

Step Back in Time

Mark Sutcliffe joins the University of Central Lancashire's very own 'Time Team' to uncover the prehistoric secrets of the Hodder Valley

Vistors often describe the rural tranquillity of the Hodder Valley as 'like stepping back in time.' It's a well-worn cliché that is taking on a new meaning following extensive archaeological investigations in the hills above Whitewell.

For among the caves and limestone outcrops that form the foothills of the Bowland Fells, evidence is emerging that, far from being a bucolic backwater, the beautiful Hodder Valley was a popular stopover on a prehistoric highway.

Archaeologists Rick Peterson and Mike Woods have spent months excavating likely sites after high-tech geophysical scans suggested ancient structures lay just beneath the surface of some tell-tale earthworks at New Laund – the distinctive hill that lies just across the River Hodder from Whitewell.

And the evidence they have uncovered is pretty compelling. Artefacts and fragments found at the site suggest this elevated plateau and the sheltered pasture below was a place of significance and sanctuary for the last 6,000 years.

In those days, when the climate was a little warmer than today, bears, wolves and wild boar would have ranged free across the Bowland Fells and highly mobile hunter-gatherers would have followed the rivers inland to hunt deer or herd elk.

Even after the adoption of farming, the idea of permanent settlement hadn't occurred to our ancestors, but these nomadic tribes would follow established routes – often following river valleys – and make camp for extended periods where they felt safe, or at places of ritual or possibly even religious significance. Here, they would rest, feast and maybe even trade with other tribes.

Rick and his team of archaeology students found stone tools and fragments of bone in a series of prehistoric dustbins known as *pits* or *middens* within a lightly fortified enclosure sheltered beneath the ridgeline of New Laund Hill.



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This Neolithic motel, which is probably around 5,000 years old, would have been an obvious stopover for tribes moving between the lowlands and more mountainous areas on migration routes that would have probably followed seasonal patterns.

It may also have been a meeting place for tribes to trade, socialise and possibly celebrate religious festivals or conduct ancient rituals.

On the day we visited the site, the lure of the Bowland Fells to nomadic prehistoric hunter-gatherers and farmers was amply demonstrated by the striking views from the summit of New Laund Hill.

Despite being a relatively modest 229 metres above sea level, together with its companions to the west, this distinctively knotty outcrop offers views that stretch for more than 70 miles down to the Cheshire sandstone ridge and beyond to the Clywdian Hills across the border in North Wales.

If we could see them, then anyone surveying the view across the intervening lowlands could see the Bowland Fells. Marching north, then following the Ribble and Hodder valleys would bring them here – establishing an easily defined route that could be explained to others and replicated every season.

And like the Sandstone Ridge and the Clwydian Hills, the story of human settlement of the Forest of Bowland follows a similar trajectory. Fast forward 3,000 years or so and the archaeological evidence suggests the existence of a prominent hillfort on the elevated plateau overlooking the Neolithic enclosure.

This was a more heavily fortified structure – probably comprising a bank and ditch surrounding a large round house with a primitive cobbled path leading into the doorway.

Extended family groups would live here on a more or less permanent basis and while the settlement was fortified, Rick thinks it's unlikely to have any real military significance.

"We've been excavating this area since 2011 and we have found hundreds of artefacts," explained Rick. "There's tangible remains of an Iron Age roundhouse which we've dated to 200BC and a whole lot of supporting evidence and artefacts for what may have been the Neolithic equivalent of a fairground on another part of the hill. We have also found even earlier tools, left by Mesolithic hunter-gatherers, beneath the Iron Age house."

"This suggests that the Hodder Valley was an important ancient route from around 7,000 years ago. In those days,

hunter-gatherers and pastoralists (early farmers) tended to follow the rivers. The valley floor may have been boggy – so they would often stick to ridgelines either side of the river.

"These tribal nomads ranged over large areas and by following the Hodder, they could reach North Yorkshire, the Lake District – where the best stone axes in Britain were made – and across to the Yorkshire Coast at places like Flamborough Head, which was an important source of flint."

And just as the hunter-gatherers paved the way for Iron Age settlers, the prehistoric precedent they set continued throughout history. The Romans constructed a road running north to Lancaster on the other side of the Hodder and in the 9th century, the Vikings may have used the Hodder Valley to shuttle between their stronghold in Dublin and the Viking 'capital' of York. A thousand years later, the Inn at Whitwell became a coaching inn – providing accommodation for weary travellers on the 18th century turnpike roads.



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Prehistoric Bowland



12,000 BC: Ice Age

Bowland made uninhabitable by glacial ice hundreds of metres thick.



9000 BC: Paleolithic

Primitive tribes of hunter-gatherers may occasionally have moved through the valley following the elk upon which they were dependent on migration.



5000 BC: Mesolithic

Evidence of nomadic hunter-gatherers following the rivers into the hills, hunting in the forests using primitive flint and stone weapons



2000 BC: Neolithic

Evidence of tools used for killing and butchering animals and a well-established camp below New Laund Hill.



1500 BC

Itinerant Bronze Age settlers used caves in the limestone and began large scale felling of trees to pave the way for more modern farming methods



200 BC

Archaeological evidence for an Iron Age hillfort on the level plateau just beneath the summit of New Laund Hill.

Access

New Laund Hill is part of a local farm, not part of Bowland Access Land. However, the public footpath between New Laund Farm and Fair Oak Farm offers excellent views of the two prehistoric sites.

Just a mile or so from the site of the hillfort, the Wild Boar Park is home to a recreation of an Iron Age round house and – of course – plenty of wild boar, which would have been resident in the Hodder Valley back in the iron age. www.wildboarpark.co.uk