

The Palaeolithic & Mesolithic Ages

Early humans roamed over Western Europe from the time Britain was still joined to the Continent. Their progress across England was limited during certain periods by the spread of glacial ice sheets, which at their furthest southern extent reached as far as the Thames valley.

During the warmer periods between the Ice Ages, the so-called “interglacials”, the climate was warm enough for oak forests to spread over the fertile parts of the country, promoting the extension of animal species northwards, followed by man who hunted them for food and clothing.

Human presence is indicated by the finding of stone tools, weapons and working floors, and the rare recovery of fossilised bones. Large numbers of stone tools have been uncovered in England, but very few have been uncovered in working and living

areas; lacking significant find spots, these examples are only useful as specimens. Traces of mobile hunter-gatherers are mostly found in the open country, on areas of hilltop gravel, or on the banks of ancient rivers. Very few vestiges of such sites remain, though at Swanscombe in Kent the find-spot of a human skull some 350,000 years old is now a protected site.

Although such localities lack appeal, of more interest are the remains located in rock shelters and caves. It must be stressed that few of these early groups lived in caves or other shelters, and such places may have become much altered since they provided refuges. In any case, the living area was usually the cave mouth and entrance, the interiors being dark and moist, and occasionally the habitat of the ferocious cave bear (Fig.1.).

Fig.1. Skulls of the savage cave bear in Skipton Museum, North Yorkshire. These formidable beasts vied with early humans for the possession of caverns during the last Ice Age.



