

TWEED VALLEY SESSION TWO - THROUGH THE MISTS OF TIME

The Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Periods

About 15,000 years ago the last Ice Age gave way to a period of gradually improving climate. Within 2,000 years much of what is now north Britain was a tundra-like landscape with a mainly dry and warm climate.

The Old Stone Age – the Palaeolithic period from the age of the Ice Age to about 8,000BC – has left its mark on the region.

By 7,000BC the optimum climate had been reached, on average about 2 degrees centigrade warmer than today. The land bridge with continental Europe was finally severed in about 6,000BC, leaving Britain an island.

By this time our region was largely covered by dense forests of birch, oak and alder. It was into this environment that Man first appeared in what is now the borderland.

However, little evidence survives of Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age habitation in the region.

The Tweed Valley area has no natural source of flint and early inhabitants made use of poorer quality volcanic stone or with small flints washed across the North Sea from Scandinavia.

The people of the Mesolithic period lived a nomadic, hunter-gatherer lifestyle, following the sources of food through the seasons

PHOTO – CAVE SHELTER

Evidence of rock shelters of this period has been discovered in rock escarpments like Goat's Crag near Milfield. The remains at sites like this include evidence of the use of fires, animal bones, stone flakes or microliths, and simple ornaments made from animal teeth or shells.

The Neolithic Period

The Neolithic or New Stone Age began in about 4,000BC.

More advanced tools were becoming available, showing that mobility and some trade was going on. Flints from the chalk cliffs of East Yorkshire and axes made from volcanic stone quarried in the Lake District have been found widely throughout the region.

These stone tools could be very efficient. In a recent experiment carried out in Denmark, over 100 trees were felled using a single axe head that had not been sharpened since the Stone Age.

The lifestyle remained nomadic in the Early Neolithic period, though clearances were being made for seasonal encampments and for the grazing of animals.

Man began to make a significant impact on the landscape with increasing clearance from about 2,500BC.

Ritual and Burial Practices

As family groups moved around the countryside, they imbued natural features with symbolic or ritual meaning. Hills, rocks and pools of water would be given a ritual significance associated with their place in the seasonal activities of the group. Unlike today, religion and everyday life were completely interwoven.

PHOTO – ROUTING LINN CUP AND RING MARKINGS

Sometimes natural stone outcrops were carved with mysterious symbols in the form of concentric grooves and notches known as cup-and-ring markings. North Northumberland has Britain's largest concentration of these markings, although some examples can be found in the Scottish Borders.

Neolithic burials were in collective graves covered by long mounds or cairns. Among the few that have survived in the region are Dod Hill near Ilderton and the so-called Mutiny Stones at Longformacus near Duns. The Mutiny Stones cairn is 85 metres long and up to 23 metres wide. Even though it has been badly robbed, the cairn still stands up to 2.5 metres in height at the eastern end.

In about 2,000BC a new wave of settlers appeared on the scene. They are generally known as Beaker Folk, from the beaker-shaped pottery often found in their burial sites. Bodies were placed in a crouched position in shallow, stone-lined graves or “cists”. Skeletons of Beaker Folk show marked differences from the earlier Neolithic people, particularly in the shape of the skull.

PHOTO - YARROW STONE

There are many single standing stones, or monoliths, scattered about the region.

PHOTO – DUDDO STONES

There are a few stone circles, such as the Duddo Stones and the oval ring of 13 stones standing near the summit of Burgh Hill, Roxburgh.

ILLUSTRATION - HENGE

There are also many henge monuments, comprising circular banks with internal ditches enclosing a central, possible “sacred” space. There would sometimes be an inner circle of stones or timber uprights. Examples in the region include the Coupland Henge at Milfield, which has been shown to predate Stonehenge by several hundred years.

PHOTO – MAELMIN HENGE RECONSTRUCTION

Larger monuments such as long-cairns, henges and stone circles point to a social change as their building required substantial communal effort. Leadership and some probably some form of social hierarchy would be necessary to carry out these large scale construction projects. They also illustrate a more settled lifestyle and the concern of extended family groups to impose their territorial claims on the land they occupied.

The Bronze Age

Increasing population led to intensification of land clearance and ultimately to the barren landscape that is the main feature of the upland areas of our region today.

PHOTO – BRIGANTIUM HUT

Bronze Age people lived in round houses built from a mixture of earth, turf and stone, faced on both sides with wattle screens. The entrance was generally cobbled and there is evidence that the internal space was divided by partitions.

The economy of the early settlers was largely pastoral and some sites may only have been occupied seasonally when livestock was taken to the upland for grazing in the summer.

However, rows of small cairns, known as cairn fields, are evidence of the clearance of fields for cultivation. No doubt stone picking was work for the children! The remains of barley, oats, wheat and flax have been found in excavations of Bronze Age sites, along with the querns that were used for grinding the grains.

At around this period burial practices changed from inhumation in cists to cremation, with the remains being buried in urns under round cairns.

