



Stone Age tools

The period before metal tools were developed is called the Stone Age. This period covered at least 2.5 million years, most of human history. During this time, the type of tools made and the stone used to make them changed considerably.

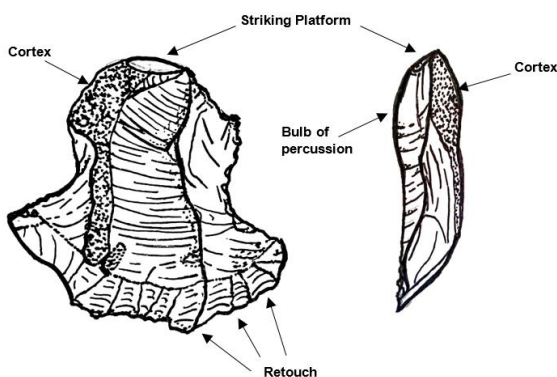
The Stone Age is divided into three periods. The first is the Palaeolithic. Palaeo comes from the Greek word for old. Lithic is from the Greek word for stone.

Palaeolithic (The Old Stone Age): 2,500 000 to 10,000 BCE

The first tools or weapons produced were very basic, and some were no more than rocks used as clubs and hand axes. Other tools gradually evolved, made from many different types of natural stone. Flint was the most common used, but tools were also made from more exotic materials like jadeite and obsidian. Obsidian looks like black glass and is formed by volcanic action. Well-made obsidian blades are as sharp as modern surgical knives.

Flint occurs naturally in chalk soils, but is not found locally in Weston. The outer surface of a flint is called the 'cortex'. This is rough compared to the inside of the rock, which looks glassy.

Parts of the flint can be flaked off by hitting the stone at different angles and at different speeds. This forms sharp edges, making a tool.



An illustration showing the features of a worked flint © Emily Hawkes



Both sides of a Palaeolithic hand axe © The Portable Antiquities Scheme

The animals that roamed around Britain during this long period were very different from the animals that live here now. There were large wild cattle called aurochs, bears, huge deer, and even woolly mammoths. These were all very large prey for people armed only with stone weapons.

Banwell Bone Caves contains the bones of bears, deer, bison and reindeer from about 80,000 years ago.

Mesolithic (The Middle Stone Age): 10,000 to 5,500 BCE

Following the Palaeolithic came the Mesolithic period. Meso comes from the Greek word for middle. This was when flint knives and arrowheads first appeared. It was also during the Mesolithic period that we became separated from the European Continent as water levels rose. The area of land between Britain and Europe, known as Doggerland, was flooded and what we now call the English Channel was formed.



Worked pieces of flint from our collection © Weston Museum



Neolithic arrowheads © Weston Museum

Although we call it the Stone Age, our ancient ancestors also made use of other materials. Hunters of the time made excellent bows from yew wood. A bow found in Meare on the Somerset levels was 1.9 metres long. Highly decorated with laced leather, it could fire an arrow 100 metres. The people of this time also lived in houses or shelters made from wood and used hides (animal skins) for clothing and protection.

The caves at Cheddar have been found to contain evidence of habitation during the Stone Age. Cave paintings in Europe and elsewhere show hunters and their prey. Along with other finds, including carvings in bone and wood, this shows that art was now developing.

Neolithic (The New Stone Age): 5,500 to 2,500 BCE

During the Neolithic period (neo comes from the Greek word for new) farming became widespread and people began to produce tools on a larger scale. Using antler horn picks, they mined for flint in places such as Grimes Graves in Norfolk in the early Neolithic period.

In the later Neolithic period flint was gradually replaced by bronze for making tools, probably with knowledge brought in by travellers. The world was not connected as it is now, and whilst we were using flint tools, the Egyptians were building pyramids. Information travelled slowly.

Many types of flint tool were produced in the Neolithic. These included spear heads, hand axes, scrapers, knives, arrowheads and borers for drilling holes. Although some of the tools, particularly axe heads, appear to have been only for show, most were for everyday use. Scrapers were made for cleaning animal skins.

Arrowheads and other tools have been found locally to Weston and are in our display. Flint tools have also been found in Bruton, Priddy and Wedmore.

Flint Knapping

To turn a piece of flint into a useful tool takes a lot of skill. The process is called "Knapping." The craftsman holds the piece of flint in his hand and then hits it with another hard stone. This other stone is called the "hammer stone". He gradually works the piece of flint until he is happy with the shape.



The process of knapping being demonstrated © Tonto National Monument

Small flakes chipped off can be used as scrapers and are called "microliths". Using their skill the craftsman was able to make a range of tools from large axes to very small arrowheads.

Flint tools were widely used in Stone Age societies as they were easy to find, carry, shape and sharpen. The more practiced the 'flint knapper', the more effective the tool they could produce.



Weston-super-Mare
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