

## CHAPTER 13

# Engaging a Wider Audience

Don Henson and Nicky Milner

### Introduction

The site of Star Carr is of major international importance for our understanding of Early Mesolithic ways of life and for the early postglacial resettlement of northern Europe; yet the site is largely unheard of (and the Mesolithic largely unknown) in the nearby town of Scarborough (Milner et al. 2015, 233). Surveys carried out in the town during 2009–2011 showed that only 8% of respondents knew the name and any details of the site. Likewise, only 8% knew anything about the Mesolithic period. Only 3% had heard of both the Mesolithic and Star Carr (Milner et al. 2015, 235–237).

This lack of awareness of the Mesolithic is not restricted to the local area around the site but is a national phenomenon. Finlayson and Warren noted that the Mesolithic is invisible to the public as its sites are mostly empty fields or beaches without ‘the physical immediacy of an encounter with a monument’, and that Mesolithic studies were an academic specialism with ‘little public resonance’ (Finlayson and Warren 2000, 134). Wickham-Jones also noted that:

‘Few hunter-gatherer sites are laid out for the public to visit, information on their lifestyle is usually glossed over in popular depictions on television or in the literature, and courses are often only for the initiated. It is almost as if these people never existed.’

(Wickham-Jones 2010, 2–3)

A simple search on Google for the periods of British prehistory yields 488,000 results for the Mesolithic. This may seem impressive but is the least number of results for any of the prehistoric periods: only 1.1% of the total search results for periods of British prehistory. The marginality of the Mesolithic in mainstream popular publishing is illustrated by the *Very Short Introduction* series published by Oxford University (Gosden 2003), whose volume on prehistory has index entries for the Palaeolithic and Neolithic but not for the Mesolithic. There was some Mesolithic content in the longest running of all British archaeology television series, *Time Team* (1994–2013), although this was sparse: only four programmes in 20 years. In sum, it is argued that the Mesolithic is still the most neglected period in British prehistory (Blinkhorn and Milner 2013, 5).

---

#### How to cite this book chapter:

Henson, D. and Milner, N. 2018. Engaging a Wider Audience. In: Milner, N., Conneller, C. and Taylor, B. (eds.) *Star Carr Volume 1: A Persistent Place in a Changing World*, pp. 331–338. York: White Rose University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22599/book1.m>. Licence: CC BY-NC 4.0

However, this does not need to be the case. In other parts of Europe the Mesolithic is much better known outside of academia and through the public engagement work we have done as part of the Star Carr project, we are well aware that there is a thirst for information and opportunities for engagement, once people get to know about the period. This chapter sets out some of the work we have undertaken in order to rectify this and in particular focuses on the work by DH on producing resources for schools, which forms part of a PhD project on ‘The Public Perception of the Mesolithic’.

### A framework for public engagement

The Mesolithic seems to be far more recognised and given greater prominence within the public sphere on the continent than in Britain. Some of the key sites for the period are in Scandinavia, especially in Denmark. Therefore, it is no surprise that the Danish school curriculum includes the Late Mesolithic Ertebølle culture among the topics to be taught in history. It is part of the canon of knowledge that all children are expected to know. Danish museums have been especially active in interpreting the Mesolithic to the public. For example, the Mid-Jutland Museum Service has created a trail around the Mesolithic site of Bølling Sø which integrates virtual reality through QR codes that can be scanned by visitors’ phones. They have also created an online schools resource about the site, *Livet med Bølling Sø* ([www.nilen.dk/projekter/boellingsoe/index.htm](http://www.nilen.dk/projekter/boellingsoe/index.htm)).

The National Museum in Copenhagen has three whole rooms devoted to the Mesolithic. There is even a whole museum devoted to a Mesolithic site, Vedbækfundene (Figure 13.1), which has interpretive displays of a high standard and intellectual coherence that cannot be matched by any British museum displays of the period (Figure 13.2). Likewise, Mesolithic sites in Northern Germany are well served by the displays at the Schloss Gottorf museum in Schleswig-Holstein where two large rooms use a mix of objects and three-dimensional reconstructions to bring the period to life. In the Netherlands, visitors to the Archeon archaeological theme park near Leiden can begin their visit by entering a Mesolithic campsite (based on excavated evidence from Bergumermeer) on a lake edge and even take a dug-out canoe onto the lake (Figure 13.3).

This difference in approach to public engagement in different parts of Europe was discussed at the MESO 2010 conference in Santander, prompting further attempts to improve the situation, particularly in Britain. The Mesolithic Research and Conservation Framework for England, funded by English Heritage/Historic England, identified the promotion of the period as a major strategic theme: Strategy 1: Improving public engagement and education (Blinkhorn and Milner 2013, 26), based on: ‘a continuing need to disseminate our understanding of the Mesolithic widely, clearly and in non-specialist language in order to explain the story of how the repopulation of Britain took place in a changing world’ (Blinkhorn and Milner 2013, 13).

