Britain’s oldest cremation burial found in Essex

Cremated human bone and pyre debris from Langford, near Chelmsford, Essex, has been dated to the mesolithic, the hunter-gatherer era that followed the end of the ice age and lasted for 6,000 years. This is the first cremation burial of this era recognised in Britain, and the first well documented mesolithic grave of any type.

The excavation was at the site of a new effluent pipeline laid by Essex & Suffolk Water, 200m from the river Chelmer. Prior evaluation by Oxford Archaeology identified two bronze age burial mounds, so the pipe’s route was moved to avoid them. The barrows’ circular ditches were visible in air photos, but as nothing showed at the revised location, it was assumed the ground would be relatively clear. In the event, significant archaeological remains were uncovered during works in March-May 2014.

Among these were seven Anglo-Saxon post-built huts and two sunken-floored huts. A pit on a wall line of one of the huts, 1m across and originally about 70cm deep, tranpired on excavation to contain 185g of cremated human bone and a large amount of charcoal. Louise Lee identified the remains of at least one adult, and noted that combustion of the corpse would have required a fire of over 600°C, indicating an understanding of pyre technology.

Thinking the burial might be an outlier from the barrows 60m away, archaeologists had a piece of bone radiocarbon dated. The surprise result was about 5950-5550BC, firmly in the mesolithic (5000-4000BC). Two further samples, of bone and charcoal, were dated with identical outcomes. Nick Gilmour, project officer at the dig, told British Archaeology that but for the hall, the pit may not have been found, as the area was searched for Anglo-Saxon postholes with particular care.

Human remains from the British mesolithic are rare. Recent exhaustive searches through archives and museum stores by Christopher Meiklejohn, Andrew Chamberlain and Rick Schulting, tracked down 20 burial sites between Devon and the Inner Hebrides. They were mostly in caves, with radiocarbon dates ranging from 8500 to 4100BC. Curiously, given the great increase in excavation funded by developers since 1990, nearly half of these sites were found before 1990.

Until now, all of the remains consisted only of uncremated bone. Most were recovered without forensic excavation, and the sites typically consist of little more than skeletal fragments – though Chantal Conneller has argued this is because bodies were ritually disarticulated. Thus as well as being the first mesolithic cremation burial from Britain, the Langford pit is also the only clearly recorded British grave structure of this era.

In 2001 archaeologists excavated three mesolithic cremation burials in Ireland, where rare human remains of this date are otherwise unburnt bone. One of the burials, at Hermitage, Co Limerick, was similar to the Langford burial. Cremated fragments had been collected from a pyre, where temperatures of over 600°C had been achieved, and apparently pounded up. They were then placed at the bottom of a pit 60cm across and 30cm deep, which held a post. Charcoal and bone were carbon dated to around 7400BC.