

## **Human: Half a Million Years of Life in Bucks.**

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Since George Liscombe's *Victoria County History* (1831-1847 and 1905-1927) subsequent comprehensive studies of Buckinghamshire County history have been scarce. The exhibition *Human* (6th March-11th July 2010) and its accompanying publication; *An Illustrated History of Early Buckinghamshire*, (Farley 2010), aim to resolve such a hiatus. Both book and exhibition chronicle the local archaeology, spanning over a century of fieldwork, and places local level archaeology within an epic narration of human history. Presenting local archaeology thus lends it with the wider relevance that will hopefully inspire increased patronage of local museums, presently about to be hardest hit by current economic policies. The exhibition is a collaborative achievement by the Buckinghamshire County Museum curatorial team.

Both exhibition and book are divided into five time periods, threaded together by themes intrinsic to all human communities; living, dying, fighting, climate and food. Time is rendered dimensionally as well as visually by colour-coordinated plaques of varying thickness and a painted blue line running from reception to exhibition room indicating the Ice Age, all on a relative scale. Therefore, the timescale of human history is experienced physically and this works as an effective mnemonic device. Larger than life portraits of past individuals by Alan Marshall were specially commissioned by the museum to welcome the visitor to each new period. These are not scientific reconstructions but primarily drawn from briefs containing information on the remains and burial goods of locally recovered individuals. Marshall's final likenesses are based on his own family members, rendering these beautiful illustrations warm and accessible.

Recovery biases may have governed how these themes are communicated, but they are clearly indicated. Likewise, composing a narrative from the debris of the past, is constrained by the reality that one site rarely yields data complete enough for the task. To assemble data sets such as utensils from a Roman kitchen, artefacts from different sites or dating as much as a century apart, have been arranged together. Again, such anachronisms are clearly acknowledged. *Human* is a narration of place and person experienced through reconstructed physical encounters.

### **Period One: Ice Age and Palaeolithic 38000-4000 BC**

These early exhibits focus upon the relationship between humankind and the environment. Still unmitigated by the advent of the agricultural revolution or by the social dynamics of urbanism, the dialogue between humans and the surrounding world is startlingly direct. Yet, humans pale by comparison to the giant mammals with which they coexisted. The scale and power of these prehistoric animals are conveyed through the remains of a

woolly mammoth, the lower jaw of a cave jaguar and a painted reconstruction of a woolly rhino, measuring 2.2m high at the shoulders. An illustration of the flora and fauna of Marsworth 200,000 years ago recreates the living, breathing context of these fossilised bones. Displayed alongside are Palaeolithic stone tools that neatly fit into a human hand. These, by contrast, convey the fruits of human dexterity. This dexterity, both manual and vocal, is arguably the key to our ability to have both survived alongside and eventually outlived these creatures. These early tools therefore constitute evidence for what Binford (1962) coined our '*extra-somatic*' adaptation. Alongside the exhibition was a lively programme of experimental archaeology, with flint-knapping and sword-working to recreate some of the artefacts on display. This programme proved archaeologically informative as well as publicly engaging. Experimental flint-knapping and butchering demonstrated how a larger Palaeolithic tool, considered as a likely status item and too cumbersome for use, may have proved necessary for butchering mammoths. These findings contribute to understanding to what extent early man's efforts were driven by functionality or symbolic significance.

### **Period Two: First Farmers 3,500 BC – 43 AD**

This section documents Childe's (1981) Neolithic Revolution through new technologies such as crop farming and weaving. The first display case contained tool kits associated with key activities, similar to Binford's models, within three distinct periods; Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age. New social hierarchies such as chiefdoms and Priesthoods were blossoming at this time, as demonstrated by a collection of gold torques recovered from Milton Keynes (on loan from the British Museum) as well as the Gayhurst Barrow Cemetery, one of seven located near Newport Pagnell. A unique burial, constituting part of the original barrow, was reconstructed and viewable through a case within a painted mural representing the original mound. The burial may have had grave goods, but none save the limb of a pig were uncovered. However, the individual's importance is evident from the mound construction itself, which would have required considerable labour expenditure. The uniqueness of this burial derives not from its contents but from the scatter of over 300 cattle parts, all from prime cuts of meat, atop it. However, none of the bones show signs of being butchered for food. This display of a ritual burial illustrates that by 3000 BC communities in Britain were expressing systems of belief and hierarchy.

### **Period Three: Rome 43 AD- 410 AD**

By 43 AD Roman traditions began to infiltrate the local communities. However, approximately 95% of the material culture remained local, particularly at smaller sites. Communicating the subtlety of Romanisation, a gradual and complex process, is omitted in order to convey key transitions, resembling those specified by Service's model of increasing complexity (Service 1968).

