

Britain's Oldest House?

By Julian Richards

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Mesolithic Britain was thought to have been inhabited by hunter-gatherers, constantly on the move in search of food; however, the recent excavation of a dwelling in Northumbria reveals our Stone Age ancestors to have been ingenious and elaborate house builders. Julian Richards re-assesses a distant past.

The Mesolithic past

The Mesolithic, or Middle Stone Age, can seem a very remote and 'mysterious' time. It started in about 10,000BC, as the last Ice Age ended. Imagine northern Britain and everything north of this lying under vast ice sheets, with so much water locked up in the ice that sea levels could be 50m (160ft) below those of today.

Animals returned to graze, and with the animals came people.

What we now know as Britain was part of the European landmass in the Mesolithic Age, and was joined to France and Denmark. And the shallow fishing grounds in the North Sea that are now known as the Dogger Bank were then a huge island.

But as the ice melted and retreated northwards, the seas rose, just as they are doing today, and the newly shaped lands became covered first in arctic tundra and then in dense mixed forests. Animals returned to graze, and with the animals came people.

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The people that returned to these newly habitable lands were not settled farmers, but were hunters and gatherers. It is thought that they must have been constantly on the move in order to survive, searching for wild foods such as nuts and berries, and tracking wild animals for meat and skins. We assume that since they were so mobile, they lived in temporary structures that were light, easily dismantled and portable.

Unfortunately, if this is the case, there are unlikely to be many physical traces for archaeologists to find. So, even though there are a few exceptions in Britain and Scandinavia where dwellings of some sort have been found, all that can usually be expected of a site where Mesolithic people lived is a scatter of finely worked and very distinctive stone tools.

Buried clues

The fact that we have found so little from Mesolithic times is what made the discovery that I heard about last year all the more remarkable. When amateur archaeologist John Davies spotted flint tools eroding out of the edge of a sandy cliff face near the village of Howick, in Northumberland, he reported his finds. When Newcastle University archaeologist Clive Waddington went to investigate, he realised that this wasn't just a scatter of flints on the surface, but the first indications of something deeply buried.

A small exploratory excavation showed that this was a Mesolithic house, dating back, on the basis of the flint tools found inside it, perhaps as much as 10,000 years. When I was told about it, this was what really intrigued me, as even at first sight, this was far more than the expected flimsy structure; it was both substantially built and very early in date. What could this, potentially the oldest house in Britain, tell us about life in the Mesolithic, and would it change some of our existing ideas?



Mesolithic footprints on the coast at Howick ©

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The excavation was far from easy. The sand was either baked rock hard, in which case all the vital colour differences that distinguished the individual layers simply disappeared, or it was wet - good for the colours but too soft to walk on. Boots were banned; it was either socks or bare feet. But somehow, over many weeks, the fragile structure of the house was teased out. It consisted of a shallow circular hollow, cut into the sand, a small segment of which had disappeared over the edge of the cliff.

Within this lay the structural evidence - a circle of substantial post holes, with charcoal stains in their bases, and a number of smaller stake holes, some angled in from outside the hollow. But what were even more remarkable were all the hearths that lay inside the house, shallow depressions filled with charcoal and burnt nutshells, flecked with fragments of bone, the evidence for 10,000-year-old meals.

Ancestral nut roast

It was the nutshells, those of the hazel nuts that had survived burial due to having been charred, that provided some of the most important evidence for both the way in which the house had been used, and for how long. Some of the hearths appeared to have been used solely for roasting



Excavations of the fireplaces revealed some startling finds ©

nuts, and the sheer quantity of shells suggested that large quantities of food were being gathered and preserved here, presumably for consumption in the winter when food would have been scarce and hard to find. This was one of the first indications that the house might have been lived in on a permanent basis rather than seasonally, as part of a cycle of migration in search of food.

But there was another way in which the nutshells could provide information about the house. Radiocarbon dating relies on measuring the radioactive carbon absorbed during their lifetime by all living things. A tree, for example, will absorb its carbon throughout its life, with the result that the inner ring of a large tree may be hundreds of years older in radiocarbon terms than the outermost ring that grew the year the tree died. Nuts, in contrast, grew and fell or were picked in one season, so they only contain one year's radioactive carbon. This is what makes them such ideal samples for precise radiocarbon dating.

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Alex Bayliss, of English Heritage's Scientific Dating Division, realised that the house uncovered at Howick offered a unique dating opportunity. There were thousands of ideal dating samples in the form of nutshells to choose from; the resources were available to date up to 20 samples (radiocarbon dating is an expensive process); and the best part was that there was a sequence of hearths from inside the house, one on top of the other, sometime separated by layers of clean sand.

This meant that Alex knew the order in which the dates from individual hearths should fall, the earliest at the bottom of the sequence, and this would help to narrow down the range of each date. Had 20 samples from the interior of the house been dated without knowledge of their order, then the best that could probably have been hoped for would have been to say that the house fell within a 400- or 500-year date range. With the information from the sequence, possible only because the house had been so carefully excavated, Alex was able to state that the house was built in about 7,600 BC and, even more remarkably, that it had been lived in for perhaps as long as 100 years.

