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First People Overview

Up until about 10,000 years ago Redcar and Cleveland would have been buried beneath vast ice sheets. When the Ice Age ended these ice sheets retreated leaving a tundra landscape, a bit like the Russian steppes. At this time people probably hadn't settled in the area but large animals like woolly mammoth and rhinoceros would have grazed the tundra. The fossil remains of these sorts of creatures are sometimes found on local beaches.



Mammoths and other large creatures roam the glacial tundra.

The first people arrived in a period known as the Mesolithic which means the Middle Stone Age. This period begins at about 8000BC. At this time the climate became warmer and mixed forests developed. The large animals of the Ice Age became extinct and were replaced by wild cattle, deer and boar. The people of the Mesolithic were hunter gatherers and exploited the landscape by collecting shellfish from the coast, fruit and nuts from the forest and by hunting the animals. They moved around the landscape according to the seasons and left behind little other than the flint tools which they used to tip their arrows and cut their meat.



Mesolithic flint blades for cutting and processing meat and animal skins

In around 3200BC farming begins in a period known as the Neolithic or New Stone Age. Instead of hunting and gathering people begin to plant crops and domesticate animals. They start to clear the forests using stone axes which are often traded from far a field. Neolithic people also build the first monuments for burying their dead. Archaeologists have excavated a large burial mound of this period at Street House near Loftus.



Excavations of the Neolithic Monument at Street House, Loftus

By around 1800BC society has become much more complicated with the discovery of the first metals giving rise to the Bronze Age. At this time people started to live in tribes and began to defend their settlements suggesting that warfare was common. Important people are buried in their own circular burial mounds with their possessions. A settlement of this date has been excavated at Eston Nab.



A Bronze Age Burial Mound at Black Howes, Near Guisborough

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Highcliffe Nab

Highcliffe Nab is a rocky outcrop on the edge of the North Yorkshire Moors. It overlooks the medieval town of Guisborough and provides a stunning viewpoint across the Tees Valley and surrounding moorland.



An aerial view of Highcliffe Nab shows the rocky outcrop emerging from Guisborough Forest.

Amateur archaeologists, Norman and Patricia Harbord, collected over two thousand worked flints from the surface of the Nab in the early 1990s. Many of these were characteristic of the Mesolithic period when hunting and gathering was the prime mode of subsistence.



A reconstruction of a Mesolithic hunting party.

Mesolithic people would have lived a nomadic life similar to the Native Americans or Aboriginal Australians. They would roam around the landscape to exploit natural resources when they became available at different times of the year. This is the earliest evidence of human activity on Teesside and dates from around 6000 to 3200 BC.

Highcliffe Nab lies on the Cleveland Way Long Distance Footpath and the volume of walkers meant that the site was rapidly eroding. A new stone footpath was proposed from the base of the Nab to its summit.

Tees Archaeology arranged to excavate the bedding trench for this by hand over a 3-week period in August 1995. Over 850 flints were recovered from a trench 1 metre wide and 15 metres long.



Tees Archaeology excavates the route of the footpath.



Tees Archaeology excavates the route of the footpath.

The flint tools recovered from the site include scrapers for processing meat and animal skins, microliths used as projectile points and sharp pointed pieces used for piercing.



Flint microliths from Highcliffe Nab used for arrowheads.

The excavation revealed that Mesolithic hunter-gatherers took advantage of the fine vantage point as an observation post and possibly a beacon. Burnt flint from the excavations indicated that fires were lit at the summit of the Nab. These may have been campfires but could also have been used to signal to other people in the surrounding landscape.



*Stunning views can be had in all directions from the Nab.
This view is looking across Guisborough to Upleatham with the North Sea beyond.*

It is also likely that the Mesolithic people utilised the viewpoint to track herds of wild animals such as deer and wild cattle across the landscape.

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The Neolithic Long Barrow at Street House, Loftus

The Neolithic period began in around 3200BC. As well as being the first farmers, Neolithic people were also the first to build monuments. Excavation of these monuments sheds light on the fascinating and bizarre rituals carried out in the period that are certainly not for the faint hearted.



A tapering stone mound is constructed over the monument.

In 1979 the excavation of a later Bronze Age round barrow at Street House near Loftus, revealed an earlier Neolithic Structure beneath it. This monument consisted of a long mound of stone that was wider at one end than the other. It was 36 metres long and 18 metres wide at its broadest and tapered to 8 metres at its tail.

The archaeologists carefully removed the stone mound to examine how the monument was used. Beneath the mound were the remains of three different parts of the monument.

The wide end housed the entrance, which consisted of a ditch with post holes cut into its base. These post holes carried large timbers that formed a façade at the entrance of the monument. The post hole in the centre of the trench was the largest and held a huge timber which was one metre wide.



*The monument during excavation showing the ditch of the entrance façade.
Note the excavators cleaning out the façade ditch showing its depth.*

The façade had two flanking arms, which projected out to form a deep forecourt. A small arrangement of timber posts within the forecourt may have been the remains of an avenue leading to the structure. It is thought that ritual feasts were held in the forecourts of these sorts of monuments.

