

17. Valley Drive Neanderthal Findspot

In 1935 a Palaeolithic flint hand-axe was found in a shallow gravel pit about half way down Valley Drive. It was in fresh condition, with fine flaking along its cutting edges, and weathered with a white and grey patination.

The hand-axe had the broad shape and flat butt typical of the Mousterian industry of the Neanderthals. Other such hand-axes have been found in Norfolk, as at Little Cressingham and Lynford. They may be dated to a milder climatic phase of the Devensian cold period, perhaps 45,000 or 50,000 years ago. Studies of fossil pollen have shown that the landscape at this time would have resembled the steppe heathland of northern Scandinavia today, with heather, rushes, grasses and a rich herb layer, and patchy tree cover of Silver Birch, Scots Pine and Norway Spruce.

Large mammals would have included Bison, Spotted Hyaena, Reindeer, Wild Horse and Woolly Mammoth. Midges and mosquitoes would have been abundant in summer!

Neanderthals are not direct ancestors of modern humans, although recent DNA research shows that non-African people share up to 4% of their genes, suggesting that some interbreeding took place. They became extinct about 30,000 years ago



2. A Neanderthal family group in Long Valley, about 45,000 years ago.



1. The Mousehold hand-axe. A tool like this could be used for many different tasks, including chopping meat and bones, and cutting plants and wood.



3. The Mousehold handaxe, now in Norwich Castle Museum.

The hand-axe was found in gravelly subsoil layer overlying the plateau gravels. It was probably discarded on the land surface, where it became weathered. It then became incorporated into the subsoil during the last glacial period, perhaps 20,000 years ago, through the churning action of seasonal freeze-thaw processes.



4. Stony, sandy clays exposed in the bank on the north side of Valley Drive. The Mousehold hand-axe was found near here. This mixed deposit may be a mound of quarry spoil, or perhaps a periglacial 'head' deposit which developed here during the last Ice Age.

Photo credits

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