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Prehistoric Britain

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Illustrated from contemporary sources by

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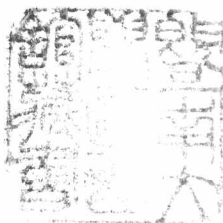
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ON THE PLAIN AND THE DOWNS

THE wind blows strong across the chalk uplands of Salisbury Plain. The rolling hills, covered with short sheep-cropped grass, stretch for miles, and only occasional beech-woods break the smooth line of the horizon and offer a barrier to the wind.

Salisbury Plain and the Marlborough Downs together form a great chalk block, thirty miles from north to south and fifty miles from east to west. Find a map of this part of England. Do you see how few towns and villages there are? Thousands of years ago, when England was just beginning to be settled by wandering tribes, more people lived on Salisbury Plain than in most of the rest of England. The low-lying land and the river valleys were marshy and covered with dense woods too thick to be cleared by the stone axes of prehistoric men. But movement was easy on the lightly-wooded dry chalk uplands. In the white chalk, too, there were flints to make their tools and their weapons.

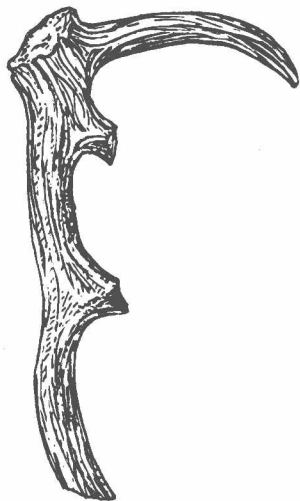
If you visit these chalk-lands today, you will find them very much the same as in prehistoric days.

You may still see the marks of an ancient trackway leading over the hills down to a distant river. You will see the huge ditches and ramparts of a hill-top camp and the mounds which mark ancient burying-places. If you search you may be lucky enough to find a flint arrow-head or some flint tool. The great stone temples at Avebury and Stonehenge are the most amazing monuments left by these early men. As you read of how the stones were brought there and arranged in great circles, perhaps you will be able to picture the busy scene at the temple and all around the rolling hills, and the grass and bright flowers dancing in the breeze.

NEOLITHIC FARMERS

The Feast at Windmill Hill

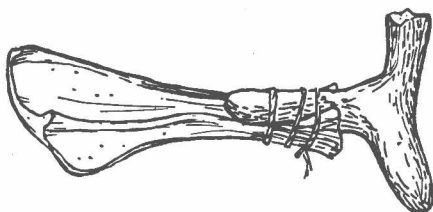
It was a very hot day, far too hot for digging. The boy wondered whether he could slip away to the stream for a drink without being seen. His father's back was turned, but he decided that he would be sure to be seen as he ran down the hill and it was far too hot for a beating. When his father turned round, the boy had picked up his digging tool again and was hard at work. This is his tool. It was made from the *antler** of a red deer and was about two feet long. The point had to be hammered into the chalk with a stone, then levered backwards and forwards until the chalk was loosened. It was very hard work. When a pile of broken chalk lay at the bottom of the pit, the boy scooped it up in his shovel and put it into a leather sack. When the sack was full, he scrambled out of the pit and emptied it on a big heap of chalk.



Antler pick

* You will find words printed like *this* in the Glossary on pages 91-92.

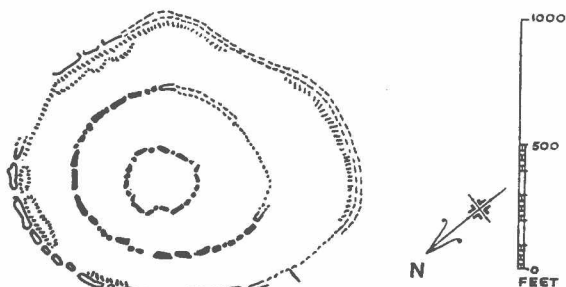
His shovel was made of the flat shoulder-blade of an ox tied on to the end of a stick with a leather *thong*. As you



Shoulder-blade shovel

can see in the picture, it was not very broad, but it was better than scooping up the chalk in his hands.

He was working on top of a hill, along with a crowd of people all busy making an enclosure. Three circular banks of earth were being thrown up, one inside the other, round the highest part of the hill. This would leave a grassy space on the very top. The banks were made of chalk dug out of ditches. The enclosure, with banks and deep ditches, was not meant to keep human enemies out but to keep cattle in. Once the animals were driven into the space at the very top of the hill, through the gaps left across the ditches and the banks, hurdles were put across these gaps and then they could not get out again. Here is a plan of an enclosure:



Plan of an enclosure

The boy remembered how every year his *clan* met many other clans, all with their cattle, at an enclosure on top of a hill like this one. They always met in the autumn, before the winter came on, when there were plenty of berries and wild fruit of all kinds to eat. For the rest of the year they split up, so that each group could have its own grazing lands.

At last the boy's father told him that his part of the ditch was deep enough and he could stop digging. Thankfully, the boy threw down his antler pick at the bottom of the ditch, climbed out, and went to see his mother and sisters.

Each family had been given a little land between the ditches. There they put up a simple hut, and penned their animals.



