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PRESS

BEFORE ENGLAND
LEARNING COMPANION 3

THE UPPER PALAEOLITHIC

Modern Humans and the Return to Britain

An educational guide exploring the human story of Britain during the *Upper Palaeolithic* period

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Explore Britain's Past,
One Period at a Time.

Before England Learning Companion 3

The Upper Palaeolithic

Modern Humans and the End of the Ice Age

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Part of the Before England Learning Companion series.

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BEFORE ENGLAND LEARNING COMPANION 3

Welcome to the third volume in the Before England Learning Companion series.

Each Learning Companion explores the archaeological evidence behind one period of Britain's past. Rather than presenting a complete history, these guides explain how archaeologists reconstruct ancient lives through discoveries, scientific investigation and the evidence preserved in the landscape.

The Upper Palaeolithic marks the arrival and repeated return of modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) to Britain during the closing stages of the Pleistocene. Britain remained within the Quaternary Ice Age, and the landscape changed repeatedly as colder glacial periods alternated with warmer intervals. Vast ice sheets expanded and retreated, sea levels rose and fell, and for much of this period Britain remained connected to mainland Europe across the lowlands now submerged beneath the North Sea..

This was also a period of remarkable innovation. People developed increasingly sophisticated stone tool technologies, produced finely crafted objects from bone, antler and ivory, and adapted their way of life to some of the harshest environments ever occupied in Britain. They followed migrating animals across open grasslands and river valleys, made clothing to survive the cold and learned to exploit the changing resources of the Ice Age landscape.

The Upper Palaeolithic also provides Britain's earliest clear evidence for artistic expression and symbolic behaviour. Cave engravings, personal ornaments and carefully prepared burials demonstrate that these communities were capable of creativity, planning and complex social traditions. Such discoveries remind us that archaeology is not simply about survival, but about understanding the beliefs, relationships and identities of people who lived thousands of years ago.

Although Britain was occupied only during warmer intervals, the evidence left behind provides an extraordinary insight into the lives of the first modern humans to enter these landscapes. Every archaeological discovery, from a finely made flint blade to an engraved cave wall, adds another piece to the story of how these communities lived, travelled and adapted to a world shaped by continual climatic change.

This companion also introduces the scientific methods used to investigate the Upper Palaeolithic. Archaeologists combine excavation, environmental analysis, radiocarbon dating and microscopic examination of artefacts to reconstruct ancient landscapes and human activity. These techniques allow us to understand not only what people made, but how they lived and how their environment changed over thousands of years.

This companion introduces the major archaeological discoveries, important sites and scientific evidence that allow us to understand Britain's Upper Palaeolithic and the closing chapters of the Ice Age.

Period at a Glance

Dates

Approximately 40,000–10,000 BC (c. 42,000–12,000 years ago)

People

Homo sapiens (modern humans)

Climate

Cold Ice Age conditions with periods of severe glaciation interrupted by warmer phases. Britain was occupied only when the climate allowed.

Landscape

Open grasslands, tundra, river valleys and the extensive plains of Doggerland connecting Britain to continental Europe.

Important Animals

Reindeer, horse, red deer, mammoth, woolly rhinoceros, bison, arctic fox and hare.

Important Sites

Kent's Cavern, Paviland Cave, Creswell Crags, Gough's Cave and Hengistbury Head.

Key Discoveries

Long flint blades, bone and antler tools, cave art, personal ornaments, ceremonial burials and evidence for complex hunter-gatherer societies.

Key Technologies

Blade technology, burins, antler points, bone needles, spear throwers and carefully prepared hunting equipment.

Why This Period Matters

The Upper Palaeolithic marks the return of modern humans to Britain. It provides the earliest evidence for art, symbolic behaviour and increasingly sophisticated technology, revealing communities whose lives combined practical survival with creativity, belief and social identity.

Upper Palaeolithic Britain



Doggerland c.10,000 BP. Adapted from Polaris999 (2009), Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain)

These sites date to the Upper Palaeolithic period (c. 40,000 – 11,700 years ago) and provide key evidence for the return of modern humans to Britain after the last Ice Age.

