Creswell Crags lends its name to the principal facies of the British Later Upper Palaeolithic and for the visitor it is without doubt one of the most evocative Pleistocene experiences in the country. Straddling the county boundary between Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, the dramatic Magnesian Limestone gorge, punctuated by caves, is a landscape one might more reasonably expect to encounter in the Dordogne than in the heart of a former rural coalfield some 15 km from Sheffield.

On 22 August the infectious enthusiasm of Brian Chambers of Creswell Heritage Trust guided 16 Society members through a highly informative and memorable day. Having assembled at the visitor centre and donned caver’s helmets, Brian took us on an illuminating (and illuminated!) tour of the gorge and into the deeper recesses of Robin Hood’s, Church Hole and Pin Hole caves. The caves contain exceptional evidence for human activity and environmental change c 80,000-10,000 BP and through the excavations primarily of Boyd Dawkins in the latter part of the 19th century, Armstrong in the earlier part of this century, and Jenkinson in the 1980s, much is known of their archaeology and geostratigraphy. Considerably more, however, remains to be learnt, in particular regarding the extent and character of the Middle Palaeolithic deposits.

On-going work includes experimentation on small mammal taphonomy (ie strategically placed dead rats) and monitoring any vibration caused by blasting in the nearby quarry. The Trust’s main programme of research, however, is addressing the substantial quantity of lithics, faunal remains and records held by a frighteningly large number of museums - at least 38! This collections audit is feeding into the preparation of a Conservation Plan aimed at ensuring the long-term preservation, enhancement (removal of 20th century clutter) and public appreciation of the Crags. Another key element is a ‘sensitivity study’ which will assess the vulnerability of in situ deposits, cave fabric, and the landscape as a whole to change and visitor pressure.

Re-emerging from the gloom, it was time for lunch and the pub. On returning to the visitor centre, we admired the audio-visual displays, and as the regional English Heritage Inspector, I gave a short talk on the broader aspirations of the Creswell Initiative towards World Heritage Site status. These days the name of the game is not just conservation, research and presentation, but also how heritage-related projects can contribute to economic regeneration - an issue which helps considerably to draw in funding. The imminent removal of the sewage works from the eastern end of the gorge by Severn Trent Water at a cost of £3.5M is being promoted as the largest private sector contribution to such a project. Furthermore, plans are well advanced for the removal of the road through the Crags.

The day concluded with the chance to examine some of the flint and bone artefacts, with Brian icing his answers to our many questions from a seemingly inexhaustible supply of entertaining anecdotes.

For visitors of all ages and for those with much or little knowledge of archaeology, Creswell Crags is a fascinating, stimulating and unique place. Our thanks go to Brian Chambers for making the field trip such an enjoyable success.

Jon Humble, Conservation East Midlands, English Heritage