



BENEATH HAY BLUFF AND SNODHILL CASTLE, HEREFORDSHIRE, UNITED KINGDOM

Course ID: ARCH 365BG

June 27-July 25, 2026

Academic Credits: 8 Semester Credit Units

FIELD SCHOOL DIRECTOR(S)

Prof. Julian Thomas, CAHAE, University of Manchester (Julian.Thomas@manchester.ac.uk)

Prof. Keith Ray, School of History, Archaeology and Religion, University of Cardiff (rayk1@cardiff.ac.uk)

Tim Hoverd, Herefordshire County Council, Hereford (tim.hoverd@herefordshire.gov.uk)



OVERVIEW

The field school is composed of two distinct elements, and students will spend an equal period of time on the two areas of investigation, both within a short distance of the village of Dorstone, in the southwest of Herefordshire, on the border between England and Wales. Since 2010, the Beneath Hay Bluff Project (Directed by Julian Thomas and Keith Ray) has been investigating the character of prehistoric, and specifically Neolithic activity in southwest Herefordshire. Snodhill Castle, by contrast, is a Norman castle, owned and cared for by the Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust. Excavations here are being directed by Tim Hoverd of Herefordshire Council.

This region has been somewhat neglected by prehistoric archaeology, in part owing to a lack of antiquarian investigations, but it is increasingly clear that it is distinguished by a rich and under-exploited prehistoric record. In seeking to address questions of monumentality, memory, place and material traditions, we have excavated at a number of sites, including the funerary round cairn at Olchon Court and the long mounds, buildings and causewayed enclosure of Dorstone Hill. The region is a rural one, with picturesque villages, castles, abbeys, rolling hills and lush river valleys: it is at once typically 'English' and bordering on rugged Welsh uplands. The field school provides a unique learning experience by drawing on the resources of both the University of Manchester and Herefordshire Archaeology, who contribute facilities, equipment and staff. All of our supervisory staff are professionals from the world of commercial archaeology, who bring a wealth of experience and know-how.

In detailing the character of Neolithic southwest Herefordshire, the following themes are of central importance to us:

- The chronology of the introduction and transformation of Neolithic innovations in Britain;
- The creation and maintenance of significant places: 'narratives of place';
- The development of monumental landscapes;
- The use of exotic materials (notably rock crystal) and the establishment of inter-regional contacts;
- The formation and maintenance of regional identities in prehistory;
- The place of prehistoric monuments in modern societies.

The Beneath Hay Bluff Project is now entering into a mature phase of investigation, which is seeking to broaden our work in southwest Herefordshire, and to characterise Neolithic activity across a broader timescale. Having identified a site of national importance at Dorstone Hill, we are now seeking to place this monumental complex into a wider context, by addressing a series of new sites, and seeking to engage our local community to a greater extent. While completing work at Dorstone Hill, we will be expanding our scope to investigate a number of other sites. These include the major megalithic tomb of Arthur's Stone.

Arthur's Stone is a Neolithic chambered tomb in southwest Herefordshire, dating to the period around 3600 BC, located on a hilltop between the valleys of the rivers Wye and Dore. Arthur's Stone is a scheduled monument in the care of English Heritage, and it has long fascinated both archaeologists and local people, but it remains poorly understood. It consists of a long cairn of small stones, within which is set a chamber composed of a massive capstone set on top of a series of uprights. The capstone is broken, and this may have happened during the construction of the monument, and the dramatic aspect of the site provided the inspiration for the Stone Table in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*.

In 2021, an area was excavated immediately in front of the tomb, where pits or hearths might have been expected, but to our astonishment it was discovered that an earlier phase of the mound, composed of earth and timber, extended some distance beyond the known structure. Moreover, two lines of postholes were discovered, forming an avenue of upright timbers leading toward the monument from the Golden Valley. In 2022, further excavations demonstrated that the timber avenue had been replaced in stone, creating an imposing processional way leading toward the tomb. The 2022 season also revealed the beautifully constructed drystone wall that surrounds the stone cairn, and provided indications that the massive chamber had existed as a freestanding entity before the cairn had been constructed around it. In 2023, excavations were conducted in the immediate area of the massive 'capstone chamber', which demonstrated that the chamber had originally been a free-standing structure, within a ring-shaped cairn of irregular cobbly stones. Later, this was enclosed within the larger long cairn, composed of fine dry-stone walling. The lamellar stones used to build this later structure are likely to have come from a massive quarry in the field to the north of the monument, which we partially excavated in 2023. Overall, our investigations demonstrate that Arthur's Stone had a long and complex history of construction and use, in which its outward appearance was repeatedly reconfigured.

During the 2024 field season, the investigation of Arthur's Stone was paused, and a 20m diameter circular anomaly that had been identified by drone survey was investigated. This proved to be a dismantled stone circle of probable Late Neolithic date, the only certain example known in Herefordshire to date. In 2025, recommenced on the Arthur's Stone monument, concentrating on the forecourt and the junction between the dolmen structure and the later long cairn. This demonstrated that extensive damage and stone-robbing had taken place in the façade area, and that the upstanding 'portal' stone was not in its original position. A series of other large stones buried in the forecourt debris suggest that there may originally have been another chamber in this area.

