



# Digs and rituals

*Local schoolchildren enact their own version of a Neolithic ritual during one of Cadw's 'Make and Break' events at Tinkinswood Burial Chamber in the Vale of Glamorgan*

Local volunteers and schoolchildren have been working with archaeologists to discover more about prehistoric monuments on their doorsteps.

Dr Ffion Reynolds, Cadw's public engagement and Welsh language manager, describes the process.

A tight group of children — some with animal skins draped around their shoulders, others drumming — are gathered in front of Tinkinswood Burial Chamber. All eyes are

focused on one boy holding up a human skull and on the ground is a pile of shattered pottery.

Not a scene from Wales's ancient past, as glimpses of trainers and school uniforms

testify, but a school outreach event in March of this year marking the culmination of the six-month-long Tinkinswood Community Archaeology Project in the Vale of Glamorgan.

The aim of the project — in which Cadw worked in partnership with Archaeology Wales, the Council for British Archaeology and Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales — was to bring local people together with professional archaeologists to explore and reinterpret the great chambered tombs at Tinkinswood and St Lythans, which lie about 1.6km (1 mile) apart in the countryside west of Cardiff. Untangling portions of the sites' long histories

through clearance, excavation and re-enacted rituals has given participants of all ages a greater sense of identification with and ownership of these magnificent monuments.

At Tinkinswood, the project built on pioneering investigations by John Ward, keeper of archaeology at the National Museum of Wales, in 1914. Ward showed that a roughly rectangular mound, or cairn, revetted with drystone walls, surrounded the chamber — except on the east where the walls curved in to create a forecourt before the tomb's entrance. These are all characteristic features of so-called Cotswold-Severn tombs. More than 900 fragments



*Volunteers from the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers taming the encroaching vegetation at Tinkinswood*

of human bone were recovered, perhaps representing up to 50 individuals, including men, women and children.

John Ward restored Tinkinswood for public display, and visitors have been able to explore and enjoy it ever since. In recent years, however, vegetation had begun to encroach on the site and the first phase of the community project concentrated on removing the undergrowth.

A local group of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (now The Conservation Volunteers) began clearing the site in September 2011 and, within a few days, it was again possible to make a complete circuit of the monument and inspect the entire revetment wall. Their hard work also had the benefit of reopening views that make it easier to appreciate the monument's setting in the landscape.

The group fenced the adjacent area, known as 'The Quarry', so it could be opened to visitors for the first time. This has long been proposed as the source for Tinkinswood's enormous 40-tonne capstone — one of the largest in Britain.



*The full extent of the monument at Tinkinswood can be appreciated after the vegetation clearance*

There were also two enticing jumbles of stone nearby that might have been fallen chambered tombs. So, these sites, along with the tomb at St Lythans, were perfect candidates for community excavations.

The appeal for diggers met with an enthusiastic response from members of the Wenvoe History Group, a host of local volunteers and a number of archaeology students from Cardiff University. Many had never picked up a trowel before.

The excavations at Tinkinswood spanned two weeks in late October and early November 2011. Rather than finding Neolithic material as expected, our team discovered

interesting Bronze Age and Roman finds.

One of the possible fallen chambers — the closest to the quarry area — proved to be a modest Bronze Age barrow, about 5m (16 feet) in diameter. It covered two pits cut into the bedrock but, presumably due to the acidity of the soil, no discernible traces remained of the 4,000-year-old burials. In the upper levels of the barrow, however, we found a lot of cremated bone and a Roman coin, making it clear that the area around Tinkinswood was being used long after the main Neolithic chambered tomb was built. The evidence that people continued to visit well into the Roman period has transformed our understanding of the surrounding landscape.

The other possible fallen chamber turned out to be a modern creation, possibly from field clearance or perhaps a folly created to echo the

architecture of the main Tinkinswood chamber.

Unfortunately, although we dug six test pits in The Quarry, no Neolithic evidence for quarrying came to light. The source of Tinkinswood's great capstone must, therefore, remain uncertain.

In the latter part of November, the focus of the project shifted to St Lythans. Although human remains and pottery were found at the site in the nineteenth century, this was the first time the tomb had ever been scientifically excavated and we began the three-week-long dig with a great sense of excitement.

