



On the coastline extending southwest from Clacton-on-Sea to Jaywick Sands in Essex, a series of sediments preserve a distinctive Lower Palaeolithic record dating to around 400,000 years ago. While the coastline is now well protected by sea defences this was not the case at the end of the 19th century when coastal erosion exposed sediments. These related to the former course of the Thames river system and to a period of climatic warming (an interglacial) when temperatures became almost as warm as those today. Investigations by the collector Samuel Hazzledine Warren led to the discovery of numerous localities producing a distinctive stone artefact assemblage characterised by large, hard hammer struck flint flakes and no handaxes. This technology contrasts with that of early sites such as Boxgrove and those which belong to the same warm period as the Clacton deposits, which contain abundant numbers of well-made handaxes. The large flakes of what came to be known as the Clactonian Industry are perfectly useable for cutting activities such as slicing meat or vegetable material. Some flakes showed distinctive notched edges which might have been useful for scraping wood or bone.

The Clacton sediments also produced a rare example of a wooden Lower Palaeolithic tool: the tip of a wooden spear made of yew wood. Only nine other similar objects have been found from the Lower Palaeolithic record of Europe and that from Clacton is the oldest. We do not know for sure which human population was

responsible for making the wooden spear or the distinctive tools of the Clactonian. *Homo Heidelbergensis* is present in Europe at this time but evidence from Swanscombe and the Spanish site of Atapuerca also suggest the presence of human populations exhibiting features which are found in the anatomy of *Homo neandethalensis*. It might be that different populations, with different technologies were moving in Britain at different times during this interglacial.

#### Further Reading

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



Clacton spear Natural History Museum, London (photograph cc)

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