

TEACHER'S BOOKLET

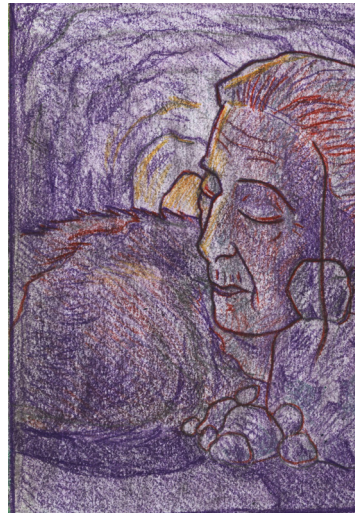


The University of Manchester

FROM PREHISTORY TO PRIMARY SCHOOLS

THE MESOLITHIC

LIFE IN BRITAIN AFTER THE ICE AGE



9600 - 4000 CAL BC

These last **hunter gatherers** moved around the British landscape **seasonally**, acquired a range of animal and plant resources, and used tools made from **antler, wood and flint**.



WHERE PEOPLE LIVED

After the last ice age, Britain began warming up. The landscape became a rich woodland with pine and birch trees characterising the early Mesolithic environment. These species were later joined by hazel, elm, oak, lime and other 'broadleaf' trees. This produced a rich mosaic of woodlands, open grassland patches, and lush river valleys and wetland areas.

At the start of the Mesolithic polar ice caps still locked up lots of water, meaning the sea levels were so low that Britain was connected to Europe. The English Channel and parts of the North Sea were rich landscapes referred to now as 'Doggerland'. Inhabited by Mesolithic groups, evidence of their sites are occasionally dredged up by fishing trawlers even today! However, as the Mesolithic progressed ice caps began to melt. This led to sea level rise, eventually flooding Doggerland and the English Channel. Britain was cut off from Europe by around 5500 cal BC. Doggerland communities migrated into Britain or the European continent.

MESOLITHIC

NEOLITHIC

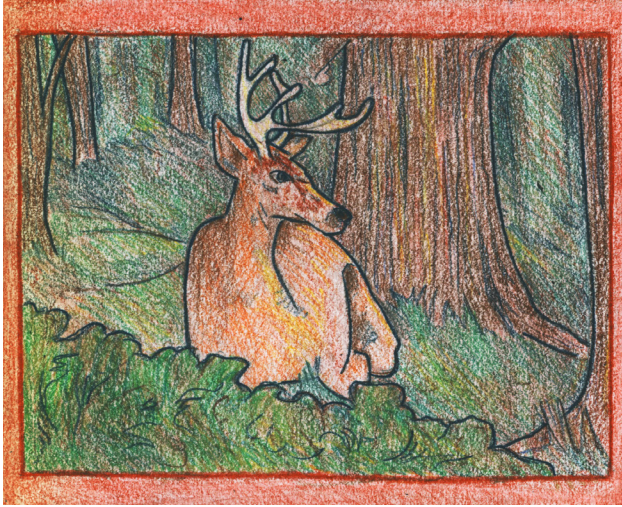


Mesolithic people lived in forests and woodlands, regularly close to rivers and lakes. Many sites reveal structures in small gatherings - perhaps best thought of as places occupied at particular times of the year, as groups moved around the landscape, undertaking a wide range of activities. At Star Carr, multiple structures have been found at the edge of a lake, and a number of wooden platforms extending into the lake edge show where occupants may have fished, taken boats out into the lake, or hunted in the reedbeds. It seems people were moving along coastlines, in river valleys, and on upland areas, such as the Pennines (including sites just outside of Rochdale!). Sites like Star Carr suggest long and repeated occupation, whereas others may simply represent a single person, or a small group stopping for just an hour or two, before moving on.

BRONZE AGE

IRON AGE

HOW MESOLITHIC PEOPLE LIVED



People in the Mesolithic were hunter gatherers, using a wide array of things in the environment. They shared their landscape with a variety of animals, including red deer, elk (which you might recognise as American moose), roe deer, aurochs (massive wild cows), wild boar, beaver, fox, wolf, bear, badger, wildcat and pine marten, many of which they hunted and used for their meat, bones, antler, hides and fur. They also hunted bird species, fished, and used marine resources, such as shellfish. But these were not carnivorous cavemen - plants also played an important part of their diet, including a range of seeds, nuts, fruits and roots.