Research Companion 3

The Upper Palaeolithic

Key Sites in Britain

1. Creswell Crags
Important rock-shelter complex with art, carvings and evidence of modern human occupation around 30,000 years ago.

2. Gough's Cave
Rich Upper Palaeolithic site with worked bone, ornaments and some of the earliest human remains in Britain.

3. Kent's Cavern
Major cave site with human remains, animal bones and stone tools dating to around 20,000–15,000 years ago.

4. Paviland Cave
Famous for the 'Red Lady' burial and Upper Palaeolithic tools and ornaments.

5. Kendrick's Cave
Important cave site with human remains and evidence of modern human activity around 12,000 years ago.

6. Hengistbury Head
Major coastal site with rich Upper Palaeolithic deposits, stone tools, ornaments and worked bone from around 12,000 years ago.

What Was the Upper Palaeolithic?

The Upper Palaeolithic was the final stage of the Ice Age and the period during which modern humans (***Homo sapiens***) occupied Britain. It followed the Middle Palaeolithic, when Neanderthals had lived in Britain during warmer intervals, and lasted until the beginning of the Mesolithic around 10,000 BC**.**

This was not a period of continuous settlement. Modern humans entered Britain when climate and geography allowed, before disappearing again as conditions deteriorated. During the coldest phases of the Ice Age, particularly the Last Glacial Maximum, much of Britain became uninhabitable and human occupation disappeared completely. As the climate improved, people returned once again.

Britain itself was very different from today. Sea levels were much lower than at present, exposing extensive plains across what is now the North Sea. Rivers crossed these open landscapes, allowing people and animals to move between Britain and continental Europe without crossing open water.

These changing environments influenced every aspect of life. Communities had to respond to shifting climates, the seasonal movement of animals and the availability of natural resources. Camps were often established close to rivers, caves or sheltered valleys, providing access to fresh water, food and raw materials for making tools. Although populations were small, they occupied an immense landscape that stretched far beyond the coastline of modern Britain, forming part of a connected European world.

The Upper Palaeolithic is especially important because it marks the first clear evidence for many behaviours that we now associate with modern humans. Archaeologists have discovered finely made stone blades, tools fashioned from bone and antler, personal ornaments, cave art and carefully prepared burials. These discoveries show that people not only adapted successfully to challenging environments but also expressed ideas, identity and beliefs in new ways.

Although the archaeological evidence is limited compared with later periods, each discovery adds to our understanding of how modern humans lived at the end of the Ice Age. Together, these sites reveal a landscape occupied by skilled hunter-gatherers whose lives combined innovation, cooperation and creativity. As archaeological techniques continue to improve, new discoveries are helping researchers build an increasingly detailed picture of Britain's first modern human communities and the changing Ice Age world in which they lived.

Did You Know?

The Upper Palaeolithic contains Britain's earliest known cave art. At Creswell Crags, archaeologists discovered engravings made around 13,000 years ago, making them the oldest confirmed Ice Age art yet found in Britain

Who Were the First Modern Humans?

The people of the Upper Palaeolithic were **Homo sapiens**, the same human species as ourselves. They first appeared in Africa over 300,000 years ago before gradually spreading across Europe and Asia. By around 40,000 years ago, modern humans had reached Britain during warmer periods of the Ice Age.

These early communities lived by hunting animals, gathering wild plants and moving across large territories as the seasons changed. Their survival depended upon a detailed understanding of the landscape, animal behaviour and the changing climate. Britain was never permanently occupied during this period. Instead, people entered the country when conditions were favourable and retreated when colder climates returned.

Movement across the landscape was carefully planned rather than random. People probably followed familiar seasonal routes, returning to places where game was plentiful, good-quality flint could be collected and natural shelters provided protection from the weather. Knowledge of these landscapes was passed from one generation to the next, allowing communities to survive despite repeated climatic changes and the advance and retreat of the great Ice Age glaciers.

Modern humans brought new skills and technologies with them. Long, carefully made stone blades replaced many of the heavier tools of earlier periods, while bone, antler and ivory were fashioned into specialised hunting equipment, needles and ornaments. These innovations allowed people to make better clothing, improve hunting techniques and adapt to a wide range of environments.

