

Stone Age Camp



The evidence represents a temporary stone age camp dating to the Middle stone age (Mesolithic). A camp of this type was used by hunter-gatherer people who would hunt for their meat and gather fruit, nuts and vegetation rather than farm. The shelter is made of bent saplings from the woodland. There are signs of stone age crafts such as flintknapping and bow making as well as the remains of a meal. The people who occupied this site have left with most of their possessions leaving behind evidence of their stay.

The evidence is designed to suggest that this camp was occupied for a very short time rather than being used as a permanent house. This camp would not have been used by a large group, it could have sheltered around 2-3 people. This would be typical of a small mobile group in the Mesolithic, who did not have a permanent base but would move around the land with the seasons following the resources they needed to survive.

Overview of the Stone Age:

The stone age is the time period when humans were using stone to make tools with sharp edges. This is the earliest human time period. The beginning of the stone age is marked by archaeological finds of the first stones that have been shaped by a person. This evidence comes from Kenya and dates to 3.3 million years ago. The earliest evidence of stone age people in Britain dates to 900,000 years ago.

The stone age is the longest time period in human history covering 99% of the time that humans have existed. The most commonly found evidence of stone age people is stone tools. This doesn't mean that stone age people were only, or even mostly using stone tools. Stone tools are likely to survive over thousands or millions of years because they are not made of organic materials, like wood or bone, which rot easily. It is very likely that stone age people were using a wide variety of tools made out of organic materials that have simply rotted over time.

As the stone age covers such a long time it is divided into 3 periods during which people behaved in different ways. These periods are called the old, middle and new stone ages or Palaeolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic.

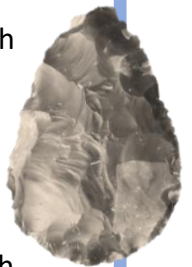
- **Palaeolithic** (c.900,000 years ago - 9,000 BCE in Britain):

The Palaeolithic is the oldest part of the stone age. It is the period in which we evolved to be modern human beings. During the Palaeolithic different human species lived side by side in many parts of the world including in Britain. At various points during the Palaeolithic species called Homo Antecessor, Homo Heidelbergensis, Neanderthals and Homo sapiens (modern humans) lived in Britain.

The earliest Palaeolithic evidence in Britain is stone tools found in Happisburgh in Norfolk. At the time these were used Britain was in the Ice Age and was still connected to Europe. During the Ice Age the climate in Britain went through a lot of changes. In the colder periods the early people would have abandoned the area and Britain was only occupied when it was warmer.

During the Palaeolithic people were mobile and travelled over wide distances. They would have come into contact with and hunted now extinct species such as woolly mammoth and woolly rhinoceros. Evidence left by humans includes stone tools, bones, beads and antlers. Towards the end of the Palaeolithic we also see art.

Famous Palaeolithic sites in Britain include Creswell Crags, Boxgrove, Kent's Cavern and Swanscombe.



Overview of the Stone Age:

- **Mesolithic** (9,000-4,000 BCE):

The Mesolithic is also known as the middle stone age. During this period people were hunter-gatherers and it is believed most of them moved around the landscape with the seasons. People would hunt deer and wild boar and fish as well as gathering wild food such as hazel nuts.

Stone tools from this period are different from those found in the Palaeolithic. During this time we see the first evidence of adzes (a woodworking tool). Mesolithic people also started making and using tiny stone tools called microliths. They would shape these tiny blades into arrowheads or knives or whatever they needed in their daily lives.

Evidence of houses from this period tends to show that a lot were quite small buildings. Archaeologists work out the size from the signs left in the soil of the remains of the house posts which give the footprint of the building. Famous British Mesolithic sites include Star Carr, Culverwell and Mount Sandel.