MESOLITHIC

NEOLITHIC



In order to hunt, forage, gather and fish Mesolithic groups would have been mobile, moving through the landscape, visiting a wide range of different habitats in different seasons, from river valleys and forests to coasts and uplands. At the site of Formby, we can see footprints of humans and a number of other species, including aurochs, red deer and cranes preserved in mud that would have been part of a wetland environment at that time. This gives us an incredible snapshot of Mesolithic humans moving through this environment, maybe even tracking an animal, or looking for plant foods. Some of these journeys may have been long, but others may have been much shorter, moving around a number of well-used areas in a single valley or coast, re-occupying the same sites numerous times.

BRONZE AGE

IRON AGE

MESOLITHIC TECHNOLOGY



Drawing: Amelia Halls

In Mesolithic Britain, there was no metal or pottery, so tools and artefacts were made from flint, and a range of organic materials, including bone, antler, wood and animal skins. People were expert flint knappers, taking raw flint and working it with 'hammerstones' and antler beams to produce flint 'flakes' and 'blades', which were then turned into a wide range of tools, used for butchery, plant processing, bone and antler working, scraping hides, bead making and anything else that needed robust tools. The most iconic flint tool in the Mesolithic was the 'microlith', a small worked flint that could be used to make 'composite tools', such as arrows, which had many microliths attached to them. Alongside flints, Mesolithic arrows were also tipped with antler points made from red deer, like the 'barbed antler points' from Star Carr in Yorkshire.

Barbed antler point made by Nick Overton



MESOLITHIC

NEOLITHIC



Not all artefacts found at Mesolithic sites were tools; excavations have found beads made from stone and amber, including a unique engraved pendant from Star Carr, 'amulets' made from animal bones and other exciting objects, such as the Star Carr red deer 'frontlets'. These were made from the top of a red deer skull with the antlers attached, and some had holes cut into them, suggesting they may have been worn by humans, perhaps for hunting or for use in important ceremonies.

BRONZE AGE

IRON AGE

MESOLITHIC BELIEFS



Mesolithic people had a complicated relationship with their dead; some were buried in caves, and later on some were cremated, but others were intentionally disarticulated and separated into different parts. These parts were carried around, and deposited in a number of different places, including caves, and places associated with water. Archaeologists think Mesolithic humans believed that the remains of their dead continued to be alive, or retained a spirit, making it important to keep them with them, or place them in significant locations. The selection of caves and watery sites suggests a focus on places of change, between land and water, or between above and below ground, perhaps as places that allowed peoples' spirits to transition from the bones into an afterlife, or spirit-world.

MESOLITHIC

NEOLITHIC



Studies of hunter-gatherer groups living today suggest Mesolithic humans may have understood much of their world as being 'alive', with animals, plants and even landscape features having the potential to possess powerful spirits. As a result, the daily life of humans would include many interactions with other parts of their world, which were alive, just like them. The red deer antler frontlets, which may have been worn by people in important ceremonies, provides a good example of Mesolithic humans communicating with other parts of their world, in this case, the red deer they hunted, or perhaps guardian spirits that watched over red deer and human hunters.

BRONZE AGE

IRON AGE

MESOLITHIC SITES



FORMBY BEACH

The beach at Formby is an amazing Mesolithic site that is within easy reach of Manchester. The National Trust run tours showing members of the public Mesolithic human, animal and bird prints that have been preserved for millenia, and are now being exposed by tidal erosion.

"These traces of our prehistoric ancestors are a fascinating, fragile and finite evocation of our distant past." Jamie Lund, Archaeologist.

MESOLITHIC

NEOLITHIC

FORMBY FOOTPRINTS

During the later Mesolithic the area we now call Formby would have been a coastal wetland used by humans, animals and birds. During hot summers some tracks were baked hard in the sun, only to be then covered in sand. This is how the footprints have been preserved for us to discover.

When you go to see the tracks you will be able to identify the creatures that produced them. However, you can also see which direction they were travelling, and if they are associated with other prints. Each tide reveals a new episode before it is washed away for ever. What will you discover when you visit?

Formby Beach, Victoria Rd, Formby, Liverpool, L37 1LJ. formby@nationaltrust.org.uk, 01704 878591

Photograph: Red Deer print, Alison Burns



BRONZE AGE

IRON AGE

MESOLITHIC

3D PRINTED BARBED ANTLER POINTS



These barbed antler points are characteristic Mesolithic artefacts. The examples above were produced by archaeologists at the University of Manchester. These experimental objects have then been scanned and 3D printed so that your school can have one in the teaching collection.