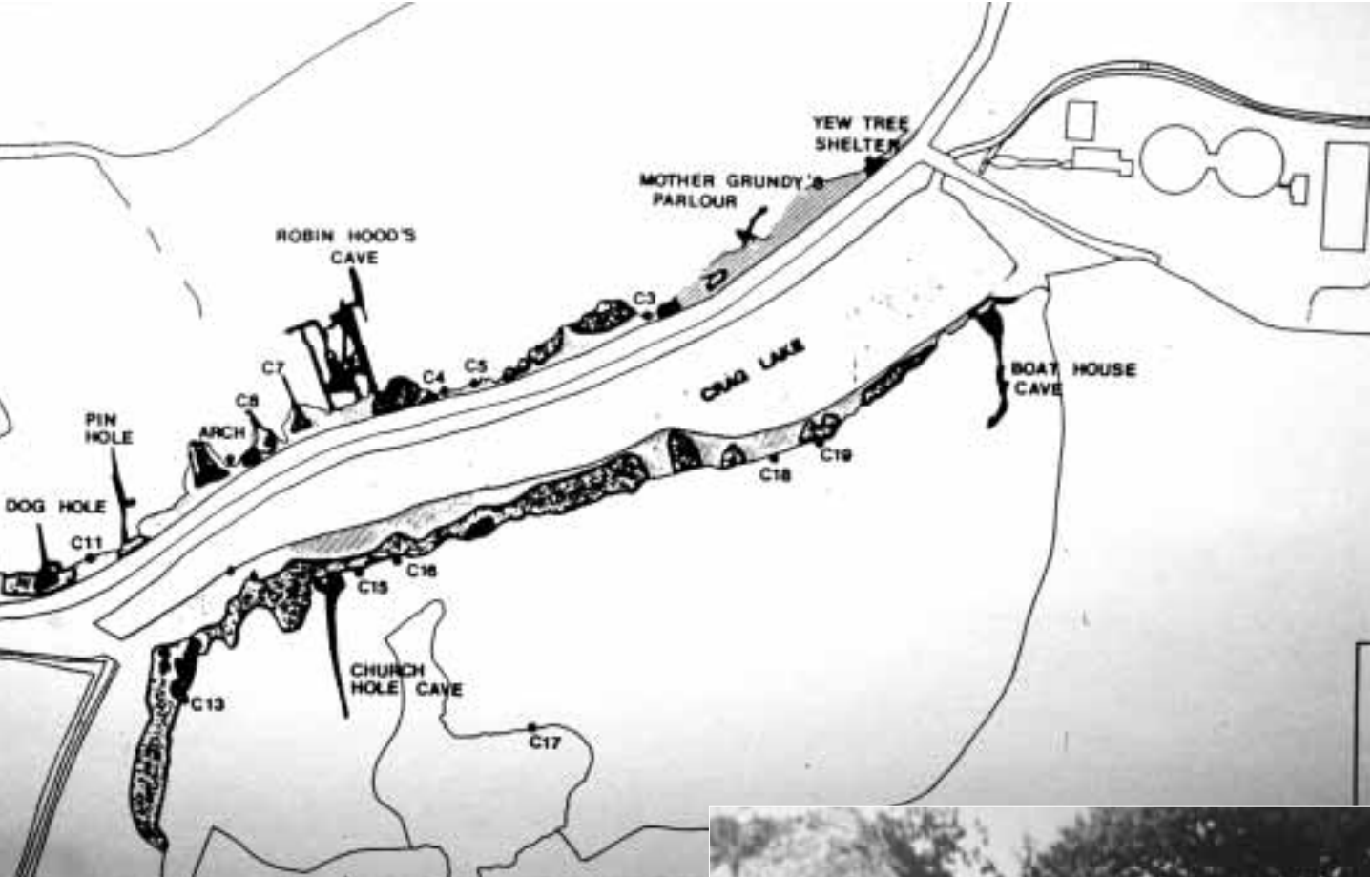


Fig.2. Plan of the Creswell Crags ravine in North Derbyshire, a classic site of the last Ice Age in Britain. The main caves are named, and the two magnesian limestone rock faces are riddled with some 20 caverns and shelters.

Fig.3. The Pin Hole during an early excavation in the 1870s. The contents of the cave were literally shovelled out, and much valuable information on the site was lost forever.



No English caves have produced examples of painted art, although a few have yielded carved bone, tooth or antler ornaments. Several inhabited caverns are open to the public; they include the Creswell Crags complex in North Derbyshire (Figs.2&3.) Here a magnesian limestone ravine is cut by a small stream, and its two rock faces are riddled with a series of caves and rock shelters (Fig.4.). The larger of these sites was seasonally occupied by hunter-fisher communities of the late Palaeolithic period, although there was earlier sparse habitation by Neanderthals. The earliest tenure was circa 43,000 BC, then 30-28,000 BC, and finally around 10,000 BC. Traces of later occupation have also been found down to Roman and later times.



Fig.4. An aerial view of the ravine from the south. The Pin Hole is centre left, and the lake on the right is a comparatively recent feature. Animal herds roaming the gorge were comparatively easy prey for the hunters who lived here during the arctic summers.



Fig.5. Robin Hood's Cave is an extensive system, with two entrances. Homo Sapien hunters lived in the cave entrances, and did not penetrate any distance inside. Large numbers of animal bones were recovered from the cave during digs in the 1870s.



