

# Exploring the Mesolithic on Dartmoor

A Digital Resources Pack compiled by Emma Stockley

Part of MED Theatre's *What if...?* project, with thanks to National Lottery Players



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# NOTES

## Sketches

The sketches used in this pack were drawn by the late Mike Miller who lived in Moretonhampstead. Mike was an artist and had a passion for collecting stone tools, known as lithics, from across Dartmoor. In 2023 Mike's collection of Dartmoor lithics was entrusted to Emma Stockley for study as part of her PhD. Permission to use Mike's drawings has been kindly granted by Mike's widow Carole Seymour.

## Web links and videos

Whilst every effort has been made to check the content of the links to the websites and videos in this pack, please remember to exercise your own judgement and common sense when using the internet. If you have any concerns, please speak to a trusted adult.

## Content warning: images of animal butchery and human remains

Due to the nature of evidence from the Mesolithic, you may find that some of the links and videos contain images of archaeological human remains or animal butchery. No images of this nature have been included in this pack.



Above. Mesolithic leather worker at Haytor Rocks © Mike Miller



## Want to learn more?

In this section you'll find further information on the main topic. More resources are suggested at the end of the pack including fiction, graphic novels and a film.

# INTRODUCTION

This Digital Resources Pack is designed to give you an overview of the Mesolithic period in Britain and more specifically, on Dartmoor. It makes use of archaeological evidence from across Europe.

The Mesolithic period was a time of great change. It was the last time that people were hunter-gatherers in Britain and the last time that Britain was joined to mainland Europe.

This short animated [BBC film](#), whilst aimed at young children, will give you an overview of the Mesolithic period through the eyes of a family of hunter-gatherers.

Stone tools made from flint make up the majority of evidence from the Mesolithic period. Flint does not occur naturally on Dartmoor but lots of flint tools and waste have been found, indicating the presence of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. Read this [BBC article](#) to learn more.



Above. Archaeological excavations on Dartmoor being carried out to look for evidence of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers.  
© Emma Stockley



## Want to learn more?

The process of making stone tools is called knapping. Watch [How to make a Palaeolithic hand axe](#) showing Time Team's Phil Harding knapping a piece of flint. Don't try this at home!

# WHEN

The Mesolithic period in Britain can be divided into four distinctive parts:

## **The Early Mesolithic (9400 – 8200 BC)**

After the Ice Age, Mesolithic pioneers moved into Britain along coasts and major rivers. One population arrived from the north, another from the south. Settlements were focused alongside lakes and rivers.

## **The Middle Mesolithic (8200 – 7000 BC)**

Settlement became more widespread. Evidence of [hazelnut processing](#) indicates that hazel trees were an important food source for Mesolithic communities.

## **The Late Mesolithic (7000 – 5200 BC)**

There is an increase in regional diversity during this later phase and evidence of small shell and organic middens in coastal areas in the north and southwest of Britain. Rivers remain important to Mesolithic communities across Britain. In the southwest, Mesolithic communities appear to value [colourful pools and hot springs](#).

## **The Final Mesolithic (5200 – 3900 BC)**

Huge middens are created on the Scottish east coast and on the [island of Oronsay](#).

Conneller, C. (2023) *The Mesolithic in Britain*. London: Routledge.



## Want to learn more?

Explore the online journal [Mesolithic Miscellany](#) for a wide range of scientific papers, popular articles and projects about the Mesolithic period. Sign-up for a summary of Mesolithic monthly news straight to your inbox!

# PEOPLE

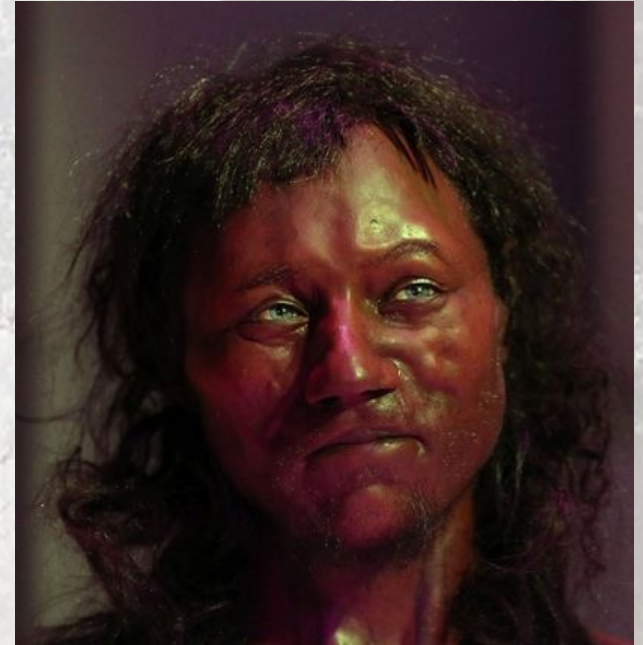
In 1903, a Mesolithic skeleton was discovered in a cave in Somerset. The skeleton has become known as Cheddar Man and he lived almost 10,000 years ago.