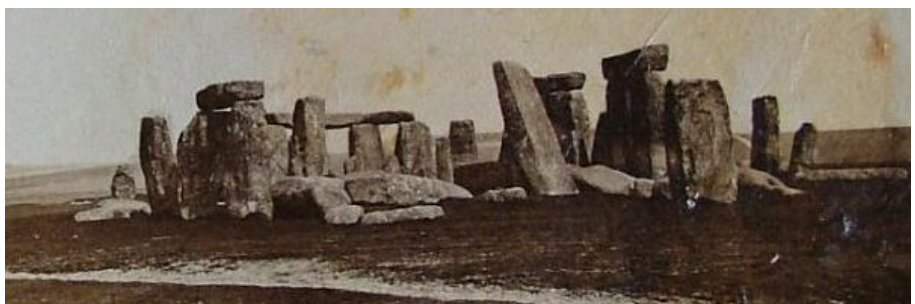


- **Neolithic** (4,000-2,500 BCE):

The Neolithic is also known as the new stone age. In this period we see the first evidence of large groups of people permanently settling and beginning to plant crops and farm domesticated animals such as pigs and cattle.

During this time forests began to be cleared to make way for farmland and polished stone axes are a very commonly found Neolithic tool. Pottery began to be made for the first time in Britain and we also see the first signs of large monuments such as big burial mounds and henge monuments. This period sees the beginnings of warfare with arrowheads found stuck in human bones at some sites. Archaeologists also find evidence of larger buildings, which would be needed with a more settled lifestyle.

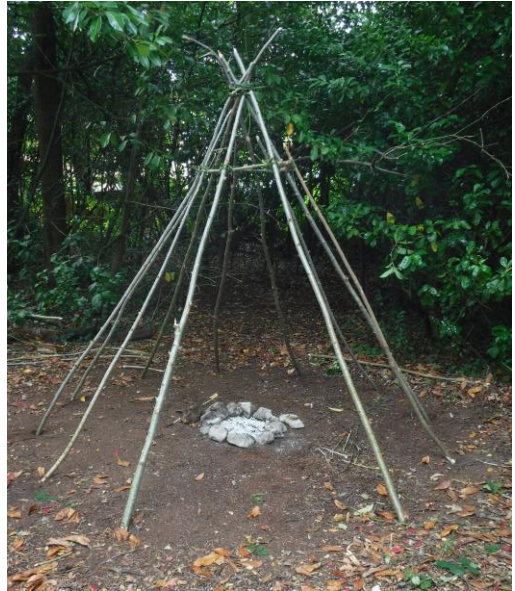
Famous Neolithic sites in Britain include Stonehenge, Skara Brae, Grimes Graves and Silbury Hill.



Evidence

Shelter:

This is an example of a temporary structure based on evidence from the Mesolithic. It would have been the home to a small hunting party of Mesolithic people for a few nights. The structure would probably be covered with a roof of sewn animal skins which would be too precious to leave at the site and would be carried with the band when they left. All that would remain would be the frame. The evidence archaeologists are likely to find of this structure are small holes where the wooden stakes have been dug into the ground which would appear as dark marks in the soil.



The structure is made of ash and rowan wood that was cut down with a Mesolithic woodworking tool called an adze. You can find evidence of the stumps where the trees were cut throughout the woodland. Holes were dug for the posts using a digging stick which can be found behind one of the posts at the back of the structure.

The frame is tied together using twisted bramble stems. All materials would have been sourced locally as the hunting band would not have carried the shelter with them.

Archaeological Evidence:

Archaeologists use evidence of fires and postholes alongside other material that can be dated to the Mesolithic to find out where camps like these were. The evidence suggests that Mesolithic people had seasonal base camps (an example is Star Carr) and from these camps hunting and gathering parties set out and created temporary camps as and when they needed to gather food resources.



Discussion questions:

What is this?

What is it made of?

How was it made?

Who would have used it

How many people could have fit in it?

