

Prehistory Section Update 2020

The year began well with a talk in Leeds by Tom Booth of the Crick Institute where the genetics of the British Neolithic were outlined. The sophistication of the study of ancient DNA has reached a point where it is possible to pronounce with defensible certainty that the hunter-gatherer (Mesolithic) population of these islands was out-competed and replaced with little mixing by Neolithic people from what had become mainland Europe. Some three thousand years later Bronze Age settlers arrived in a largely depopulated land, the Neolithic people having succumbed to a series of poor harvests brought about by climate change and a plague to which they had little or no immunity. Makes you think...

Last October Rupert Till, University of Huddersfield, presented a resume at Pictureville in Bradford of the recently-concluded European Music Archaeology Project. There is a host of material online which you are urged to consult. Fascinating and illuminating, injecting humanity into what can be a dry catalogue of features, finds and interpretations.

We crossed the Pennines for the Barrowford Prehistory Day where several speakers discussed ongoing work much nearer to Calderdale than activities in East Yorkshire, which are our typical comparator. The take-away point is that finds over the last hundred years from (say) Widdop and Thursden may well have ended up in museums in Skipton, Rochdale and Huddersfield. Modern county databases too make an artificial distinction on the basis of a boundary that did not exist five thousand years ago. This makes for complications when trying to reconstruct the activities of pastoralists with winter bases in the Burnley basin who moved their stock up onto the summer grazing of the South Pennines, or earlier hunters whose traditional movements crossed the whole area.

The Yorkshire Archaeological Society hosted a study day where Steve Sherlock discussed the Neolithic in the Tees Valley, like ours an area that saw continued reuse such that suitable settlement sites now have a jumble of finds and features from contrasting periods spanning two or three thousand years. Prehistory isn't simple.

In Wigan, Don Henson - University of Liverpool - spoke generally about the use of flint in prehistory. More specifically, in relation to finds in east Yorkshire, he had found that utilitarian, everyday tools were made from the local, outcropping flint whereas artefacts with more social/ritual uses were made from more unusual flint derived from the glacial till. This indicates a more sophisticated appreciation of the available resources than had previously been thought.

Then it all went a bit quiet for obvious reasons. My latest newsletter piece makes reference to activities and resources online, many of which are highly recommended. We await a disastrous drought to lay bare the reservoir shores for further exploration and, more importantly, the publication of the Environment Agency's completed LIDAR survey of the whole country, promised for late summer. This will be a significant help in locating and understanding how the Calderdale upland was used in prehistory.