



Creswell Crags is one of the most important landscapes in the British Isles for understanding human activity during the last Ice Age. Where a river cuts through limestone hills on the Derbyshire/Nottinghamshire border a steep sided gorge has been eroded over hundreds of thousands of years. The low cliffs contain a series of caves.

During the last Ice Age, a period we refer to as the Devensian, ice sheets advanced to cover large parts of what is now the British Isles. At this time, lower sea levels meant that Britain formed a north-west extension of the European continent, linked to Belgium and the Netherlands by the now-submerged landscapes of Doggerland. Although we think of the Ice Age as being a long and unrelenting period of extreme cold and ice, it is important to remember that, whilst generally colder than the present climate, it featured periods of relative warming and severe cold snaps. During milder parts of the Devensian, although still cold by our standards, Britain would have provided an open, landscape of grasslands and small isolated stands of woodland, in which people would have been able to survive.

The gorge at Creswell Crags, and the river which ran through it, would have connected with other rivers flowing east into the now submerged landscape of Doggerland. Animals including horse, reindeer, mammoth and woolly rhinoceros would have moved in Creswell Crags and the surrounding landscapes, and with them at certain times, hunters from two different human species: *Homo neanderthalensis* (Neanderthals) and our own species *Homo sapiens*. The combination of a river, providing a routeway through the landscape, and caves, providing shelter and the opportunities for hunting animals in the narrow space of the gorge, made Creswell an attractive location for human activity. That has left us an archaeological record from this remote period in a number of the caves.

Archaeologists first began investigating the caves of Creswell Crags in the 19th century. While

early excavations were carried out using imprecise methods, more recent work continues to reveal the details of life in the region during the last Ice Age. Neanderthal archaeology came in the form of characteristic stone tools which are made in the way we see across Europe at this time – a technological tradition called the Middle Palaeolithic. Neanderthal hunter gatherers occupied the gorge from 60,000 years ago through to 40,000 years ago when they were replaced in Britain and across northern Europe by modern humans. From around this period the gorge has evidence for hunters using characteristic leaf-shaped stone spear tips, known as leaf points. We do not know which species of human made these tools as the technology shares features of both the Middle Palaeolithic, which we associate with Neanderthals, and the later Upper Palaeolithic, which is more associated with modern humans.

During the Upper Palaeolithic, several different groups inhabited the caves of Creswell Crags in the milder periods of the Ice Age. Upper Palaeolithic archaeology covers a wide range of periods from 40,000 years ago through to 12,000 years at the end of the last Ice Age. Finds include flint spear tips of different shapes and forms, a bone needle showing the manufacture of complex clothing, and engraved animal bones showing the figures of a human and a horse. Recently carvings have been found on the walls of the caves themselves, which are very similar to some of the cave art found in France, Spain and Germany. This, combined with strong similarities in the ways people made their stone and bone tools at that time, suggests that Creswell Crags formed the northernmost edge of a network of communities who shared many of the same ideas and beliefs during the final phase of the Ice Age. Where no caves were available as shelters, they would have used tent-like shelters. One such has been revealed by a scattering of flint tools beside a small gorge in igneous rock at Bradgate Park in Leicestershire. It is likely that gorges were favoured as they could be employed as hunting traps.

After the Ice Age had ended, and changes in sea level and climate led to the formation of the British Isles as we might recognise them today, Creswell Crags continued to be visited by people. The caves provided shelter for hunter-gatherer groups of the Mesolithic period, sacred burial spaces for the dead during the Neolithic, and shelter for shepherds and goatherds during the Iron Age and Roman periods. Now, Creswell Crags is home to a visitor centre and museum, which run tours of the caves, and allow you to see the Ice Age cave art for yourself.



Engraving of horse's head on bone from Creswell Crags © Trustees of the British Museum



Reconstruction of the Creswellian camp beside Little Matlock Gorge in Bradgate Park, Leicestershire. © Bradgate Park Trust

Further Reading

Bahn, P.G. 2009. *Britain's oldest art: the Ice Age cave art of Creswell Crags*. English Heritage

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

www.creswell-crags.org.uk



Reconstruction of Creswell Crags during the last Ice Age © Creswell Crags Museum and Visitor Centre

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