Another Bronze Age ritual was the depositing of metal artefacts, such as the hoard of 14 axe heads found at Kalemouth and another group of 7 discovered at Eildon Mid Hill. Harness rings and other fittings for a miniature chariot were found at Horsehope in Peebleshire.

From about 1,200BC the climate of Britain became wetter and it became common for deposits to be made in water or boggy ground. Examples in our region include a Bronze Age torque necklace recovered at Stichill near Kelso, a bronze cauldron found at Alnham moor in the Upper Breamish Valley and three bronze ceremonial shields discovered in marshes near Yetholm.

Echoes of these prehistoric rituals continued until very recent times. It was a May day custom for local people to process to the Pin Well near Wooler to drop in a bent pin and make a wish. Travellers on the openly moorland route between the Yarrow Valley and Innerleithen were wise to drop a piece of cheese into the Cheesewell at Minch Moor to propitiate the local spirits.

Iron Age Hillforts

From the late centuries BC until the first century AD, fortified hill-top settlements became common in the region.

From about 500BC more substantial defences were being constructed, often referred to as “hill forts”. This is probably evidence of increasing concern with territorial boundaries and the development of more complex tribal systems leading to dispute and conflict.

The hill-forts may have been defended settlements, but they were also statements of the status of the heads of extended families or clans who built them.

The earliest hill-forts were often protected by a single earth rampart or stone wall with an external ditch. By the 1st century BC, one or two extra circuits of ramparts and ditches had been added to many of the larger settlements. Extra sections of ramparts or cross-ditches were sometimes constructed to defend particularly exposed parts of the site.

The largest hill-forts in our region were at Yeavinger Bell near Wooler and Eildon Hill North at Melrose.

PHOTO – YEAVINGER BELL AERIAL VIEW

The hump of Yeavinger Bell dominates Glendale, which was obviously a very fertile and highly populated area in prehistoric times.

PHOTO – YEAVINGER RECONSTRUCTION

There were at least 130 dwellings within the massive ramparts. When first built, the walls must have presented an impressive sight. Built from the local andesite stone, they would have been bright pink in colour before they weathered to a dull grey.

Yeavinger Bell is the largest hill-fort in Northumberland and probably the main tribal centre south of the Tweed for the confederation of tribes known as the Votadini.

PHOTO – EILDON NORTH

Eildon Hill North overlooks the route along the Tweed and the Leader Water. The first phase of settlement dates from the 6th or 7th century BC, when a single rampart around the summit enclosed an area of about three and a half hectares.

By the 1st century AD the site covered four times this area and there were three concentric ramparts protecting some 300 hut circles for timber framed houses. The population could have been as many as 2,000 people, suggesting that Eildon North was an oppidum or tribal centre near the territorial boundaries between the Selgovae and the Votadini.

The hill-fort of Hownam Rings near Kelso shows a progression from a fort defended by a single earth rampart with wooden palisades, replaced by a massive single stone wall, then strengthened by the addition of further ramparts and ditches superseded by an unprotected settlement.

The so-called Hownam Sequence has been generally applied to hill-fort sites throughout the Borders.

Like Eildon Hill North, the wooden palisade enclosure of the first phase of occupation at Hownam Rings has been radio-carbon dated to the 6th and 7th century BC. A later single stone wall 3.6 metres thick was faced on either side with stone blocks and in-filled with rubble, probably in the 1st century AD and a series of ramparts was constructed. The last stage of occupation was an undefended settlement of stone-built houses that shows occupation from at least the late 3rd to the 7th century AD.

The site overlooks the trackway known as The Street, which follows a line across a high plateau southwards to Upper Coquestdale.

PHOTO – THE SHEARERS

Close by the Hownam Rings is a line of 28 stones known as The Shearers, which may be part of an ancient field dyke associated with the last period of occupation in the late Roman period.

A few hill-forts such as Dreva and Cademuir had additional defences in the form of chevaux se frises – rows of pointed upright stones set in the field to break up a charge by an enemy mounted on chariots or horses.

Brochs

There is a handful of circular stone brochs in our region, for example at Torwoodlee near Galashiels and Edin's Hall, which stands on the slope of the Cockburn Law overlooking the valley of the Whiteadder Water near Abbey St Bathans.

This type of high status fortification is rarely found outside the Scottish Highlands and Western Isles and possibly represents some level of Pictish influence in the area at the time of its building, probably sometime in the late 1st century BC or early 1st century AD.

PHOTO – AERIAL VIEW OF EDIN'S HALL

The 5 metre thick walls of Edin's Hall broch contains small chambers, passages and stone stairways, and enclosed a courtyard of 17 metres diameter.

The broch is surrounded by the remains of an earlier oval fort with a double rampart and ditches and a later settlement of hut circles and enclosures

It appears the broch tower was abandoned at the end of the 1st century AD, at about the time of the Roman invasion.

PHOTO – BROCH RECONSTRUCTION

The site is supposedly named after a giant called Etn, who had three heads and went around with a bull n his shoulders and a sheep under each arm, plundering local farms.

A two ton boulder in the nearby Whiteadder Water is said to be a pebble he tipped from his shoe.