



PALAEOLITHIC FACTSHEET I
HAPPISBURGH AND THE EARLIEST
OCCUPATION OF BRITAIN: LOWER
PALAEOLITHIC

Happisburgh is a village on the rapidly eroding eastern coast of Norfolk 18 miles north east of Norwich. The low cliffs here are formed of glacial till (muds and debris) that was laid down between 450,000 and 12,000 years before the present (BP). These overlie and protect deposits dating to between 500,000 ago and almost 1,000,000 years BP.

Rapid erosion of the cliffs by the sea has led to regular discoveries on the foreshore of Ice Age mammal bones and occasional stone artefacts. Since 2001 research by the Ancient Human Occupation of Britain project have revealed a number of localities preserving important evidence for the earliest occupation of Northern Europe.

At Happisburgh the ancient River Thames, that flowed far north of its present course, crossed into the now submerged landscapes of Doggerland. Its gravels here produced clear evidence for human activity in the form of artefacts made from flint. These artefacts are simple flake tools which would have been useful for processing meat and plant resources. The deposits in which the artefacts were found are thought to date to at least 850,000 years ago and are therefore the earliest clear evidence for the presence of hominins in northern Europe. While no fossil human material has been found from this, or any other site in the region, it is assumed the type of early human that made these tools was a species called *Homo antecessor*, which has been identified in southern Europe at this time. The artefacts are found associated with extinct mammals and plant remains which suggest a relatively open woodland landscape and cool, highly seasonal climate. As these environments were very different to those of Africa or southern Europe, it suggests adaption to very different ecologies to those in which early humans had first evolved.

In 2013 a series of footprint were found in clays eroding out on the foreshore at Happisburgh.

They were preserved in sediments which also dated to at least 850,000 years BP. The footprints were those of adults and children and seemed to represent a hominin group on the muddy edges of the ancient Thames floodplain. They are the oldest human footprints to be found outside of Africa.

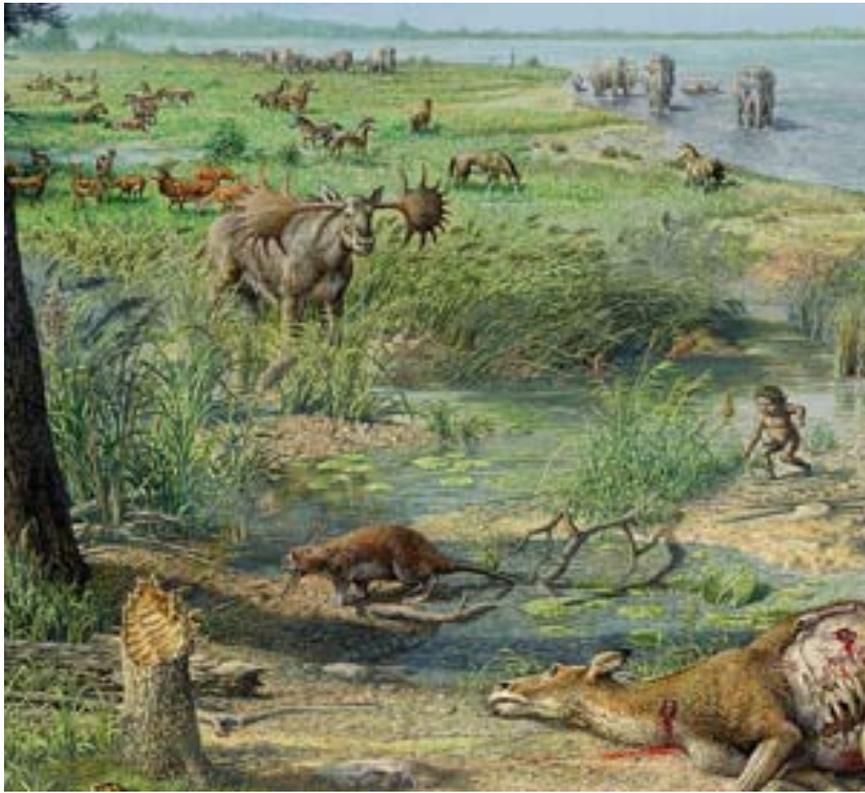
Other relatively simple stone tools have been found eroding from cliffs on the Suffolk coast at Pakefield. These date to a period of warm climate around 750,000 years ago and show that early humans were continuing to move into Britain when climatic conditions allowed. By 600,000 years ago artefacts of a new type appear in Britain. Large well-made handaxes appear in river deposits at Maids Cross Hill and Brandon Fields; these artefacts represent some of the earliest evidence for the Acheulean technology in Northern Europe. Handaxes continues to be a feature of the Palaeolithic record to varying degrees throughout the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic periods. However some sites show that flake tools continued be used (eg, High Lodge), sometimes exclusively (eg, Clacton and levels at Swanscombe and Barnham). We don't know exactly what species of early human made these tools but it could have been a species called *Homo heidelbergensis*.

Further Reading

Ashton, N. 2017. *Early Humans* (Collins New Naturalist Library, Book 134). London: HarperCollins UK

Pettitt, P. and White, M., 2012. *The British Palaeolithic: human societies at the edge of the Pleistocene world*. London: Routledge

Stringer, C. 2007. *Homo Britannicus: The incredible story of human life in Britain*. London: Penguin UK



*Happisburgh reconstruction ©
John Sibbick and AHOB*

Handaxe



This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Matt Pope (Institute of Archaeology, UCL)