Our trenches provided a wealth of evidence about the structure of the tomb. Although the cairn had been badly damaged by thousands of years of stone robbing and recent ploughing, it was clear that the cairn was constructed from locally collected limestone slabs



## The monuments in their time

Both Tinkinswood and St Lythans are between 5,000 and 6,000 years old, dating from the Neolithic period when the inhabitants of Britain were first embracing lives as settled farmers. This was

a time of epoch-making changes. Archaeological evidence has revealed that Neolithic people were beginning a long process of transforming the landscape by carving out fields from the wilderness and raising herds of domesticated animals. At the

*Excavation under way on 'the fallen burial chamber' at Tinkinswood that turned out to be a Bronze Age barrow*

and boulders and was originally 30m (98 feet) long and 12m (39 feet) wide.

Just as at Tinkinswood, the mound was surrounded by a low, drystone revetment wall, with more impressive drystone walls flanking the approach to the chamber from the east, creating a forecourt.

A trench in the forecourt area yielded up a number of important artefacts, including fragments of human bone and teeth, part of a bone needle, a fragment of a Neolithic polished stone axe and sherds of Neolithic Grooved Ware pottery. All have been sent for analysis by specialists.

One of our most exciting results was the recovery of charcoal samples from the prehistoric ground surface beneath the monument. Radiocarbon dating of these



*An offering for the ancestors — at one of the Make and Break events*

same time they started to fashion pottery that could be used for cooking and storage.

The people of Neolithic Britain also began to honour their dead with the construction of megalithic tombs. Also known as dolmens or cromlechs, these communal tombs are found in every corner of Wales. These burial chambers involved the communities that constructed

samples should give a clearer understanding of the dating and sequence of construction at St Lythans.

The end of the excavations did not bring the end of the project. In spring 2012, Cadw worked with the nearby primary schools at St Nicholas and Peterston-Super-Ely on a programme of activities called 'Make and Break', inspired by broken Neolithic pottery that John Ward found in the forecourt at Tinkinswood. This has been interpreted as the remains of ancient rituals in which the community deposited broken pots in memory of those buried within. The children set about creating their own version of the ritual.

Inspired by a visit to view artefacts from the 1914 excavations and an afternoon at Tinkinswood, they made their own coiled pots and worked with sound artist Dylan Adams on music to accompany their ceremonies. Then, on two days at the end of March, the classes took over Tinkinswood with drums, skins, pots, a polished stone axe and the all important skull. Pots were broken, fantastic music made and a deep impression left on all involved. One of the children wrote after the event:

'The ceremony made me feel like I had just lost a family member because it was about someone going into the burial chamber to the world of spirits ... It had a strange, dark feeling ... It felt quite exciting at the

them in major efforts of planning, organisation and construction. Archaeological excavations have produced evidence of successive burials and ritual activities.

These monumental tombs were more than just 'houses of the dead'; they were also unshifting expressions of a community's identity through its connection with its ancestors and its land.

© Helen Hywel



*A drawing of the burial chamber at St Lythans by Helen Hywel, one of the project volunteers*

start because the drums had a catchy beat, but then we got to the pot breaking and then it got spooky and a bit eerie because it seemed like we were in a trance ...'

For all of those children at Tinkinswood on those two days in March, the Neolithic past briefly became part of their present, and they will never think about the monument in the same way again. ✚

• Although the Tinkinswood Community Archaeology Project has finished, you can still visit the website — <http://tinkinswoodarchaeology.wordpress.com/> — to learn more about the project and read the dig blogs.



*The excavations in progress at St Lythans* © AerialCam, 2011

## A stroll around Tinkinswood and St Lythans

This pleasant circular walk visits both Tinkinswood and St Lythans Burial Chambers and gives stunning views across the Ely Valley before returning to its start in the village of St Nicholas.

### Before you start

**Distance:** 9.2km (5 ¾ miles)

**Time:** 3 ½ hours

**Map:** OS Explorer 151

**Start/Parking:** St Nicholas is on the A48 between Cardiff and Cowbridge. Park with consideration near the church on the north side of the village (grid reference ST 090743).

**Cadw sites:** Tinkinswood Burial Chamber and St Lythans Burial Chamber — unstaffed sites, open 10am–4pm

**Terrain:** This is a moderate walk along field paths and lanes. Please be alert for vehicles on the lanes

**Public transport:** X2 Cardiff – Bridgend – Porthcawl bus. Visit [www.traveline-cymru.info](http://www.traveline-cymru.info) for service information.

**Refreshments:** Tearoom at Dyffryn Gardens. Open 1 March–31 October: 10am–6pm; 1 November–28 February: 10am–4pm

Be sure that you have stout footwear and suitable clothing. Please follow the Countryside Code: [www.countrysidecode.wales.org.uk](http://www.countrysidecode.wales.org.uk)

**(1)** Walk out to the A48 and turn left. After a short distance, turn right into the lane signposted Dyffryn. Walk for 150m (165 yards) to a kissing gate on the right that leads to the well-marked Millennium Heritage Trail (MHT). Follow the trail south across stiles until the Tinkinswood Burial Chamber appears on your right.