Behind the façade were the remains of a wooden burial chamber. The remains within the chamber consisted of the body parts of at least eight individuals. Before the bodies had been placed in the chamber they had been left to decay in a process known as excarnation.

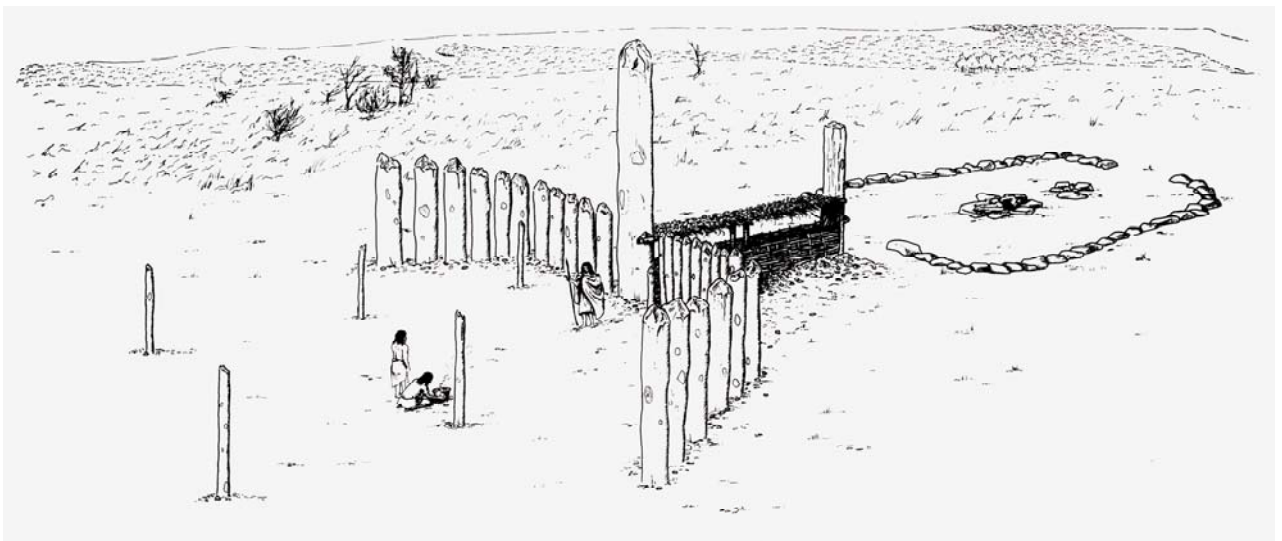
Excarnation was common practice in the early prehistoric periods although it seems a bizarre and grisly practice today. Excarnation is the process of leaving a body to the elements in order that the soft tissue is stripped away leaving the bare bones. The bones are then collected and placed in a communal tomb. Often the bones will be sorted and stacked into piles.

The third part of the monument consisted of a kerbed enclosure at the narrower tail end. There was some paving within the enclosure which may have been an excarnation platform for placing fresh corpses.



The kerbed enclosure at the back of the monument, perhaps used to store decomposing corpses.

Once the monument had reached the end of its life it was purposefully burnt to the ground. The remains were then covered with the stone mound to form a permanent landscape feature.



A reconstruction of the Street House long mound prior to its destruction by fire

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The Bronze Age at Eston

The Eston Hills are a prominent ridge of higher ground rising up from the Tees Valley at Eston before delving back down towards Guisborough.

By the Bronze Age farming had been taking place on and around the Eston Hills for hundreds of years. Much of the woodland had been cleared to be replaced by grazing cattle and sheep, fields and farmsteads.



Bronze Age people construct burial mounds on the Eston Hills

The people of this period believed that the landscape was sacred and this was reflected in the number of religious monuments they built. The round barrows, mounds of earth some 12 metres across and up to 2 metres high, not only acted as monuments to their religion, but also as territorial markers, defining the tribal boundaries.

The burials within the mounds were almost certainly of the highest status members of the society and these important few were usually cremated and placed in pots. The large number of burial mounds on the Eston Hills suggests a high population in the area at the time.



Wealthy individuals were buried with personal possessions. The large vessel may have held a last meal. The smaller cup may have held incense. Jet beads are also often found.

In the late Bronze Age farming expanded all over the Eston Hills to cope with the increased population. The round barrows were ignored as more extensive field systems were developed and defended settlements were established. One of these survives at Eston Nab.



The Bronze Age settlement at Eston Nab.

Eston Nab occupies the highest point along the precipitous north facing slopes of the Eston Hills, overlooking Teesmouth and the Lower Tees Valley and on a clear day offers extensive views to the Pennines and far into County Durham.



An aerial photograph showing the later Iron Age defences that were added to Eston Nab in around 500BC.

The remains of a Bronze Age fortification has been excavated on the highest point of the site and traces of round houses were found within. In the mid 5th Century BC, the site was enlarged and the defences, which can still be seen today, were constructed. These consist of a stone wall that was later buried in soil to create a bank. The site does not appear to have been occupied at this time. This suggests that the cultivation of the Hills had led to erosion and that the farmers were forced to move their farmsteads onto the heavier clay soils of the Tees Lowlands.

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