

The Ice Age in the East Midlands and Norfolk

The Ice Age in the East Midlands and Norfolk is reconstructed from several key sites. Here are some examples of key sites in this region and the information they hold:

Cromer

In 1990, around 600,000 years after it died, the remains of the West Runton Elephant was discovered in the cliffs at West Runton, near Cromer, Norfolk. Excavations of almost the entire skeleton of the Elephant were subsequently made by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit and specialist surveying and computing services from the Swedish consultancy Arkeologikonsult. The elephant has been identified as an early form of mammoth *Mammuthus trogontherii*. It stood about 4 metres at the shoulder, and at ten tonnes would have been nearly twice the weight of a modern African elephant. It had died in a shallow, swampy river channel. Hyaenas had scavenged the carcass, leaving tooth marks on some of the bones and their characteristic fossil droppings (coprolites).

The river mud and silt which buried the skeleton comprises the fossil horizon known as the West Runton Freshwater Bed, now exposed in the cliff face. West Runton is the international type-site for the Cromerian Temperate or Interglacial stage, currently dated to about 600,000 years ago. At this time, Britain was connected to continental Europe across what is now the southern North Sea and the climate was similar to that of today.



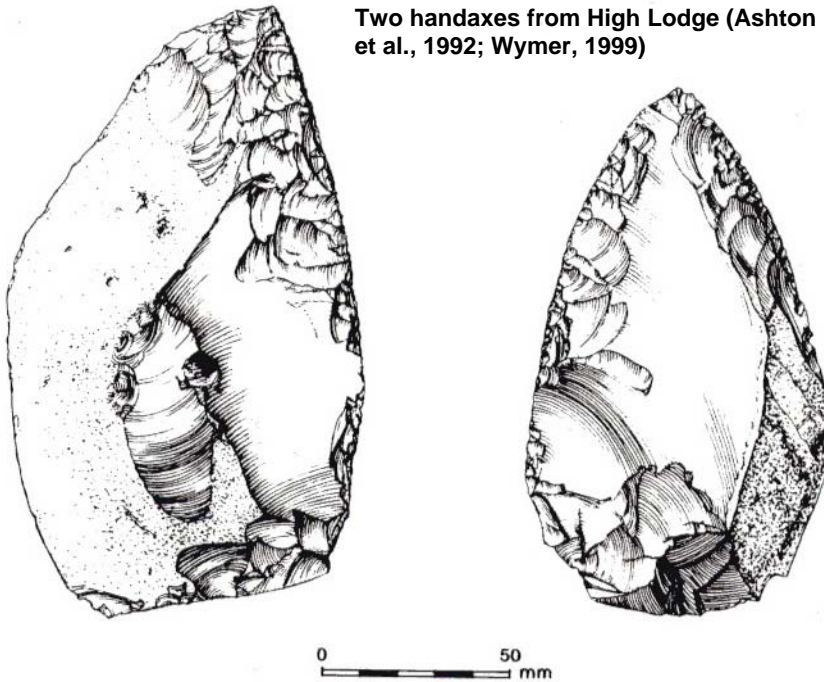
High Lodge

In the Midlands, some 500,000 years ago, instead of the Warwickshire Avon and Leicestershire Soar, a river 310km in length, which has been named the Bytham River, drained from the southwest Midlands and the Pennines through Warwickshire and parts of Leicestershire before turning south through mid-East Anglia and eventually eastwards into what is now the North Sea but was then dry land.

The Bytham River was probably one of the most important routes of colonisation for Britain's first human inhabitants. Several important archaeological sites such as High Lodge lie along the route of this lost river.

The first colonisers of Britain, before 500,000 years ago, probably belonged to the ancient human species *Homo heidelbergensis*, an ancestor of the Neanderthals. The stone tools of this period are classified as Lower Palaeolithic, with the most characteristic tool type being the handaxe.

Two handaxes from High Lodge (Ashton et al., 1992; Wymer, 1999)



Lynford

During the early stages of the most recent glacial stage (about 60,000 years ago) the build-up of ice sheets removed enough water from the oceans and Britain again became part of mainland Europe. Associated with this was the first evidence of the re-colonisation of Britain by Neanderthals, along with the appearance of such other colonists as the woolly rhino. The stone tools of this period are classified as Middle Palaeolithic, and the re-colonisation of Britain is particularly associated with a flat-based, sub-triangular type of handaxe (often described as 'bout coupé'). Several such handaxes have recently been uncovered at Lynford Quarry in Norfolk, along with the remains of butchered reindeer and horse bones.



Mammoth tusks excavated from Lynford



Handaxe from Lynford
(Photo credit: Norfolk Archaeological Unit)

Glaston

During a relatively routine excavation of an early medieval site at Glaston in Rutland, the University of Leicester Archaeological Services team uncovered much earlier Ice Age deposits. Investigation of the deposits unearthed a flint 'leaf point' sandwiched between bones. This has been identified as being characteristic of similar flint tools found in Britain, Germany and Poland and can be broadly dated to c. 35,000 years old (the British Early Upper Palaeolithic). At this time Britain was joined to the rest of Europe, as sea levels were much lower than today. The climate would have been cold and dry and the environment (known as 'Mammoth Steppe') similar to that of modern Siberia.

The site is particularly rare and important for this country as it is in an open air setting. Previously, finding such a site in an open location was thought to be

very unlikely due to later erosion and much of our knowledge for the period has come from excavations of cave sites. The location of the site, on a ridge top offering a good vantage point with wide views of the river valleys, may have been the attraction for both people and animals. Interestingly it has never been proved which type of human was responsible for the type of

technology displayed in the leaf point as during this period Neanderthals were co-existing with early modern humans.



Identification of the animal bones found in association with the 'leaf point' flint spearhead revealed a surprising array of species, long extinct in this part of Britain, including woolly rhinoceros, spotted hyena, early horse, woolly mammoth, wolverine, mountain hare and reindeer.



Creswell Crags

Creswell Crags in Nottinghamshire is a 500 metre-long limestone gorge honeycombed with caves and smaller fissures. These caves contain stone tools and the remains of animals and plants that provide evidence for a fascinating story of human occupation and activity during the last Ice Age, between 50,000 and 10,000 years ago. Further evidence came to light in 2003 with the discovery at Creswell Crags of Britain's only known Ice Age rock art. Creswell Crags was among the most northerly places on earth to have been visited by our ancient ancestors, a story that is unique on a European and World scale.





From: <http://www.creswell-crags.org.uk/>