



GRIMSPOUND

Audio Guide Transcript

Helen Allen: So we've just parked the cars up in the little layby there. And where are we heading?

Win Scutt: Well, I'm going to take you up this little hill about 300 yards to Grimspound, which is actually one of the most visited of our sites on Dartmoor. And it is spectacular. It is amazing. It's 3,000 years old, roughly, and it's what you might call a Bronze Age village. Not far up this hill, about 10 minutes' walk.

Helen: So I know we'll be visiting a few key locations which people can follow using the downloadable PDF map from the English Heritage website.

Win: And of course, you can listen to it at home if you want to and just enjoy it. Or you can follow us with each of these locations on the map.

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Helen: Well, Win. That was quite a climb up that hill, wasn't it?

Win: It was. I need a little bit of a break, but it's an opportunity to show you what we've arrived at.

Helen: Well, I'm a bit puzzled. What are we actually looking at here?

Win: Well, this is a Bronze Age settlement. Some people call it a village, but it's enclosed by a massive wall. Colossal, isn't it? And actually, to try to sort of scope this in your mind about how big it is – well, first of all, it's a big circle of stones. It encloses about two football pitches. And just look at this. I mean, just great big boulders, bigger than gravestones, if you like, you know. And when we look across the width of it, it's the width of a good sized road, you know, maybe even two lanes. And it's, what, about chest height? Something like that. So a colossal feat of engineering. And it must have taken hundreds of people to construct this, presumably to enclose their houses here. I mean, some people say that it's defensive, but we don't really believe that these days because it doesn't sit on the top of a hill. It's sort of slid down the side inside this little valley. So I think mainly it's here to impress, but it certainly does impress because these are colossal stones, aren't they? Just imagine dragging these across the moor.

Helen: I can't. So when do you think this dates back to?

Win: Well, we haven't got accurate dates for this one because the last time it was excavated was back in the 1890s. But by comparison with other sites on the moor, we can say it's probably late



Bronze Age. So 3,000 years ago, if you like, we'd be talking more accurately about the period from 1500 BC to 700 BC, something like that. And it's round about 700 BC that this is all abandoned.

Helen: Do you have any idea why it was abandoned?

Win: Well, the moor was gradually becoming depopulated round about, soon after 1000 BC, 900, 800, 700 BC, gradually being depopulated because the Bronze Age people that lived up here had cleared all the forest and that exposed this very fragile granite soil to erosion and to all the minerals being leached out of the soil. And the soil actually goes into a completely new kind of soil, a new kind of ground, typical moorland vegetation with deciduous grasses and things like that. So the prehistoric people had actually created this sort of ecological disaster that meant they had to abandon the moor. And this was probably one of the sites that they had to abandon at that stage.

Helen: That's really interesting because we think of ecological disasters as being a very modern phenomenon, and that's clearly not the case.

Win: Well, yeah, lots of people think of the moor as being a perfectly natural wildscape, you know, and it is a beautiful place, but it's very much a human creation. You know, it's those people settling vast areas of the moor in the second millennium BC, in 2000 to 1000 BC, and they're everywhere. Well, perhaps not the very high parts of the moor, but these sort of softer parts of the moor they were occupying. And we find field systems, we find stone boundaries – not as big as this one in front of us, but we find stone boundaries that divide up the landscape between territories, parishes, communities and areas of pasture. Incredible human organisation going on at that stage. It's the largest preserved or best preserved prehistoric landscape in north-western Europe. And archaeologists from all around the world come to study this because we can see how society has changed, that people have started to organise their landscape and they may even be controlling people there, you know, in other words, we might have kings and chiefs or whatever who are saying this is how we want the landscape to be divided up. So it's a real landmark in human society that we can see shown through these physical remains of their hard work on the moor.

Helen: So we see this big wall around the hut circles here.

Win: I mean, you mustn't call them hut circles, you know. No!

Helen: What should I call them?

Win: Well, when they first found them, they thought they were hut circles. And actually, you still see it on the maps: they're described as hut circles. I'm a bit of a sort of campaigner on this, but we should really call them round houses, because they are very substantial ones. Let me take you into the pound now, the enclosure, and I'll show you some of these houses.

Helen: Okay. Sounds good.

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Helen: Well, here we are inside what I now know is a round house. It's pretty small. But I should say we've kind of crouched down behind a rock here to shelter us from the wind, which I guess is always present in Dartmoor. But it's small, Win! How could anybody live in this house?

Win: It is. Well, you could get a couple of beds in here, maybe get the kids in here as well. You reckon? It's not a very big house and it's not very typical, actually, of the ones on Dartmoor. This is diddy. I suspect that this house and the others inside Grimspound were probably seasonal houses, where they just come for the summer pastures and they're grazing sheep and maybe cattle up here. So they're not living here all the time. They are a bit too small and there are about 24 known here and they are unlikely to all be permanent dwellings.

Helen: So most of their life was lived outside the house and basically just slept and cooked in here? Or how would you imagine their life being?

Win: Yeah, I think a lot of it's going to be outside, but then the weather isn't always very nice. Is it true we're lucky today in having such nice weather. But I think a lot of the time you're living in the dark in a very smoky interior. You'd have the fire going on all the time here and you'd do all your cooking and your washing, putting the kids to bed and all that sort of thing in here. And this house, well, we see a circle of stones now. It's actually been rather poorly reconstructed, I think, back in Victorian times, and I take a lot of it with a pinch of salt, these walls here. But in essence, we've got a circle of stones all joining together, encircling a very small room.

Helen: How far across would you say it is?

