite difficult to do on Dartmoor, so it's obviously been deliberately chosen as a site, and it's what we call a ritual site, ritual meaning that we've got monuments which we think are associated with ceremonial use or ritual use, and those specifically are the stone rows, we've got a large free standing stone circle over there and a standing stone, and so it's those four components that make up the ritual site as such. I think the other thing that you really need to think about as soon as you're here, there's actually quite a lot of open space in between the specific monuments and so we have to try and imagine that perhaps there were other things here that have actually gone, not necessarily all built of granite, maybe some wooden things as well, which have long since disappeared, so what we might be having here is actually just the remains of an even more significant site, but as it is it's actually still very impressive. And I think what we also have, as well as having this wonderful ritual site, and it's a tremendous archaeological landscape, because to go back to what I was saying about it being deliberately chosen, you can see we've got wonderful all round views, you've got the River Walkham running down there, which I think probably has some significance to the placing of these monuments, and we look round and we can see the tors all around, and I think the other thing that's important to remember is actually these tors are really unchanged, from as they appeared to the people who built these monuments, probably 4,000, 5,000 years ago, and I think that actually helps you feel the sort of sense of place.

So the most outstanding feature as we're standing here, are these two stone rows?

I think they probably are, they certainly catch the eye as you walk down from the car park. The stone rows are very much a Dartmoor thing, we've actually got over half the national total of stone rows on Dartmoor; we don't still fully understand what their purpose was but most of them seem to be associated with burial cairns so I think they were probably part of the burial process. The unifying trait with Dartmoor stone rows is their linearity, they're actually all fairly straight, otherwise they come in all shapes and sizes, we have singles, we have doubles, like these ones at Merrivale, we have trebles, we've even got one stone row that actually has seven stones, it's seven stones wide, so as I said, they come in all shapes and designs. As I said, most of the stone rows, we think, are connected with burial cairns, on the southern row we've actually got a large burial cairn right in the middle, and when I say a burial cairn, it's actually a cist, and that is a stone chest, rather like a stone coffin where we think ashes or possibly an inhumation was placed. If you stand on that cairn in the middle of the southern row you actually see that the row slightly changes orientation, so we actually think that that cairn was marking the end of the first stone row there, and this later bit that runs up to the east is

actually a later edition, so you know, over time these rows were continued to be used, and continued to be important really.

And any ideas of what they were used for and what their significance were?

Well I think the best analogy is actually possibly they would be used as we use a church today, they were places where people gathered, certainly to mark some kind of burial, to say farewell to people, but perhaps also to celebrate, to celebrate births, to celebrate some kind of union, or just perhaps to watch things in the night sky, we really don't know, and in a way I think that's our fascination, that we don't know, and everyone can have their own ideas, their own theories and we can't actually prove or disprove them.

In addition to the stone rows and close by we've actually got a number of burial cairns, and I think again we're looking at a very structured funerary landscape and if we walk down here the first cairn that you see is this great big one with a capstone on top of it, and that's another big cist, very much bigger than the cist that's in the middle of the southern row, and if we look in the middle there we'll see, in fact, that we've got two stones and its lost it's middle, and we know, again from documentary sources, that it was either one of the local farmers or the local innkeeper down at the Merrivale Inn, he needed some new gateposts so he came up and he split the capstone of the cist. And if you look in the cist its actually a good sized cist and when it was excavated in the 1890s they found some flint and some sharpening tools; if we stand just outside it we can see that actually there was a mound all around it and originally it probably would have been covered in earth as well, so it would have been quite an impressive site, but as I said, it's a large one so we actually can imagine that perhaps a body was put in here, rather than just ashes, a body in a sort foetal position. In total we've got something like sixteen burial cairns in the area and they're all very different shapes and sizes and what we don't know is whether the differences signify the gender, the importance, the age, we just don't know.

Or the time?

Indeed, most of Dartmoor's burial cists, these stone chests, seem to be associated with stone rows, so we're probably looking at something that's about 4,000 years old.