

The Bytham River System – a key routeway for early humans to visit the British Land Area

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In a colourful and persuasive presentation, Jim Rose described his discovery 30 years ago of the sand and gravel of a buried valley at Castle Bytham, north of Stamford in Lincolnshire. Subsequent work by several investigators, notably the AHOB (Ancient Human Occupation of Britain) a 30-strong multi-disciplinary team, came to the revolutionary identification of human occupation at Pakefield 750,000 years ago, possibly even a million years at Happisburgh, far earlier than previously believed.

Jim described a river system then flowing into the North Sea including the Danish river, the Rhine, Thames and Somme, but also the River Bytham, rising in the West Midlands at Stratford-on Avon and flowing through East Anglia. The controversial identification of rich early human archaeology along much of its length including estuarial mud at Happisburgh as pre-, not inter-, glacial led to a complete rewriting of the glacial history of Britain. The Happisburgh discovery, widely reported with a major article in the Financial Times, included human and animal (bison, hippopotamus, lion, elephant, deer and other) remains, tools and butchered bone, all beneath glacial deposits.

The archaeology for all this was good, as was the identification of a Mediterranean climate from bones, plant, insect and carbonate precipitation techniques. The type of man, possibly Heidelbergensis, and dating were much less certain. The climate of Britain has varied greatly over the last million years, and it has been repopulated roughly every 100,000 years (our occupation of it only goes back about 12,000 years).

It is also not clear why no similar discoveries have been made in the Thames and Hampshire areas, apart from Boxgrove, near Chichester, which may be due to another river system. Nor have there been similar discoveries in Northern Europe. This is due to the severe icing there, with glacial movement eroding all vegetation, whereas Eastern English glaciers floated over the land without causing such damage.

Interesting studies of stream power for the palaeo-Thames, which glaciation diverted South, suggest heavy deposition in the Colchester area – close examination of Stanway spoil heaps was recommended.

'Homo Britannicus' written by Chris Stringer of AHOB (Allen Lane ISBN 0-713-99795-8) is a good read of this and associated topics.