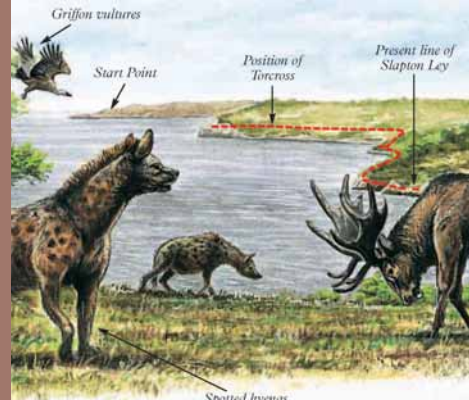


Earlier Prehistory

in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Palaeolithic. About 750,000-12,000 BC

During this vast length of time, human beings have left very little visible influence on the landscape of the British Isles. People were few in number and did not permanently settle in one place, moving across the landscape in search of food, either nuts and berries, or game, which they hunted.

These people made no great monuments, mainly living in rough perishable shelters of branches covered with the skins of the animals they hunted. A few lived at the mouths of caves and their living areas and rubbish dumps have been found there, perhaps because they were more likely to have survived in such places.



A selection of tools, similar found at locations shown below

They followed herds of wild animals, such as deer and wild ox, which roamed the countryside hunting, them in order to survive. Larger animals also lived wild in their world, and at various times during this period, when the temperature fluctuated several times between arctic tundra and subtropical heat, mammoths, rhinoceros, bears, wolves, hyaenas and hippopotamus lived in what became Britain. Their bones have been also been found in limestone caves, and occasionally in river gravels and silts.

These people did not farm or keep animals, although they may have had hunting dogs. Other than the cave sites, among the few places where evidence of their presence is known are broad river valleys, flanked by gravel terraces on which they made their temporary encampments.

To butcher the animals which they hunted, they made various stone tools. The most common of these are known to us as handaxes. Despite the name, they had a variety of uses, perhaps for cutting meat, disjuncting bone and sinew, smashing bones to retrieve the marrow and possibly even having a function in the kill.

It should not be assumed that stone tools were the only ones used however. In exceptional cases, where waterlogged remains survive from these remote periods, they show that stone tools were in the minority, wood and bone being the most common. These seldom survive, so we get a biased view of artefacts from prehistoric societies. This should be borne in mind for all other periods of human existence, even our own.

Mesolithic About 12,000-4500 BC

As in the Palaeolithic period, people continued to be nomadic, moving from area to area in search of food and never staying in one place for more than a couple of months. For this reason, evidence for their presence is very difficult to find.

Throughout this period the sea level was gradually rising, due to the slow natural warming of the Earth after the last Ice Age, so one reason why we find so few Mesolithic sites is that they were on the coastline and are now under water.

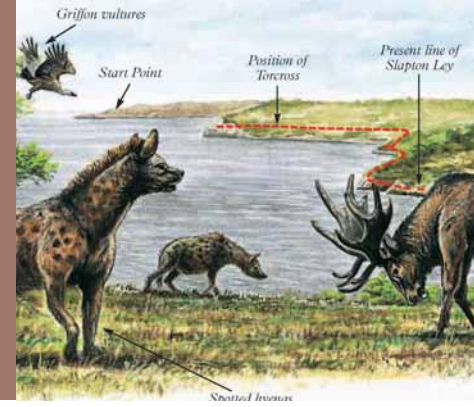
Study of the submarine contours of the English Channel suggests that the Mesolithic coastline surrounded an area of broad shallow valleys ending in tidal inlets and estuaries, which would have made rich hunting and fishing environments, and would have looked somewhat similar to our present-day environment.