One of the most significant changes during the Upper Palaeolithic was the appearance of symbolic behaviour. Archaeologists have discovered decorated objects, personal ornaments, cave art and carefully prepared burials that show these communities expressed identity, beliefs and social relationships in increasingly sophisticated ways.

The archaeological evidence reveals highly adaptable people who successfully lived in some of the most challenging environments ever occupied in Britain. Their discoveries, skills and traditions formed the foundations of the hunter-gatherer societies that followed at the beginning of the Mesolithic.

Did You Know?

DNA studies show that all people living today outside Africa share a small percentage of Neanderthal DNA. This is because modern humans and Neanderthals met and had children together thousands of years before modern humans reached Britain.

How Do We Know?

Everything we know about Britain's Upper Palaeolithic comes from archaeological and scientific evidence. Unlike later periods, there are no written records describing the lives of the people who lived at the end of the Ice Age. Archaeologists therefore reconstruct their world by studying the objects they left behind, the places they occupied and the environments in which they lived.

Stone tools provide much of the evidence. Long flint blades, scrapers, burins and carefully shaped points reveal how people hunted, prepared food, worked hides and made other tools. Changes in the design and manufacture of these implements also help archaeologists identify different phases of the Upper Palaeolithic. Broken tools, waste flakes and discarded cores also reveal where tools were made and repaired, providing valuable evidence for activities carried out at individual campsites.

Caves have preserved some of Britain's most remarkable discoveries. Sites such as Kent's Cavern**,** Creswell Crags**,** Paviland Cave **and** Gough's Cave contain layers of sediment that preserve stone tools, animal bones, hearths and human remains. By carefully excavating these deposits, archaeologists can reconstruct how people used these sites over thousands of years. Careful recording of the position of every object allows archaeologists to understand how different areas of a cave were used and how occupation changed through time.

Scientific techniques have transformed our understanding of this period. Radiocarbon dating provides accurate ages for organic materials such as bone and charcoal, while microscopic analysis can identify how tools were made and used. Environmental evidence, including pollen, sediments and animal bones, helps reconstruct the changing climates and landscapes of Ice Age Britain. Isotopic analysis of human and animal bones can also provide information about diet, movement and the environments in which people lived.

Archaeologists also compare discoveries from Britain with sites across continental Europe. Similar technologies, ornaments and works of art demonstrate that Britain's hunter-gatherers formed part of a much wider Upper Palaeolithic world connected by the land now known as Doggerland.

Although relatively few Upper Palaeolithic sites have been discovered, every excavation adds to our understanding of Britain's first modern humans. New discoveries and improving scientific techniques continue to reshape what we know about life at the end of the Ice Age.

Did You Know?

Archaeologists can often tell whether a bone was cut by a stone tool or bitten by a predator. Under a microscope, each leaves distinctive marks that help reconstruct events from thousands of years ago.

UPPER PALAEOLITHIC TIMELINE

c. 40,000 years ago

Modern Humans Arrive

Modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) reached Britain during warmer phases of the Ice Age. Their occupation was brief and interrupted by periods of severe cold.

c. 40,000 years ago

Neanderthals Disappear

Neanderthals gradually disappeared across Europe. The reasons remain uncertain, but climate change, small populations and the spread of modern humans may all have contributed.

c. 33,000 years ago

The Red Lady of Paviland

A young man was buried in Paviland Cave with red ochre, ivory ornaments and other grave goods. It is one of the oldest known ceremonial burials in western Europe.

c. 27,000–19,000 years ago

The Last Glacial Maximum

Ice sheets covered much of Britain, making large areas impossible to inhabit. Human occupation disappeared from Britain during the coldest part of the Ice Age.

c. 15,000 years ago

People Return to Britain

As the climate warmed after the Last Glacial Maximum, modern humans returned, following migrating herds across the open landscapes of what is now the North Sea.

c. 15,000–14,000 years ago

Occupation at Gough's Cave

People used Gough's Cave in Somerset as a campsite. Archaeologists discovered stone tools, worked bone and evidence for the processing of both animal and human remains.

c. 13,000 years ago

Ice Age Artists at Creswell Crags

People engraved figures onto cave walls at Creswell Crags, creating Britain's oldest confirmed Ice Age cave art.

c. 12,900–11,700 years ago

The Younger Dryas

One final return to colder conditions interrupted the warming climate. Around 11,700 years ago temperatures rose rapidly again, marking the beginning of the Holocene and the end of the Upper Palaeolithic.