A new understanding

So, does this house, sturdily built of



A reindeer head-dress found at Star Carr, a Mesolithic site in Yorkshire ©

substantial wooden posts, where, according to the dating evidence, several generations of Mesolithic hunters built hearths to cook their meals and keep warm, change the way in which we think about life at this time?

There are clearly places within Britain and the continent of Europe where the natural resources would allow all year round occupation. Howick is one of these, sitting on the coast, with a combination of resources based on the land - such as animals, flint for tools, wood for construction and fuel - and on the sea, which would provide fish, seals, sea birds and their eggs, and shellfish. There is even a nearby source of fresh water, a stream that investigation proved had flowed at the time that the house was occupied.

Mesolithic people were prepared to modify their natural environment in order to improve their hunting grounds.

There is also evidence, exclusively from the British Isles, that Mesolithic people were prepared to modify their natural environment in order to improve their hunting grounds. Some of this evidence has been found on the inter-tidal mud flats of the Severn Estuary, far south of Howick. Here, Martin Bell from Reading University is investigating a submerged Mesolithic forest, where many of the tree trunks are burnt - evidence of the deliberate burning of woodland.

Burning is done to create an open space, a clearing that will then be re-colonised by useful trees such as hazel, and will also attract animals to graze, easy targets for waiting hunters. Elsewhere there is also evidence for the increasing use of the bow and arrow for hunting at this time; many of the very characteristic 'microliths' (literally tiny flints) from this period were used as points or barbs on spear or arrow tips.

Rituals and ceremony

There was another weapon in the Mesolithic hunter's armoury - the weapon of magic. Denmark shows great cultural similarities with Britain at this time, hardly surprisingly as it is simply part of the great North Sea area that is sometimes known as Doggerland. Here carved amber animals and engravings on bone have been found, that seem best explained as totems to help the hunter, or to have been used by shamans in hunting rituals.

And deer skulls have been found at a site at Starr Carr in Yorkshire; each of these has the antlers shaved down to

make them lighter, and holes have been drilled in the skull so that they could be worn as headdresses. These are not 'ordinary' objects; they have no obvious function, and they can best be explained as having been used in some important and extraordinary ceremony.

A child is buried with a stone exactly the same shape as a tongue placed in his mouth.

So all the evidence, from the sturdily built house to the available resources, and the hints of social rituals and ceremonies, suggest that permanent settlement was possible in Mesolithic times. In Denmark there are sites where, although the houses are quite flimsy, they are close to human burials, some showing signs of elaborate funeral ceremonies.



An elaborate child's burial ©

A child is buried with a stone exactly the same shape as a tongue placed in his mouth. By the side of a woman buried with an elaborate necklace of stags' teeth lies a baby, cradled in the wing of a swan. These signs seem to be an attempt, for the first time, to mark out territory, to establish ownership of a place and its resources.

The meaning of home

But did people really settle down in the way that we assume that they started to do, with the coming of agriculture, about 4,000 years later? Surprisingly, the evidence from some Mesolithic communities that lived by the coast is that they weren't eating the abundant marine food that lay on their doorstep - so can we assume that people behaved in a 'logical' way, using all the resources available to them and settling down permanently at the first possible opportunity? It is impossible to be sure.



Howick house - under construction ©

Like so many tantalising glimpses into the distant past, it could not take us deep enough into the minds of the generations of Mesolithic hunters.

Clive and his team built a replica of the Howick House (near to the original), based on the archaeological evidence that they had so carefully observed over the duration of the excavation. For all of us that were involved in its construction (during November, in Northumberland) the experiment was driven by the need to get the roof on, light a fire and get warm indoors. To us, the effort of building the replica meant that it was now 'home', somewhere that bound us to that place and which, had we been hunters and gatherers, we would have filled with food and not strayed far from.

But we were 21st-century archaeologists, we were all used to the idea of 'home' as a fixed place. How was the house used 10,000 years ago? We knew it was a unique structure that had taught us a lot, and suggested that we should not simply think of the Mesolithic as a time of nomads in flimsy tents. Unfortunately, however, like so many tantalising glimpses into the distant past, it could not take us deep enough into the minds of the generations of Mesolithic hunters that had built it and lived in it, so far back in our past.

Find out more

Books

Early Man in Britain and Ireland: an Introduction to the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic by Alex Morrison (Croon Helm, 1980)

Star Carr Revisited by AJ Legge and PA Rowley-Conwy (University College London, 1988)

Hengistbury Head Dorset: Volume 2-The Late Upper Palaeolithic and Early Mesolithic Sites by RNE Barton (University of Oxford Committee for Archaeology, 1992, 1989)

Prehistoric Settlements by Bob Bewley (Batsford/English Heritage, 1994)

About the author

Julian Richards has been a professional archaeologist for over 30 years. He has extensive experience of working in the field, surveying and excavating prehistoric and later sites. He has written and presented many series for the BBC including *Meet the Ancestors*, *Mapping the Town* and *Blood of the Vikings*.