Steven Birch and a small team of archaeologists are excavating a remarkable cave on the Isle of Skye.

**Entrance to the underworld**

In May 2002, I discovered prehistoric deposits in a high-level fossil passage in Uamh an Ard Aichadh (High Pasture Cave), a natural limestone cave on the island of Skye with 320m of accessible passages. The material had been disturbed by cavers five years before, the cave itself having been found in 1972 by students from the University of London Speleological Society: it is the second longest cave complex on Skye. Martin Wildgoose, George Kozikowski and I began our project as research survey and excavation, but in 2004, with funding from Historic Scotland and the Society of Antiquaries, and assistance from the National Museums of Scotland of Scotland, we turned to research.

Trial excavation uncovered almost a metre of in situ deposits in the cave. Large quantities of artefacts and ecofacts were recovered. Bone is well preserved, and wet sieving produced fish bones, charcoal, grain, iron hammer scale and other items. Animal remains include bear bone and wolf canines, a butchered cow and a small midden of periwinkles. Among the artefacts were antler and bone objects, coarse pebble tools, pieces of stone rotary quern and a fine iron socketed adze with a fragment of the wooden handle. Possible late bronze age pottery and a radiocarbon date of 390–1600 BC (from a pig mandible) confirm a prehistoric context.

In the passage’s upper fills around 90% of the animal bone was pig, unusual in Hebridean assemblages where 20–35% is the norm from broch and dun sites. Preliminary analysis by Carrie Drew and Peter Rowley-Conwy at the University of Durham has identified at least 12 individuals. Many vertebrae were cleaved, suggesting animals had been divided into left and right portions, an unusual butchery practice for this period of prehistory, perhaps for feasting.

We surveyed the landscape around the cave entrance and the cave passages below ground. Stone-built structures above the cave, including a roundhouse, cells and a U-shaped enclosure, also suggest prehistoric activity.

This unusual site may have been an important aspect of the late bronze age/early iron age Skye landscape (1200–450 BC). Are we looking at a “natural” form of souterrain, for which we have many man-made parallels in the island? Or could this be a more unusual type of site, possibly with links directly to the underworld?

This year we are concentrating on trial excavations on the surface, exploring the possible original cave entrance revealed by ground penetrating radar within the U-shaped enclosure. We had always thought there should be an alternative entrance, because of the present difficulties of access, with around 60m of stream passage — a factor that became more apparent during removal of archaeological deposits from the cave for wet sieving.

We launched the High Pasture Cave website in February (www.high pasture-cave.org), before starting fieldwork in March. First to go live was the news section, followed by the photographic virtual tour of the cave. As work progresses, we post an excavation diary with plans and photos, detailing strategy and achievements – and weather delays (heavy rain and strong wind kept us off the site for 10 days in March)

Separate entries describe finds with many photographs. We have uncovered a remarkable depth of well-stratified deposits — now over 3m, unusual for a prehistoric Scottish site. Our preliminary interpretations suggest that during the early iron age the cave was deliberately back-filled with sediments rich in ecofacts and artefacts, and granite cobbles and boulders. The “special” pig deposit may have been associated with this event. A thick layer of quite sterile clay was used to “seal” the former entrance.

Substantial essays on the website describe the earlier work in 2002/3 and 2004, with 10 specialist reports on material recovered last year. These range from Ruby Ceron-Carrascos (University of Edinburgh) describing fish bones and marine molluscs and Claire L Pannell (University of Glasgow) on land snails, to reports on small finds and pottery. There are also articles about the cave, and information on how to find us.

The website was joint funded by Highland Council and Skye & Lochalsh Leader+, an European Community initiative. We hope to have a regular core of visitors (we are already up to over 12,000 hits) when we hope to break through into the cave’s original entrance. Watch the web.

**Steven Birch is co-director of the High Pasture Cave Project with Martin Wildgoose.**