

Prehistoric Shillington

Stone Age visitors

The climate fluctuated wildly during the 'Ice Age' when long periods of intense cold made life impossible. However, there were some warmer periods when the climate was similar to today's. At some point between 400,000 and 240,000 years ago, early people (*Homo heidelbergensis*) visited here from Europe.

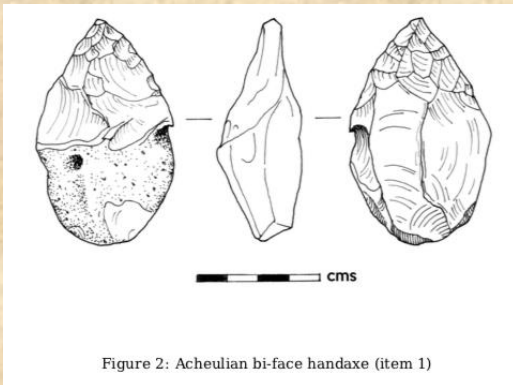


Figure 2: Acheulian bi-face handaxe (item 1)

They left behind a distinctive object that marks the beginning of Shillington's human history. It was an axe head made of flint (Aeschulian Wymer type E). Tools like this were made by banging one flint against another to break off pieces and leave a sharp edge. Neil Pinchbeck of Enfield Archaeological Society identified it and kindly supplied these drawings.

We're all Europeans

About 11,650 years ago, the climate warmed and Neanderthals and modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) spread north across Europe. They had probably reached Shillington by 7,000 years ago. Their flint tools included knives, scrapers and piercers. They also heated flints in a fire then used them to heat water which allowed them to make stews for the first time.

More stone tools (Identification and photograph kindly provided by Neil Pinchbeck, Enfield Archaeological Society)



Settle down now



About 6,500 years ago, people settled down to keep animals and grow crops. Many lived near springs where they could get water and streams where they caught fish. As the population increased, the farmers cleared woodland to create extra fields.

Their homes were circular, timber framed huts thatched with reeds and a single entrance facing south like this modern reconstruction at the Chilterns Open Air Museum.

As they went about their daily business, they created trackways. Some of the roads that we use today may follow these ancient routes.

The ancestors

It is likely that certain areas on the hills were reserved for 'the ancestors'. A local chief was buried in a round barrow at Knocking Knoll on the hills above Pegsdon. William Ransom of Hitchin excavated it in 1856 and found only pottery. Someone else had got there first. The remains of another burial mound survive 500m away in woodland.



Round Barrow at Knocking Knoll

Barrows like these date from between 5,500 and 4,700 years ago. Made of chalk, they would have been very prominent from the low ground and a constant reminder of those who'd gone before.

The Bronze Age

About 2,600BC (4,600 years ago), Egyptians were building pyramids and the first stones were erected at Stonehenge. Copper and tin were mined elsewhere in Britain. Someone discovered that mixing them together formed bronze which made better tools and weapons than flint. A middle to late Bronze Age spearhead was found at Bury Farm in Pegsdon.

Potters discovered how to make better quality pots too. They withstood heat which meant that food could be cooked over fires, making boiling stones redundant. During 2013, when the first archaeological test pits were dug around Shillington, several pieces of Bronze Age pottery from about 1,000BC emerged from the grounds of the Old Vicarage.



Test pit in the Old Vicarage garden

The amount suggests that a small settlement existed there. Its location was well-chosen as the hill where the church stands sheltered it from the coldest winds and it is close to springs. A flint bladelet may indicate earlier use of the site. Other archaeological finds from this period are: -

- a barbed and tanged flint arrowhead, probably from the early Bronze Age discovered in fields NW of Shillington (HER 18535).
- A copper alloy bead was found near Chibley Farm (HER 18985) and a bronze, socketed axe 104mm long, 54mm across the widest part of the blade from 900-600BC.

The Iron Age - A land shortage

The population was expanding and all the flatter land was in use. Farmers took extreme measures to create more of it on the steep slopes at Pegsdon.

They made 'strip lynchets' which are similar to the stepped terraces used for growing olives and vines in mountainous parts of Europe.



Strip Lynchets on Pegsdon Hills

The soil was very chalky and they can't have been very productive compared with lowland fields. Some people have suggested that they date from the 1,200s or early 1,300s when the population was also booming. They were abandoned long ago and the area became sheep pasture. Despite soil creeping down the steep hillside and concealing their original profile, they remain prominent features on the hillside today.