Recently, Cheddar Man's Ancient DNA has been used to understand what Mesolithic people may have looked like – and the results may surprise you.

Read about [Cheddar Man](#) and how Ancient DNA is being used to understand more about the past.

Watch this [BBC clip](#) showing the moment Cheddar Man's face is revealed for the first time!

*Right:* A reconstruction of Cheddar Man courtesy of the Natural History Museum, London.



## Want to learn more?

Watch the film, [Who was Cheddar Man?](#) which includes interviews with the scientists involved in Ancient DNA research.

# SHELTER

Mesolithic communities did not live in permanent settlements with buildings made from stone. Instead, they constructed shelters from locally sourced materials that were often used for only part of the year.

This [YouTube film](#), made by a team of archaeologists and students at University College Dublin explains how a Mesolithic structure may have been built. As well as the raw materials needed for the building, materials for the tools also had to be sourced.



*Left: Two reconstructions of Mesolithic shelters at [Butser Ancient Farm](#), one covered with skins and the other with grass thatch.  
© Emma Stockley*



## Want to learn more?

Read about [the construction of two replica Mesolithic huts](#) in Germany, based on evidence from middle and northern Europe. What problems did the team encounter?

# FOOD

Mesolithic people were hunter-gatherers. They hunted species including red deer, wild boar and auroch (wild cattle) and gathered berries, roots and tubers.

The presence of charred hazelnut shells on many Mesolithic archaeological sites suggests that hazelnuts were an especially valued food group. Shell middens and evidence of wooden fish traps indicate that seafood also formed a large part of the Mesolithic diet in parts of Britain.

Watch [Clinging on](#), a short film explaining how limpet shells from a Mesolithic shell midden can reveal how ancient communities lived on a Scottish island 6000 years ago.

The highest parts of Dartmoor may have attracted red deer in search of grazing. This [Guardian article](#) reports on recent excavations at a site near Lustleigh that may have been used as a viewpoint for spotting migrating herds of game.



Above. Stone tools like this from Lustleigh indicate that Mesolithic communities were visiting Dartmoor, probably for hunting.

© Emma Stockley



## Want to learn more?

Explore this [Timeline of Food](#) by English Heritage and notice how the human diet has changed over time. Alternatively, take a look at this article by the Prehistoric Society about [Mesolithic hunting equipment](#).



# LANDSCAPE

Dartmoor would have looked very different in the Mesolithic.

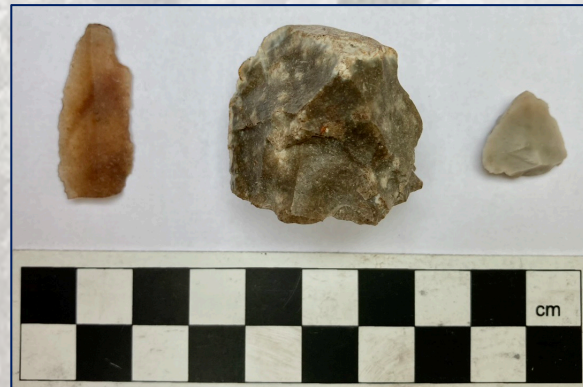
Dartmoor-based charity, [Moor Trees](#) have reconstructed Dartmoor's post Ice-Age landscape in their [Vision for Dartmoor](#). You can see how wooded the landscape was, with only the very tops of the tors being open.

Towards the end of the period, there is some evidence that Mesolithic communities may have been using fire to control the nature and type of vegetation on Dartmoor, for example, to encourage the growth of preferred tree species such as hazel, or to open-up areas for grazing animals to make hunting easier.

This [blog post](#) by conservationist and rural social scientist Adrian Colston examines the evidence for the use of fire on Dartmoor in more detail.



