

One million years of the human story in Britain

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London's Natural History Museum is holding an exhibition until September 28, 2014, on the human occupation of Britain. It focuses on the Palaeolithic period, which covers about 99 percent of human history from the earliest known use of stone tools about 2.6 million years ago to approximately 10,000 years ago.

The Natural History Museum exhibition is pioneering on two fronts. For the first time, it brings together the most important archaeological finds over the last few decades. Additionally, it displays the most recent evidence indicating that human activity in Britain dates back 900,000 years—twice as long as previously thought.

The majority of the exhibition focuses on the changing environment over the last 1 million years, during which the land mass known as Britain was attached to Europe for most of the time and only became an island twice. On 10 separate occasions, it is thought Britain was colonised by at least four different species of human after ice ages gave way to warmer conditions.

On show are clay model heads of *Homo antecessor*, one of the earliest known human species dating from 800,000 to 1.2 million years ago, *Homo heidelbergensis*, from at least 600,000 to perhaps 200,000 years ago and Neanderthal Man—*Homo neanderthalensis* (350,000 to 35,000 years ago). There are also wax models of Neanderthal Man and modern man, *Homo sapiens*, that are the most lifelike and scientifically accurate ever made.

These models really help the observer to see the similarities between the different members of the *Homo* genus (hominins).

Skeletal evidence of *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo heidelbergensis* and early *Homo sapiens* has been found in Britain, but it is mainly the artifacts that

these early travellers left behind that the exhibit focuses on. These finds can reveal important information about our early ancestors and their cognitive evolution and technological development.

Shortly before the exhibition opened, research results revealed that sediment layers discovered in May 2013 at Happisburgh on the east coast of Britain contained the oldest collections of hominin footprints to be found outside of Africa. Only the footprints found in Laetoli and Koobi in Tanzania are older.

The Happisburgh footprints have been dated to around 800,000 years old and may belong to *Homo antecessor*, a species known to have been present in Spain around the same time. They appear to belong to a family group of, maybe, five individuals who were walking across mudflats searching for crabs, shellfish and seaweed. Because the footprints are the most northerly evidence found so far, they suggest man must have already adapted to the cold earlier than previously thought, acting cooperatively to hunt, make clothing and construct shelters.

How the researchers were able to date the footprints is also a fascinating tale. The exhibition explains that stone tools and animal bones with signs of butchery found in the sediment near the footprints were left when the direction of the world's magnetic field was the opposite of what it is today. The last time it switched was 780,000 years ago, and therefore the tools and the footprints must date from before then.

Other recent developments include the advances being made in DNA studies, which have enabled genealogists to trace paternal and maternal lines back 60,000 years to the first migrations of modern humans. Many of us today have a small percentage of Neanderthal DNA within our genetic make up due to interbreeding between the species. Comedian and

musician Bill Bailey, TV presenters Clive Anderson and Professor Alice Roberts, and others all have their DNA traced in a short documentary at the end of the exhibit.

Using skeletal remains of the mammals that lived in Britain during this era, the exhibition is able to show the dramatic changes in the climate—from a warm Mediterranean-like land of plenty to an icy waste in the course of a thousand years. Hippos, elephants, sabre-toothed lions and giant deer all migrated to Britain within interglacial periods when the land was much warmer. Britain was mainly unoccupied throughout glacial periods when the ice sheets would sometimes extend into northern France.

Human occupation of Britain was intermittent due to these dramatic fluctuations in climate. Only at the end of the last ice period, roughly 10,000 BP (before present), were humans able to continuously occupy Britain. This reviewer was particularly moved by the ability of the members of the *Homo* genus to migrate and adapt to this far-flung, often hostile region of Europe. The fact that after thousands of years of being uninhabited, hominins would return to almost the same regions seems to suggest some form of communication between the species.



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