

Palaeolithic Girl - 25,000 years ago

Modern humans first moved into Britain during the early Upper Palaeolithic (approximately 40,000 years ago); a period of encroaching glaciation. However, it is thought that the humans then retreated before the advancing ice sheets that moved south across Europe and left Britain uninhabited for some 10,000 years.

At the height of the last glaciation, ice virtually covered the whole of Wales to a thickness of some 300 metres. However, seasonal visits to certain areas, including south and south west Wales, may have occurred even at the height of glaciation.

It is not fully understood how modern humans replaced Neanderthals, although it is thought that the latter were less well equipped to adapt to the changing climate. Studies measuring the carbon and nitrogen isotopes found in the protein of ancient bones have concluded that modern humans had a varied diet that included meat, fish and seafood, whereas the Neanderthal diet was less diverse. This would be problematic if the change in climate led to a reduction in the availability of a chief food source.

As with Neanderthals, modern humans during this period were hunter-gatherers hunting wild animals for meat and gathering food, firewood, and materials for their tools, clothes, or shelters. They also made and used stone tools such as handaxes, knives and spearpoints.

Due to a lack of written records from this time period, nearly all of our knowledge of the Palaeolithic way of life comes from archaeology and comparisons to modern hunter-gatherer cultures that live today.

Between 18th and 25th January 1823 bones covered in red ochre were discovered by Rev. William Buckland, during an archaeological dig at Goat's Hole Cave, now better known as **Paviland Cave**, one of

the limestone caves between Port Eynon and Rhossili, on the **Gower Peninsula** in South Wales.

The bones were originally thought to be those of a woman that became known as the "**Red Lady of Paviland**" but now have been identified as a fairly complete Upper Paleolithic-era human male skeleton dating to 29,000 years ago. It was the first human fossil to have been found anywhere in the world and at present, is also the oldest ceremonial burial anywhere in Western Europe.



Today **Paviland Cave**, is found in the sea cliffs and can be cut off at high tide, but twenty-nine thousand years ago, when it was used to bury the young man, the cave stood high above the flat grassy plains that extended for approximately 112km to the sea.

A reconstruction of the Paviland burial scene.
(Photo Amgueddfa Cymru/National Museum Wales)

A horse jawbone, etched with zigzags is the oldest known piece of Welsh artwork, recently dated to some 13,500 years ago found in **Kendrick's cave near Llandudno**. It was discovered together with the bones of four human individuals.



Nine decorated cattle and red deer teeth discovered at Kendrick's Cave, found in association with a decorated horse jaw and the human bones of 3 adults and 1 child.
(Photo Amgueddfa Cymru/National Museum Wales)

Although much of our knowledge for early modern humans in Wales has been discovered in caves there is little evidence of cave art in

Wales or across the rest of Britain. There are a few examples from caves at Creswell Crags in Nottinghamshire, England. However, further east and south in France and Spain there are fantastic examples of cave art from this period. It may be that it has yet to be discovered here in Wales or that it hasn't survived but there is no reason why the early modern humans of Wales were not as artistic or skilled as their European neighbours.

Links

<http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/rhagor/article/1963>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/periods/prehistoric02.shtml>

http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/touring_exhibitions_and_loans/sharing_the_treasures.aspx

<http://www.creswell-crags.org.uk/learning-resources/collection-resource.aspx>

<http://www.stone-circles.org.uk/stone/creswellcrags.htm>

<http://www.lascaux.culture.fr/#/fr/00.xml>