

National Curriculum: Prehistory Units

Star Carr: Background information for teachers

Star Carr is in eastern Yorkshire near the village of Seamer, 5 miles south of Scarborough. Its name derives from the Danish (Viking) for sedge fen. The lake that was left here after the glaciers retreated filled with decayed vegetation to form a peat fen that is now represented by flat, productive farmland. Waterlogging and low levels of oxygen in swamp fens has meant that organic material such as wood survives below this farmland.

Natural infilling of the lake had already begun when the wooden platform was started about 9000 BC. Its purpose was probably to allow people to get to the water's edge that was moving further out as swampy fen developed around the margins. Chopping marks on some of the preserved timbers show that trees were deliberately felled with flint axes to make the platform; they didn't just drag fallen trees to the spot. In addition to the trees and brushwood that made up the platform, some more carefully laid and worked wood looks as if it was a trackway or jetty leading into the lake.

The people living here during the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) 10,000–4000 BC survived entirely by hunting, fishing and gathering wild foods, as they had done in the preceding Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) when caves like those at [Lascaux](#) and [Cresswell Crags](#) were decorated. Unlike those times, however, warm conditions had led to the spread of dense forests. There were no longer great open plains where herds of large animals could be easily hunted. People now needed to be by open areas such as lakes so that a wide variety of resources could be exploited. At Star Carr, bone evidence shows they hunted red deer, elk and aurochs (great wild cattle that are now extinct) in the woods, beaver and wild fowl on the lake edge, and fish in its waters. No boats have been found, but a paddle has, and hollowed out tree trunk boats are known from sites of the same date at [Bouldnor Cliff](#), near Southampton and in Denmark.

The house structure depicted on the PowerPoint is not from Star Carr. It is the reconstruction of a better preserved but similar site at [Howick](#) in Northumberland. The microliths found still fixed in wood are also from another site, this time in Sweden.

The red deer stag 'frontlets' are the tops of skulls with the antlers attached. The question of their use should excite pupils' interest. The holes made in the top of the skulls immediately suggest eye holes, so children will consider them to have been masks. Point out to them that the antlers are not complete. They would have been much longer, as Slide 9 shows. To make children reason out an answer stop at Slide 9. Print the outline 'stag frontlet' sheet at double original size, ideally onto A3 card. Pupils cut it out (including the holes) and bend the antlers up at right angles. Now tell them to try holding it to their faces as a mask, remembering that the antlers would have been longer. Are the antlers pointing the right way? Would they have been too heavy to hold up if pointing forwards? Now try putting the cut out on top of the head as a cap. Do the antlers point the right way now? What could the holes be used for? Now that pupils have reasoned their way to an answer continue with the PowerPoint.

An excellent novel for Year 5-6 children studying this period is *Wolf Brother* by Michelle Paver, but it is scary for Years 3-4. The Forestry Commission Scotland have, however, produced an excellent resource book *Wolf Brother's Wildwoods* based on the novel. It has excellent ideas, particularly for outdoor Forest School-type activities, which are appropriate to slightly older children. It can be obtained free from: Forestry Commission Scotland, National Office, Silvan house, 231 Corstorphine Road, Edinburgh, EH12 7AT.

If Star Carr is not dealt with in the Year 3-4 Prehistory module, it makes a good area of study to accompany the reading of *Wolf Brother* and associated Forest School activities in Years 5-6.

Further reading

Milner, N., Taylor, B., Conneller, C. & Schadla-Hall, T. 2013. *Star Carr: Life in Britain after the Ice Age*. York: Council for British Archaeology

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