Celtic culture

The Iron Age began when another useful metal for making tools spread across Britain between 800BC and 600BC. A distinct Celtic culture emerged as a steady flow of people arrived in Britain from northern Europe bringing their language, knowledge, beliefs and rituals with them.

The eight Celtic festivals were spaced equally across the year and celebrated with bonfire, feasting and rituals. They were held on these dates:

- 21 December was Yule, the winter solstice and the shortest and darkest day. It marked the beginning of a new solar year.
- 1 February was Imbolc when the amount of daylight was becoming noticeably longer.
- 21 March was Ostara, the spring equinox when day and night were equal.
- 1 May was Mayday and celebrated spring when the soil was warm enough for planting crops.
- 21 June, Midsummer, was when daylight reached its maximum.
- 1 August or Lunasa, was a time when crops were ripening even as daylight began shortening.
- 21 September was the autumn equinox (Mabon) when the sun shone for no more than 12 hours a day.
- 31 October. Samhain was held when the nights were noticeably longer. It was time to remember your ancestors.

Head for the hillforts

On a hilltop above Hexton is a large oval area surrounded by steep banks and ditches called Ravensburgh castle. This hillfort has similarities with around 20 others in the Chilterns where they occur at fairly regular intervals. Their spacing suggests that each was constructed by a distinct group with a common ancestor to show that this was their territory. They were created around 600BC.

The photograph shows the entrance which is complex so that anyone coming in has to negotiate several turns. The banks and ditches around the hillfoot and its location on high ground suggest that Ravensburgh had a defensive purpose. However, archaeologists have found little evidence of conflict here or at any of the others. Signs of permanent settlement are lacking too and obtaining water was difficult in such elevated locations. At Ravensburgh, fetching it from the Burwell Spring 50m below in the valley would have been an arduous chore.



Hillfort construction must have been well-organised and needed many participants to move all the soil. Being among them and attending subsequent events there would have strengthened the bonds among participants. Hillforts were special places and probably used intermittently, perhaps to celebrate the Celtic festivals. They fell into disuse about the same time as the Roman occupation began in 43AD. Whether the two were linked is unclear.

This is my land

Possibly contemporary with Ravensburgh and constructed one kilometre away on the Pegsdon Hills is a substantial linear bank and ditch. Even today after centuries of erosion, the height difference between the top of the bank and base of the ditch is over 3m. It has an overall width of 20m. It runs uphill from the head of a natural steep-sided valley on the chalk scarp in a SSE direction. It is about 200m long and stops about 100m short of the track we call the Icknield Way.

A much smaller bank links the two and may mark the alignment that the uncompleted larger earthwork bank was meant to follow. A dozen similar banks occur elsewhere adjacent to the Icknield Way, often roughly midway between hillforts. They don't seem to have prevented the movement of people, livestock and goods and they may have been little more than grandiose boundary markers.



Map of Icknield Way, Ravensburgh and earthwork

When soil fertility dwindled, farmers and their families had moved to cultivate a new area but as the population grew, the scope for doing so disappeared. Farmers learnt to restore soil fertility by rotating crops with grazing by livestock that manured the soil.

In the mid to late Iron Age, several small farmsteads surrounded by fields existed including one photographed from the air north east of Shillington Bury. Cropmarks show similar activity near Apsleybury Wood and east of Shillington Mill.

Iron Age pottery has been found north and south of Higham Gobion and crop marks show linear features and a ring ditch. Archaeological surveys ahead of possible developments in the area have revealed other similar features and suggest a well-used and well-ordered landscape. A single sherd of Iron Age pottery in a test pit (SH18/3) indicate that people were likely to be living in the area of Northley Farm and a brooch from this period had been found nearby previously.

Mirror, mirror

Between 1998 and 2000, metal detectorists made some extraordinary discoveries near Pegsdon Common Farm. One of them was a late Iron Age polished-bronze mirror (diameter: 20cm). Decorated with engraved circles, ovals and arches, emphasised by a fine basket weave infill, it is the work of a person with exceptional skill. A relatively simple loop handle is typical of its time.

The photograph shows it on display at Stockwood Discovery Centre in Luton.