Enclosure at Knap Hill, Wiltshire

Each family had to give one of their best animals to be eaten at the great feast that was soon to be held at the enclosure. The boy's father had killed a young bullock. It was skinned and cut up by his wife and children. They used sharp flint knives to take out *sinews* to serve as string. They split the leg bones with heavy stones, so as to expose the delicious marrow inside.

The boy found his favourite sister, who was just a little

older than he was. She was kneeling on the ground, using a little round flint scraper to clean the bullock's skin like this:



Cleaning a skin



An antler skin-comb

Her hands were sticky. When she noticed her brother, she sat back on her heels and held out the scraper to him. He threw it back at her.

"Woman's work!" he said, proudly picking up his father's herding stick, and leaning on it.

She laughed at him, and went on scraping the fat off the inside of the skin, so that the skin would not get hard as it dried.

"It's lucky you've got women to work for you," she said. "Otherwise, where would your clothes come from?"

"I don't need any more," he said. Stooping down, he picked up one of her tools. "What's this for?" he asked.

"It takes the hair off the outside of the skin, when I've soaked it. It's made of deer antler."

"I can see that," replied her brother, "but what a dull job!"

"It isn't," said the girl. "I like to feel the skin getting soft as I work on it, and wonder which of us will wear it. If you'll make me some new scrapers, I'll ask mother to let you have this one, and make it extra soft for you. You will be glad to wrap yourself up in it by the fire when the nights are cold."

The boy was feeling tired after all his digging. He decided that making tools would be a change. If his father caught him standing around doing nothing, he might give him something a lot worse to do. He wondered where to find some flint. Then he remembered a big lump sticking out of the side of the ditch he had dug. He had hurt his toe on it several times as he was climbing in and out with his leather sack.

He went off, and presently came back with pieces of the stone, which he had smashed to get some chips of the right size. He squatted down on the grass, battering the edge of each flint with a hammerstone.

When he had finished some scrapers for his sister, he made himself a thin, sharp arrowhead, like this:



Flint arrowhead

To make it, the boy placed a thin piece of flint on some wood, that served as a table. He used a hard, pointed bone

to press tiny pieces of flint off each side, until the arrow-head was thin enough. A neolithic arrowhead was leaf-shaped, and about one inch long. The one in the picture is drawn larger, to show you the little mark left where each tiny piece of flint was pressed off.

Their mother suddenly shouted to the younger children to go and fetch water and sticks for the fire.

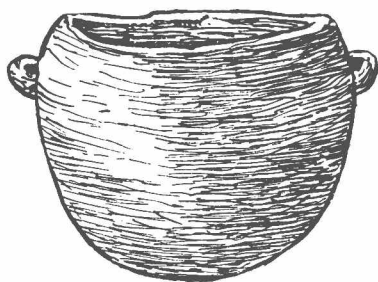
"Those children!" she screamed to the woman at the next fire, which was blazing brightly, tended by an obedient little boy. He was sucking a strip of dried meat that his mother had given him for fetching a huge load of firewood. "Those lazy children," their mother went on. "The days are warm, and they don't bother to look after the fire if my back is turned. Then I find it's gone out when I want to cook the evening meal, and I can't put my hand on the fire-stones. All they think about is the feast they're going to have. If I have to spend half the day lighting the fire, they won't get a feast!" she grumbled.

The boy and his sister were looking forward to the feast. They were very excited, in spite of all the hard work. They enjoyed the autumn meeting, when, every year, the *clans* came together as one big tribe. People exchanged news. Marriages were arranged between members of different clans. Women traded leather clothes and tasty things to eat and drink. Men argued as they exchanged animals. Dogs barked and got in everyone's way(I)*. Children made new friends and went to look at the new baby brothers and sisters of their old friends. Stories were told around the many fires in the evenings.

The most important time at the enclosure was the great

* You will find out how we know this by looking up this number on page 87. Look up each number as you come to it.

feast. Specially-chosen people prepared and served the food. Every family gave an animal to be eaten, and smooth pots to hold food and drink.



Neolithic pot

This is a pot found at Windmill Hill. It is dark brown, and almost one foot high. Can you see the little handles? They may have been made so that a wooden lid could be tied on to them.

The feast was sacred. Afterwards, the pots that had been used were broken, so that they could not be used for ordinary meals. The bones were not given to the dogs as they usually were (2). The broken pots and bones were placed in a ditch, and chalk from the nearby bank was raked down until all the rubbish from the feast was covered up.

After the feast there were great ceremonies, when the older boys and girls were taken into the tribe as men and women. After this, they stopped playing with the children, and were given different work (3).

The boy and girl could smell the supper that their mother was cooking. It made them feel hungry.

"Come on," said the girl, jumping up suddenly. "I found some lovely nuts down by the stream, and if we don't hurry up, someone else will eat the lot."

The children ran off down the hill, into the cool of the woods, looking for hazel nuts.

The Traders

One of the women in the clan was different from all the rest. She was taller, and had strange ways. Her people were the traders, who travelled about exchanging axes of specially hard stone and deer antlers, for flour. She had stayed behind, after one of their visits, to marry the boy's eldest brother.

