

# The Palaeolithic of the South-West

## The British Palaeolithic

The British Palaeolithic period (c. 750–10,000 years ago, also known as the Old Stone Age) is characterised by hunter-gatherer lifestyles, stone tool technologies, and an Ice Age (Pleistocene) climate that cycled between cold (glacial) and warm (interglacial) periods. Three types of hominins (this term includes both modern humans and pre-modern humans) lived in Britain during the Palaeolithic period:

- *Homo heidelbergensis* was present in Britain during the Lower Palaeolithic (c. 750–250,000 years ago), and although they relied upon a small range of stone tools (including handaxes) they were skillful hunters.
- *Homo neanderthalensis* (the Neanderthals) were present in Britain during the Middle Palaeolithic (c. 250–40,000 years ago). They too were skilled hunters and mainly reliant upon stone tool technologies, but they also introduced new tool types and tool-making techniques, and ranged more widely across their landscapes.
- *Homo sapiens* (modern humans) were present in Britain during the Upper Palaeolithic (c. 40–10,000 years ago), used more specialised hunting techniques, and added bone, antler and wooden tools to their tool-kits.

## 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), most notably a range of important cave sites (including Kent's Cavern and Gough's Cave amongst others).

## The Palaeolithic Rivers of South-West Britain project



This project has emphasised the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic archaeology (c. 750–40,000 years ago) of the south-west region, particularly the stone artefacts associated with the Pleistocene (Ice Age) sands and gravels of rivers to the west of the Devon/Dorset border, such as the Axe, Otter and Exe.

**Gough's Cave, Cheddar**  
The largest collection of well-dated Late Upper Palaeolithic tools in the UK, together with human and animal bones, was excavated from this cave. The cave was occupied over a 1,000 year period by modern humans who were re-colonising Britain at the end of the last glaciation (approximately 10,000 years ago). There is also evidence for horse hunting (perhaps with dogs), and possible cannibalism, at Gough's Cave. Middle and Upper Palaeolithic archaeology has also been found in other caves in this part of Somerset. To find out more visit the Cheddar Gorge caves.



**Doniford**  
Pleistocene (Ice Age) river gravels are exposed in the cliffs at Doniford: these gravels have produced both stone tools and mammoth bones (on display nearby in Watchet Museum)



**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 about 250,000–300,000 years ago. A selection of the handaxes from Broom can be seen at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter.

**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

**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. 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.

