

Woolly rhino found in Ice Age game reserve

PHOTOGRAPHS: NEWS TEAM INTERNATIONAL and CATER'S NEWS AGENCY

By Anthony Browne
Environment Editor

A QUARRY worker in Staffordshire has uncovered the most significant Ice Age find in northern Europe for more than 30 years.

Ray Davies pulled up the intact skull of a woolly rhino in the bucket of his digger in Lafarge Aggregates Quarry at Whitemoor Haye, unearthing a menagerie of animals, including mammoths, bison, wild horses and wolves, and a range of plants and insects.

The number of woolly rhinos found at the site rose to four yesterday, including one of the most perfectly preserved examples found in Britain, dating back more than 30,000 years. It still has plant material sticking to its teeth, giving clues to its last meal.

The finds have been investigated by archaeologists from the University of Birmingham, and the main specimens have been taken to the Natural History Museum.

Andy Currant, curator of Ice Age mammals at the museum, said: "Overall, it's the best single palaeontological find since the 1960s by quite a long way. It's the best find of a woolly rhino in Britain for at least 100 years."

The skeleton of the woolly rhino is complete but for its rear flanks, which are still being sought. The horns, which would have been about a metre long, were made of hair and have since rotted away.

However, the skeleton is so well preserved it is thought that it must have frozen immediately after death. "The bones are exceptionally well preserved. Usually, remains have been scavenged by predators and only fragments survive," Mr Currant said.

A woolly rhino skeleton was discovered in Derbyshire in the 1820s, but has been lost.

The entire find should enable archaeologists to build up a detailed picture of what life was like in this particular corner of Britain between 30,000 and 50,000 years ago.

"We'll be able to piece together the whole Ice Age environment in that area by the banks of the River Trent," Simon Buteux, director of the field archaeology unit at the University of Birmingham, said. "The plants in particular



Cold storage: the remains of a woolly rhino which were unearthed by a quarry worker's digger in Staffordshire, the most significant Ice Age find in northern Europe since the 1960s

are beautifully preserved; they look as if they were buried last week, quite frankly. And in among them are remains of beetles which are very sensitive to the climate, so this will give us good clues to what the local environment was back then."

It is thought that the bison, mammoths, wolves and woolly rhinos were at the spot because it was a fertile watering hole.

Gary Coates, one of the archaeologists, said: "I've been working at Whitemoor Haye quarry for five years and have excavated everything from prehistoric burial grounds to Roman farmsteads, but this was totally unexpected. It's the biggest find, in all senses of the word, I've been involved with."

The woolly rhino is not thought to have survived in Britain after the advance of the last Ice Age 27,000 years ago, although it survived in Siberia until at least 20,000 years ago.

It weighed about two tonnes and was similar in size to the African rhino, although it was only distantly related. Its closest living relative is thought to be the Sumatran rhino, an endangered species.

The woolly rhino is thought to have depended on the woolly mammoth to create its habitat. The mammoth lived in large numbers and cleared swaths of the forest that

covered Britain, creating the spaces in which the woolly rhino thrived.

The finds from the Staffordshire quarry show that Britain once had as rich a wildlife as

anywhere in the world today. "It was like Africa, but colder. All these were native British species, just as badgers are," Mr Currant said.

Although Neanderthal man

existed at the same time as the woolly rhino, and probably hunted the animal, it is not thought that man was on the Staffordshire site at the same time. "We'd love to find evi-

dence of human activity, Neanderthals perhaps, but we think this period in this place was simply too cold for humans to have been able to cope with," Mr Buteux said.

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