Evidence

Hearths:



There is evidence of 2 hearths or fireplaces left in the camp, one inside the shelter and one outside it. Hearths are very common evidence and are found at archaeological sites where people were living. Fire would have been an essential in Mesolithic times for cooking and for many of the crafts that were necessary for survival. The fires at this camp have been used for cooking and for heating up glue to fix an arrow. The fire inside the shelter is surrounded by rocks. These rocks pick up the heat from the fire and radiate it even after the fire has died down. Leaving these rocks inside would keep the stone age people warm overnight.

There is also evidence of how the fire was started. In the stone age the most common method of starting fires would be using friction. This would be similar to bow drill methods that modern bush craft instructors use nowadays with a fire drill being quickly rubbed against a fire board to create a hot ember that could be used to start a fire. There is evidence of the remains of a half burned fire board near the external hearth. This would have been burned because it was used up. There is also a fire drill that has been thrown away. It is about a metre from the hearth towards the track to the camp.



Archaeological Evidence:

Hearths are a very common find on archaeological sites. They are very good evidence that there was human activity. Fire by friction would not normally leave any evidence as the materials needed for it are organic and would rot but we can assume this method was used as cultures nowadays still use it to start fires.



Discussion questions:

What is this?

Why is it here?

How was it made?

Do you think this was done on purpose?

Evidence

Stone tool making:

Evidence has been left of stone tool making (flintknapping). There is a pile of flint shards which is the left over material from making stone tools (also called debitage). Flint was used as it has very sharp edges so must be handled extremely carefully. Any sharp piece of flint could be used for cutting jobs but if these pieces were shaped further into tools they would probably be taken with the hunting band when they left while the debris would be abandoned at the camp.

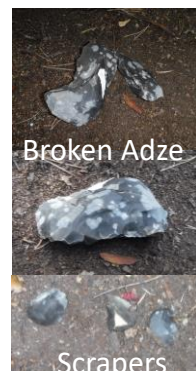


People in the Mesolithic often made very small flint tools called microliths. There is evidence of this in the small lumps of flint in the pile of flint nodules to the side of the waste pile. These lumps are called microblade cores and are a common find at Mesolithic sites. The large lumps of flint (known as nodules) would have been brought to the camp from their source to be knapped when they were needed.



There is also evidence that the stone Age people were trying to make an adze. To the left of the waste pile facing the shelter there are 2 pieces of flint lying separately that can be fitted back together to form a crude adze. This adze broke while it was being knapped so was abandoned at the site. Any completed tool would have been taken away.

Other evidence left includes a stone on the waste pile that was used for making the stone tools. This red stone is a different material to the flint and is broken so was abandoned. Flint would be shaped into tools using these stones (called hammerstones) and also antlers or bones. There are also 3 small circular tools by the external hearth. These are called scrapers and were often used for cleaning animal skins that were to be turned into leather. These are small and could easily have been overlooked when the Mesolithic people left the site.



Archaeological Evidence:

Flint is a very common find on Mesolithic sites because it doesn't rot so survives to modern times. The shape of the flint tools is one of the ways archaeologists can work out that a site dates to the Mesolithic.

Discussion Questions:

What is this material?

What would it be used for?

How did it get here?

Why was it left here?

Who would have made this?

Evidence

Bow and arrow making:

There is various evidence of bow and arrow making activities scattered around the camp suggesting that the stone age people were fixing arrows and making bows at the site. There are 2 arrows at the camp. One is in the process of being fixed by the hearth inside the shelter and was overlooked when the camp was abandoned. There are feathers underneath it that need to be attached to the end to finish the arrow. The second arrow is in the bushes facing away from the shelter beyond the external hearth and stone tool waste pile. It could have been lost after it was shot at an animal in the clearing. Both arrows are tipped with microliths that are typical for the period.



