

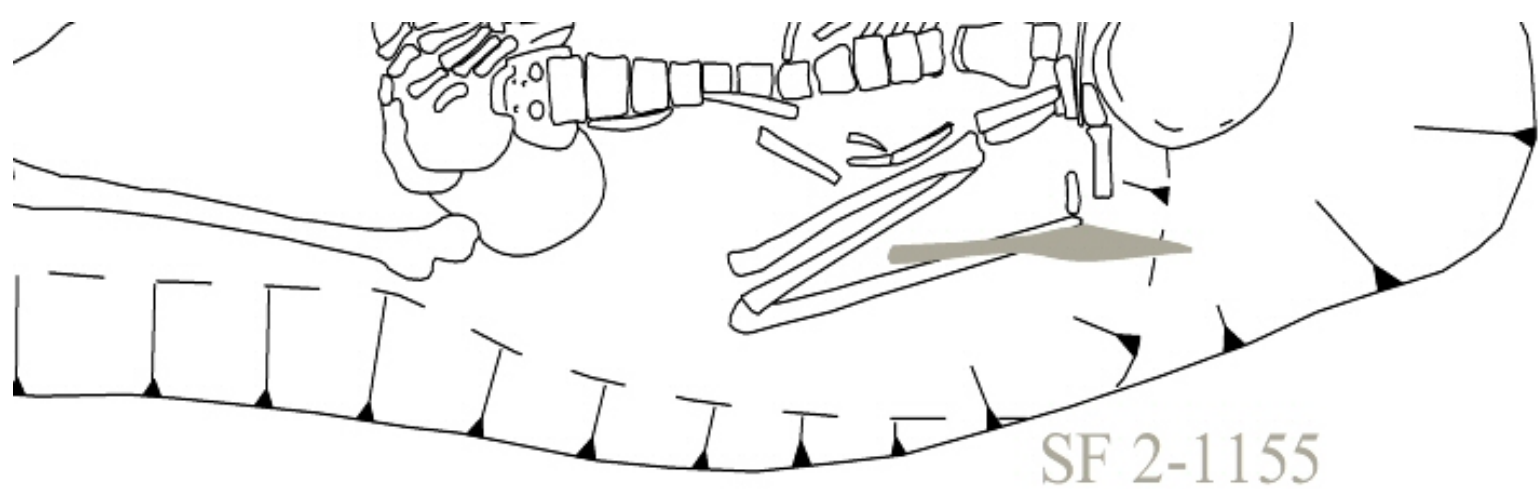
Monuments to the Dead: Excavations at West Meon

Bronze Age and Saxon archaeology

The Saxon cemetery

A total of 49 burials have been excavated across the area of the site. These are a mix of adults, teenagers and children who were buried in a variety of crouched and stretched out (extended) positions. Some of the graves are orientated east-west but the majority are north-south. Several of the individuals were buried with grave goods including weapons, jewellery and tools which, when combined with the orientation of the bodies, strongly suggests that the burials are pre-Christian, probably from the 6th or 7th centuries AD.

A preliminary study has been carried out on a selection of the skeletons to give a very general idea of who was buried in the cemetery. Even at this early stage the results are proving to be interesting. Further analysis will be undertaken once the excavations are finished and the bones have been cleaned and conserved.



Gravegoods: Above: The iron spearhead with Skeleton 1155. Right and far right: Child burial Skeleton 1196 (see top right) with the four glass and stone beads.

Grave 1122, Skeleton 1194

Skeleton 1194 is the remains of a very robust (large) male who was in the age range 26-35 when he died. The size and shape of his bones pointed to his sex, while the fusion of the sections of his long bones, the presence of limited dental wear and minimal arthritis on the vertebrae suggested his age-at-death.

The position of the skeleton within the grave showed that he had been buried on his back, with his arms and legs fully extended. The skull position was not in its correct position on the top of the spine, which may be a product of movement as the grave soil formed, but the lower jaw is completely absent and may have been removed prior to burial.