In 2026, we will return to the stone circle, to excavate the other half of the structure, as well as conducting further work on the avenue.

Snodhill Castle is a ruined motte-and-bailey castle, about 1 mile south of the village of Dorstone in west Herefordshire, England. It is recognized as one of the major castles of the Welsh Marches. It was built in the 11th century to secure the border between Norman England and the Welsh Princes. This unique structure was rescued from collapse and loss in 2017 and is now being excavated and selectively restored by the Snodhill Castle Preservation Trust. The remains of a Royal Free Chapel were uncovered in 2021 when excavators found painted wall plaster. The excavation also revealed parts of a fine arch, stained glass and a small figure believed to have been part of a cross. Royal Free Chapels, also known as Royal Peculiars, were first set up in the 8th Century and would be used by travelling English monarchs. While about 40 are known to have existed, only nine existed inside castles, including Windsor Castle and The Tower of London.

ACADEMIC CREDIT UNITS & TRANSCRIPTS

Credit Units: Attending students will be awarded 8 semester credit units through our academic partner, Connecticut College. Connecticut College is a highly ranked liberal arts institution with a deep commitment to undergraduate education. Students will receive a letter grade for attending this field school (see assessment, below). Students are encouraged to discuss the transferability of credit units with faculty and registrars at their home institution prior to attending this field school.

Transcripts: An official copy of transcripts will be mailed to the permanent address listed by students on their online application. One more transcript may be sent to the student's home institution at no cost. Additional transcripts may be ordered at any time through the [National Student Clearinghouse](#).

PREREQUISITES

None.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

This field course aims to introduce students to the archaeology of Herefordshire and the borderland between England and Wales, to a series of current issues in the archaeology of Neolithic Britain, and to the techniques and methodologies employed in the study of prehistory in Britain, and in the investigation of medieval architecture. As a subsidiary issue, students will be introduced to the landscapes and archaeology of a picturesque rural area. Learning will therefore take a series of different forms: readings provided before the start of the field school; excavation and survey experience in the field; lectures; informal teaching sessions in the field; trips to sites, monuments and museums. In the field, students can expect to take part in stratigraphic excavation, to record contexts and finds, to make use of both total station and GPS survey equipment, and to draw plans and sections. Student progress in the acquisition of skills in the field will be monitored through the use of a personal Archaeological Skills Passport.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the field school, students should:

- Have acquired a broad familiarity with the archaeology and landscapes of the southern borderland between England and Wales, from prehistory to the Medieval period;
- Be familiar with some of the key issues in the archaeology of Prehistoric Britain;
- Be familiar with the main excavation, survey and recording methodologies employed in British prehistoric archaeology;
- Have acquired a basic level of competence in a variety of archaeological field skills (including, for example: troweling, mattocking, shoveling, barrowing, test-pit excavation, feature excavation, section drawing, planning, total station survey, GPS survey, laying out a grid, soil sieving, feature photography, context recording, finds recording), and should understand their appropriate use;
- Have been introduced to a further series of methodologies conducted by specialist staff in the field (such as drone photography and photogrammetry, environmental sampling, geophysical survey, etc.);

ASSESSMENT

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|-----|--------------------------------|
| 40% | Active fieldwork participation |
| 60% | Assessed fieldwork report |

However, should any project participant develop coronavirus symptoms they would be quarantined, and the entire project would be tested. You can find details here: <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

Both excavation sites are very close to the camp site. While either could be walked in under half an hour, we will convey all personnel to site by minibus each day.

If you missed your connection or your flight is delayed, please call, text or email the field school director immediately. A local emergency mobile phone number will be provided to all enrolled students.

COURSE SCHEDULE

All IFR field schools begin with a safety orientation. This orientation addresses local and program protocols concerning student behavior, appropriate attire, local practices and sensibilities that may be unfamiliar, potential fauna and flora hazards, IFR harassment and discrimination policies, and the student Code of Conduct.

DORSTONE FIELDWORK TIMETABLE 2026

		<i>Activities</i>
Saturday 27 June	Travel	Arrive Dorstone c. 5:00 pm; campsite induction
Sunday 28	Digging	Onsite safety induction
Monday 29	Digging	
Tuesday 30	Digging	Village Hall talk: Julian Thomas
Wednesday 1 July	Digging	Site assistants 'How to get into Commercial Archaeology' talk
Thursday 2	Digging	
Friday 3	Digging	Venus Figurines w John and Laura
Saturday 4	Day off	
Sunday 5	Digging	Pendants w John and Laura
Monday 6	Digging	Hazelton North Excavation w John
Tuesday 7	Digging	Village Hall talk:
Wednesday 8	Digging	Arrowheads w John and Laura
Thursday 9	Digging	Keith trip for IFR students.
Friday 10	Digging	First half students return to Manchester
Saturday 11	Day off	Travel Day Ian Bateman rewilding lecture in evening
Sunday 12	Digging	Site assistants 'How to get into Commercial Archaeology' talk
Monday 13	Digging	Venus Figurines w John and Laura
Tuesday 14	Digging	Village Hall talk:
Wednesday 15	Digging	Pendants w John and Laura
Thursday 16	Digging	Hazelton North Excavation w John
Friday 17	Digging	Keith trip for IFR students/ Arrowheads w John and Laura
Saturday 18	Day off	
Sunday 19	Digging	Creative Archaeology workshop with Max and Laura – storytelling at Arthur's Stone @6pm
Monday 20	Digging	Creative Archaeology workshop w Max and Laura
Tuesday 21	Digging	Village Hall talk: Julian Thomas / Drone training with Stuart Philipson
Wednesday 22	Digging	Open Day / Drone training with Stuart Philipson
Thursday 23	Digging	
Friday 24	Digging	
Saturday 25	Travel	Leave Dorstone; flights out of UK