WHY THE TIMELINE MATTERS

The Upper Palaeolithic was a period of remarkable environmental change. Modern humans repeatedly entered and left Britain as the landscape changed around them. They developed new technologies, created Britain's earliest art and adapted to increasingly challenging conditions before the beginning of the Holocene transformed Britain once again.

The Main Discoveries

The Upper Palaeolithic is known through a small number of exceptional archaeological sites. Together they reveal how modern humans returned to Britain, adapted to the changing Ice Age landscape and developed new technologies, beliefs and artistic traditions.

Kent's Cavern, Devon

Kent's Cavern preserves one of the longest archaeological records in Britain. Excavations have uncovered stone tools, animal bones and fragmentary human remains dating from both the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic. The cave has played an important role in understanding when modern humans first reached north-west Europe and the transition from Neanderthals to Homo sapiens.
Evidence found: Stone tools, human remains and Ice Age animal bones

Paviland Cave, Gower Peninsula

Paviland Cave is famous for the burial known as the Red Lady of Paviland. Discovered in 1823, the skeleton was originally thought to be that of a Roman woman, but later research showed it belonged to a young man buried around 33,000 years ago.

The body had been covered with red ochre and placed with ivory ornaments and other grave goods. It remains one of the oldest known ceremonial burials in western Europe and provides remarkable evidence for symbolic behaviour during the Upper Palaeolithic.
Evidence found: Human burial, red ochre, ivory ornaments and worked animal bone.

Creswell Crags

Creswell Crags, on the Derbyshire–Nottinghamshire border, is Britain's most important Upper Palaeolithic cave complex. Excavations have revealed repeated occupation by hunter-gatherers during the closing stages of the Ice Age.

In 2003 archaeologists identified engraved figures on the cave walls, confirming that Britain possesses genuine Ice Age cave art. These engravings include animals and abstract designs similar to those found elsewhere in Europe.
Evidence found: Flint tools, animal bones, cave art and occupation deposits.

Gough's Cave, Somerset

Gough's Cave has produced one of Britain's richest collections of Upper Palaeolithic finds. Archaeologists discovered stone tools, worked bone, antler implements and human remains dating to around 15,000 years ago.

Some of the human bones show cut marks made during the careful removal of flesh, while several skulls appear to have been deliberately shaped into cups. The reasons for these practices remain debated, but they provide rare evidence for complex behaviour at the end of the Ice Age.
Evidence found: Flint blades, worked bone, human remains and modified skulls.

Hengistbury Head, Dorset

Hengistbury Head preserves evidence for repeated occupation during the closing stages of the Upper Palaeolithic and into the Mesolithic. Its position overlooking the coast demonstrates the importance of rivers, estuaries and changing shorelines to hunter-gatherer communities as the climate became warmer.
Evidence found: Flint tools and evidence of repeated hunter-gatherer occupation.

Why These Sites Matter

Each of these sites preserves a different part of Britain's Upper Palaeolithic story. Together they reveal the arrival of modern humans, the development of new technologies, the emergence of art and symbolism, and the remarkable ability of people to adapt to a changing Ice Age world. Every new discovery adds to our understanding of the first modern humans to live in Britain.

Did You Know?

The Red Lady of Paviland is neither red nor a lady. The skeleton belongs to a young man, while the "red" refers to the ochre sprinkled over the burial more than 33,000 years ago.

Climate and Environment

The Upper Palaeolithic took place during the closing stages of the Pleistocene, the geological epoch that formed most of the Quaternary Ice Age. Climate continued to alternate between colder and warmer conditions, repeatedly transforming Britain's landscape and determining when people could occupy the country.

