BEFORE THE ROMANS

The first remains of modern humans in Britain date from the Upper Palaeolithic (later Old Stone Age) period and have been found mainly at cave and rock shelter sites in South-West Britain and the English Midlands. These traces date to the period from about 40-15,000 years ago, a time of extremely cold climatic conditions when North-East England was periodically covered by an ice sheet, and the resultant low sea levels meant that Britain was connected to Ireland and the European mainland. North-East England was probably free from ice cover around 15,000 years ago, but remained extremely inhospitable until about 10,000 years ago, when a warmer climate encouraged greater biodiversity, including the development of deciduous woodland. Although two possible Upper Palaeolithic finds have been recorded in the area of Tyne and Wear (HER 1326 and 5462), and several well-attested sites are known in the wider region, it is likely that these represent occasional forays into the area by nomadic groups, rather than long-term settlement.

It is likely that the earliest human settlers moved into the lower reaches of the rivers Tyne and Wear soon after the retreat of the last Ice Age in the middle of the period between about 10-6,000 years ago, known as the Middle Stone Age, or Mesolithic. People in this period depended for their existence on hunting, fishing and gathering wild plants for their livelihood, and seemed to favour coastal sites where such resources were more readily available. Although the Mesolithic inhabitants of the north-east were not farmers, there is evidence to suggest that they changed the environment by setting fire to areas of forest, perhaps in order to stimulate new plant growth on which deer and other animals could feed. In total about 40 Mesolithic find sites have been recorded in Tyne and Wear, most represented by small flint blades known as microliths, which formed part of composite tools used in hunting, felling trees or working with wood, bone, leather and other raw materials. Some of the most notable finds from this period in our region have been recorded from Whitburn, where a Mesolithic harpoon head (HER 851) as well as flints and possible structural remains (HER 1998) have been found.

The Neolithic is the period from about 6000 years ago notable for the appearance of the first farming communities. Whether these communities were incomers or existing groups who adopted farming practices is unknown, but the impact of the gradual change from hunting and gathering to farming was very considerable in terms of its impact upon the landscape and material traces left behind. Indeed, the spread of farming across the British Isles was a social revolution comparable in scale and environmental impact to the Industrial Revolution some 6000 years later. Neolithic farmers cut down some of the forest cover in order to plant wheat and barley, and raise herds of domesticated sheep, cattle, and pigs. What hunting they did as a supplement to their agriculture may have been done with the assistance of small dogs. They settled permanently in stable communities which allowed them to engage in the construction of communal monuments and to develop a different relationship with the landscape. Little is known about the settlements of the Neolithic period, but it is likely that some communities, or parts of communities may have continued to live in different places during the year, perhaps leading their herds up to higher ground during the summer and coming down from the hills at the beginning of Winter.

The first farmers introduced the manufacture and use of pottery vessels to Britain (HER 112), as well as a range of stone tools not previously seen. Neolithic flint tools were generally larger than the small Mesolithic microliths; leaf-shaped flint arrowheads (HER 238, 442, 529 and 5127) were one of a range of new tool

shapes introduced. Polished stone axes (HER 4, 390, 598 and 838), often made from stone from distant places, particularly Langdale in the Lake district, were clearly greatly valued by their owners and appear to have played a particularly important role in Neolithic society. As well as having a practical use for clearing forests they may also have had religious and symbolic purposes. The importance of such objects is just one indication of the increasing time spent by Neolithic society on ritual activity, reflected in the large size and complexity of the mortuary structures and burial mounds (HER 114) in which they buried their dead, as well as in the prevalence of other large communal monuments, such as henges and causewayed camps (possible examples in Tyne and Wear are HER 109, 1918 and 4835).

The beginning of the Bronze Age is defined by the introduction of bronze objects, which in the North-East occurred around 4,500 years ago in the form of flat axes (HER 593 and 777) and riveted daggers. The introduction of metalwork also seems to be associated with the arrival from the continent of a distinctive, often highly-decorated form of pottery, known as 'beakers' on account of their shape but often found in association with burials (HER 470, 518 and 599). From around 4000 years ago 'beakers' were replaced in burials with pottery vessels of different form and decoration, known as 'food vessels' (HER 8, 147, 336 and 360) and 'cinerary urns'. Indeed, much of the pottery surviving from the Bronze Age has been recovered from burial contexts where it was often used to contain the burnt remains of cremations, which increasingly became an important way of burying the dead. These burials were frequently placed in round barrows of earth or stone. By the middle Bronze Age, around 3,500 years ago, a much wider range of metalwork was in circulation. This included tools and jewellery as well as weapons and armour, although the majority of the large number of items of middle-late bronze age metalwork recorded from Tyne and Wear has been in the latter category (HER 58, 386-9, 597, 767-70, 839 7 1379). There is little evidence for Bronze Age settlement sites in Tyne and Wear, but evidence from elsewhere in the North suggests that the nature and pattern of settlement changed little from the Neolithic, with small, scattered groups of roundhouses being the norm. The evidence from prehistoric pollen, as well as remains of stone clearance in upland areas shows that woodland was being cleared for farming, and that grassland and moorland were increasing along with the farmland necessary for the cultivation of new crops. However, at the end of the period, from around 3000 years ago, clusters of roundhouses began to be enclosed by timber palisades, presumably as a protective measure. Stone circles, henges and burial mounds which continued to be built or reused during the early Bronze Age, had largely gone out of use by the later Bronze Age period, as had the late Neolithic or early Bronze age 'cup and ring mark' rock art tradition, some examples of which have been found in Tyne and Wear (HER 584 and 1955).

The beginning of the Iron Age is marked by the introduction of iron and its gradual replacement of bronze, although in most other respects few changes seem to have occurred in the settlement pattern and lifeways of early Iron Age populations. People continued to grow crops and farm cattle and sheep, and lived in simple circular houses made from wood, wattle and daub. In upland Northumberland, the pallisaded enclosures of the later Bronze Age give way to earthwork enclosures known as hill-forts, which are often of the same size as, and sometimes overlie the pallisaded sites. However, while hill-forts are undoubtedly the most well-known and generally best-preserved monuments of the Iron Age, they do not appear to have been built in such numbers and certainly do not survive well in lowland contexts, with only possible traces of such monuments recorded from Tyne and Wear. Settlement in the lowlands, within the territory of the great British tribe, the Brigantes, seems to have consisted of occasional hill-forts and numerous scattered

farmsteads, remains of which have been found under the Roman Fort at South Shields (HER 4357) and the Priory at Tynemouth (HER 118), and are visible outside the built-up areas as rectilinear cropmarks on aerial photographs (HER 308-9, 328, 668 and 4832-41). Finds from Iron Age sites are rather rare, since iron does not survive well and the material culture of this period appears to have been relatively poor, with the crudely made bucket-shaped pottery vessels of the period surviving particularly badly. However, a number of distinctive 'beehive'-shaped quernstones for grinding grain have been found (HER 589, 5219 and 5441) and at least seven log-boats or dug-out canoes have been recorded from the rivers Tyne and Wear (HER 346, 508-9, 596 and 692). Our knowledge of burial practices and ritual activities in this period is very limited, since Iron Age people disposed of their dead in archaeologically invisible ways and, with the exception of settlement sites no large communal monuments appear to have been built.

By convention the Iron Age ends with the Roman invasion of Britain in A.D.42, but in practice there was little or no Roman military presence in this region for some 30 years after that date, and even when the North was subjugated after A.D.71, the Roman occupation seems to have had little impact on the lifeways and settlement pattern of large segments of the native population.