*Left.* A Mesolithic camp at Sharp Tor, Dartmoor. Notice how wooded the surrounding slopes are.  
© Mike Miller



*Left.* We know that Mesolithic communities were present on Dartmoor because they left behind evidence of stone tool manufacturing.  
© Emma Stockley



## Want to learn more?

Plan a visit to the [Royal Albert Memorial Museum, RAMM](#), in Exeter which has some fantastic examples of lithics from Dartmoor.

# STAR CARR

To get an idea of what life was like over 10,000 years ago, we can take a virtual fieldtrip to [Star Carr](#), a Mesolithic archaeological site in North Yorkshire. The site has become world famous due to the preservation of artefacts found buried beneath peat.

Learn about the [site and history of research](#), the mysterious [red deer antler frontlets](#) and the [engraved pendant](#).

Visit the project's [YouTube page](#) to watch experts discussing some of the key finds.

An [animated reconstruction](#) of the site shows the lakeside environment where Mesolithic people built structures, hunted and fished.



Image from the Yorkshire Museum. Photo by Neil Gevaux

Above. One of the red deer antler frontlets found at the site. You can read a scientific journal article about the headdresses [here](#).



## Want to learn more?

Sign up for a free four-week online course, [The Mysteries of Star Carr](#), led by the University of York. The course covers archaeological excavations at the site, how hunter-gatherers used stones to make tools and evidence for the use of plants and animals.

# FARMING

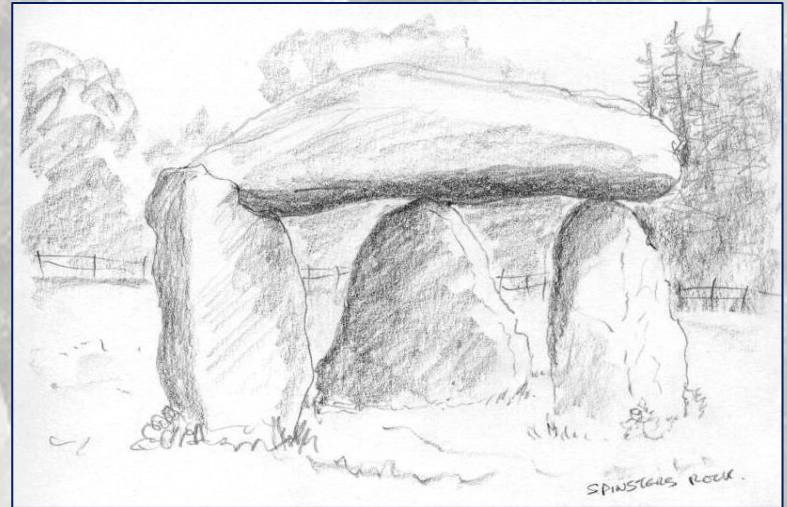
For many years, archaeologists have debated whether farming arrived in Britain as an idea that was adopted by hunter-gatherers or whether it was brought to Britain by migrant farmers from the continent.

Recent studies of Ancient DNA have revealed the answer. Read [this article](#) to learn how a new population arrived in Britain, bringing farming with them. This influx of Neolithic farmers ultimately led to Britain's population of hunter-gatherers being largely replaced.



Above. With the arrival of farming came new ways of interacting with the dead. This is Spinsters' Rock on Dartmoor, an early Neolithic portal dolmen tomb. © Mike Miller

Left. Replica Neolithic pots from Ireland. Pottery also arrived with farming and was a technology previously unknown to Britain's hunter-gatherers. © Emma Stockley



## Want to learn more?

Listen to [12,000 years: The story of Dartmoor's Archaeology](#), a talk by [Dartmoor National Park's](#) archaeologist Dr Lee Bray. Alternatively, find out if hazelnuts were Britain's first farmed food in this [blog post](#) by archaeologist Francis Pryor.

# FURTHER RESOURCES

## Mesolithic fiction

- *The Pits*, Lesley Howarth
- *Wolf Brother*, Michelle Paver
- *The Gathering Night*, Margaret Elphinstone

## Graphic novels

- *Mezolith* volumes 1 and 2, Ben Haggerty

## Film

- *Alpha*. Not Mesolithic but set in the last Ice Age. View the trailer [here](#).

## Website

- [Mesolithic Miscellany](#)

## Academic books

- *The Mesolithic in Britain*, Chantal Conneller
- *Mesolithic Britain and Ireland*, Chantal Conneller and Graeme Warren (eds)

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Mesolithic hunter on Dartmoor © Mike Miller