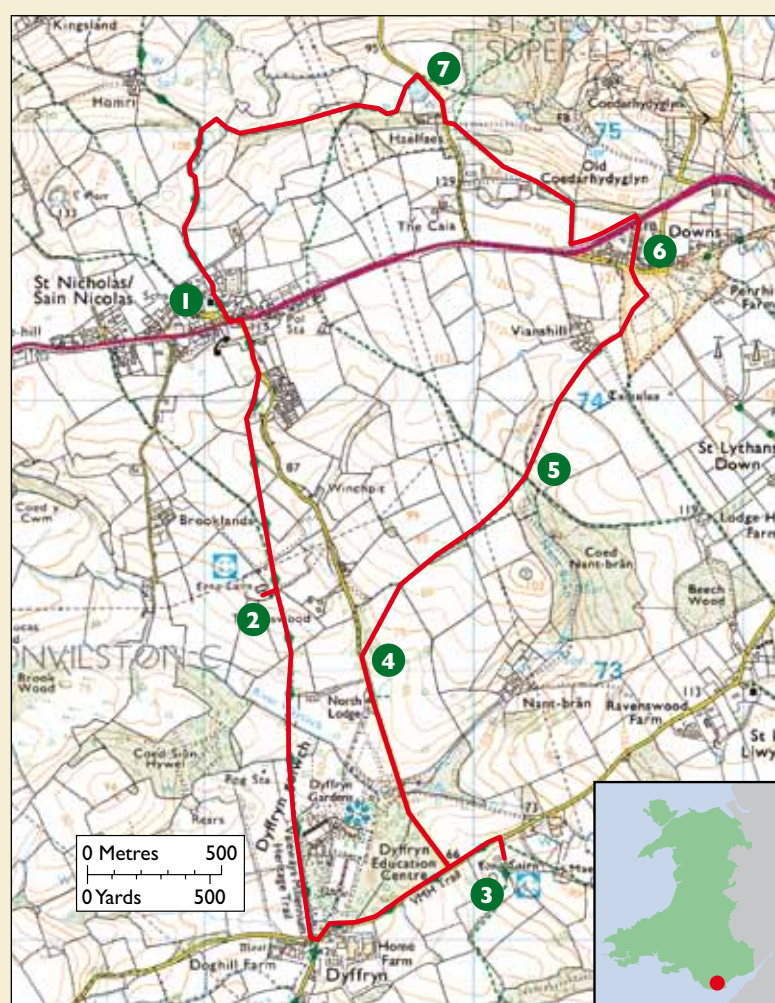
**(2)** Pass through the kissing gate to visit the burial chamber and be sure to listen to the new audiopost. On leaving the site, cross two stiles nearby to rejoin the MHT. Continue south across further stiles until you

reach a lane. Turn left, leaving the MHT, and follow the lane. After passing a lane on the left, continue 200m (220 yards) to a kissing gate on the right that leads to St Lythans Burial Chamber.

**(3)** After visiting the site, which also has a new audiopost, retrace your steps to the intersecting lane and turn right. The lane passes the entrance to Dyffryn Gardens, where a short detour will allow you to get refreshments or explore the fine nineteenth-century gardens (charge for garden admission). About 150m (165 yards) beyond there is a stile on the right.

**(4)** Cross the stile and bear half-left uphill to a gate behind some trees. Continue through fields and across stiles with the hedge on your right. The path eventually veers away from the hedge and after crossing a stile descends through a small copse (liable to be wet underfoot in rainy weather) to a well-marked junction of paths.

**(5)** Cross the stile following the path to 'The Downs'. Continue through fields and across



stiles until, after passing farm buildings on the left, you reach the small common known as The Downs. Turn left on a mown track, pass through trees and turn left on a path to reach a road lined with houses. **(6)** Take a narrow road through fields and across

footbridge over the A48. Cross the A48 and continue along the verge until you reach a few steps on your right leading to a kissing gate. Follow a well-marked path across several stiles to a quiet lane at Haelfaes Farm.

**(7)** Turn right and follow

the lane downhill about 150m (165 yards) to a stile on the left. Cross the stile, and follow the path through a stand of trees and through several fields to reach a track climbing up from the Ely Valley. Turn left and follow the track back to St Nicholas.



Visitors enjoying the new audiopost at Tinkinswood