



Paviland Cave, (also known as Goat's Hole), Gower, Swansea has had a long history of human use. The cave was a shelter for people at times both before the last ice advance and again after it. Paviland Cave is famous for its associations with Professor William Buckland of Oxford University. In 1823 he was involved in the discovery and excavation of the skeleton of a young adult male with associated grave goods. This skeleton is often better known as the 'Red Lady of Paviland Cave'.

Today Paviland Cave lies on the southern coast of Gower, and is only accessible with great caution and advice from HM Coastguard at the lowest of tides. However, the coastline and the landscape we see today is very unlike that which people would have seen during Palaeolithic times. The landscape would have been a wide plain with animals including reindeer, mammoth and woolly rhinoceros roaming and so it would have been more accessible to people using it for shelter.



*Paviland Cave today (Image P1060144).*

The first excavations took place in Paviland Cave in 1822 when two Roman coins and what were recorded as elephant bones were discovered in the cave. Early in January 1823 Professor William Buckland visited the cave in the company of Miss Talbot, John Traherne and Lewis Weston Dillwyn, during which time they recovered the remains of a partial skeleton. They initially thought they had found a customs man who they decided had been overcome and murdered by smugglers on the Gower coast. On February 15 1823 Buckland announced the findings in a lecture he gave in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Later the same day Buckland wrote a letter to Lady Mary Cole, the landowner, saying, 'the man whom we voted an exciseman, turns out to be a woman, whose history would afford ample matter for a Romance to be entitled the Red Woman or the Witch of Paviland – for some such personage she must have been.' The interpretation offered by Buckland was that this was the burial of a woman who had lived in the cave during the Iron Age or Roman period. The grave goods found with the skeleton included ivory bracelets, ivory rods and perforated shells. The bones were stained red with ochre, all of which led Buckland to infer that the skeleton was that of a female.



*Buckland's illustration of his discoveries in Paviland Cave. (Image DL000831).*

The skeleton is now preserved in the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. It has been subject to regular study since its discovery, including dating on four occasions. The most

recent dating on a scapula (shoulder) bone dates the skeleton to a time around 34,000 years ago. This date would put the 'Red Lady' as living during a period of warmth and it is currently amongst the oldest to be associated with manufactured grave-goods.

The study of the skeleton concluded that the remains are that of a young adult male, aged in his mid-twenties at death. Study of isotopes in his bones indicates that his diet comprised around 10% resources obtained from the sea such as fish or shellfish. This suggests that he was mobile and he ate what he could find during his regular movements around the landscape, rather than living on the coast in winter and inland in the summer. His skeleton as found was not complete, his skull was missing, as were most of the bones from the upper right hand side of his body. The bones that have survived show no sign of the cause of his death, indeed his bones are healthy. So how he died remains a mystery. We do know that he was given a careful burial with rich grave goods. Amongst these were perforated sea shell beads of flat winkle. Buckland recorded finding about 'two handfuls' close to the thigh. These may have been worn as beads or sewn onto clothing. The shells would have been collected locally from the coast. Ivory rods and bracelets were also found in the burial. The rods may have been blanks for making beads, or as others have suggested, fragments of magical wands. The bracelets are small and so may have been hung from clothing, rather than worn on the wrist. The red staining of the bones that gave the young man his name the 'Red Lady' comes from ochre. How it came to be in the grave is unclear. It may have been sprinkled over the body in the grave, or perhaps was used in the preservation of the skins he used as clothing. Ochre has been discovered in graves of burials of a similar age elsewhere in Europe.

Whilst Paviland Cave is often best known for the remains of the skeleton of the 'Red Lady' the cave also contained archaeological evidence of other occupations both before and after the last ice advance. Many of these are stone tools and most have come from excavations by Professor William Sollas that took place in the cave in 1912. He recovered over 4,000 stone tools in the cave. Different researchers have studied these over the past 100 years and the current thinking is that the tool assemblage includes nine blade leaf-points that were made by a Neanderthal, so a different species of human who probably used the cave shortly before the

'Red Lady' who was an anatomically modern human like us today.



*An artist's reconstruction of the burial of the 'Red Lady' (Image DH000502).*

Other stone tools of Aurignacian technology have also been found amongst the tool assemblage and these are slightly younger than the blade leaf-points and would have been made by a modern human, but slightly before the presence of the 'Red Lady'. These tools suggest that the cave was in use at least three times before the last ice advance, with the burial of the 'Red Lady' possibly the latest of these.



*A worked bone tool found in Paviland Cave that may be associated with the burial of the 'Red Lady' (Image ref DH000328\_03).*

As the climate became colder and the last ice sheet advanced to cover all but the southernmost tip of Gower it would have been impossible for humans to survive in Wales. The people moved south into France and Spain where there were more plentiful food resources. Gradually though they returned after the ice retreated northwards and plants and animals returned to the country. The stone tools give us the indication that this cave was occupied again just after 15,000 years ago.

Paviland Cave is therefore one of the most significant sites of Palaeolithic age in Wales. It

has a long sequence of use which can be obtained by the detailed study of the stone tools, the grave goods and by radiocarbon dating and study of the skeleton and animal bones that have been recovered from the excavations in the cave.

### **Further Reading**

**Aldhouse-Green**, S. 2000. *Paviland Cave and the 'Red Lady'*. Bristol: Western Academic Specialist Press

**Dinnis**, R. & Stringer, C. 2014. *Britain: one million years of the human story*. London: Natural History Museum

**Jacobi**, R.M. & Higham, T.F.G. 2008. The “Red Lady” ages gracefully: new ultrafiltration AMS determinations from Paviland. *Journal of Human Evolution* 55, 898–907

*This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Elizabeth Walker, (National Museums and Galleries of Wales)*

---

The Prehistoric Society is a registered charity (no. 1000567) and company limited by guarantee (no. 2532446). Registered Office: University College London, Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY. Date published: 09/2019.