



Introducing Prehistoric Dartmoor



People have been visiting and living on Dartmoor for thousands of years. Most of that vast stretch of time was before recorded history during the **prehistoric** period. It was during this period that people and their animals dramatically altered the appearance and nature of Dartmoor. These changes would have occurred gradually generation after generation. Evidence from tiny plant pollen grains preserved in the moor's peat

bogs indicates large scale clearing of trees over many hundreds or even thousands of years. Large areas changed into grassland, some of which was enclosed within walls, banks and hedges. The higher ground was left open. Due to climate change towards the end of the prehistoric period much of this grassland slowly became poorer and boggier, and changed into the typical moorland we recognise on Dartmoor today.

1) A Stone Age (Mesolithic) Dartmoor scene (7,000 years ago)



2) A Bronze Age Dartmoor scene (3,500 years ago)



3) An Iron Age Dartmoor scene (2,500 years ago)





1) Stone Age (Mesolithic)

We can try to imagine the earliest human use of Dartmoor during the **Stone Age (Mesolithic)** period 7,000 years ago. To create a picture we must try to use the evidence that archaeologists have found and fill the gaps with sensible guesswork based on remains found in other places. People have always needed large animals to make a living off the rugged granite landscape. We know that the people in the Mesolithic were hunters of wild game and gatherers of wild plants in a mainly wooded landscape. Thin layers of ash or charcoal in the peat bogs on the higher parts of Dartmoor suggest that they were cutting and burning trees, creating clearings in the woods. This was to encourage grazing animals such as deer or wild cattle and to help them hunt for food and other useful materials such as skins for clothing.

A recent archaeological excavation of a Bronze Age round house
Careful excavation of the floor has uncovered a number of **finds**. Each find allows us to work out what it came from, and what prehistoric people would have used it for.



Find: a quern
Use: for grinding grain into a flour for baking

Find: a piece of pottery
Use: a pot for holding food or water

Find: an arrowhead
Use: a bow and arrow for hunting

Find: an axehead
Use: an axe for chopping wood

Find: a spindle or whorl
Use: for spinning wool to weave into clothes

Reconstruction Bronze Age round house

Spot the items found in the excavation above in the picture below



3) Iron Age

Things continued to develop and life on Dartmoor a thousand years later (2,500 years ago) would again have changed, and not necessarily for the better. The climate had become colder and wetter, the soils and the vegetation were changing and becoming less productive through overuse. Many settlements and their surroundings on the higher ground were abandoned. More competition for resources (food and useful materials), combined with the production of new and more effective iron tools and weapons, would have led to more warlike conditions. Some of the remaining people built and used hill forts for defence, farming was more mobile and dependant on grazing animals, and society was dominated by chiefs and their warriors.

Much of this information comes from the archaeological remains but some knowledge of this **Iron Age** world comes to us from the Romans who conquered most of Britain and wrote down their history. This therefore brought the **Prehistoric** period to an end and much of Dartmoor would have looked familiar to us today.



Iron Age warrior

2) Bronze Age

If we then imagine a glimpse across the moor during the middle of the **Bronze Age** 3,500 years ago, much of Dartmoor would have looked very different from how it looked during the Mesolithic period. Instead of hunting and gathering people had become expert farmers. They would still have hunted and gathered food from the wild. However, they were far more dependent on their domesticated livestock; sheep, cattle and ponies. They probably used

some of the animals' manure to grow crops in their enclosed fields. This different way of life allowed Dartmoor to support many more people who in turn cleared more forest lower down, built more settlements and enclosed more land for the cultivation of crops. The archaeological evidence indicates a peaceful, well organised society with strong religious ideas that was well connected through traded goods and ideas with the outside world.



Bronze Age farmer

Bronze Age Link Activity

Match the archaeological feature with the statement. We have done one for you.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES

A large burial cairn
on top of a hill

Cow hoof prints preserved under a
wall that fell down 3,000 years ago

Ruined houses and
abandoned fields

Unused bronze axe head
carefully put in a peat bog

Many round houses were
scattered among the small fields

STATEMENT

Climate change - a colder, wetter
climate made farming very difficult

Some people were regarded as being
more important than others

During the Bronze Age many people
felt safe from attack from raiders

Some people liked to offer their
most valued possessions to their gods

People in the Bronze Age liked to
eat beef and enjoyed dairy products

Dartmoor's religion and beliefs during the Prehistoric times

We cannot know what prehistoric people thought or believed. However, we cannot doubt that religion had a powerful influence on their understanding and behaviour. The many surviving standing stones, stone rows and stone circles tell us that these monuments were just as important to them

Merrivale stone row as seen today



Further information available
from our web site

www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk

- Fun Zone
- Factsheets
- Publications

as our present day Dartmoor churches and chapels are to us today. Were they places for gathering, for worship? Did they use them to celebrate the seasons?

We do know from the many nearby graves that they liked to bury their dead close to these places but over such a long period their religious beliefs and activities must have developed and changed.

For further information, and a list of other Fact Sheets available, contact the:

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