The need to communicate the Mesolithic more widely is an important issue. It is in many ways the key period in the story of Britain. It was when Britain was first permanently settled and whose population formed the base genetic stock to which later migrations have been added. Moreover, the life led by Mesolithic communities has many resonances with the present day. Their study could form part of discussions about various contemporary issues such as long-term climate change, rises in sea levels, sustainable interactions with the ‘natural’ environment, amongst others, as pointed out by Wickham-Jones (2010).





**Figure 13.2:** The display case at the British Museum which covers Mesolithic Europe and features some material from Star Carr and a column of the Meilgaard shell midden from Denmark (Copyright Don Henson, CC BY-NC 4.0).

Within the overarching theme, a number of more specific sub-themes were identified in the research framework (Blinkhorn and Milner 2013, 26–27):

- S1.1 improving coverage in national media of the relevance of the period to discussion of climate change and sea level rise;
- S1.2 increasing Mesolithic display in museums;
- S1.3 innovative presentation using digital technology and the Internet;
- S1.4 working with local societies;
- S1.5 running training workshops in Mesolithic archaeology;
- S1.6 engaging schools, having it taught in the curriculum and producing resource packs for schools;
- S1.7 improving undergraduate understanding of the period;
- S1.8 developing more avenues for PhD research into the period.

**Figure 13.1 (page 332):** Mesolithic gallery at Vedbækfundene in Denmark which takes the visitor through various seasons and how different raw materials were used (Copyright Don Henson, CC BY-NC 4.0).





**Figure 13.3:** The view from the Mesolithic camp at Archeon in the Netherlands with dug-out canoes on the lake for the public to use (Copyright Don Henson, CC BY-NC 4.0).

Sub-themes 5, 7 and 8 are long-term goals that require future work. However, actions have been taken on the other sub-themes by the POSTGLACIAL team during the lifetime of the project. Outreach work between 2006 and 2015 has included (Milner et al. 2015, 242–244):

- publicising the excavations through site open days;
- engaging with local people through more than 50 talks to local groups and taking volunteers to help on the excavations;
- having local school pupils on site in 2013 and 2014;
- creating an activity resource for the Young Archaeologists' Club, also freely available for schools;
- providing public events at various national and local festivals;
- publishing books aimed at a public audience (Milner et al. 2012; 2013c);
- working with The Yorkshire Museum on several exhibitions about Star Carr, using short films, information boards, a virtual fly-through and soundscape;
- working with The Rotunda Museum in Scarborough on a new permanent display about Star Carr.

In addition, the excavations have attracted local, national and international media attention for 'Britain's Oldest House' in over 120 newspapers worldwide (e.g. *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *Toronto News*, *Brisbane News*) and worldwide TV and radio coverage (BBC, Sky, ITV, Channel 4, CNN) (Milner et al. 2015, 233). The excavations have also now appeared on two series of the BBC television archaeology magazine programme *Digging for Britain*. Work with schools has intensified with the delivery of 18 classroom sessions on the Mesolithic in 10 schools in North Yorkshire. Other outreach activities include interviews on BBC Radio York, a Minecraft

session with the York branch of the Young Archaeologists' Club and the development of a website with short films and information ([www.starcarr.com](http://www.starcarr.com)).

### Resources for schools

The wider research into the communication of understandings of the Mesolithic in Britain identified a number of channels of communication in which the public perceptions of the period are forged. These include webpages, popular books, newspaper articles, images, television, museums and fiction. Not all of these reach the same audiences and not all reach a mass audience. While the outreach activities listed above were a useful way of publicising the project's work, it was felt that school education offered the possibility for reaching the largest potential audience from the widest range of backgrounds. Producing educational materials for use in schools would also allow outreach work to continue after the end of the project. Therefore, a major output of the research is a set of resources for use in primary schools that are available for download on the Star Carr website, at <http://www.starcarr.com/schools.html>.

Star Carr is well placed to deliver exciting content to the teaching of prehistory, as is the Mesolithic as a whole, with many new discoveries in recent years enhancing our interpretation of the period and giving it greater visibility in the media. In creating resources for schools, we are following the lead given by Grahame Clark, who was an early and passionate advocate for the role of archaeology in education (Clark 1943). Clark highlighted the ability of archaeology to develop an understanding of common humanity and put right many of the ills that were plaguing the modern world. The specific context of his advocacy may have been during the Second World War, yet his words still have potency today: 'What is needed above all is an overriding sense of human solidarity such as can come only from consciousness of common origins. Divided we fall victims to tribal leaders: united we may yet move forward to a life of elementary decency' (Clark 1943, 113).

