



Prehistory: Palaeolithic

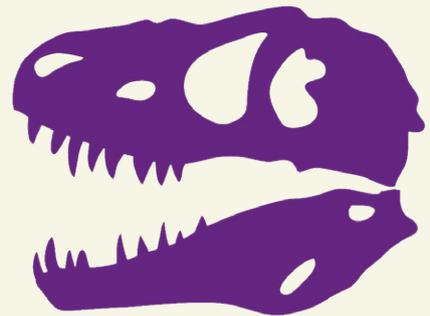
800,000BC – 8,300BC

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.

Here we introduce you to the Palaeolithic in Kent (pronounced pail-ee-oh-lithic). This period starts when people first enter the country by land, now submerged under the English Channel, and ends when the sea level rises at the end of the last Ice Age cutting the UK off from mainland Europe. Currently these dates are set at 800,000BC to 8300BC, subject to change with new archaeological discoveries! It is also important to remember that there was no continuous human occupation of the UK during the Palaeolithic.

Were there dinosaurs?

We wish! Dinosaurs were long gone by the time people came to the UK. We did have some animals that are extinct in the UK today, such as hippos and mammoth (called Mega Fauna because they were so large!) and we found evidence of these in Herne Bay.



Quick facts!

1. Life wasn't just a fight for survival, people had language, art, culture, and religion. We can see some of their art in cave paintings and from carved bone in the shape of the animals or people.
2. The 'Palaeo' part means old and 'lithic' means stone, making it The Old Stone Age. Tools were made from flint and shaped by striking two pieces together. Striking flint against iron produces a spark which can be used to make fire - we still use this technology today!

3. People were nomadic and lived in communities, following herds of animals as they moved around Europe. Animals such as elk and moose are still around today, but the larger species, such as mammoths have sadly become extinct. Meat and fish were a very important part of the diet, supplemented by berries, leaves, and nuts. Dogs were domesticated to help with hunting although where and when this first occurred is hotly debated.
4. Most people lived in tent-like structures made of the materials they had to hand, such as animal skin, wood, or maybe even mammoth bone!
5. People wore clothes made of animal skin. In warmer interglacial periods they might have made cloth from flax or other vegetable fibres. From the few burials we have found we know they wore beads made of bone, stone, ivory, and shells either as jewellery or sewn onto their clothes.

The Palaeolithic in the UK

The Climate

The Palaeolithic period starts in the Pleistocene period defined by periods of fluctuating Ice Ages. The climate fluctuated a lot, going through different glacial (Ice Age) and interglacial (warm) periods. During the coldest glacial periods an ice sheet covered most of Britain (at its worst that included everything north of the Thames) and people moved to warmer places to live. The interglacial periods were sometimes warmer than our climate today.

These periods came round in cycles often lasting thousands of years. Our current period is called the Holocene and has lasted 12,000 years so far. It is an interglacial period and temperatures should naturally start to decline into a glacial period – but many scientists are worried that global warming has disrupted this pattern.

