




*Leaf point with Birch tar*

# Prehistory

'Before written evidence'

The longest part of our past



Reconstruction from Howick, Northumberland, of  
oldest excavated 'house' in Britain, c. 7800 BCE

# Prehistory Part 1

## Hunters and gatherers after the Ice Age

# Stainton West on the Carlisle western by-pass

A routine excavation 2008-2011, ahead of a new road and bridge over the Eden

Route between Carlisle and Burgh-by-Sands, both important Roman sites

The area is known to be full of Roman sites and artefacts

And a few Roman potsherds were found but mostly....



# A site used from Mesolithic times onwards

- 'Mesolithic' period in Britain covers the time from about 8000 BCE to 5000 BCE. Earliest people on this spot 6000 BCE
- The time when we were recovering environmentally from the last Ice Age
- Stone, bone and timber, resin / pitch
- Waterlogged conditions facilitated good preservation of organic remains eg wood and pollen
- The ancient landscape could be reconstructed - not one river as now, but many shallow channels, created and managed by beavers, used by humans to catch ponded fish
- An internationally important type-site

- Wood showed gnawing by beavers and scratching from bears
- Radio-carbon dating of charcoal from hearths shows that that Mesolithic hunter-gatherers and new ideas such as farming did live in the same landscape - at least here
- Important because there is still debate about whether nomadic hunter-gatherers and settled farming could / did exist in the same landscape
- For a type-site of such importance, ***there is absolutely nothing to see were you to go to the site***

Informative graphic

<https://i0.wp.com/annrocks.co.uk/files/2014/04/CNDRPoster1.jpg?ssl=1>



## **Key Artefact: 'microliths' ie tiny flaked / chipped pieces of stone**

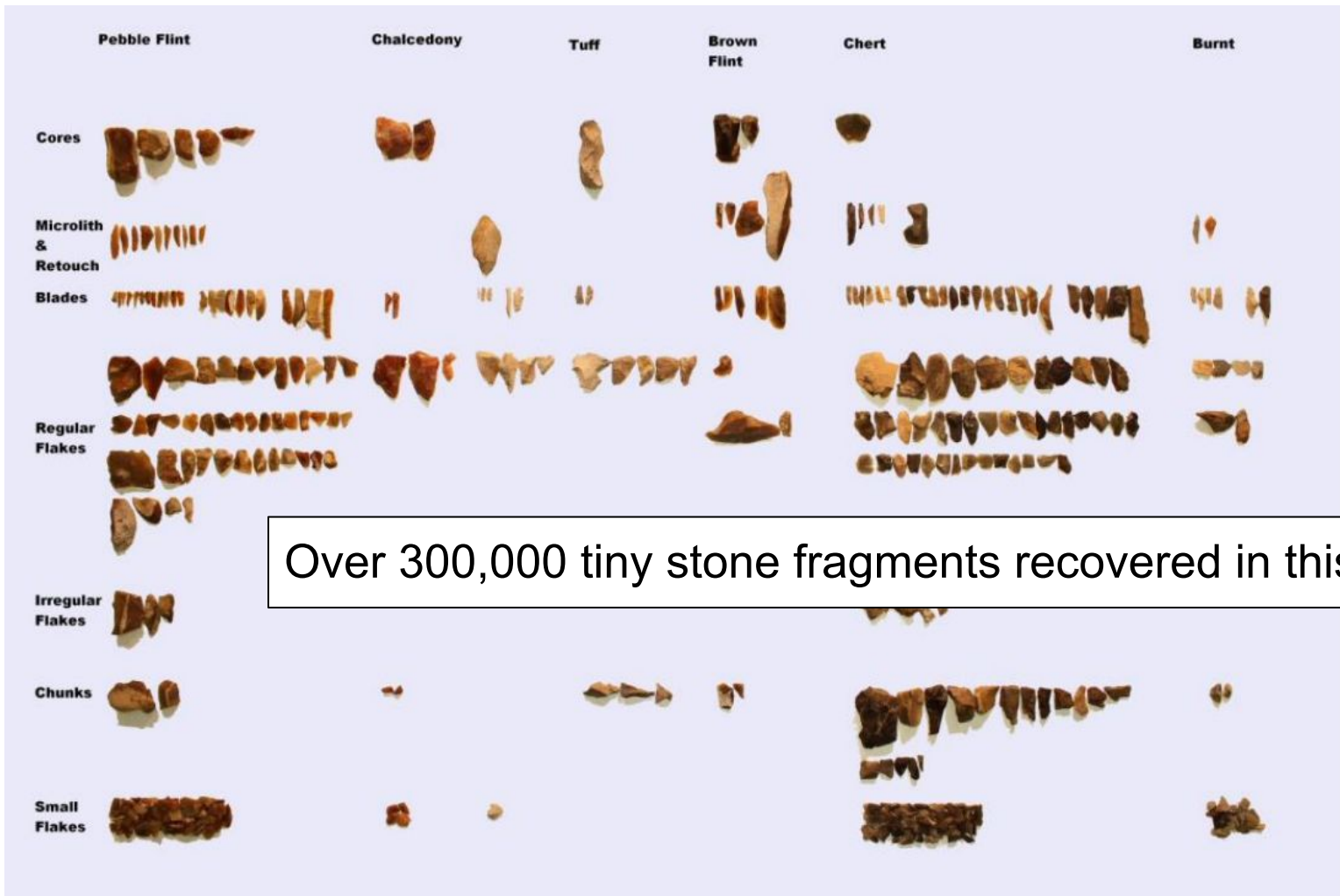
Stainton West comprised an open site of over 800m<sup>2</sup>