When her people had gone away she had been very sad. At first the girls in her new tribe laughed at her, for she did not know how to make pottery or grind corn into flour. But in the end they admired her strength. She was able to work for hours without tiring, and was cleverer than they were at snaring animals and finding things to eat in the woods. And she was very clever at curing skins.

She was surprised to see the clay pots which the other women used. She told them how her people carried water in leather bottles and made other containers of bark. The women argued about which was better—to make clay pots, which took a long time, and were easily broken, or to use leather ones.

Then they taught the newcomer how to make clay pots. They showed her the best places to look for clay. It had to be mixed with grit, or finely-crushed pieces of broken pot, so that the pot would not crack when it was being fired. To make a pot the woman squatted on the ground and

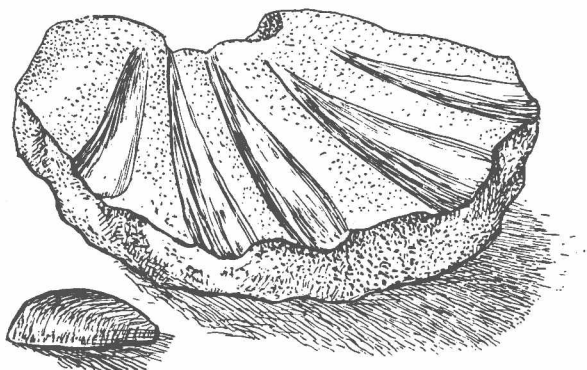
rolled handfuls of clay into long rolls between the palms of her hands. Then she built up the pot by coiling the rolls round and round. As she worked, she smoothed the sides of the pot, to hide the joins between the coils. The bottom of the pot was always rounded, not flat. This made it less likely to be upset when put down on the uneven ground. Sometimes a woman would stand her pot on a mat made of reeds (4) while she was shaping it. If she stood it on the ground, bits of rubbish like odd grains of corn (5) became mixed with the wet clay.

In return for lessons in pot-making, the strange woman taught the others to make baskets.

One day the traders arrived on another visit. The strange woman's mother was among them again. The traders spread out on the ground the things they wished to trade to the farmers. There was a great pile of deer antlers. The farmers needed these for digging. There were two different heaps of stone. One heap was of flint, pieces of black, glassy stone. The traders mined this themselves from deep in the earth. The farmers knew that it was easier to shape than the flint they picked up themselves on the surface of the ground. It was less brittle, too, because it had not lain in the hot sun and cold frost, and so the tools they made from it did not break so easily.

The other heap of stone was made up of lumps of very hard rock, roughly shaped into the form of axes. This rock was quite different from any other stone the boy had seen. It was greenish, not at all like flint, and he knew that it could not be chipped into shape like a flint axe. If his father needed a new axe for cutting down trees he would exchange flour for a lump of this rock. Then he would give it to the boy to grind until it was smooth and polished, with a sharp edge.

This meant crouching on the ground in front of a big stone with a flat surface, on which the lump of rock was rubbed up and down until it became smooth. This is the stone the boy used. The rubbing wore grooves in it. It



Stone for grinding axes

was very hard work. You can find out for yourselves how difficult it was. Try making a big stone smooth by rubbing it on a rock. The boy used to sprinkle sand from the stream on the stone, as it made the job a little quicker. Although he could make a flint axe in a few minutes when his father needed one, the rock axe would last much longer once it was finished, for it never broke as the flint one did.

“Where do you find the axe-rock?” the boy asked one of the traders. The trader waved his hand towards the west. “When we travel towards the setting sun, we come at last to mountains. They are much higher than the hills on which you drive your cattle in the autumn, and there are no trees on them. In places that we know of, where none of you corn-people live, we find the strong axe-rock.

Some mountains are green, like this rock. Others are pink and grey, and sparkle (6) in the sun as if they were made of stars."

"Do you dig it out of the mountain with deer antlers, as we dig our chalk ditches?" asked the boy, curiously.

The man laughed loudly. "We should break all the antlers we ever collected doing that. No, we explore the slopes of the mountains looking for heaps of stones. These are cracked off the mountain by winter frost and snow. Rain washes them down the sides of the mountain into great piles. When we find such a pile, we camp near it, and look at all the broken rock. We choose all the pieces that are the right size for axes, and batter them into roughly the right shape. Then they are ready for boys like you to grind smooth on a grinding-stone." (7)

"But how do you shape this rock?" asked the boy. "I can never shape it with my flint axe. I used to try, but it only broke the edge of my axe."

"Our hammers are made of rock just as hard as the axe-rock," the man replied. "They are very big and heavy, and though they cannot make a sharp edge, they make the lumps of rock roughly axe-shaped, and save us carrying waste stone."

Meanwhile the woman who had married the boy's brother had found her mother among the traders and was eagerly telling her all the new ways she had learned. She took her mother to see her hut, and to admire the clothes she had made. Just inside the door of the hut was the quern or grindstone, a large, flat stone worn down in the centre by the rubbing stone that she pushed backwards and forwards. She showed her mother how to grind corn into soft white flour, and then gave her some of the flat cakes she cooked in the ashes of the fire.