

La Varde

What is it?

It is an ancient monument where people, in the past, buried their dead. We call it a dolmen but a more correct name is a 'passage grave'.



How old is it?

We think people might have started using it from around 4000 BC (about 6,000 years ago). At approximately the same time in history, slaves were building pyramids in Ancient Egypt.



How do we know how old it is?

We can't date stones, but we can date bones. So we can estimate the age of the dolmens from the bones found in them.

What does La Varde look like?

From the outside, it looks like a large mound of earth, with a doorway. Inside, it is one large room. There is no light inside and it can be dark, depending on the position of the sun.

Why is La Varde so special?

It is the largest surviving prehistoric monument in Guernsey. It is on a hill above Pembroke Bay and has fantastic views over the common. It is over ten metres long and the huge main capstone weighs about 30 tonnes (that's the same weight as the Millenium Stone outside the dolmen). To give you an idea of scale, a small car weighs about 1 ton.

Why did people build dolmens?

To bury dead bodies inside. It is possible that dolmens would have been used for other purposes too, such as marking special life events – for example, similar to how churches today are used for christenings, weddings and funerals. There is still a lot about dolmens that we don't know.

How did people build dolmens without diggers?

With a lot of effort! People in those days had no metal tools. Wheels or oxen would have been used to pull the great stones uphill and into position. These monuments were clearly very important to the people that built them. Most of the tombs have their entrance pointing towards the sunrise. Herm has so many tombs in the north of the island that archaeologists have called it an 'Island of the Dead'.

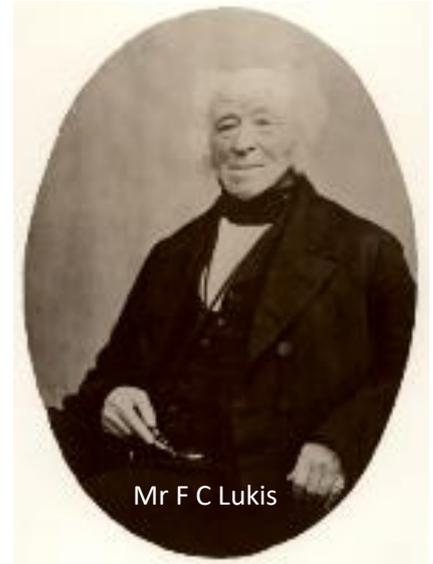


What has been found inside?

A famous Guernsey archaeologist called Mr Lukis first visited the site in 1811. Luckily for us, Lukis kept useful records and diaries. He says that he found a skull on that day. You can see this skull on display at Guernsey Museum. In 1837 he returned with his son to excavate the dolmen. In his diary he wrote:

'at the depth of about 6ft ½ or thereabouts human remains were found in abundance upwards of 30 distinct skeletons having been taken up or disturbed, but in various stages of decomposition, some of the bones falling to powder under the pressure of the fingers and scarcely to be raised entire. Those that had been incinerated were very much broken apparently by force previous to being buried.'

The evidence of burning shows that bodies were being cremated in the dolmen or nearby. Archaeologists have looked closely at the bones and found at least 6 adults and 3 young people were buried at La Varde, ranging from 3 years old to over 45 years old.



Can I see any artefacts from La Varde?

Yes, you can see some of the finds at Guernsey Museum.

Why is there a large standing stone outside the dolmen?

This is not related to La Varde and is definitely not ancient – it was erected in 2000 to celebrate the millennium.

When is the dolmen open?

It is open all the time and entry is free.

La Varde

L'Ancrese Common

Vale

Perrys Guide: 6 B2

Accessible via marked footpath from La Jaonneuse Road.

Plenty of public car parking at Pembroke Bay.

