

Gloucestershire International School at Great Abington

DAY 1

Three nights under the stars, as much prehistory as you can shake a stick at, authentic prehistoric food and lots of fireside philosophy - what a fantastic recipe for the lucky students at Gloucestershire International School.

And so it was that we convened at Abington Woods campsite on Monday evening in time for tent construction and the cooking of potatoes and chocolate bananas on the fire. The fire is a great place for discussion and debate, in the darkness of the woods and the crackling of the camp fire we discussed matters as diverse as Mesolithic settlement to mirrors around black holes.



With the astronomical theme in mind a few headed to the clearing to do some star gazing. The moon was in a crisp young phase and using a small 90mm refracting telescope we were able to get a good view of the craters and mountains. From the moon we headed to Jupiter and its attending moons - Io, Calypso and Ganymede. Europa was hiding on the far side of the planet. We could just about make out the equatorial belts - Jovian clouds.

We then headed out of the solar system, indeed pretty much out of the Galaxy to glimpse a view of M13, a globular star cluster - thousands of stars stuffed into a ball, albeit quite a big one, 100 light years across.

It was by now rather late and whilst the students headed off to their tents for the night a couple of the adults stayed up until 1.30 exploring the double stars, galaxies and nebulae of the night sky. Finally, we were treated to a fly by of the International Space Station - fantastic.



With the benefit of a clear dark sky Mr Forrest and Joshua enjoy a little exploration of the Universe.

On Tuesday morning we were all up bright and early to venture into prehistory. Our theme was hunter gatherers, ranging from those of the chilly Upper Palaeolithic to the Mesolithic. We had three prehistory stations - artwork, food and pottery and three groups of students.

The foraging activity was headed up by Miss James, the students exploring the woods in search of nutrition. Berries and nuts were on the menu together with tea of mint, goose grass, elderflower and stinging nettle tops. This tea was surprisingly tasty. Did the Mesolithic make tea? Did they have tea cups?



To explore this idea we headed to Dr Sturdy's group which was the very end of the Mesolithic, say around 5000BC. Our hunter gatherers had encountered some folk from the continent who had with them some ground breaking technology - pottery. Pottery must have transformed life, perhaps much as the Internet has today. Pottery creates so much potential. Aside from the practical functionality, for example storing stuff or drinking a cup of tea, it introduces skills, specialism, opportunities for trade, for expression, possibly the notion of accumulation and associated wealth.

We had clay dug from the river bank of the Granta and this idea of turning the land around us into a new form is fascinating - Neolithic Alchemy. We also had some clay we had brought with us, imported from a nearby Mesolithic clan. And we had a go! The results were fantastic, two distinctive approaches and end products that were fully functional and quality tested.



Our pottery compared with Neolithic from Switzerland in the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology



Firing and testing

Our third activity remained in the realm of hunter gatherer, but that of the Upper Palaeolithic. Art is almost as important in archaeology as pots; it demonstrates self expression, communication. It provides a prehistoric window on the world, it is, perhaps, the social media of 30,000 years ago.

Abington Woods is sadly devoid of caves so we brought our own with us, or rather a small section of a cave wall craftily constructed from paper. Using natural red ochre and charcoal everybody contributed to our cave wall, that archaeologists call a panel. Some elected to go for zoomorphic imagery, others more abstract work and one example of anthropomorphic. Dry material was used exclusively but we discussed the implications of adding water. Our problem was practical - we couldn't move the cave to the river and so we had yet to invent pottery to carry water from the river to the cave. Dr Sturdy's group, 20,000 years ahead of us of course was making those first steps into pottery production.

Another very interesting point was illustrated by Adelaide, who decided to adorn herself with ochre. So the art project entailed a number of different stages:

- Procuring the ochre and charcoal
- Making a choice of what imagery is to be applied
- Creating the drawing itself, using the contours of the cave wall to emphasise perspective of movement
- Interacting and responding to the materials and the canvas, for example, applying it to the body.





Our finished product

The inspiration for this came from each and every student. Hand prints, both positive and negative we have experimented with before - last September. These are found deep in Upper Palaeolithic Caves around the world, they are often created by children, a fact given away by the size of the hand prints. For example, Adelaide's print in the centre. Zoomorphic imagery (animals) is very common and tells us about the fauna of the Upper Palaeolithic. Our panel has a single anthropomorphic (human like) image - this is almost unheard of the Upper Palaeolithic but does appear in the Mesolithic. Abstract imagery is not uncommon and we have some here, centre and the dots top left. The dots bottom left represent the asterism of the Plough and this was directly inspired by our woodland astronomy the previous evening.

But this experiment was about much more than the finished product, it was the thought process, the community effort and the practical aspects of creating it. For example the students had to source their own charcoal and ochre (although the ochre was handily found nearby). The mining of the imagery was discussed, to some it was significant, to others, it really didn't matter. It is fascinating to think about how people responded to this sort of art 30,000 years ago, and how we respond to it today.

From deep prehistory we headed to the current day to explore archaeological techniques and map reading skills. We had a list of archaeological sites for the Historical Environment Record within 1 km of Abington Woods. There are a lot of them, we were particularly interested in Bronze Age sites.

Once we had reviewed these and armed with an Ordnance Survey Map Ollie was appointed Chief Navigator and we set off in search of archaeology. Our first stop was at St. Mary's Church and medieval field systems. The church is fantastic with a great example of a rood screen. It also has a particularly fine door and we spent some time discussing the function and significance of doorways and the liminal space that they create and occupy. The medieval field boundaries were illusive.



Doorways and rood screens serving similar purposes



We had recently considered the archaeology of colour in the classroom. Churches would once have been very colourful places, although all that remains of this today is often stained glass. Raph took some interesting images of colour and its transformative effects on the pews.

