Dig discovers ancient Britons were earliest North Europeans

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A stone worked by early human settlers in Britain to become a cutting tool.

(PhysOrg.com) -- A University College London archaeologist is part of a team who have unearthed the earliest evidence of human occupation in Britain.

Simon Parfitt was part of a team of archaeologists, palaeontologists and earth scientists from the British Museum, the Natural History Museum, UCL, and Queen Mary, University of London, who unearthed the new evidence at an archaeological dig in East Anglia.

Their findings demonstrate that ancient humans occupied Britain over

800,000 years ago, marking the first known settlement in northern Europe - far earlier than previously thought.

The excavation was funded by the British Museum and the work forms part of the Ancient Human Occupation of Britain project, which is funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

The research, published in this week's issue of the scientific journal *Nature*, reveals over 70 flint tools and flakes excavated on the foreshore at Happisburgh, Norfolk.

Mr Parfitt, who is based at the UCL Institute of Archaeology, said: "This challenges our views that early humans spread only during periods of exceptional warmth. Instead, the new evidence demonstrates that early humans were capable of adapting their behaviour as the world changed around them."

Until recently, humans living during this early period in Europe were thought to be confined to the area south of the Pyrenees and Alps, and the earliest finds in Britain were dated from sites like Boxgrove, Sussex, at about 500,000 years. However, in 2005 evidence from Pakefield, Suffolk, indicated that humans had managed to reach Britain about 700,000 years ago, when for a brief period the climate was comparable with that of the Mediterranean today. The findings from Happisburgh extend this record of human presence in Britain even further back in time.

Tools found at Happisburgh provide the first record of Early Pleistocene human occupation on the edges of the cooler - or 'boreal' - northern forests of Eurasia. Living near these forests would have presented a range of new challenges to the people living there. Much of northern Europe was covered with boreal forests, which grew and shrank with the ebb and flow of the ice ages. Edible plants and animals were few and far

between, and short winter daylight hours and severe winters exacerbated the already tough living conditions that our predecessors faced.

The evidence from Happisburgh indicates that the site lay on an ancient course of the River Thames. This large tidal river would have had freshwater pools and marshes on its floodplain, together with salt marsh and coast nearby.

Mr Parfitt, co-director of the dig in Happisburgh, added: “The flood plain would have been dominated by grass, supporting a diverse range of herbivores, such as mammoth, rhino and horse. Predators would have included hyaenas, sabre-toothed cats and of course humans.

"The site is exceptional because of the unprecedented preservation of the original materials, from pollen grains to chunks of wood, and mammoth bones to voles and mice. We've even found remains of beetles and plants, which are missing from other sites. What we have in Happisburgh is a complete buried landscape."

The team's research also includes the first published demonstration of 3D modelling of flint tools by a CT-Scanner.

More information: Happisburgh - www.britishmuseum.org/happisburgh

Provided by University College London