Further evidence that the Mesolithic people were fixing arrows is by the external hearth where there is a flat rock with a black material on it. This is a form of prehistoric glue made out of pine resin mixed with charcoal. This would be heated up next to the fire and used to stick the microliths to the tip of the arrow. If you follow the track through the woods towards the roundhouse there is a pine tree at the back of the preschool that has been hit by an adze to release the resin. This feels sticky to the touch. Other evidence left includes a bow that broke while it was being made. This has been abandoned towards the bank to the left of the external hearth when facing the shelter.

Archaeological Evidence:

Mesolithic bows have been found in Holmegaard Denmark preserved in bogs and arrows tipped with microliths have been found in waterlogged conditions in Sweden. We find microliths in this country that show breaks that suggest they were shot at something and broke with the impact.



Discussion Questions:

- What was happening here?
- What materials were used?
- What was being made?
- Did it go to plan?
- Do we do this today?

Evidence

Food Remains:

There is evidence of the stone age people preparing and eating food in two places at the camp. In the external hearth there are burned and crushed deer bones. It was common for stone age people to break bones to extract the marrow from the insides after cutting the meat from the outside. Once all the meat, fat and marrow had been taken the bones would be discarded and thrown into the bushes or into a fire. The bones show signs of charring and of being broken to pieces. This can also be used as evidence for why the Mesolithic people were at the site – to hunt deer. There is also evidence that the occupants of the camp were gathering and processing hazelnuts. In both hearth there are burned hazelnuts which were being roasted in the embers like chestnuts.



In the hearth in the shelter there are also raw hazelnuts by the side of the fire and hazelnut shells on a flat rock that was used as an anvil for breaking the shells with a rounded stone by the side of it that was used for cracking the nuts. The insides would have been eaten by the hunter-gatherers so only the shells remain.



Archaeological Evidence:

Evidence of hazelnut shells, often charred have been found at a number of Mesolithic sites. One example is Staffin Bay on Skye. Hazelnuts are a great food source as they last a long time and are full of fats and proteins.

Burned and broken bones are also a common find. They show that hunter-gatherers were trying to get the most nutrition possible out of the animals they killed. They would also be used to make objects and tools.

Discussion Questions:

Do you recognise any of these remains?

How did they get here?

Who would have done this?

Why was this left?

Do we still do this?

Evidence

Lost Leather Pouches:

Two leather pouches have been planted in the woods next to the stand of rowan trees with 4 stumps where posts were cut down for the shelter. The pouches are hidden to the left of the stumps at ground level in a holly bush.

The pouches could have been lost by someone who was cutting down the tree when the leather holding the pouch to their belt snapped. One of the pouches is a kit for carrying an ember with you to make fire starting easier. The other represents contains a number of objects highlighting the range of activities that stone age people could have been involved in. Since most of these crafts are organic the remains would usually rot and not survive to be found.



The fire carrying tube contains 2 twists of plant material. The fluffier one is tree bark and the harder one is clematis fibres. These could be used for making string – known as cordage.

Also in the roll is a birch bark tube wrapped tightly with honeysuckle inside, surrounding thistle down and, in the centre, a King Alfred's cake fungus. This material could hold an ember and if the roll was very tightly wrapped it would slowly smoulder rather than burning through the material quickly as the oxygen is restricted. This would allow the person to carry an ember with them that would allow them to easily start a fire.



Archaeological Evidence:

Evidence of this kind of material is rare as it would rot in most conditions. A similar fire carrying pouch was found on a body found frozen in the alps known as the Ice man, and similar things are used by aboriginal communities around the world.

Evidence

Lost Leather Pouches:

The second pouch contains a wide variety of things. There are 3 stone tools. Two are tools called burins which can be used for engraving or piercing. The other is an arrowhead that dates to an earlier time period. It could have been kept by the Mesolithic person as a good luck charm or amulet or simply be something they picked up on their travels.



This is the beginnings of a shell necklace made with nettle string. The shells would have been collected from the coast and pierced. There are the remains of nettle fibre processing by the shelter's hearth.

