

During an excavation carried out by Cleveland County Archaeology Section on the upper part of the beach near the Newburn Bridge in 1990, a line of wooden stakes was found; this was probably part of a fence or hurdle. This structure, together with a cut piece of antler, a number of worked flints, and a small pile of domestic rubbish, suggests that a settlement must be close by.



Artist's reconstruction of a ritual burial in the peat bog.

The Skeleton

Perhaps the most exciting find was the skeleton of a Neolithic man, discovered in 1971, which may have been deliberately buried in the peat. The man was between 25 and 35 years old, and had been placed on the surface of the peat in a crouched position on his right side. Near his right elbow a small group of flint flakes had been placed, and there was some evidence that the body had been covered with branches and twigs of birch. There are a number of famous cases in Scandinavia of deliberate burials in bogs, and they are thought to have had some ritual or ceremonial significance. Perhaps the best-known example in this country is that of 'Pete Marsh', or Lindow Man, found in a Cheshire bog in 1984. This was a body of a man in his thirties, who had been the victim of a ritual killing before being buried in the peat in about 550BC. If the Hartlepool skeleton is indeed the remains of such a ritual burial, it is one of only a very small number known from the whole of the British Isles.



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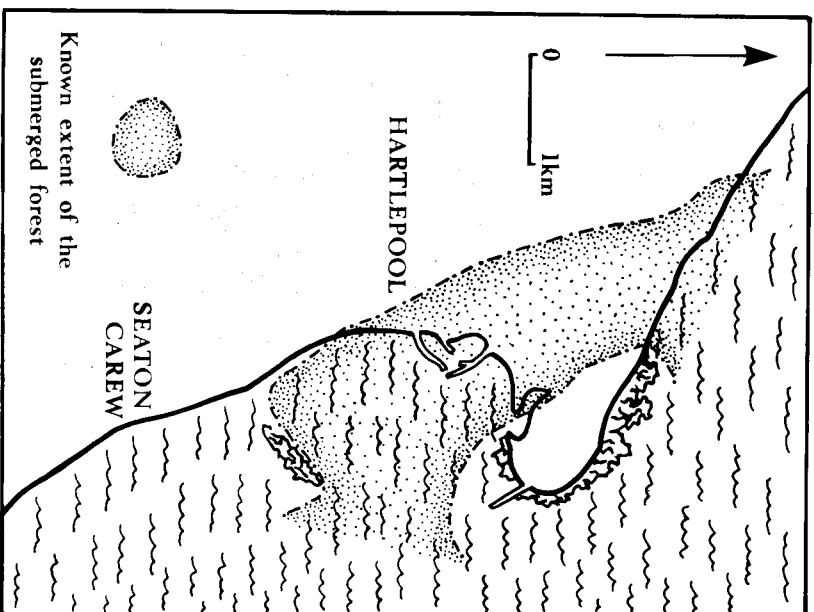


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HARTLEPOOL'S SUBMERGED FOREST

The waters of Hartlepool Bay seem an unlikely place for a forest today, but thousands of years ago this whole area was covered with trees and peat bog. In Mesolithic times, roughly 8000 BC, there was still a land bridge between Britain and the rest of Europe, and we know that much of what is now the North Sea was low-lying fenland.



Location of the submerged forest

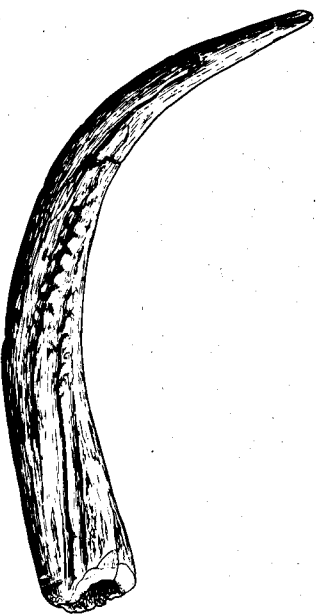
In 1931 a barbed bone spearhead lost by a Mesolithic hunter was dredged up by a trawler 25 miles off the Norfolk coast! The rising sea has inundated these fens, and created the English Channel, but in places the remains of the ancient forests can still be seen. The peat beds exposed at low tide in Hartlepool Bay are among the largest areas of this ancient landscape still to be seen.

History from the peat

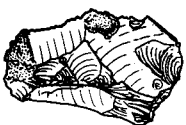
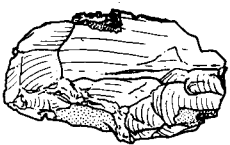
The waterlogged peat contains much information about the ancient history of the area. Tree trunks, branches and twigs can still be seen, and the pollen grains preserved in the peat can tell us a great deal about the climate and vegetation of the past, and about the effects of early human activity. In addition, the peat has preserved the remains of long-vanished animals, and can provide important information about the changes in sea-level in the distant past. For this reason the area has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

The Early Environment of the Bay

The earliest peat in this region was laid down about 7000 years ago. Roughly one thousand years later the area was inundated by the sea for the first time; a little over 5000 years ago more peat began to form as a result of a brief fall in sea



Antler of red deer, showing traces of working by early man



Flint cores left by the manufacture of Neolithic tools

level. On each occasion shallow freshwater pools formed along the coast, and these bogs were colonised by alder, elm, oak and hazel. Peat deposits gradually developed in the pools, reaching great depths in places. The bogs and woodlands were used by the earliest known inhabitants of this area, around 8000BC. These Mesolithic people were hunters and gatherers. They did not have fixed settlements, but followed the game over wide areas, and set up temporary camps. There have been frequent finds of the bones and antlers of red deer, which would have been hunted throughout the human occupation of the area. Some of the antlers have been worked for use as tools. Later, as cultivation and the herding of animals were introduced, a more settled way of life gradually came into existence.

The First Farmers

Evidence of human alteration of this wooded and boggy area comes in the early Neolithic period, about 3000BC. The pollen record shows the trees in decline, and an increase in the numbers of grassland plants. At the same time, charcoal appears in the deposits, showing that the early farmers were using fire to manage land. The land had to be cleared of trees before it could be used for agriculture, and evidence of this activity has occasionally been found. During building work in 1872, a tree stump was found in the buried peat

beds at Newport, near Middlebrough, which bore the marks of having been cut with an axe; and a fragment of a stone axe was found on the beach in 1981.

A good deal can be learnt about the first farmers of the area from the evidence in the peat. Fragments of their pottery have been discovered, together with cores from which flint tools were made, and a wooden lid with a handle. Finds of cattle and pig bones show us that animals were kept; another sign of domestication is the presence of tooth-marks on a piece of bone, showing that it had been gnawed by Hartlepool's earliest known dog, or possibly even a small wolf.



Wooden lid with handle, of about 2500BC