

Stone Age

The Stone Age is the period when humans used primitive stone tools. The dates for this depend on location around the globe. For example, humans only arrived in Britain about 800,000 years ago, so the Stone Age in Britain cannot have started earlier than that. (Note homo sapiens, our modern species, only arrived much later, about 40,000 years ago.) The Stone Age ended around 5000 years ago (when humans in the Middle East started making bronze, c.3,300BC).



local area (shown above), as well as a few items from Star Carr in Yorkshire (much of it excavated by a Cambridge team), where the 11,000-year-old remains include the oldest house in Britain.

Fitzwilliam Museum (Trumpington St, free) has various great finds from overseas civilisations that straddled the Stone Age.

Further afield, the nearest outside Stone Age site of significance is the Neolithic flints mines of **Grimes Graves** (in Thetford Forest). There is an unusual dimpled landscape, and mines that can be entered (sadly not open to under 10 year olds).

Terminology and dates:

| | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Palaeolithic | (lithic = stone age, palaeo = old) | 2,300,000 – 9,000BC |
| Mesolithic | (meso = middle) | 15,000 – 4,000BC |
| Neolithic | (neo = new) | 4,000 – 2,500BC |

What was Cambridge like?

The **Sedgwick Museum** (Downing St, free) displays the animals that would have lived in Cambridge, including the extinct bison, woolly rhino and mammoth, and still living reindeer and horse. The huge megaloceros or Irish elk (shown right) was a giant prehistoric deer skeleton purchased by Adam Sedgwick in 1838 for £140. It was missing its tail so he added a wooden one. It lived 40,000 – 9,500 years ago.

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Downing St, free) has stone age implements from the



Fiction for Year 4:

"Journey to the Ice Age" (Dinosaur Cove series) by Rex Stone.

"Stone Age Rampage" (Time Hunters 10) by Chris Blake.

"Littlenose" series by John Grant tells of a Neanderthal boy getting into trouble, along with many sequels.

"Wolf Brother" series by Michelle Paver is a fantasy set in a Stone Age world (perhaps a little advanced for Year 4).

Top Stone Age sights in the UK

Stonehenge: Created 3,000BC onwards. As well as the iconic stones that regularly cause hold ups on the A303 as people turn to look, there is a visitor centre and various burials nearby.

Avebury: Much larger stone circle, started around 2,600BC, with nearby West Kennet Long Barrow (a much older burial site some 100 metres long and 20 metres wide) and Silbury Hill (the largest man-made mound in Europe, its purpose still a mystery).

Creswell Crags: Pretty limestone gorge in Derbyshire, the caves used by Neanderthal man from about 40,000 years ago, and the only cave art in UK.

Kents Cavern: In Torquay, this cave has some of the best evidence of ancient man anywhere in the country.

Skara Brae: Neolithic village in the Orkneys, from 3,000BC. Nearby is Maes Howe, a chambered tomb dating from 2,750BC, and various stone circles.

Callanish: Stone circle on the Isle of Lewis (Scotland), begun around 3,000BC.



Top: **Stonehenge**; bottom left: **Creswell Crags**; bottom right: **Skara Brae**.

Stone Age — origins of humans

There are two crucial strands of prehistory of our ancestors. **Homo sapiens** (meaning 'wise man') is our species, which originated in Africa and then spread across the globe. However, there were earlier hominids, who also originated in Africa and then spread across the globe, but they did so much earlier.

What are Hominids? Hominids are species similar to (and including) our own, that walked upright as their main means of getting around (as opposed to some of the large primates, which can walk upright, but generally don't do it for long). Hominids include various species of **Australopithecus**, **Homo habilis**, **Homo erectus**, **Neanderthals** and, of course, **Homo sapiens**.

4 million years ago

(Or possibly a couple of million years earlier.) Hominids diverged from primates. They may have emerged as dry savannahs (flat plains) spread and jungle decreased, causing some primates to come down from the trees.

2.3 million years ago

Around 2.3 million years ago **Homo habilis** started making and using simple tools (some involving stone and thus perhaps marking the beginning of the Stone Age). Hominids appeared first in East Africa (Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia) and South Africa.

1 million years ago

Some species such as **Homo erectus**, started spreading out of Africa, also managing to control fire around this time (which may have made it easier to migrate).

850,000 BC

Much of this is quite speculative (particularly the dates, which possibly are much earlier than this), but it is known that **Homo antecessor** arrived in Britain (in Norfolk) about 850,000BC. At this time there was a land bridge connecting Britain to Europe, and it is thought that every 100,000 years or so there was an ice age that drove the hominids out, although they then no doubt returned when the weather got better.

300,000 - 200,000 BC

Homo sapiens evolved from earlier hominids, possibly with the ability to speak, and started leaving Africa around 200,000BC.

60,000 BC

Another wave of emigration of **Homo sapiens** started (earlier migrations are thought to have died out, as genetically it seems that humans now descend from this later wave of migration).

40,000 BC

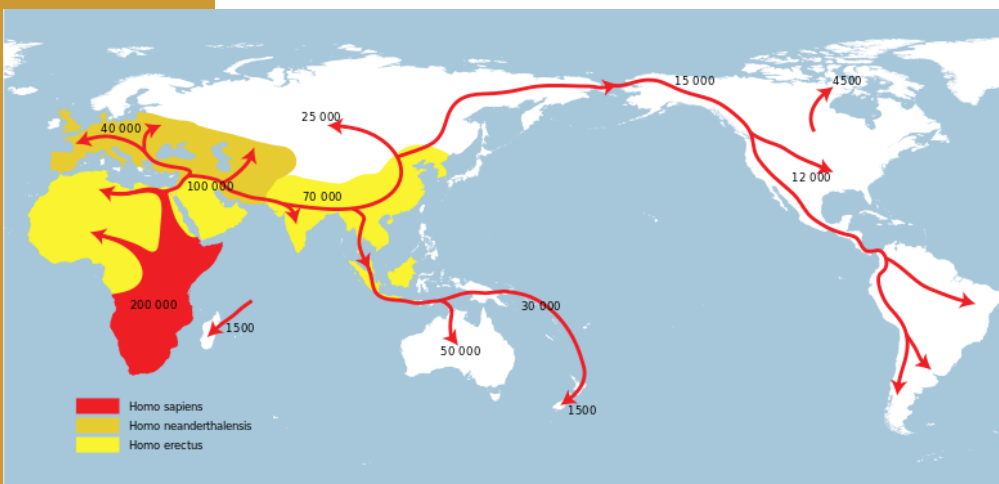
They arrived in the UK around 40,000BC (when there is evidence of them in Kents Cavern, Torquay), at which time there was a land bridge with Europe. This put them in conflict with the Neanderthals (an older species of humans) who were already in Britain and Europe, and died out around 40,000BC, although it is not known if this is linked to the presence of **Homo sapiens**.



Taking over the world

Homo sapiens also spread across the globe, initially spreading to the Middle East and hence Asia, and reaching Australia before Britain, using canoes (although the many islands and reduced sea levels may have helped them to do this) around 50,000BC.

Around 15,000BC they reached the Americas from Russia across the Bering Strait, which would have been a land bridge at that time, and spread from there all the way down the Americas.



They would have used animal skins to make clothes to keep warm in the colder climates, and fires which might be kept burning all winter. They used spears and bows and arrows to bring down large mammals (which perhaps resulted in the extinction of mammoths and the giant kangaroo). They also moved from being truly nomadic to building semi-permanent settlements and eventually developed agricultural practices.