

The Palaeolithic Rivers of South-West Britain Project

The Palaeolithic Rivers of South-West Britain (PRoSWeB) project

The PRoSWeB project was set up to investigate the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic archaeology (c. 700,000–40,000 years ago) of the south-west region, particularly the stone artefacts associated with the Ice Age (Pleistocene) sands and gravels of the rivers to the west of the Devon/Dorset border, such as the Axe, the Otter, and the Exe.



The project's fieldwork investigations have generated new information about the south-west region's rivers, including their development during the Pleistocene and the ages of their deposits, and the ages of the stone artefact archaeology associated with them (see overleaf for more details).

The Palaeolithic of the South-West

Although the Palaeolithic archaeology of the south-west is often thought to be modest in comparison to other parts of southern England, this region actually includes a number of key sites (see the map overleaf), most notably a range of important cave sites (including Kent's Cavern amongst others).

A Very Brief Introduction to the British Lower and Middle Palaeolithic

The British Lower and Middle Palaeolithic periods are characterised by hunter-gatherer lifestyles, stone tool technologies, and a Pleistocene climate that cycled between cold (glacial) and warm (interglacial) periods. Two types of hominins (this term includes both modern humans and pre-modern humans) lived in Britain during the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic periods:

- *Homo heidelbergensis* was present in Britain during the Lower Palaeolithic (c. 700,000–250,000 years ago), and although they relied upon a small range of tools (including stone handaxes) they were skillful hunters.
- *Homo neanderthalensis* (the Neanderthals) were present in Britain during the Middle Palaeolithic (c. 250,000–40,000 years ago). They too were skilled hunters and mainly reliant upon stone tool technologies, but they also introduced new tool types and new tool-making techniques.

For *further information*, please visit the project website at:
<http://www.rdg.ac.uk/palaeorivers>

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River Exe and Otter Valleys

New fieldwork during this project has explored the 'staircase' terraces of both the Exe and the Otter rivers. Dating and examination of the sands and gravels (including analysis of the size, shape and type of the gravel pebbles and structures in the sediments) have suggested that some of the higher (older) terraces have suffered erosion and a degree of re-working. This may partly explain the smaller numbers of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic artefacts (including this example from Budleigh Salterton) associated with these rivers (in comparison with the River Axe to the east: see the **Broom** box).



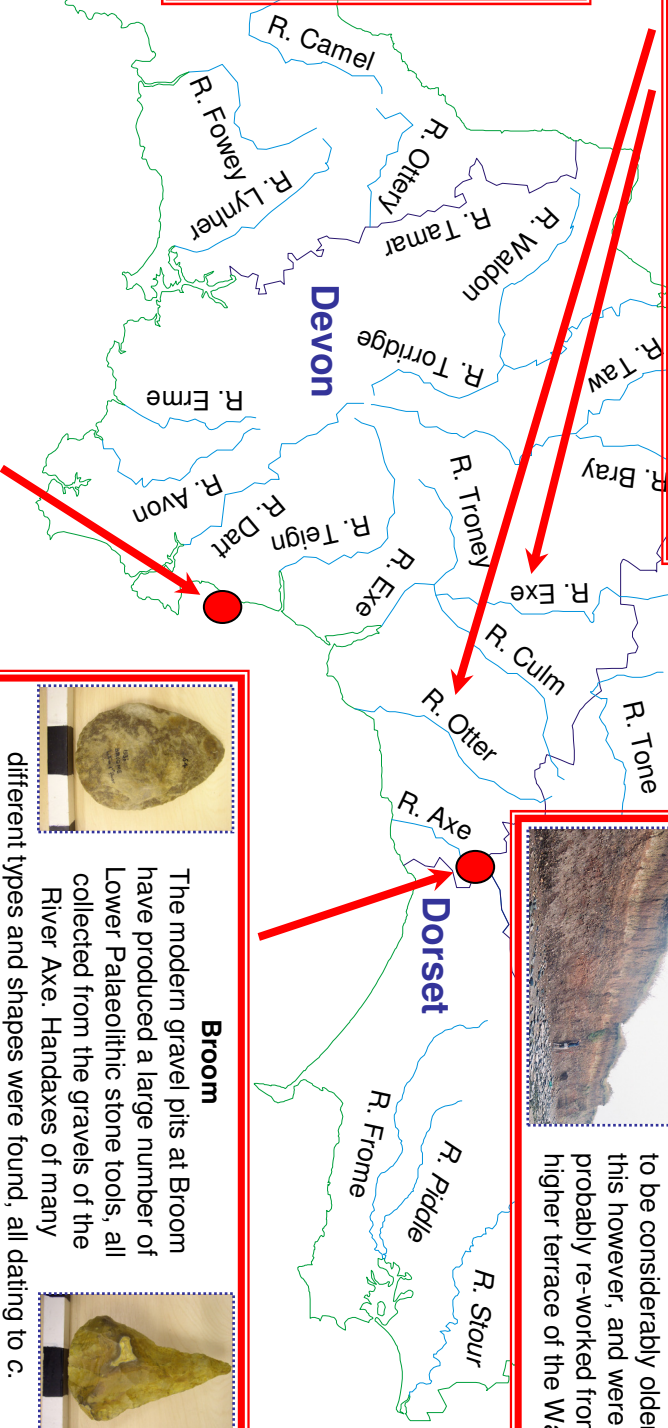
Western Cornwall

While relatively few Palaeolithic artefacts have been found in Cornwall, several stone tools have been found in the far west of the county, including handaxes and a Levallois (Middle Palaeolithic) core.



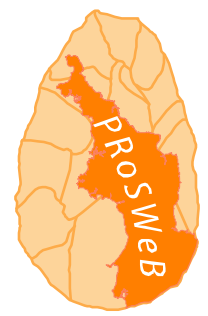
Washford Palaeoriver

Gravels exposed in the cliffs at Doniford are thought to be associated with the Washford palaeoriver (an old river which no longer exists). These gravels have produced Palaeolithic stone tools and mammoth bones, as well as more recent artefacts from the upper levels (these are on display nearby in Watchet Museum). New dating of the Doniford gravels during this project suggested that the lower gravels, which contained the Palaeolithic artefacts, are between c. 25,000 and c. 50,000 years old. The Palaeolithic artefacts are likely to be considerably older than this however, and were probably re-worked from a higher terrace of the Washford.



Kent's Cavern

This cave contains evidence for some of the earliest Palaeolithic hominins in the west of Britain, dating to around 500,000 years ago (this site was not dated or investigated as part of the PROSWEB project). It has also provided evidence for later occupations during the Palaeolithic period (as have several other caves in south Devon). To find out more visit the cave and its museum at Torquay.



Broom

The modern gravel pits at Broom have produced a large number of Lower Palaeolithic stone tools, all collected from the gravels of the River Axe. Handaxes of many different types and shapes were found, all dating to c. 250,000–300,000 years ago (this dating was conducted during a previous English Heritage project). A selection of the handaxes from Broom can be seen at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter. This project's dating of River Axe sands and gravels at Chard Junction and Kilmington has strongly suggested a marked contrast between the Pleistocene evolution of the Axe (a fill terrace system) and the Otter and the Exe ('staircase' terrace systems). Dating the differently aged sand and gravel units within deposits mapped as a single terrace of the Axe is critical for estimating the age of artefact collections such as that at Broom.