The site was divided into metre square units

Each was wet-sieved using surface water from the site

Approximately **270,000 litres of clay-rich sediment** was sieved on site, down to 2mm particle size

This yielded over **300,000 tiny 'microliths'** which were either the tools or the detritus from Mesolithic tool-making



Over 300,000 tiny stone fragments recovered in this process





Challenging to make these into a meaningful and engaging museum display.....



Many Mesolithic tools were made by fixing sharp stone fragments into antler or bone shafts

Eg spear tips and harpoons. The 'fixings' don't usually survive

People used the site at Stainton West for thousands of years

At some point, hunting and fishing was replaced by settled farming as a main way of life

But people still hunted and fished

They also made and acquired beautiful, useful things



3900-3400 BCE, 2.2m long, probably oak

Four smoothly polished axes / fragments of axes made of stone quarried at Langdale Pike, found at Stainton

The quarries are high on the Fell side

The axes were finished away from the quarries



Tullie House Museum shows how the shaping of Langdale axes was done in stages

Theories abound as to why, how, and where the 'fine production' took place





These lithic materials were brought to the site from widely dispersed and distant sources: beach pebble flint from the west Cumbrian coast; radiolarian chert from the North Uplands of Scotland; carboniferous chert from the north of Northern England; till flint from north-east Yorkshire; pitchstone from the Isle of Arran; and ochre from the Lake District.

At the heart of several natural overland routes and riverways, the site was well placed to exploit a wide range of lithic materials, and mapping of the sources of these various lithic materials demonstrates that these hunter-gatherers had contacts extending up to 350 kilometres and in several directions.

brought in as whole or, at least, as large pieces, perhaps because of the expense of transport, for example fish, requiring an intensive production of processing tools. A

Stone types found at Stainton West suggest people were communicating over wide distances

materials, such as pitchstone blades of pitchstone

The micromorphology of the chert together with the craft of the flint which this




Details from analysis of Stainton West finds continue to emerge

Eg the way tree resins were used as powerful glues

Obtained by a charcoal-burning type process

In this example, birch wood was used



Colour: around 600 pieces of red ochre have  
been recovered from Stainton West  
Used in tanning as well as for colour

<https://annrocks.co.uk/2014/08/worked-ochre-from-mesolithic-sites/>



White kaolin is stuck to some pieces

Red, white, pink colours could be made





## Prehistoric pottery

‘Late Neolithic Grooved Ware’

Never found whole -  
this is reconstructed

53 tiny pieces found at  
Stainton West, maybe  
just one vessel in bits