Britain's last Neanderthals were more sophisticated than we thought

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An archaeological excavation at a site near Pulborough, West Sussex, has thrown remarkable new light on the life of northern Europe's last Neanderthals. It provides a snapshot of a thriving, developing population – rather than communities on the verge of extinction.

"The tools we've found at the site are technologically advanced and potentially older than tools in Britain belonging to our own species, Homo sapiens," says Dr Matthew Pope of Archaeology South East based at the UCL Institute of Archaeology. "It's exciting to think that there's a real possibility these were left by some of the last Neanderthal hunting groups to occupy northern Europe. The impression they give is of a population in complete command of both landscape and natural raw materials with a flourishing technology - not a people on the edge of extinction."

The team, led by Dr Pope and funded by English Heritage, is undertaking the first modern, scientific investigation of the site since its original discovery in 1900. During the construction of a monumental house known as 'Beedings' some 2,300 perfectly preserved stone tools were removed from fissures encountered in the foundation trenches.

Only recently were the tools recognised for their importance. Research by Roger Jacobi of the Leverhulme-funded Ancient Human Occupation of Britain (AHOB) Project showed conclusively that the Beedings material has strong affinities with other tools from northern Europe dating back to between 35,000 and 42,000 years ago. The collection of

tools from Beedings is more diverse and extensive than any other found in the region and therefore offers the best insight into the technologically advanced cultures which occupied Northern Europe before the accepted appearance of our own species.

“Dr Jacobi’s work showed the clear importance of the site,” says Dr Pope. “The exceptional collection of tools appears to represent the sophisticated hunting kit of Neanderthal populations which were only a few millennia from complete disappearance in the region. Unlike earlier, more typical Neanderthal tools these were made with long, straight blades - blades which were then turned into a variety of bone and hide processing implements, as well as lethal spear points.

“There were some questions about the validity of the earlier find, but our excavations have proved beyond doubt that the material discovered here was genuine and originated from fissures within the local sandstone. We also discovered older, more typical Neanderthal tools, deeper in the fissure. Clearly, Neanderthal hunters were drawn to the hill over a long period time, presumably for excellent views of the game-herds grazing on the plains below the ridge.”

The excavations suggest the site may not be unique. Similar sites with comparable fissure systems are thought to exist across south east England. The project now aims to prospect more widely across the region for similar sites.

Barney Sloane, Head of Historic Environment Commissions at English Heritage, said: “Sites such as this are extremely rare and a relatively little considered archaeological resource. Their remains sit at a key watershed in the evolutionary history of northern Europe. The tools at Beedings could equally be the signature of pioneer populations of modern humans, or traces of the last Neanderthal hunting groups to occupy the region. This study offers a rare chance to answer some crucial questions about

just how technologically advanced Neanderthals were, and how they compare with our own species."

Source: University College London - UCL