Please note: the above outline is based on last year's activities, and at this stage should be seen as indicative.

REQUIRED READINGS

PDF files of all mandatory readings will be provided to enrolled students via a shared Dropbox folder. Students are encouraged to download and/or print readings prior to traveling. Course participants are expected to be prepared to engage the discussions led by facilitators, all of whom will be looking for compelling evidence that students have read and thought about the assigned readings prior to the scheduled day on which they are first discussed.

Bapty, I. and Ray, K. 2014 *Offa's Dyke: Landscape and Hegemony in Eighth Century Britain*. Oxford: Oxbow.

Bayliss, A., Bronk Ramsey, C., Van der Plicht, J., and Whittle, A. 2007 Bradshaw and Bayes: Towards a timetable for the Neolithic. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 17 (S1), 1-28.
doi:10.1017/S0959774307000145

Bowden, M., Lane, R. and Small, F., 2017 Snodhill Castle, Peterchurch, Herefordshire: Archaeological, Architectural and Aerial Survey and Investigation. Historic England.
<https://www.snodhillcastle.org/downloads/scarchaeologicarchitecturalaerialinvestigationsurvey.pdf>

Hilts, C. 2023 Arthur's Stone: a monumental mystery. *Current Archaeology* 404, 26-33.

Nash, G.H. 2009 Long or round? Evaluation programme and results at the Neolithic chambered monument of Arthur's Stone, Herefordshire. *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists Field Club* 56, 59-72.

Overton, N., Ray, K., and Thomas, J. 2022 Structural and sequential complexity in causewayed enclosures: implications from Dorstone Hill, Herefordshire. In: Last, J. (ed.) *Marking Place*, pp.43-60. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

Overton, N.J., Healey, E., Rovira, I.G., Thomas, J., Birchenall, J., Challinor, D., Hoverd, T. and Ray, K. 2023 Not all that glitters is gold? Rock crystal in the early British Neolithic at Dorstone Hill, Herefordshire, and the wider British and Irish context. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 33(1), pp.55-74.

Ray, K. 2007 The Neolithic in the West Midlands: an overview. *The Undiscovered Country: the Earlier Prehistory of the West Midlands*, pp.51-78. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

Ray, K. and Thomas, J. 2020 Houses foundational: gathering histories at Dorstone Hill, Herefordshire. In: Barclay, A., Field, D. and Leary, J. (eds.) *Houses of the Dead*, pp.107-19. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

Ray, K. and Thomas, J. 2024 Dorstone Hill: An Early Neolithic hilltop complex in South-west Herefordshire. *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club* 70, 45-63.

Ray, K., Thomas, J., Overton, N., Griffiths, S., Hoverd, T., Allen, M.J., Barclay, A., Birchenall, J., Challinor, D., French, C. and Healey, E. 2023 Dorstone Hill: a Neolithic timescape. *Antiquity*, 97(394), pp.869-886.

Sandoval, G. 2021 Single-context recording, field interpretation and reflexivity: an analysis of primary data in context sheets. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 46:7, 496-512. DOI: [10.1080/00934690.2021.1926700](https://doi.org/10.1080/00934690.2021.1926700)

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Barker, P. 2003 *Techniques of Archaeological Excavation*. Routledge.

Britnell, W. and Whittle, A. 2021 *The First Stones: Penywyrld, Gwernvale and the Black Mountains Neolithic Long Cairns of South-East Wales*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

Cummings, V., 2017 *The Neolithic of Britain and Ireland*. Taylor & Francis.

Cummings, V. and Richards, C. 2021 *Monuments in the Making: Raising the Great Dolmens in Early Neolithic Northern Europe*. Windgather Press.

Harris, E.C. ed., 2014 *Practices of Archaeological Stratigraphy*. Elsevier.

Kinross, J., 2015 *Castles of the Marches*. Amberley Publishing Limited.

Ray, K.W., 2015 *The Archaeology of Herefordshire: An Exploration*. Logaston Press.

Ray, K. and Thomas, J., 2018 *Neolithic Britain: the Transformation of Social Worlds*. Oxford University Press.

Thomas, J. 2016 Expanding a Neolithic landscape: Dorstone Hill, Herefordshire. *Current Archaeology*, (321), pp.16-17.

Thomas, J., Overton, N. and Ray, K., 2022 Creating ancient identities: Arthur's Stone and Dorstone Hill. *British Archaeology*, 2022(3), pp.26-31.