During the coldest phase, known as the Last Glacial Maximum, enormous ice sheets covered much of Britain. Ice was almost one kilometre thick across parts of Scotland, while much of northern Britain became impossible for people to inhabit. Open grasslands known as the Mammoth Steppe stretched across southern Britain and the exposed plains of what is now the North Sea, supporting reindeer, horse, bison, mammoth and woolly rhinoceros.

As temperatures gradually increased, the ice retreated and people returned. Rivers altered their courses, sea levels slowly rose and scattered woodland began replacing the open grasslands. Around 12,900 years ago, however, temperatures fell again during the Younger Dryas, bringing one final return to colder conditions before the beginning of the Holocene around 11,700 years ago.

Archaeologists reconstruct these changing environments by studying pollen, fossil insects, animal bones and ancient sediments. Together, these discoveries reveal not only how climate changed but how those changes continually reshaped the landscapes in which Britain's first modern humans lived.

Did You Know?

During the coldest part of the Ice Age, sea levels were more than 100 metres lower than they are today. The land now beneath the North Sea formed part of a vast landscape where people hunted, travelled and lived before it was flooded by rising seas.

Everyday Life

Life during the Upper Palaeolithic revolved around movement. Small groups travelled across the landscape, following herds of animals as the seasons changed and returning to places that provided reliable food, water and shelter.

Hunting formed the basis of everyday life. Reindeer, horse and red deer were among the most important animals, providing meat for food, hides for clothing and shelter, and bone and antler for making tools. People also gathered edible plants, nuts, berries and other natural resources whenever they were available. Rivers and lakes supplied fresh water, while fish and waterfowl added variety to the diet whenever the opportunity arose.

Most possessions had to be carried from place to place, so tools were carefully made and designed for many different tasks. Stone blades were used alongside implements made from bone, antler and wood, although wooden objects rarely survive in the archaeological record. Clothing made from carefully prepared animal skins helped protect people from freezing temperatures, while portable toolkits allowed repairs to be made whenever equipment became worn or damaged.

Fire played an essential role in daily life. It provided warmth during cold weather, allowed food to be cooked, offered protection from predators and created places where people could gather, make tools and share knowledge. Hearths also provided light during the long winter nights and may have served as important social centres where stories, skills and experience were shared between generations.

Although caves preserve much of the archaeological evidence, they were only one part of the landscape. Modern humans probably used rock shelters, temporary camps and open-air sites, moving regularly to take advantage of changing resources throughout the year. Archaeological evidence suggests that some camps were occupied for only short periods, while others were revisited repeatedly because they overlooked hunting grounds or lay close to valuable sources of stone and fresh water.

The archaeological evidence reveals adaptable communities whose success depended on careful planning, cooperation and a detailed understanding of the landscapes in which they lived.

Did You Know?

Many archaeologists believe that Upper Palaeolithic people spent much of the year living in temporary camps in the open landscape. Caves are better represented in the archaeological record simply because they protect ancient evidence far more effectively than open-air sites.

Technology and Innovation

The Upper Palaeolithic saw important advances in tool making and technology. Modern humans produced lighter, more specialised equipment that allowed them to hunt more effectively, prepare food and make clothing suited to the harsh conditions of the Ice Age.

Stone remained the principal material for making tools, but the methods used to shape it became increasingly refined. Long, narrow blades were carefully struck from prepared cores and then fashioned into knives, scrapers, burins and points. Each tool was designed for a particular task, making toolkits more efficient than those of earlier periods.

The careful selection of raw materials was also important. Good-quality flint was highly valued because it could be shaped into long, sharp blades with predictable results. In areas where flint was scarce, people sometimes carried prepared cores or finished tools over considerable distances, suggesting that valuable materials were carefully managed between camps.

People also made greater use of bone, antler and ivory. These materials were fashioned into spear points, needles, awls and other specialised implements. Bone needles suggest that fitted clothing could be made by sewing together carefully prepared animal skins, providing much better protection against cold weather.