Archaeology could give to education an understanding of 'the biological unity and the cultural inheritance of mankind' (Clark 1943, 115), as well as the complete picture of people in nature and of human society. Clark saw the school curriculum as having no relevance to real life, which 'breeds barbarians possessed of a little knowledge in restricted fields, but unaware of its relation to life in human society' (Clark 1943, 115). He argued that primary schools should begin with the teaching of prehistory and what was common to humanity (Clark 1943, 118).

Schools are a vital audience for improving perceptions of the Mesolithic and of Star Carr. The traditional outreach activities of public talks and events will only ever reach a self-selecting and restricted audience. Work with schools has the potential to reach a large number of children from a range of backgrounds.

The Mesolithic had been taught in schools in England up to 1990. Star Carr was mentioned in school textbooks from around 1962 onwards (Doncaster 1962; Bowood and Lampitt 1966; Osborn 1968; Sauvain 1970). The site was a major case study in a teachers' guide to prehistory which was the first to really encourage children to look at and question interpretations based on archaeological evidence (Dawson 1983). However, the new national curriculum was introduced in England in 1990. This began the teaching of history with the Romans and prehistory effectively vanished from school classrooms. It was only the most recent changes to the curriculum in 2013 that reintroduced the teaching of prehistory in England. The site of Star Carr was prominent in school resources produced before the national curriculum and continues to be so. It was mentioned in 18 resources between 1921 and 2015, with the next commonest sites being mentioned in only two resources each: Cheddar, Howick and Öfnet.

The national curriculum orders now stipulate that pupils should be taught about changes in Britain from the Stone Age to the Iron Age. Non-statutory examples are given of (Department for Education 2013):

- Late Neolithic hunter-gatherers and early farmers, for example, Skara Brae;
- Bronze Age religion, technology and travel, for example, Stonehenge;
- Iron Age hill forts: tribal kingdoms, farming, art and culture.

The use of 'Late Neolithic' to describe the hunter-gatherers is unfortunate and reflects both the lack of archaeological input into the latest curriculum revision and the general lack of awareness of the Mesolithic outside of those who study it. Also, we face a generation of teachers who have never taught prehistory, and therefore feel 'a bit lost' in the topic and want online resources linked to professional development (King 2015, 1–2).



The approach to improving perceptions of the Mesolithic has been to understand the role of narrative in framing understanding among non-academic audiences. Fortunately, the new national curriculum (like its earlier versions) includes telling and listening to stories as an essential part of English-language teaching. Resources based on narrative should therefore be attractive to primary school teachers who can cover more than just history through the Mesolithic. The task in producing resources for schools is therefore one of trying to rebuild the narrative of the Mesolithic in order to do more than simply provide knowledge of a previously unknown period. Narratives make learning attractive and easier for pupils and allow the highlighting of important themes, such as those outlined by Clark. The resources that have been produced are divided into three sets, each designed to answer a question:

- what is archaeology? – providing a way for pupils to engage with the authorial voice of archaeologists as creators of the Mesolithic narrative;
- what do we know of the Mesolithic? – the ideas we have constructed about the period, told explicitly through fictional narratives;
- what can we learn from the Mesolithic? – highlighting the thematic resonances between the Mesolithic and the present.

The first question is answered through the Archaeological Skills Log (Figure 13.4). This is based on an underlying narrative that attempts to engage pupils with archaeological processes and for us as archaeological authors to be overt about how we construct our narratives. The skills log has five separate lessons with 13 classroom

#### RECORDING OBJECTS

When archaeologists draw their finds, they try to be as accurate as possible. They will draw at least the top and side views of an object. They will measure the length, width and thickness. They will describe the shape, colour, texture and any markings or features they can see on the surface of the object.

Look at the photographs and take one object to draw, measure and describe.




Hint: the photograph is 1.4 times smaller than real life.



Hint: measure the finger in the photo, then your teacher's finger to see how much bigger the photo is. If 3 times, measure the flint and divide by 3 for the real size.