From St. Mary's we headed into the nearby field to find a Bronze Age barrow. This was always going to be challenging as we knew (from the HER) that the site was under a house but nevertheless, this was an exercise in map reading and Ollie successively navigated us to within 100 square metres of the site and the troublesome modern housing.



Bronze Age burials to be found below the modern houses on the edge of these fields - we wondered if the homeowners knew what lurks under their foundations

In the afternoon we headed off to Wandlebury Ring, just up the road.



Wandlebury Ring is an Iron Age hill fort, but now much landscaped and with a building standing within it you would probably not spot its ancient legacy. Nevertheless there are some impressive ditches and it is one of relatively few hillforts that display evidence of some warfare, in the form of skeletons in the ditches bearing cut marks.



Joshua examining an Iron Age coin of Tasciovanus, who ruled this area around 10BC. Minted in what is now St. Albans, this coin may, or may not, have actually passed through this hill fort 2000 years ago!

Back at the campsite we resumed our Palaeolithic art experiment which required the onset of nightfall. Cave art is typically found in the very deepest and darkest (indeed pitch dark) parts of the cave where the only way in which they can be experienced is through firelight. There is a theory that the flickering nature of firelight brings the images to life. So we tried this for ourselves and I think all will agree that firelight absolutely transformed our art, and did bring it to life. This really was a very cool experiment, the nature of a photograph does not really do it justice.



Rock art by firelight - I am not convinced that this experiment has ever been done before



Baking by fire - this has definitely been done before!

And so with experimental archaeology and fire roasted chocolate orange cake consumed, astronomy thwarted by cloud, it was time to turn in.

DAY 2

Day 2 of our trip was Cambridge day. We kicked off with some outdoor learning in its purest sense - a lesson in the amazing outdoor chapel in the woods, our whiteboard dangling from the branches of a tree.



Now this is a proper classroom

Our resource for the day was a fellow by the name of William Camden and his amazing book - Britannia, first published in 1586. This was one of the first history books of Britain, including geography and botany. Camden gives us some interesting insight into 16th century Cambridgeshire.

One of many intriguing comments he makes is that:

"...Cantabar the Spaniard is said to have first founded this university 375 years before Christ, and Sigebert King of the East Angles to have restored it. Being ruined in the Danish invasion, it lay long neglected till the prospect began to clear under the Norman government. Houses of learning, inns and houses of learning and halls for scholars were now founded...."

So, if Camden can be trusted, and of course we cannot assume he can, but it might be the case that Cambridge has a much, much longer reputation as a place of learning than the foundation of Peterhouse College in 1284. Maybe it was a renowned place for education when Wandlebury Ring was in full swing. We do know that Iron Age kings sent their children to Rome for an education - why not bring education to Britain?

With education very much our theme for the day we headed into the City and our first stop, Cambridge Leadership College. This is an amazing place, ultra modern learning, equations written on the walls and windows and an engineering task set for our students involving spaghetti and jelly babies.



Next up, a visit to more traditional education - a tour around Gonville and Caius College. Steeped in tradition, its three arches through which you can only pass once you have reached a certain status - not unlike our church and rood screen yesterday perhaps. A glimpse of Stephen Hawking's rooms and a tour of the magnificent chapel and anecdotes from our most enthusiastic 1st year guides - who could not be impressed? Mind you, I don't think they would appreciate equations on the 14th century windows - even if they were by Stephen Hawking.





One tradition we loved was that all students wear their college gowns for dinner - something that perhaps GIS should adopt!

From the College we headed to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, via St Bene's Church, Cambridge's oldest building and an example of Anglo Saxon long and short quoins in the tower, the Eagle Inn, famous for the announcement of the discovery of DNA and the Cavendish Laboratories where the atom was first split.



Although late Anglo Saxon, could Cantabar the Spaniard have prayed in a former St. Bene's church?

The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology is a curious exhibition. The top floor (prehistory) seemed to be either moving in, or out, with exhibits and their boxes piled high. It made for good effect. Amongst the collection, plenty of Neolithic pottery from around the globe, a Levallois stone core - we have studied these in class, and fantastic local finds from throughout prehistory.

There was also quite a lot of Indian themes going on, the totem poles and canoes proving to be the most popular exhibits for our students. Frustratingly, next month an exhibition of Star Carr, Britain's most famous Mesolithic site, will be unveiled. This would have fitted in perfectly with our Abington Woods experience.

From one museum to another, we just had time for a coffee and whistle stop tour of the Fitzwilliam Museum, with its eclectic collection from rock art to Monet and everything in between.



We were able to compare ancient and more recent art, pottery and, proving most popular amongst the students, 17th and 18th century swords and armour.

But with the Museum closing and the time on the coach parking ticket ticking away, we had to head off. The coach was, interestingly parked right outside Sancton Wood School, founded by Dr. Sturdy's mother!



Sancton Wood School

Back at the campsite, supper was a chicken stew and rice cooked over the campfire.



Again the clouds conspired against any astronomy but there was some cricket to be watched on the village green before our second and final full day drew to a close.

What you might call gas mark 7

During the two days we applied much of our classroom learning to practical, experiential activity. The themes of finding out about the past, societies, migration, maps and navigation, our place in the world and many others were incorporated into our activity.

In addition, the students were encouraged to participate as teams and to work together. Our fireside philosophy sessions drew out interesting and enlightening comments and thoughts and overall the benefits of outdoor learning both to pupils and staff was clear, something we intend to do more of both on away trips and within the school facilities.

Many thanks must be expressed to everybody involved in this outing and to the students themselves for their positive and enthusiastic participation.



The food of Mesolithic champions