Hunting technology also continued to improve. Carefully made spear points and other hunting equipment allowed people to exploit a wide range of animals living on the open plains of Ice Age Britain. Although wooden weapons rarely survive, archaeologists believe that many stone and bone tools were attached to wooden shafts to create effective hunting spears. Combining different materials into a single tool demonstrates increasing planning and technical skill.

The manufacture and maintenance of these tools required considerable knowledge. Stone had to be carefully selected and shaped, while bone and antler were worked using cutting, scraping and polishing techniques. Worn blades could often be replaced without discarding the entire weapon, allowing valuable materials to be used efficiently and equipment to be repaired while on the move.

The variety of tools found at Upper Palaeolithic sites demonstrates increasing skill and planning. Rather than relying on a few general-purpose implements, people carried toolkits designed for different activities, reflecting a detailed understanding of materials and the challenges of everyday life. These technological developments helped modern humans adapt successfully to changing environments and laid the foundations for later innovations during the Mesolithic.

Did You Know?

Some Upper Palaeolithic bone needles have eyes similar to those found on modern sewing needles. They show that Ice Age people could make carefully fitted clothing, an essential skill for surviving in cold climates.

People and Society

Upper Palaeolithic communities lived in small groups made up of families and close relatives. These groups travelled across large areas, sharing food, knowledge and responsibilities as they followed the seasonal movement of animals and responded to changing environmental conditions.

Cooperation was essential. Hunting large animals required careful planning and teamwork, while everyday tasks such as making tools, preparing hides and caring for children depended upon the skills of the whole group. Archaeological evidence suggests that knowledge was passed from one generation to the next, allowing successful hunting methods, survival skills and tool-making techniques to be preserved over thousands of years.

Children probably learned by watching and helping older members of the group from an early age. Skills such as making stone tools, recognising edible plants, tracking animals and understanding the changing seasons would have been built up through experience. This transfer of knowledge helped ensure that each generation could survive in the demanding environments of Ice Age Britain.

The appearance of personal ornaments, decorated objects and carefully prepared burials also suggests that social relationships became increasingly important. These discoveries indicate that people expressed identity and recognised the importance of individuals within their communities.

Although populations were small, Britain formed part of a much larger world connected to continental Europe. People, ideas and technologies could spread across the open landscapes of Doggerland, linking communities separated by hundreds of kilometres. Seasonal gatherings may also have provided opportunities to exchange knowledge, find partners and strengthen social connections between different groups.

While many aspects of Upper Palaeolithic society remain uncertain, the archaeological evidence reveals adaptable, cooperative communities whose success depended as much on shared knowledge as on individual skill. Their ability to work together and pass on experience was as important to their survival as the tools they carried or the animals they hunted.

Did You Know?

Small beads made from animal teeth, shells and ivory have been found at Upper Palaeolithic sites across Europe. These ornaments may have shown identity, status or membership of particular groups, making them some of the earliest known forms of personal jewellery.

Beliefs and Symbolism

One of the most important developments during the Upper Palaeolithic was the appearance of clear evidence for symbolic behaviour. Archaeologists have discovered art, personal ornaments and carefully prepared burials that show people were expressing ideas and beliefs beyond the practical needs of everyday survival.

The most famous British example is the burial at Paviland Cave on the Gower Peninsula. A young man was buried with red ochre, ivory ornaments and other carefully placed objects around 33,000 years ago. This suggests that death may already have held social or spiritual significance, although the precise meaning of the burial can never be known.

Upper Palaeolithic people also created Britain's earliest known art. At Creswell Crags, archaeologists have identified engravings of animals and abstract designs carved into the cave walls around 13,000 years ago. These discoveries connect Britain with the wider tradition of Ice Age cave art found across Europe.

Personal ornaments made from animal teeth, shells and ivory have also been discovered at Upper Palaeolithic sites. These objects may have been worn as jewellery or used to express identity, although their exact purpose remains uncertain.

Archaeologists cannot know exactly what these people believed, but the evidence clearly shows that they were capable of artistic expression, symbolism and complex social traditions. These discoveries remind us that the first modern humans in Britain were not simply surviving the Ice Age—they were creating culture as well.

Did You Know?

