



Prehistory: Mesolithic

(8300BC – 4000BC)

The prehistoric period is arguably one of the most fascinating periods to study because it is the longest (approximately 800,000 years) and we have little evidence surviving, especially from the earliest times. To understand what life was like we have to draw on archaeological evidence, science, experimental archaeology, research, and anthropology to form our understanding. New discoveries are being made all the time, and what we thought we knew about this period is constantly evolving.

In this section we introduce you to the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) period in Kent. Officially the period begins when the ice caps melted after the last glacial period. The UK was eventually cut off from mainland Europe by rising sea levels. Although there is no exact date this happens the period is said to start around 8300BC and continues until the introduction of farming around 4000BC. As with all dates in the prehistoric period these are subject to interpretation.

Quick facts!

1. The UK was covered in dense woodland which was so thick that people moved around using the sea and rivers. Mesolithic communities mostly lived their lives by the water, were great boat builders, and developed an extensive toolkit for fishing. Don't be fooled into thinking the Mesolithic people were trapped on the island though, they were experts at building boats and would have been able to move across the sea with ease.
2. Tools became smaller and more specialised to adapt to the environmental changes. People began to use composite tools (tools made from more than one material), for example wood was used to make handles for tools. Barbs appear in hunting tool kits to increase the chances of a successful kill. We call these smaller tools microliths (tiny stones).
3. For the most part communities hunted, foraged, and fished, moving between seasonal camps to make the most of natural resources. However, there is growing evidence to suggest some communities were able to remain in one place the whole year round, especially by the end of the period. By starting to keep animals and planting crops they ensured there was enough food to go around everyone throughout the year.
4. There is evidence of art, culture, and religion from across Europe. Some Neolithic monuments may have possible Mesolithic origins (Stonehenge being one of them!), and some petroglyphs

(rock carvings) might have been made during the Mesolithic. There are few surviving burials in Britain but European examples show a continuation of late Palaeolithic practices.

5. The number of people in the entire country would have been measured in hundreds of thousands rather than millions. (to put it in perspective the population of London today is approximately 9 million people). Communities would have met up at different times of the year to trade, swap information, and to find partners.

The Mesolithic in the UK

The Mesolithic across the UK is seen as being a marked difference to the Palaeolithic that came before it. The warmer temperatures melted the ice sheets covering the land and the unlocked water caused sea levels to rise and cut off the UK from mainland Europe. Trees started to grow and the country became covered in dense woodland. At the start of the period the trees would have been pine, alder, and birch but by the end there were more species. We know this because we use environmental science to analyse pollen, seeds, and tree remains from archaeological sites. The large herd animals who roamed the plains of Europe in the Palaeolithic were replaced by smaller animals, such as deer species, squirrel, auroch, pigs, and boar, which required different hunting techniques and a new toolkit.