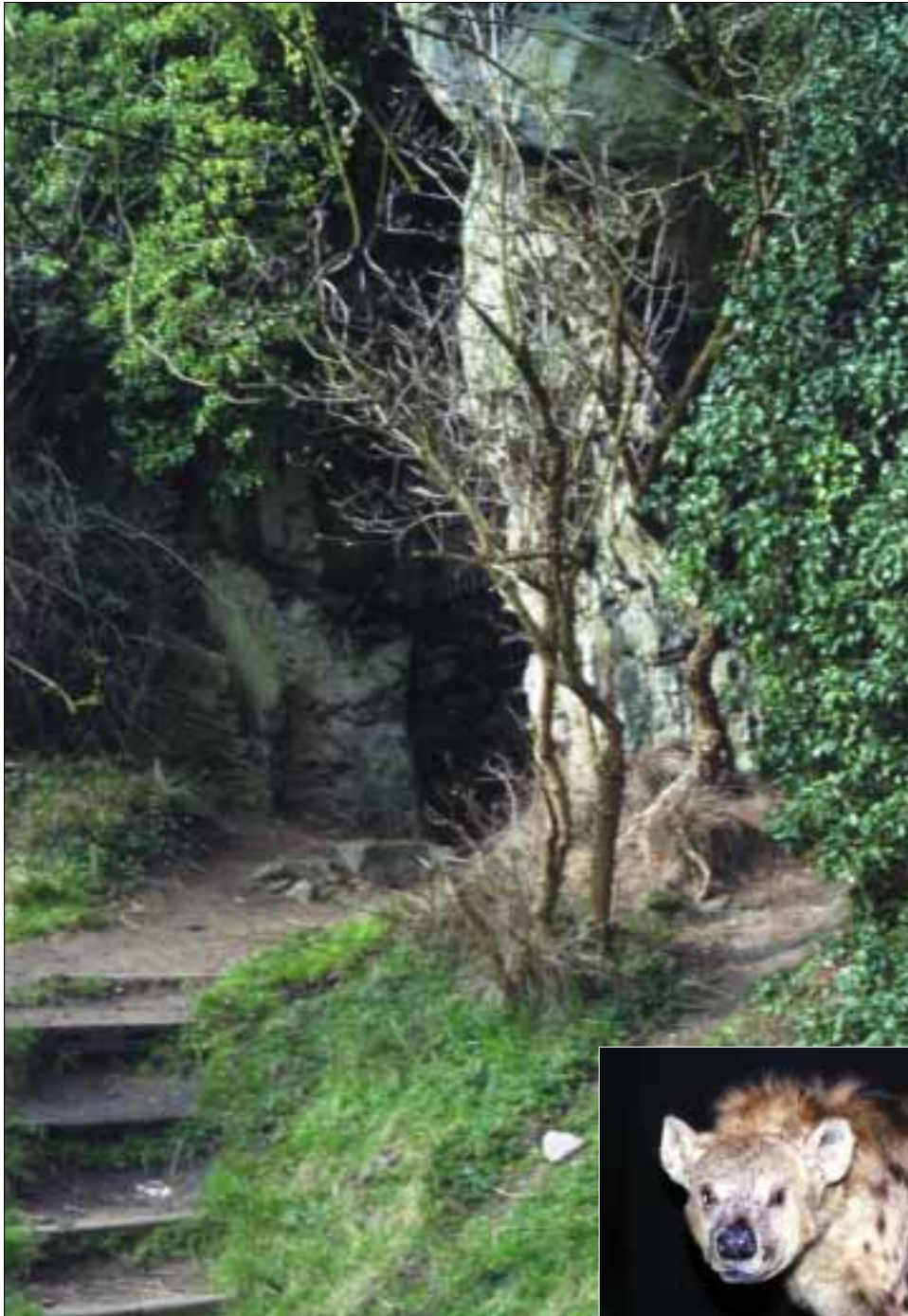


Fig.6. The Pin Hole gets its name from its narrow, diminishing length. It was the earliest of the caves at Creswell to be inhabited, by bands of Neanderthals, from around 45,000BC.



Fig.7. Another rival to humans for cave occupation was the hyena. Judging by the remains found at Creswell, these scavengers existed in considerable numbers in the locality.



Fig.8. The early humans who seasonally occupied the Creswell caves were superb craftsmen in flint, bone and antler. This splendid bone pin was found in Church Hole cave.

Fig.9. Found in Robin Hood's Cave, this horse's head incised on a piece of reindeer rib is one of the rare examples of representational art found in Ice Age Britain.



A Visitor Centre explains the site, and guided tours of certain caves are available if pre-booked. The main sites are north of the B6042, which presently runs through the gorge. From east to west they include Mother Grundy's Parlour, a horseshoe shaped cavern with a cramped passage leading off north-east. Numerous poorly-documented finds include flints and split bones. Robin Hood's Cave (Fig.5.) has two entrances leading to two main chambers. Many fine flint tools have been found here, plus a carving of a horse's head on a reindeer rib and the bones of many extinct animal species, including the woolly rhinoceros. The Pin Hole (Fig.6.) is a narrow diminishing cave 15m long, occupied by Neanderthals and later used by hyenas (Fig.7.). Finds have been made of decorated bones including one doubtful specimen engraved with a human figure.

On the south side of the stream is Church Hole, a straight cave 60m long and lived in until Roman times. Finds here included a superb bone pin (Fig.8.). Most of the material from Creswell was passed on to Manchester Museum, where displays of some of it can be seen, although the incised horse's head (Fig.9.) is in the British Museum. Other material from Creswell consists of Neanderthal type hand axes made from pebbles found in the nearby stream (Fig.10.), and deer ribs embellished with designs carved with flint burins (Fig.11.). Flakes were struck off prepared cores as seen in Fig.12., which also shows the bone tools used in the striking.

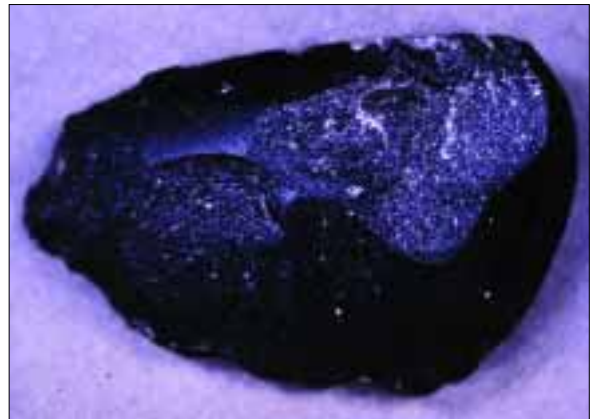


Fig.10. Hand axes are ubiquitous tools found all over the Palaeolithic world. This example is of Neanderthal design, and was made from a Bunter pebble taken from the stream at Creswell.



