

WHO WERE THE INHABITANTS OF FARNDON FIELDS?

Hunter-Gatherer Lifestyles

A hunter-gatherer (or forager) society is one that derives its nutrition from wild, undomesticated sources. This can mean the hunting of game, fishing and/or foraging for edible plants and fungi. Although increasingly rare in the modern world, forager lifestyles are still retained by some groups, including the Hadza of the Rift Valley and the Kalahari !Kung. Other groups, like the Aché of eastern Paraguay, have suffered tremendous changes to their lifestyle during living memory owing to encroachments into traditional lands. For the vast majority of our existence, *Homo sapiens* followed these kinds of lifestyle, with agriculture and pastoralism only emerging around 11,000 years ago at the advent of the Neolithic.

It has been frequent practice to make allegorical comparisons between modern hunter-gatherer behaviour and the residues of the archaeological record, a practice known as **“ethnographic parallel”**. It is important to be aware of critical issues surrounding the use of ethnographic data, as modern groups are not “pristine” or “frozen in time”, and our readings of behaviour are always en-couched within the socio-political ideas of the time. For example, during the colonial period, the philosopher Hobbes famously characterized the life of “pre-civilized” people as **“solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”** (from *Leviathan*, 1651). This idea has unfortunately lingered in the popular imagination of “cavemen”. A contrary view was presented during the Man The Hunter conference (1966), wherein it was argued that foragers actually expended less effort in their daily subsistence than did industrial societies, possessing more leisure time as the **“original affluent society”**. This was, of course, a popular idea during the height of the hippie movement – in reality, neither extreme is an accurate representation of these societies.

Bearing this in mind, some generalisations can be made about the character of hunter-gatherer societies:

- Semi, or fully nomadic with a low population density
- Small group size
- Periodic congregation for important events, e.g. exchange of resources and partners, grand hunts, rituals
- More egalitarian, with lower differentiation in personal wealth
- Sexual division of labour
- Low levels of economic specialization, lacking clear “professions”
- Religion is frequently animist (belief in a soul/spirit within all things), often with shamanic practices

- Organised, between-group warfare is uncommon
- Interpersonal violence/within-group feuding may be frequent

Ethnographic Parallel and Social Characterisation

At sites with acidic soils like Farndon Fields, skeletal material tends not to preserve, therefore nothing can be directly said about the biology of the exact population which passed through there. We do, however, know a great deal about remains from European sites of a roughly comparable date.

As *Homo sapiens*, the Late Upper Palaeolithic people showed a suite of characteristics which are diagnostic to our species. These traits include a large cranial capacity (although this is shared by our closest relatives, *Homo neanderthalensis*), a frontal bone (forehead) which is less sloping than other hominid species, and a projecting mental protuberance on the mandible – a very human chin! Pioneering new research on the ancient DNA of Mesolithic hunter-gatherer remains has shown that these populations carried genetic markers for darker skin and blue eyes. If a degree of genetic continuity can be assumed from the Late Upper Palaeolithic through to the Mesolithic, then this striking look may have been present within the population of Farndon Fields.

It is difficult to estimate longevity in ancient populations, as the most reliable methods for determining age-at-death from the adult skeleton are based upon degenerative changes in the bone, which do not markedly change once the individual is over 50 years of age. We also do not have enough remains from any one “biological population” and have to resort to pooling together fossils spanning thousands of years to have a large enough sample to analyze. However, it can be said that several individuals are known to have **lived into at least their fourth or fifth decade**, including the Magdalenian woman at Chancelade, France and the “crushed man” of Laugerie-Basse, France. Research on modern hunter-gatherer groups indicates that their longevity is surprisingly high, ranging between 68 – 78 years: quite different from the concept of “nasty, brutish and short”!



