In July 2018, Mark Casswell, the owner of Tetney Golf Course, was extending a pond next to one of the fairways when he made an unexpected discovery. As the mechanical digger stripped away a thick gravel layer it accidentally disturbed a remarkably well-preserved wooden coffin scattering its contents. Mr Casswell immediately informed the Environment Agency, who in turn alerted Historic England and the then Portable Antiquities Scheme FLO Adam Daubney. On visiting the site, Adam immediately recognised its significance; what had been revealed was an exceptionally rare Bronze Age burial that had originally been interred beneath a now-eroded mound. Adam also retrieved the only artefact found to be associated with the burial, a decorative stone axe which still retained its perfectly preserved handle. That July was a particularly hot one, and it was clear that not only would the fragile wooden coffin start to decompose in the open air, but the remains of the mound would quickly deteriorate.

Coincidentally, Hugh Willmott from the University of Sheffield was working at the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Scremby, only a few miles away when the burial was discovered (see CA347). Aware of this, Adam and Tim Allen the Inspector for Ancient Monuments paid him a visit, and the next day Hugh and his team went to Tetney to undertake the recovery of the exposed coffin wood, and to excavate and record their immediate burial context. They were able to accurately identify the original burial cut and reconstruct the profile of the surviving mound above. The coffin had been sunk into heavy clay, which had been responsible for its preservation, before a gravel mound was constructed over the top of it. In the subsequent centuries alluvium had built up against the mound causing it to become obscured, until its accidental rediscovery in 2018. Hugh’s team also recovered the partial remains of the occupant of the burial, as well as samples of organic-rich deposits from within the coffin.

Following a year of cold storage, the coffin and axe were transported to the specialist care of Ian Panter at the York Archaeological Trust, one of the few facilities equipped to handle the conservation of such large wooden objects. Once safely stabilised, Ian and Mike Bamforth, a specialist in ancient wood technology, were able to take the first proper look at the coffin. Measuring approximately 2.5m long and 1m wide, the coffin was originally created by carving a large, single, fast-growing oak tree. A ‘split timber’ construction technique was used, where the tree trunk was split lengthways first to create a half, or slightly larger log for carving, rather than hollowing out a whole tree from scratch. It then had a separate planked lid, part of which also survived. In total it is estimated to weigh at least half a tonne.

Whilst the coffin is impressive in its size and construction, the axe that it originally contained is truly breath taking. Just 34cm long, the surviving turned wood handle tapers to fit the stone head, which appears to be made from a carboniferous limestone encasing fossilised coral. Around 4,000 years old it is a sophisticated tool but given its decorative nature and size it may well have had a more symbolic rather than practical function.

Analysis of other aspects of the burial have been ongoing at the University of Sheffield. Osteological analysis of the human skeleton by Emma Hook suggests that the individual was male, in their 30s, and at around 5’9” comparatively tall. However, they clearly had a strenuous lifestyle as they were also starting to suffer from osteoarthritis. Other fascinating results have started to emerge from the analysis by Ellen Simmons of the organic deposits found within the coffin. This suggests that the man was buried on a layer of moss and other plants such as juniper or yew, while hazelnuts found in the coffin might be the remains of a food offering. Most interestingly, the presence of small plant buds suggests that the burial likely took place in mid to late spring.

Research on this remarkable find is still ongoing and will continue for many months. Isotope analysis of samples from the skeleton’s teeth may reveal if he was born and raised close to Tetney, or whether he originated further afield. Further work will also be undertaken on the organic residues to identify other plant species present in the coffin, whilst pollen samples should be able to tell us about the wider environmental conditions in the area 4,000 years ago. As the coffin was made from a fast-growing tree with wide rings, dendrochronology has not yet been able to provide a precise date for the burial. However, a future programme of ‘wriggle matching’ this data with radiocarbon dating has the potential to narrow down the felling of the tree to a decade or even a single year. Once the conservation of the wood is completed at York all the finds will go on display at The Collection in Lincoln.

The excavations and research at Tetney have been a great example of a project that was only made possible through the collaboration between university, national heritage and conservation partners, as well as many independent specialists. Future analysis will undoubtedly reveal more exciting clues as to the life of individual buried and the complex nature of his interment, as well as shedding light on the wider environment of North Lincolnshire at the start of the second millennium BC.