Fig.11. This strip of deer rib was carved with a geometric design made with a sharp flint graving tool or burin.



Fig.12. The flint core in the centre of the illustration had prepared flakes struck off it using the bone and antler tools placed alongside. The struck flakes can be seen around the core. They were turned into knives, scrapers, spearheads and other implements.

Fig.13. Typical flint blades from "Creswellian" sites such as Cheddar, and used for a variety of purposes such as blades, graters and burins.



Kent's Cavern, Torquay, now a show cave, was occupied by Palaeolithic hunters who left flint hand axes and laurel-leaf blades, as well as smaller blades similar to those found at Creswell. A few bone and antler tools have also been unearthed here. A piece of human mandible, carbon-dated to 30,000 BC, is the earliest evidence of modern man found in Britain. Profuse remains of Pleistocene animals have also been uncovered, many of which can be seen in the local museum at the resort.

The Cheddar Gorge contains a number of caves and fissures, the most famous being the Gough's Cave show cave. This site was inhabited between 12,000-8,000 BC, and recent excavations have revealed evidence of extensive hunting and processing of meat from the red deer and horse. Broken-up human bones, which suggested the cutting off of the meat and smashing for marrow extraction, hint at cannibalistic practices. Several thousand flint artefacts, mostly blades (Fig.13.), have also been unearthed here, plus a few carved bones. The latter includes two perforated batons, one made out of the humerus from a human arm. Finds can be seen in the Cheddar Caves Museum, together with animal bones from the same period, and the skeleton of the so-called "Cheddar Man", which is dated to very late in this period (around 7130 BC). Smaller sites include Flint Jack's Cave, Soldier's Hole, and Sun Hole, also lived in during the same time span as Gough's Cave.

On the northern edge of Langcliffe Scar, above Settle in North Yorkshire, is Victoria Cave, the most northerly English cavern inhabited at the end of the last Ice Age, and lying very close to the permanent ice sheets just to the north. Above the remains of hippopotamus, woolly rhino, hyena and elephant, were bear, fox and red deer bones, mixed with tools of the period, including harpoon points made from antler and red deer bone. Some of the finds from the cave are in Skipton Museum.

Between 12,000 and 4,000 BC the English climate gradually warmed up and small groups of food-gatherers, fishermen and hunters spread across the countryside. Around 8,000 BC the sea level had risen as a result of the melting of the ice, and had flooded the area now known as the North Sea. As a result Britain had become an island. The Mesolithic era, covering the period from around 10,000-4,200 BC, represented a transition from the wandering to a more settled way of life. On the coastal sites, groups of travellers collected shellfish, whose empty shells and other debris were left in large middens (Fig.14.).

Small and scattered transitory settlements still existed, usually on the higher ground, and on the lighter soils, such as a site at Abinger in Surrey where a primitive shelter may have existed, associated with several thousand microlithic flint tools, and a nearby water supply. The most famous Mesolithic camping site in England, Starr Carr near



Fig.14. Shell middens, such as the one illustrated, were formed by the hunter-gatherers of the early Mesolithic period, who collected the shellfish for food and dumped the waste product in often large piles that accumulated over time.

Scarborough, has nothing now left to see, although this organic platform, built on the edge of a glacial lake, housed several hunting and fishing families on a seasonal basis. The site has produced a wealth of finds including numbers of antler spears and harpoons (Fig.15.), bone mattocks (Fig.16.) flint axes, and red deer antler frontlets, the latter used as head-dresses, either for rituals or as disguises in hunting forays. The most common remains from this period are the tiny flint microliths used as hunting equipment in composite bows, spears or harpoons. There were some attempts at landscape management during this time, using stone axes for forest clearance.



Fig.15. Mesolithic spear and harpoon blades fashioned from deer antler; these were used to spear fish and hunt animals. The hole in one example is presumably for the weapon to be retrieved using a length of cord tied to it.

Fig.16. Bone mattocks from Star Carr. These were used to grub up roots and other vegetable foodstuffs. The specimen on the right still has part of the wooden handle preserved in the hole.