Magdalenian cranium and mandible of an adolescent, from Les Hoteaux, Ain, France

Settlement and Resources



A Magdalenian tent from Pincevent (Ile-de-France), near Fontainebleau, France (12,000 BCE)

As mentioned, hunter-gatherers tend toward a nomadic lifestyle, corresponding to the transient nature of their resource base (for more information on the natural environment of Palaeolithic Farndon, see “where” and “when”). We know that our site was occupied by several different groups, or “archaeological cultures”, including hunter-gatherers attributable to the Creswellian and Federmesser cultures (Late Upper Palaeolithic). It is difficult to say precisely how long each visit would have lasted, or how many times people passed through. However, the presence of scrapers alongside projectile points suggests that preparations for hunting and accompanying processing of its products took place here: a **hunting camp**, rather than an isolated kill.

It is within this context that we understand the knapping scatters as representing temporary stops in a particularly opportune area. Within the flood plain of the Trent, people here would have been well situated to hunt animals which drawn by the fresh water and herbage, possibly ambushing herds as they forded the waters. Comparison may be drawn with the **Paris basin open-air sites** of similar chronological attribution, including Étiolles, Verberie, and Pincevent.

Zooarchaeological analyses of reindeer remains at the two latter sites indicate that animals were killed during the autumn, indicating that these were **seasonal occupations**. Lacking organic preservation at Farndon, we cannot perform these kinds of analyses, but it is certainly possible that this site was a known spot for a resource at a particular time of year. Indeed, soil micromorphology seems to indicate that some of the knapping events took place during the summer months. Interestingly, recent analyses of fossil wolves from central Europe indicate that the dog domestication may have begun during the Middle Upper Palaeolithic – predating our site and raising the possibility that man’s best friend could have accompanied the Farndon people on their hunt.

Further evidence for a nomadic way of life amongst these people comes from analysis of raw material catchment areas. It is believed that much

of the Creswellian flint at Farndon shares a source with the material from Creswell Crags, believed to derive from what is now the southwest coast of England: a considerable distance.

Art and Beliefs

Open-air sites like Farndon may represent relatively short-term, prosaic occupations. However, this does not capture the full richness and depth of Upper Palaeolithic culture which is exemplified by sites containing parietal (cave) art, like our local Creswell Crags, or the great caves of **Altamira** in Spain and **Lascaux** in France. Our early ancestors were amazingly creative and talented people, making use of techniques like superimposition and incorporating the natural undulations of their cave “easel” to bring their creations to life. These were certainly no amateurs – but what did this art mean to its creators?

Artwork may well be the most intensively studied aspect of Upper Palaeolithic Archaeology, with many theories competing to explain its significance. Perhaps the least complex idea is that of “**art for art’s sake**”, that they are simply products of a creative mind. However the awkward situation of many pieces seems to speak against this idea, being placed in passages that required physical exertion and/or artificial light to access and work within them. Alternative theories relate to aspects of the spiritual life and beliefs of these people.



Magdalenian painting of a bison, from the Hall of Polychromes in Altamira Cave, Cantabria, Spain. Another early suggestion, highlighting the preponderance of game animals within the artistic repertoire, was that the paintings represented a kind of **sympathetic magic** for a bountiful hunt.

Similarly, **shamanism** plays a part in recent theories that abstract forms relate to the visual illusions that may accompany trance states, so called “entoptic phenomena”. Certainly, the remoteness of some pieces suggests a “sacred space”, and physical trials are employed in modern shamanism, giving credence to the idea. However, anthropological analysis of **finger flutings** (fingertips dragged into wet clay, as found at sites such as Rouffignac) has suggested that **men, women and children were all involved** in its creation. Clearly, as with most things in life, there is no one clear, all-encompassing explanation: Palaeolithic art likely meant a host of different things, to different people, at different times in their life!

Though the majority of the rock art seen in the Upper Palaeolithic involves prey animals, or artistic forms, there are some examples of

human representation. Distinct in its appearance from the more realistic portrayals of animals, the stylised depictions found at La Marche grant us a rare and personal view of these ancient people.

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