Central to this section are the discoveries of Yewden Villa, Hambledon, unique in British archaeology and recently at the centre of international media speculation, because of the recent recovery of mass infant-burials (Farley 1983). The exhibition, conceived

prior to these findings, focuses on the identity of a Roman serving woman called Siitomina, the first named individual in Buckinghamshire history. Siitomina's name was recovered from an inscription on the base of a Roman pot at Yewden. The humble nature of the object implies Siitomina's status was that of a freed woman. According to the exhibit, the rank of freed woman heralded new social concepts within the burgeoning Roman Empire. Buckinghamshire's position within the empire is also denoted by the proliferation of exotic goods, exemplified by an exceptional blue and white ribbed glass bowl of the second-century AD from the Chilterns, and the spread of a common religion represented by a fourth-century silver baptism spoon bearing the inscription '*Veneria Vivas*,' ('long live Veneria') recovered in 1872 from Great Harwood. This increased social complexity created specialised collectives, wherein individual identity became subordinate to the individual's function within a larger body. Etching one's identity upon material possessions has precedents, but the formalisation of this process suggests the increasing centrality of social systems to human struggles.

#### **Period Four: Anglo-Saxons 410 AD-1066 AD**

This chapter in local history commences with the etymology of the name 'Buckinghamshire,' derived in around the tenth or early eleventh century AD from the Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'district' (*scire*) and the placename 'Bucca's Meadow.' The date of 410 marks a contentious and pivotal moment denoting the Roman abandonment of Britain. This period also saw the advent of English's slow proliferation amongst formerly predominantly Welsh and Gallic speaking peoples (Farley 2010). 410 to 500 AD marked the turbulence of the Saxons' arrival from Northern Germany and Denmark. Many of these new Germanic invaders were likely illiterate and subsequently there exists a gap in the written record at this time. Although literacy may have continued at certain sites it is only as late as 571 AD that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle appears, with a reference to certain placenames including Aylesbury and this is displayed within the exhibition. . Four main aspects of the archaeology of this time are then documented; weaponry, defence, daily life and finery. The remains of a mature woman, the most spectacular of 18 inhumations exhumed in 2001 during the construction of the Aston Clinton bypass in the parish of Drayton Beauchamp, dating to around 650 AD, are on display. These provide an interesting comparison with a sample of the discoveries made at Taplow, Maidenhead, Buckinghamshire, a seventh century royal grave excavated in 1883 by James Rutland. Drayton Beauchamp's wealthy lady was originally thought to be a princess, but it soon became clear on comparison with Taplow that though magnificent, she was not royal. The lady of Drayton Beauchamp's grave goods include gilded saucer brooches, a bead necklace and a toilet set. Taplow, by contrast contains magnificent grave furnishings, including a lyre comparable to those uncovered at Sutton Hoo.

#### **Period Five: Medieval and Tudor 1066 AD-1603 AD**

Church and Manor, as principal administrative centres of Medieval and Tudor life, feature prominently in this closing section, and serve to demonstrate that despite changes in method, fashions or materials an ultimate commonality binds the present to the fundamental needs and organisation of that past world; wherein inhabitants

managed their debts and sought after privacy and amusement. This is achieved through the display of Nottingham Alabaster figures, Tuscan jugs (15th-16th centuries) and nine eye-shaped monastic seals (14th-15th centuries) recovered from local Abbeys, a small selection of objects from daily life including keys, a die and a decorative wild boar's head. Three artefacts in particular serve the exhibition's argument. Firstly a Tally Stick (14th century) for keeping track of debts, marked to record the amount of debt owed by an individual. Sadly, Victorian usage of tally sticks as firelights and a fire at Westminster in 1834 have resulted in only a few examples surviving today. Next is the Boarstall estate plan (c. 1440), the earliest surviving map of Buckinghamshire, less a geographic rendition of space than a narrative claim to legitimacy, represents the Fitz-Nigels family's declaration of hereditary keepership over Bernwood royal forest. In the foreground the king bestows the keepership to the Fitz-Nigels for ridding the land of an irksome wild boar. Finally, the Darell-Tucker-Dayrell cup (1598), an Elizabethan silver-gilt, gourd-shaped cup and cover that forms part of the standing drinking-cups tradition. These cups were often fashioned from exotic materials such as ostrich egg or coconut shell, or are simulacrum vessels of precious metals conveying encounters with the New World.

The triumph of this exhibition was to have defined local archaeology within a greater human narrative. The use of objects, illustration, text, accompanying video and events all aided access to a collective and local past on multiple levels. The exhibition encapsulated key points of transition in local, national and human history simultaneously. The creativity of its curators and contributors is testimony to the human dexterity it celebrates.

## References

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