#### Recording sheet

Site	Star Carr	Object	Barbed point/ Microlith
<b>Describe</b>		<b>Measure</b>	
A barbed point, made of antler. A long, thin slice of antler with 10 barbs cut into one side for two thirds of its length. One third at the base is not barbed. The whole comes to a narrow point.		<u>Length</u> point = 135 mm microlith = 20 mm	
Microlith made of flint. A small blade of pale, yellowish-brown flint. One edge had been made curved. The opposite edge is straight and unaltered. The overall shape is a crescent.		<u>Width</u> point = 11 mm microlith = 8 mm	
<b>Draw</b>			

**Figure 13.4:** Recording objects as an archaeologist, from the Archaeology Skills Log (www.starcarr.com) (Copyright Don Henson, CC BY-NC 4.0).



















activities that take pupils through five steps to becoming an archaeologist: finding out information, identifying things, recording objects, analysing how people lived and telling others about Star Carr. As well as classroom activities, the skills log contains sets of information (fact checks) about the period. There are also debating points which highlight disagreements about what we think the period was like or where there is more than one possible interpretation of the archaeological evidence. The activities support the teaching of historical skills, literacy, numeracy and art.

The second resource is based on a set of overt fictional narratives (short stories) about the daily lives and experiences of named characters, 11,000 years ago. The stories allow for the exploration of various aspects of Mesolithic life, while the use of named characters should enable greater pupil engagement with the period. The nine short stories provide insights into the life of a Mesolithic family: Neska (a girl, 9 years old), Mutil (a boy, 6 years old), Aita (their father), Ama (their mother) and Osaba (Aita's brother). Each story illustrates an aspect of Mesolithic life and is backed up by a short section on what and how archaeologists know about this. There are 28 classroom activities based on the following short stories: moving home, making things, food, friends and strangers, a hint of winter, the bad old days, boy or girl, animals or plants, coming of age, a new life. The activities are designed to support not only the history curriculum but also art and design, design and technology, English, geography and maths.

The third resource is *Lessons from the Middle Stone Age* and provides background knowledge and ideas to help pupils develop their own narratives about a few key aspects of the period. It introduces them to the idea of debate or uncertainty about our understandings of the past (Figure 13.5). There are seven lessons with 19 activities for the classroom: change is inevitable, the living environment, healthy eating, what makes us happy, the origins of ourselves, human diversity and the great debate (do we see prehistoric people as either noble savages or nasty and brutish, to get pupils to think about how we value the past and different ways of life). The lessons can help to support personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE), spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC) as well as history.

These resources are supported by a set of background information about the Mesolithic and Star Carr. They are all designed to be used in the classroom and as stand-alone resources without access to artefacts or museum displays. However, they could easily be adapted to be used with both.

**PLANTS, MUSHROOMS AND SEAWEED**  
**Which of these could you eat?**

Be careful - some you could eat but some are poisonous!					
					
Bladder wrack	Nettle	Yellow water lily	Brown birch bolete	Sea lettuce	Wild strawberry
					
Blackberry	Saffron milkcap	Black briony	Death cap	Cattail	Woody nightshade
					
Pine	Devil's bolete	Fool's Parsley	Hazelnuts	Fly agaric	Wood mushroom

**Figure 13.5:** Worksheet on which plants you could eat in the Mesolithic (Worksheet copyright: Don Henson).

## Conclusions

The Mesolithic may have low archaeological visibility through a lack of upstanding monuments. However, this is not the same as saying it has low importance or can be safely marginalised in public interpretation. There have been several new discoveries in recent years that have caught the attention of the media: the Goldcliff (and other) human footprints, the Warren Field pit alignment, the sites at Blick Mead or Langley's Lane, the Maerdy decorated post, the Greylake skulls, Cheddar Man, the Howick or Echline houses, the underwater site at Bouldnor Cliff, the reconstruction of Doggerland and the Storegga tsunami. There have also been a series of popular novels set in the Mesolithic such as Paver's *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*, as well as *The Gathering Night* (Elphinstone 2009) and *Stone Spring* (Baxter 2011). The first of Paver's novels, *Wolf Brother* (Paver 2004) has been the subject of three sets of schools resources. The biggest of these was produced by the Scottish Forestry Commission (Mackay 2013). The Mesolithic is becoming much more visible.

The period has great relevance for the modern world with current concerns about climate change and sustainability. It is also a fascinating way of life so very different from our own and yet one that is attractive to many with its seeming closeness to nature. This is exemplified by the popularity of television series such as *Bushcraft* presented by Ray Mears in 2004, Mears' series *Wild Food* presented with Gordon Hillman in 2007 and the so-called 'reality' series *10,000 BC* in 2015 and 2016. As Clark noted, the Mesolithic also has cogent lessons about humanity that are surely needed now more than ever before. It is too important to leave to the largely inaccessible pages of academic journals. Some of the regional and local museums in Britain are beginning to showcase the period with new displays. The school curriculum in England now has 'the Stone Age' as part of history teaching for the first time since the 1980s. The modern excavations have thus come at an opportune time. Star Carr is well placed to deliver a new public engagement with the Mesolithic. We have shown here the steps we have taken so far along this road, but this is not the end of the journey, merely the beginning.