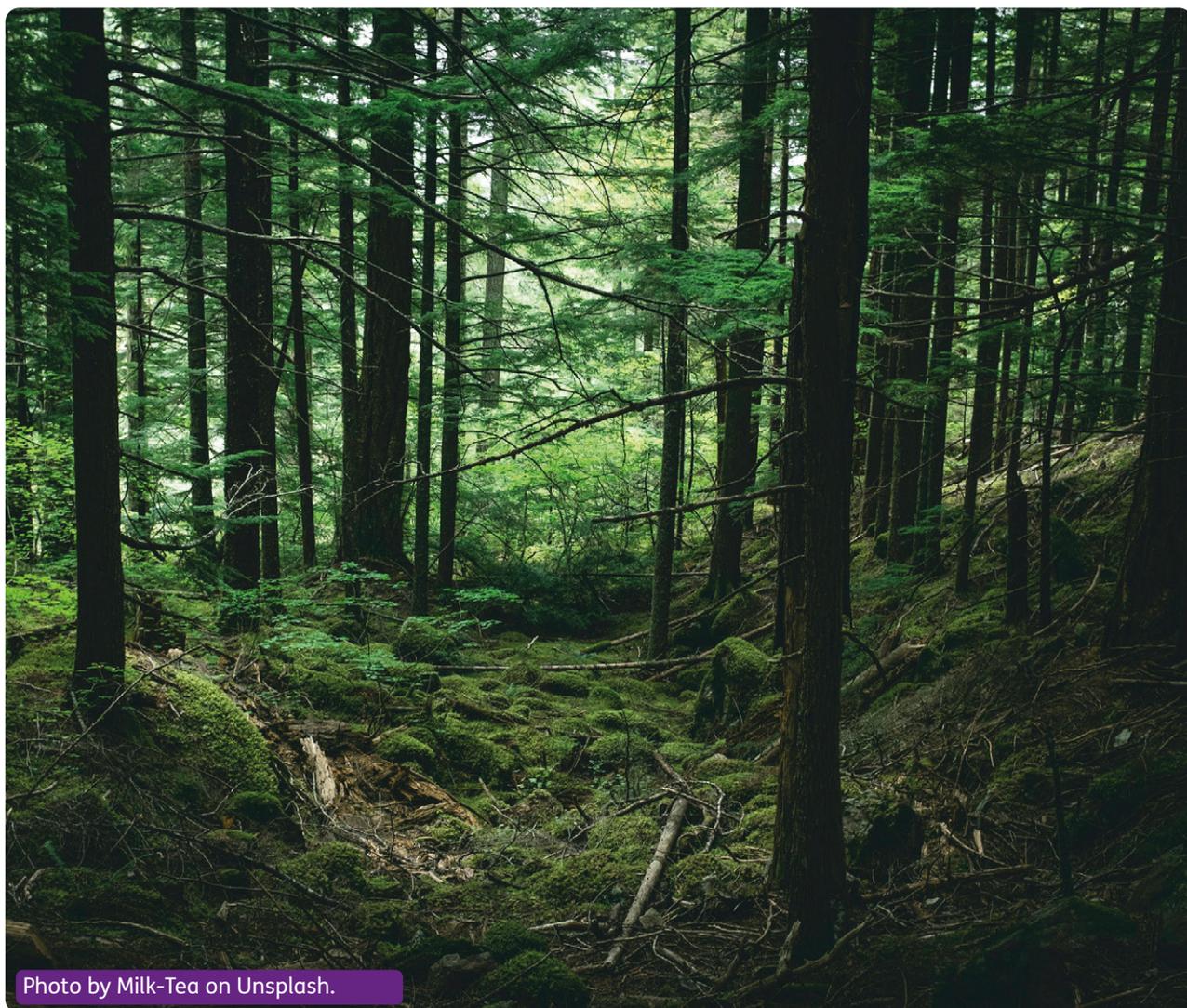


Photo by Milk-Tea on Unsplash.

Finding surviving archaeology from this period is rare. Evidence is usually in the form of tools, discarded food waste, or sometimes structures. One of the best preserved sites is [Star Carr](#) in Yorkshire which was discovered buried in the peat and contained headdresses made of antler, carved jewellery, and the first evidence of carpentry in the UK.

The Mesolithic in Kent

Like with the rest of the UK, evidence of the Mesolithic has been limited to flint tool finds and some evidence of temporary structures. We know Mesolithic people lived in the Kent landscape, but finding traces of them is incredibly difficult given how much time has passed.

Learning about the Mesolithic

There are some Mesolithic artefacts in our [Prehistory Box+](#) including replica tools, and animal bone.

The [Star Carr website](#) has a selection of stories and activities focussed on the Mesolithic.

If you can get outside why not have a go at building shelters out of natural materials, or building a campfire? If you are feeling brave you could even go foraging (**do not eat anything you are unsure about!**).

Further information

For information on finds check out the [Portable Antiquities website](#).

For further information on Kent sites check out the [Kent County Council Historic Environment Record](#).

Here you will find an overview of [Mesolithic Kent](#).

C·A·T sites and reports are searchable on our [Gazetteer](#).

Information on the Mesolithic paleoenvironmental record can be found on [Historic England's website](#).