The Red Lady of Paviland was buried with red ochre more than 33,000 years ago. Red ochre was used at many Upper Palaeolithic burials across Europe, suggesting it held an important symbolic meaning, although archaeologists still debate exactly what it represented.

Britain in the Wider World

During the Upper Palaeolithic, Britain remained connected to mainland Europe by the broad plains of **Doggerland**. Lower sea levels allowed people and animals to move freely across this landscape, linking Britain to communities living across northern Europe.

Modern humans travelled over great distances, following migrating herds and adapting to changing climates. As they moved, they carried new ideas, technologies and traditions with them. Similar stone tools, bone implements and works of art have been discovered from Britain to France, Germany and beyond, showing that Upper Palaeolithic communities shared many aspects of their culture.

Britain was never isolated. The discoveries made at Paviland Cave, Creswell Crags and Kent's Cavern form part of a much wider archaeological record that stretches across Ice Age Europe. By comparing these sites, archaeologists can understand how people adapted to different environments while maintaining similar technologies and artistic traditions.

As the Ice Age came to an end, rising temperatures transformed the landscape. Glaciers retreated, forests gradually spread across the land and sea levels began to rise. Over thousands of years, Doggerland was flooded, eventually separating Britain from continental Europe and creating the island we know today.

The archaeology of the Upper Palaeolithic shows that Britain's earliest modern humans were part of a much larger human story. They belonged to communities that travelled widely, shared ideas and adapted successfully to a changing world.

Did You Know?

Some of the closest artistic similarities to the engravings at Creswell Crags are found in caves hundreds of kilometres away in France. This suggests that Ice Age communities across Europe shared ideas and traditions over surprisingly large distances.

Why This Period Matters

The Upper Palaeolithic marks one of the most significant turning points in Britain's human story. It was during this period that **modern humans** occupied Britain, bringing new technologies, artistic traditions and increasingly sophisticated ways of understanding the world around them.

Archaeological discoveries show that these communities were highly adaptable. They repeatedly returned to Britain as the climate improved, hunted across changing Ice Age landscapes and developed specialised tools made from stone, bone and antler. Their ability to respond to environmental change helped them survive in conditions that were often severe and unpredictable.

This period also provides Britain's earliest clear evidence for symbolic behaviour. Cave art, personal ornaments and carefully prepared burials demonstrate that people expressed ideas, identity and beliefs in ways that can still be recognised today. These discoveries reveal communities whose lives were shaped not only by survival but also by creativity and shared traditions.

The Upper Palaeolithic also reminds us that Britain's past has always been connected to the wider world. Before rising sea levels created the English Channel and the North Sea, people travelled freely across Doggerland, linking Britain with the rest of Europe. Ideas, technologies and artistic traditions spread across these connected landscapes long before Britain became an island.

Although only a small number of archaeological sites have survived, each discovery adds to our understanding of the first modern humans who lived in Britain. Together they reveal a remarkable period of innovation, resilience and cultural development at the close of the Ice Age.

Did You Know?
Many of Britain's most important Upper Palaeolithic discoveries have been made inside caves. These natural shelters protected archaeological evidence for thousands of years, preserving objects that would have disappeared from open-air sites.

Investigating the Past

Archaeologists continue to study the Upper Palaeolithic because every new discovery helps us understand how the first modern humans adapted to life in Ice Age Britain. Although only a small number of sites have been found, each preserves valuable evidence about people, animals and the environments in which they lived.

Excavating an Upper Palaeolithic site requires great care. Archaeologists record the exact position of every stone tool, bone and hearth before anything is removed. Even the smallest fragment may help explain how a campsite was used, what people ate or when a site was occupied.

Modern scientific techniques have transformed our understanding of this period. Radiocarbon dating provides accurate ages for archaeological discoveries, while microscopic analysis reveals how tools were made and used. Environmental evidence, including pollen, sediments and animal bones, allows scientists to reconstruct the landscapes and climates experienced by Ice Age hunter-gatherers.

Many important questions remain. When did modern humans first reach Britain? How often did they return during warmer periods? What routes did they follow across Doggerland? How much evidence now lies beneath the North Sea? Every new discovery helps answer some of these questions while raising others.