In the later Mesolithic, people moved about less, living in semi-permanent encampments perhaps on a seasonal basis. They would move onto higher ground during the



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summer, only coming back to the coast when the weather was colder. This practice is known as transhumance and in it lies the origin of domesticated animals. Towards the end of the Mesolithic period, people found it advisable to take a mobile source of protein with them rather than have to hunt wild animals to obtain it. Nomadic peoples still in existence today in places such as Mongolia, drive semi-domesticated animals about with them as they travel in search of fresh food supplies for themselves and their stock.

The Mesolithic period was characterised by the precise and often very small flint tools which were made by the hunter-gatherers. Barbs were fitted into wooden spear heads for hunting animals and fish, while heavy hand axes were used for a variety of domestic chopping and slicing activities. Working floors on which these barbs (called microliths) and other tools were produced have been found at Bolberry Down, Start Point and near Dartmouth Castle.

There is evidence for Mesolithic activity in the valleys behind Slapton Ley, which would have been a tidal estuary then. Flint scatters near Stokenham have produced a mesolithic handaxe of brown chert, imported from East Devon. These finds suggest seasonal settlement on higher ground near the coast, people making forays down to the coastline (further out then) to collect seafood and hunt for fish.

Towards the end of the Mesolithic period, animal domestication became more common and permanent settlements began to be established. The knowledge of growing grass in a controlled way and grinding its seeds to make bread had been developed in the Middle East and was slowly moving across Europe. This sets the scene for the Neolithic period.

Neolithic.

About 4500-2300 years ago

The Neolithic period was characterised by the first settled farming communities. With pastoral farming providing an assured food supply they began to develop permanent settlements and breed better domestic animals. In addition to sheep, cattle were first domesticated in the Neolithic period. The practice of using dogs to round up farm animals may date from this time. There is little evidence for cereal growing during this period: this began later, in the Bronze and Iron Ages.

The first monuments built by humans in Britain were burial mounds, constructed during the Neolithic period. They represent the first evidence of communal construction projects and the earliest evidence for organised religion and belief.

The dead were exposed for decomposition and to be eaten by birds and animals. Later, when the flesh had been removed from the bones, significant parts of individuals, usually the skulls and long bones, were buried inside long tapering earth mounds known as long barrows, examples of which have been found near Bigbury & Ermington.

Evidence of human occupation in this period is often shown by scatters of flint from which Neolithic people made their tools. Dense scatters on hilltops and valley slopes are often found, suggesting that much of Britain was settled during this period.

Although some flint was obtained as pebbles from beaches and natural gravel beds, by the later Neolithic period, flint was beginning to be mined and quarried from chalk deposits in various parts of England. A few sites, such as Grimes Graves in Norfolk and Cissbury in Sussex were mined heavily in the later Neolithic, many hundreds of shafts being dug up to 30 feet into the chalk to reach flint which lay in beds at regular intervals. This hard black flint was traded all over Southern Britain from its extraction sites, and the very best quality tools, such as axes, knives and arrow-heads were made from it. The nearest source of good quality flint was at Beer in East Devon, and was exported all over South-West England, although other sources were found nearer, such as pebble flint from Start Bay.

Direct evidence for Neolithic settlements is rare, but a few sites have been found. One is at Haldon near Exeter, where a rectangular timber house accompanied a small fenced enclosure. Occasionally, embanked earthwork enclosures are found, but these are unusual. Flint scatters may indicate the former locations of such settlements.

Summary

Evidence for certain parts of our remote past is sketchy, and always will be.

It is very difficult for a landscape archaeologist to work in a period where there are few surviving place names and only a sketchy picture of land boundaries and settlement distribution. Intuition and an understanding of natural landscape formation processes are therefore of considerable importance in understanding how a locality may have appeared more than 1700 years ago.

The results cannot have the accuracy of later periods, where place name and documentary evidence provide sufficient evidence for precision in the decipherment of the landscape.

Author

This factsheet was written by archaeologist Robert Waterhouse, BA, AIFA, in 2005. It is one of a series of information sheets published by the South Devon AONB Unit. The material may be copied for private and non commercial use, provided the source is acknowledged.