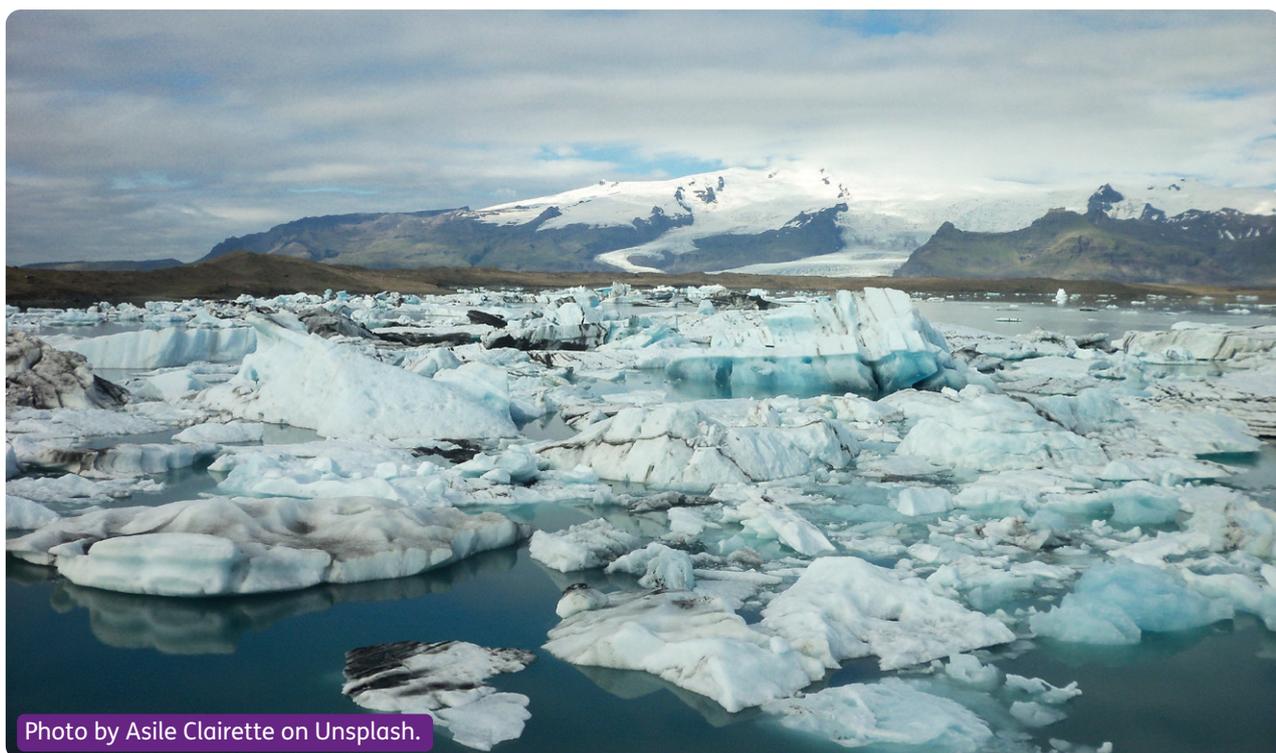


Photo by Asile Clairette on Unsplash.

First People

The exact date people arrived in the UK is not known. Finds dating to around 800,000 years ago have been recovered from Happisburgh, Norfolk. People would have come into the UK following the roaming herds of animals as they migrated across Europe. In the earliest beginnings of the UK's Palaeolithic these people would have been *Homo antecessor*, not *Homo sapiens*. Modern humans came to Britain around 40,000 years ago and have only been living here continuously for around 12,000 years. Evidence for other *Homo* species include *Homo heidelbergensis* and *Homo neanderthalensis*, but these species disappear from the archaeological record around the same time *Homo sapiens* appear. None of the people stayed in the UK during the coldest periods of the Ice Ages, and there is often thousands of years between the recovered archaeological evidence.



The scapula of a rhinoceros, from excavations at the former Herne Bay Golf Course.

The Palaeolithic in Kent

Archaeological evidence for the Palaeolithic period is not uncovered very often. This is partly because the people back then left little impact on the landscape but also because it happened so long ago the archaeology is buried deep underground. However, Kent has the highest number of Palaeolithic artefacts in the whole of the UK, one of the most famous was the discovery of skull fragments from Barnfield Pit quarry at Swanscombe. The skull belongs to a *Homo heidelbergensis* person, dating to around 400,000 years ago.

We have uncovered evidence of hippos, rhinos, and elephants in Herne Bay, dating to around 125,000 years ago!

Learning about the Palaeolithic

For the Palaeolithic period we have a number of items within our **Prehistoric Box+** including three Acheulian hand axes (from the Stour gravels at Fordwch or Sturry) and some replica resin copies of bone carvings of bison, reindeer, and the Brassempouy Venus.

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](#).

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

Information on early humans can be found on the [Natural History Museum website](#).

