

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH LIFE IN THE ICE AGE AT CRESWELL CRAGS

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Creswell Crags is a unique site on the Derbyshire/ Nottinghamshire border, a Scheduled Ancient Monument and SSSI celebrated for its Ice Age cave art and over 50,000 years of human habitation, cared for by Creswell Heritage Trust. The purpose of the project, supported by QRA Mabel Tomlinson Outreach funding, was to promote better awareness and understanding of the Palaeolithic heritage of Creswell Crags and our Ice Age ancestors more generally, as well as to engage new audiences with this heritage.

Our team specifically wanted to explore the theme of migration, which was central to the lives of the people who came to Creswell Crags as well as a thought-provoking theme for the present day. The project centred around a public event over the weekend of the 25th and 26th October 2025 and a family trail that was available throughout October 2025.

‘Signs, Spears and Smoke: Hunting in the Ice Age’

These free family sessions, led by the Education Team in Ice Age costume, explored how the skills of animal tracking, fire-lighting and hunting would have been learned and shared between families and tribes during the Ice Age. Each session started indoors looking at replica Palaeolithic objects, real animal furs and talking about the essentials for living in the Ice Age. Families then moved outside to find clues that helped them to track a series of Ice Age animals and learn how people who have followed their food sources across the continent. Everyone had a chance to try spear-throwing with an atlatl and watch a traditional fire-lighting demonstration. One hundred and fifteen people took part in these sessions over the weekend,

which was fully booked, and it attracted families with wider age ranges to our usual cave tours, which are not accessible for under-fives.

Living History

In addition to the above bookable sessions, Experimental Archaeologist Chris Woodland was on site all weekend with fire-lighting demonstrations using tools and materials used in the Ice Age (Fig. 1). Chris also had a display of prehistoric tools and fish traps he had made. Ecologist Daisy Fretwell was there in costume to demonstrate bark tanning and talk about different ways of tanning and preserving skins for clothing during the Ice Age. Daisy had originally offered to demonstrate tanning using brains; however, our team had decided this might be too gory for our visitors. Surprisingly visitors’ feedback on the day was that they would have been interested to see this demonstration!

Verbal feedback on the day to both the family sessions and living history demonstrations was very positive – people said how much they enjoyed it, learnt something new, were impressed by seeing how fire was made for example.

Frozen Footsteps: Wanderers of the Ice Age

Another element of the project was a family trail with a quiz which explored the other European sites that people who migrated to Creswell Crags during the Ice Age may have visited. A printed trail sheet was accompanied by trail boards placed around the outdoor spaces and cave entrances. Unfortunately this was less successful. Possibly due to the format,

or possibly because people just weren't interested enough by the theme as it was presented. We will be reviewing the use of trails for interpretation going forward as a result.

What the team at Creswell Crags have learned from the project

- Just because we think something is interesting doesn't mean our audience will – e.g. the content / theme of the trail.
- The sessions were all fully booked and received positive reviews and had a good indoor / outdoor combination – we can repeat this again either as the same session or a variation.
- Intergeneration learning and 'edutainment' was a key benefit of the sessions.

- The pop-up fire demonstrations were a big success. Future programming of pop-up activities could work if built up adequately and could encourage repeat visits and increase engagement / dwell time.
- Attaching an 'expert-led' activity like fire demo / flint napping to a session led by the Learning Team worked well – it's something we would do again in the future, or the potential to train up the Learning Team to be able to deliver this themselves.

Although the project might not have resulted in the levels of participation we hoped for, the quality of engagement was high and those activities that worked well will be taken forward into future programming. Creswell Heritage Trust are extremely grateful to the QRA for making this possible.



Figure 1. Chris Woodland demonstrating fire lighting with visitors