Win: Well, that's about 8 feet across there, isn't it? Or 2 to 3 metres across, which does make a pretty small room. You know, if we lived in it today, there wouldn't be much room for an armchair and a TV. But they would just have a hearth in the middle or possibly to one side. Most of this structure would be timber. So I often think of the stone circle around the bottom more as a draught excluder, because what you've got here is a very substantial building made out of timber and a lot of timber and a lot of thatch and a very heavy roof. If you imagine that it's going to get wet, it's going to be laden with snow in the winter. So you've got to have very stout wooden posts. So you probably have a circle of posts in the middle here that support what we call a ring beam, and that would hold the whole weight of the massive roof on the top of it. And then you have to imagine what it was like to be inside here with the fire going all the time. There was no chimney. Some experiments have been done on these. If you cut a hole in the roof, it creates a vortex and the fire sets light to the whole roof. So what actually happens is that you have a hearth permanently going day and night. You know, you might sort of put it in, cover it in a bit for the night, but the whole place, it's got smoke that filters through the thatch.

Helen: But it must have made the interior really smoky and a bit smelly.

Win: I've slept in one and I stank of smoke for days. I mean, you really feel like a kipper. It's absolutely, you know, dreadful. And they must have been like that. They must have had terrible lung diseases as well. And they'd be coughing their guts out all day. You know, it would be horrible. But there was no choice – if you wanted to stay warm, you had to put up with that. But it's very good, all this smoke, for preserving things. So up in the roof you probably have the hams hanging there, you know. So you have some lovely bacon. Well, that's if you kept pigs. But it was,



you know, a great way of preserving things. And all the tools and things would be hanging in the roof as well, your shepherd's crook and things like that.

Helen: So talking of animals, would they have, I mean, we've said how small it is – would the animals have been inside here with the family or because it was more of a summer pasture would they be outside?

Win: Yeah, they'd be outside. And in fact, one possibility – I'll be taking you up to the main entrance a bit later – but one possibility is that there wasn't an entrance for animals. So the only one of these that's been excavated on another part of Dartmoor, which I excavated many years ago, actually we demonstrated that there was no entrance; that the whole enclosure was to keep animals out rather than in. So that means you could let the kids run around and they wouldn't be squashed by a cow or something like that. You know, it was a safe area. So, you know, that's one possibility.

Helen: So we can see from where we are what looks to me like the main gate. Should we go up there and have a look?

Win: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's quite a dominant thing. You can see it from the whole enclosure. I'm slightly suspicious about it as well, because so much here is reconstructed. But it really does look quite impressive. Let's have a look.

Helen: Okay.

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Helen: So, Win, we've made our way up what you think is the main entrance to the enclosure. It looks pretty substantial. Would it always have looked like this?

Win: Well, it's massive, isn't it? I'm a bit suspicious because there were a lot of excavations done in the 19th century. A lot of these houses that we can see here were clearly reconstructed. They've stacked stones up that they found on the outside. So, yeah, there's a lot to be disbelieved here. And I'm a bit suspicious about this gateway as well.

Helen: When you say they've stacked stones up, who was that?

Win: Oh, well, these were I suppose they called themselves archaeologists, but it was on the boundary between antiquary and archaeologist. So archaeology came of age really in the 19th century, and they were playing around with some very basic techniques. You know, you just basically dig a hole. So in these houses, they just emptied the contents out and stacked up all the stones on the walls and kept some of the finds and sieved the bits and pieces. Nowadays, we wouldn't do it like that at all. And in fact, we've got so many techniques that we can bring to bear on sites on Dartmoor these days – things like pollen analysis. You know, now we can actually see how the vegetation has changed over thousands of years by counting the pollen grains from trees and from grass and all that sort of thing buried in peat bogs. So we can build up a picture of how this landscape was changed over thousands of years. The Victorians couldn't do that. This was



very experimental for them. It was good for the time. But archaeology has moved on so much over the last hundred, or are we talking about 126 years?

Helen: So Win, it seems to me that there's still quite a lot about this site that we don't understand.

Win: That's true, actually. There's so much we could do with proper scientific excavation these days. We could find out an enormous amount. I mean, for example, is this gateway original? Is it Bronze Age or was it added much later in the medieval period when this became a pound for impounding cattle? And it's probably then that they started calling it Grimspound – Grim, the Grim Reaper, you know, the old character of Woden in the cloak with the scythe, the person who took you to the other world, you know, hell, basically. So this was given the name Grimspound, presumably because people thought in the medieval period that this had been built by ancient giants or something like that.

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Helen: It's been so beautiful sitting here, Win. I can really understand why this is such a popular site and why we get so many visitors coming here. It's been a real privilege to just sit here and enjoy the birdsong and the incredible views and then learn about the significance of this site. It's really astonishing. And I'd love to encourage more people to come up and enjoy it. What do you think?

Win: Yeah, absolutely. It's just, well, I get very intense about the archaeology.

Helen: I know you do.

Win: And I'm speculating. I'm thinking, I'm trying to explain things all the time. You know, why have they made this big enclosure here with so many rocks? I mean, it's a massive amount of effort. But then I also have to remind myself just to enjoy the beautiful landscape and just sit back and, you know, you hear the skylarks, the stonechats. I'm not very good at birds. I wish I was. But it's just, you know, there's so much to enjoy. I mean, we're lucky that it's a nice, warm day, but even on a mizzerly day, as they call it on Dartmoor, it's a special place.

Helen: Yeah. There's a lot of atmosphere here, isn't there.

Win: Oh, it's absolute incredible the way this sits in the valley here and you've got that sort of – you're connecting with the Bronze Age. So you're going back 3,000 years. And yes, we've got lots of sites on Dartmoor. And yes, this is a popular one. But here you can see the effort that hundreds of men and women and possibly children were involved in creating this very special monument 3,000 years ago. I mean, you just have to remember the sweat and tears that must have gone into this.

Helen: Yeah.