Archaeology is continually developing. New excavations, improved scientific techniques and discoveries made both on land and beneath the sea continue to reshape our understanding of Britain's first modern humans and the closing chapters of the Ice Age.

Glossary

Antler
The branched bone grown and shed each year by animals such as deer. Upper Palaeolithic people used antler to make tools and hunting equipment.

Archaeology
The study of people from the past through the objects, buildings and other evidence they left behind.

Blade
A long, narrow flint tool produced from a prepared stone core. Blades were used to make knives, scrapers and many other specialised tools.

Bone Tool
A tool made from animal bone, often used for making needles, points and other specialised implements.

Burin
A stone tool with a strong cutting edge used for carving bone, antler, wood and ivory.

Doggerland
The vast area of land that once connected Britain to mainland Europe during periods of low sea level.

Glaciation
A period when large ice sheets spread across the land during the Ice Age.

Hearth
A place where a fire was lit for cooking, warmth, light and other everyday activities.

Homo sapiens
The scientific name for modern humans. Upper Palaeolithic people belonged to the same species as people living today.

Ice Age
A long period when global temperatures were much colder than today and glaciers covered large parts of the Earth.

Ochre
A naturally occurring mineral pigment, usually red or yellow, sometimes used in Upper Palaeolithic burials and decoration.

Radiocarbon Dating
A scientific method used to determine the age of organic materials such as bone, wood and charcoal.

Sediment
Layers of sand, gravel, clay or mud that gradually build up over time and preserve archaeological evidence.

Symbolic Behaviour
Actions that express ideas, beliefs or identity, such as creating art, making ornaments or burying the dead with grave goods.

Upper Palaeolithic
The final stage of the Old Stone Age, dating from about **40,000 to 10,000 BC** in Britain, when modern humans occupied the country during the closing stages of the Ice Age.

Suggested Reading and Places to Visit

Suggested Reading

Dinnis, R. and Stringer, C. (eds.) *Britain and the First Modern Humans*.

Gaffney, V., Thomson, K. and Fitch, S. *Mapping Doggerland*.

Pettitt, P. and White, M. *The British Palaeolithic: Human Societies at the Edge of the Pleistocene World*.

Stringer, C. *Homo Britannicus*.

White, M. *The Human Occupation of Britain During the Upper Palaeolithic*.

Places to Visit

Creswell Crags, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire

Britain's most important Upper Palaeolithic cave complex, famous for its Ice Age cave art, stone tools and museum.

Kent's Cavern, Torquay, Devon

One of Britain's most significant prehistoric caves, preserving evidence for both Neanderthals and the earliest modern humans.

Paviland Cave (Goat's Hole), Gower Peninsula, Wales

The site of the famous Red Lady of Paviland burial. Although access is restricted, the surrounding landscape and local museums explain its importance.

Gough's Cave, Cheddar Gorge, Somerset

An internationally important Upper Palaeolithic site where archaeologists discovered evidence for hunter-gatherer occupation and the famous "Cheddar Man", who lived much later during the Mesolithic.

Hengistbury Head, Dorset

An important coastal landscape preserving evidence for repeated occupation from the Upper Palaeolithic into later prehistory.

The British Museum, London

Displays important artefacts from Britain's prehistoric past, including objects from the Palaeolithic.

About the Author

Matthew Armitage is a writer and former archaeologist who worked with five major archaeological organisations before moving into the heritage sector. His field experience includes excavation, landscape survey and artefact recording across Britain and overseas.

He is the author of **Before England**, a narrative history of Britain from the Ice Age to the Norman Conquest and writes to make archaeology accessible to a wider audience through evidence-based storytelling.

Matthew is also Managing Director of the historic Tooley's Boatyard in Banbury and continues to promote Britain's archaeological and industrial heritage through research, publications and public engagement.

About Before England

Before England explores Britain's story from the earliest human occupation to the Norman Conquest, following nearly a million years of change through archaeology, landscape and history.

The Before England Learning Companion series complements the book by examining the archaeological evidence behind each major period. Together they provide both the story of Britain's past and the discoveries that allow archaeologists to reconstruct it.

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