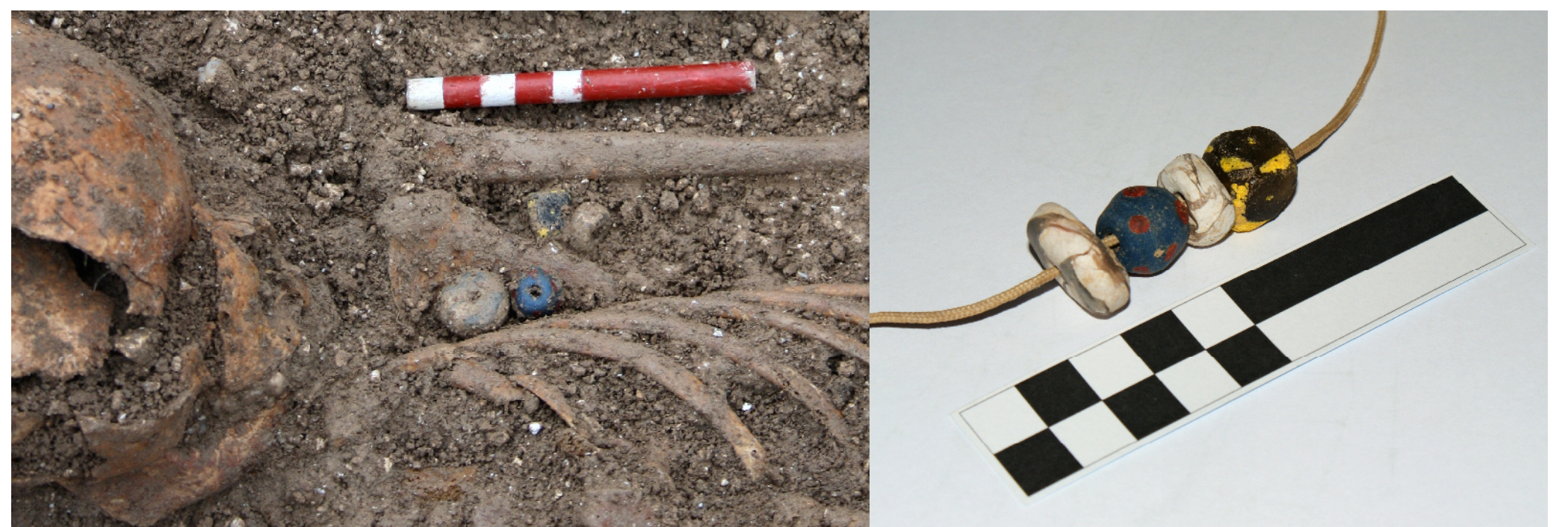
A preliminary study was done of the bones to try and identify any pathologies (injuries) which may have left their mark. One interesting observation was a well-healed hole in the left side of the man's head, towards the back. The hole measures 21mm by 16mm and displays very rounded edges from the healing process, indicating that this person survived the event. It is possible that this is an example of trepanation, which in the folklore of some primitive tribes is 'to let the demons out', but we might recognise it as a means of relieving from pressure inside the skull following a head injury.

An iron spearhead, one of several found in graves on the site, was uncovered lying to the right of the body with its tip level with the right shoulder. It was at an angle of c.45° to the body but aligned with the right forearm, suggesting that the spear may have been placed in or on the individual's right hand when he was buried.

Grave 1123, Skeleton 1196

A preliminary examination of Skeleton 1196 revealed that it was the body of a 5-year-old child. The ends of the long bones, which fuse between the ages of 12 and 14, were unfused and the gap where its lower front two teeth should have been clearly showed the adult teeth still deep inside the jaw bone. This stage of the replacement of milk teeth with adult teeth happens around the age of 5. Due to the young age at which the child died no indicators of its sex could be seen in its bones. Changes in shape and size, most notably to the pelvis and facial features, can be used to differentiate between male and female skeletons but do not happen until puberty.

The body was found lying on its back with arms and legs slightly bent at the elbows and knees and its head propped up against the side of the grave. Four beads, two made from coloured glass and two from marbled stone, were found grouped on the child's left shoulder, presumably where they slid to as their string and the body decayed.



Skeleton 1196: Above: Close-up of the child's upper body showing the beads. Right: The excavated child's burial (left) with a neighbouring adult grave (right).

Skeleton 1194: Below left: Detail of the well-healed trepanation hole in the skull. Below right: The spearhead in position above the body's right hand. Bottom right: View of the excavated grave.

