

Fact Sheet No 4: LIFE IN THE CHEDDAR AREA

Life was always easier on well-drained hilltops than on the marshes or wooded low-lying land in prehistoric days, and the Mendips have been occupied continuously since the earliest times.

Caves were prized as the best and easiest form of housing by early man, and many of the Cheddar Caves have yielded human remains and artefacts. The oldest human tools yet found here were discovered in Soldier's Hole, near Gough's Cave, and, at 40,000 years old, may just be Neanderthal.

The end of the Ice Age enabled humans to return to this area 13,000 years ago (the Late Upper Palaeolithic Period). At this time Cheddar Gorge was very busy, and Gough's Cave in particular was used as a hunting lodge and burial site. A tribe (or tribes) who may have had other settlements nearby visited the cave regularly for 2,000 years, leaving behind thousands of flints, bone and antler tools. More human bones have been found here than at any other cave site in North Europe.



These hunter-gatherers would have lived very comfortably in the "daylight" zone of the cave mouth, with draught-screens and furniture made from wood and animal skins, a cooking range, and many personal possessions. The bones of their kinsmen were buried in niches in the cave, including some bones from which the flesh had been scraped at the time of death. Was this done as a religious ritual, for hygiene, or as a cannibalistic source of food?

Although much of the evidence is lost, we know that occupation continued until Roman times. The oldest complete skeleton yet found in Britain, Cheddar Man, was buried in Gough's Cave 9,000 years ago as a Mesolithic crouch burial. He was aged 23. The skeleton was discovered in 1903.

Evidence of Neolithic life in the caves is more fragmentary, but there is a large Neolithic henge at Gorsey Bigbury, north of Cheddar. There are many Bronze Age barrows on the hills, particularly near Priddy. The four Priddy Stone Circles, also Bronze Age, were originally defended sites with high drystone walls. On the Somerset Levels, remains of ancient wooden trackways suggest that the moor and marshland were used by Neolithic hunters and Bronze Age herdsmen.

During the Iron Age Celtic farmsteads were established in many parts of the Mendips, serving the chain of hill-forts or tribal headquarters which spans the hills, Dolebury being the biggest. Iron Age skeletons were found in a "field" that is now the Cheddar Showcaves Coach Park. The lake villages at Glastonbury and Meare also date from the Iron Age.

The Romans are supposed to have come to the Mendips to take over an already thriving lead mining and smelting industry. Charterhouse

has remains of a Roman fort and settlement, with roads connecting it to the Fosse Way and (possibly) to a Roman port at Uphill. Villas and temple sites have been found at various places on Mendip.

Two famous British kings are associated with this area. King Arthur, Britain's (probably mythical) post-Roman defender against the 5th century Saxon invasions, is supposed to be buried on the Isle of Avalon (Glastonbury) while "Camelot" may have been nearby South Cadbury. The real-life King Alfred (died 899) was the most successful of the conquering Saxons. He in his turn made the "islands" at Wedmore and Athelney his fortresses against the invading Danes, besides establishing religious "seats of learning" (minsters) at Cheddar and Banwell. The Alfred Jewel was lost and later found in the marshes at North Petherton.



Under the Saxons, Cheddar became a royal palace and manor, and the Mendips a royal hunting forest. The whole area was re-organised by Saxon rulers, with Saxon place-names now predominating. There were Viking raids on the coast at Uphill, but no foothold was established.



In Medieval times Cheddar continued as a royal manor and market town, re-building its fine church in the fourteenth century and gaining its Market cross in the fifteenth. Sheep and cattle grazing and lead mining dominated the economy. The famous cheese to which Cheddar gave its name was developed here about this time. Cheeses made by the special technique now know as "Cheddaring" are today produced around the world.

The Cheddar manor had passed out of royal hands. The indifference of local farmers and landowners had caused the spread of poverty and ignorance among the villagers. Two hundred years ago Hannah More, the pioneer of women's education and one of a group of fashionable Bristol radicals which included William Wilberforce, set up Cheddar's first Sunday School, and did much to reform the godless mining communities on Mendip. Methodism became well established, and the wild old days were over.

Geology, archaeology and speleology were emerging as sciences, and caves undisturbed since the Stone Age were now broken into and exhibited. Many had rich hoards of human and animal remains. Cheddar residents George Cox, Richard Gough and Roland Pavey were able to discover and develop showcaves. The coming of the railway (1867) brought crowds of visitors to help make these eccentric showmen rich. Visiting caves was no longer a luxury for the idle rich, but became part of the national way of life.

Cheddar's economy now increasingly depended on tourism, based on the famous Gorge and caves. Dairy farming, cheese making and mineral extraction became less important, although quarrying increasingly dominated the landscape. Even in this century people were still living, camping or squatting in the Cheddar caves, and only the general shake-up of the First World War put an end to the practice.