This material is sinew. It is the tissue that connects muscle to bone. It was used by prehistoric people as a kind of string, as if it is applied wet to something it tightens and becomes a strong binding when it dries. It can be processed by pounding it with a rock or a stick and can also be chewed. It could be used to tie an arrowhead to an arrow.



This is a fire starting kit made of iron pyrites and flint. If you strike the iron pyrites with the flint tool (sometimes called a fabricator) you get a spark that can be used as a source of heat to start your fire. A kit like this was found at the Mesolithic site of Star Carr. It would probably be used to light a piece of fungus to form an ember to start a fire.

Needles like this were commonly made from bone and are known from the Palaeolithic period onwards. This needle is strung with a long piece of sinew. It would be used to sew clothes together just like a modern needle



Discussion Questions:

- What is this?**
- Why is it here?**
- What was it used for?**
- Who made it?**
- What was it made from?**

Full list of evidence left.

- Camp site:
 - Shelter:
 - Posts made of rowan and ash, with an ash hoop, tied with bramble stems.
 - Digging stick used for post holes behind shelter.
 - Central hearth surrounded by stones.
 - Burned hazelnuts in hearth
 - Anvil stone with hazelnut shells and hammerstone used for cracking.
 - Arrow in process of being fletched.
 - Feathers for fletching under arrow.
 - External Hearth:
 - Burnt bone fragments in hearth.
 - Burned hazelnuts in hearth.
 - Flat rock with remains of resin glue.
 - 3 flint scrapers.
 - Burned fire board.
 - Flintknapping Area:
 - Pile of debitage.
 - Hammerstone.
 - Flint nodules.
 - Blade cores.
 - Broken adze.
 - Surrounding area:
 - Lost arrow in bushes beyond knapping area.
 - Broken bow by bank.
 - Fire drill to the side of hearth.
- Woodland:
 - Stumps where posts cut using flint adze.
 - Pine tree with section cut to release resin.
 - Lost leather pouch containing craft materials next to tree with 4 stumps.
 - Lost leather fire carrying roll.

What does it mean?

Once everyone has had a look at the evidence it's time to start piecing together the story of what happened here. The children can act as detectives using the clues left by the stone age people to piece together the story of the stone age camp. To help them do this here are some prompts that might make them think about particular aspects of the evidence:

- Who came to the woodland?
- How many of them were there?
- Why were they here?
- What did they change?
- How long did they stay?
- How did they spend their time?
- How were they like us?
- How were they different?
- Why did they leave?
- Did they take anything with them?
- Why did they leave these things behind?
- Would you like to meet them?



Further Projects

Once the children have pieced together the story of the stay at the Stone Age camp there is further work that can be done to discover more about the stone age and get a greater understanding of the evidence left:

- Using the evidence left as a starting point children could research the objects and try to find artefacts that look like them in text books, on the internet or in local museums. They could work in groups and present their findings to their class mates.
- Children could compare the evidence left with objects we use in our modern lives. They could try to find the modern equivalent of the items they've identified (e.g. a flint blade and a modern knife or the fire place and a radiator). This can help them think about the similarities and differences between now and then.
- The children could look at how we normally find out about the past. They could research archaeologists and what they do to find evidence. This could lead to a discussion of what would survive being buried in the ground and what would rot, helping them to understand why we don't know everything about the stone age.
- The ancient crafts that the evidence represents could be looked at in more detail. There are many videos of flintknapping, bow and arrow making and firelighting using King Alfred's cakes on youtube that could be watched. Comparisons could be made with crafts that people carry out nowadays.
- Children could take examples of the objects left at the camp and make a museum. They could write captions for the objects and display them for their parents.
- Archaeologists often make reconstruction drawings of sites to show people what they would have looked like when they were used. Using the story they have worked out as a starting point, children could draw what they think it would have looked like when the stone age people were at the camp.
- Building on this children could act out a play based on what they think happened at the camp. This could be done in groups to each other or to parents/teachers.