



Burton Area in Pre History

The human story of the Middle Trent Valley around Burton upon Trent stretches back thousands of years before the arrival of the Roman legions. The natural corridor defined by the River Trent, flanked by its fertile alluvial floodplains, gravel terraces, and low-lying hills, provided an ideal environment for successive prehistoric societies. Spanning a ten-mile radius centered on Burton, modern quarrying, aerial photography, and archaeological excavations have uncovered a rich tapestry of human presence ranging from early hunter-gatherers of the Stone Age through settled farming communities of the Bronze Age to the organized tribal societies of the Iron Age.

The earliest evidence of human activity in the region dates to the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods, when nomadic hunter-gatherer groups traversed the river valleys. Following the retreat of the glaciers at the end of the last Ice Age, the landscape gradually transformed into dense primeval woodland dominated by oak, hazel, and birch. Mobile bands of humans moved along the Trent and its tributaries, such as the Dove and the Mease, utilizing the rivers for transportation, fishing, and tracking game like red deer and wild boar.

Archaeological evidence for this early era is preserved primarily as lithic scatters—flint tools left behind at temporary campsites. Across the low river terraces within ten miles of Burton, surface finds of Mesolithic flint tools, including finely worked microliths, scrapers, and blade cores, have been recovered. These small, precise flint blades were slotted into wood or bone handles to form arrows, harpoons, and cutting implements. The sandy, well-drained gravel soils near the river margins were favored spots for these transient encampments, providing easy access to fresh water and abundant foraging resources.

By roughly 4000 BC, the transition to the Neolithic period brought fundamental changes as agricultural practices spread into the Trent Valley. People began clearing the ancient forests for wheat and barley cultivation and pasturing domesticated cattle and sheep. Although permanent structural remains from the Early Neolithic are elusive due to the perishable nature of timber buildings, the period left clear footprints in the soil. Polished stone axes made from imported rock as well as leaf-shaped flint arrowheads have been discovered in the countryside surrounding Burton. These polished axes were critical tools for clearing dense woodland, and their non-local origins demonstrate that the inhabitants of the Burton area were already part of regional exchange networks stretching across Britain.

As the Late Neolithic gave way to the Bronze Age around 2500 BC, the landscape around Burton became increasingly settled and structured. The river valley witnessed the construction of ceremonial and funerary monuments, signaling a landscape rich in spiritual significance. Within the ten-mile radius of Burton, cropmarks identified via aerial reconnaissance reveal round barrows—earthen burial mounds—perched on the river terraces and surrounding high ground. Excavations of these burial sites have yielded grave goods including decorated Beaker pottery, flint arrowheads, and early copper and bronze implements.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Bronze Age in the Trent Valley near Burton is the preservation of organic material in waterlogged river deposits. Extensive aggregate extraction in the gravel pits of the Trent and Dove valleys has revealed extraordinary archaeological finds. Chief among these are several prehistoric log boats, or dugout canoes, carved from massive hollowed oak trunks. These craft demonstrate sophisticated woodworking skills and highlight the Trent's role as a major highway for trade and communication. Along with log boats, waterlogged riverbed deposits have produced preserved wooden fish traps, stakes from prehistoric revetments, and deliberate votive deposits of high-status metalwork. Bronze socketed axes, spearheads, and dirks have been recovered from the river sediments, pointing to ritual practices where precious weapons were intentionally cast into the waters to honor ancestors or river deities.

During the Middle and Late Bronze Age, settlement patterns shifted toward established farmsteads and field systems. Excavations around locations like Willington, Catholme, and Barton-under-Needwood within the ten-mile zone have uncovered postholes of roundhouses, storage pits, and enclosed farmsteads. The

local population had developed sophisticated bronze-casting techniques, livestock husbandry, and mixed agriculture, turning the river basin into a managed farming landscape.

By the time of the Iron Age, starting around 800 BC, the land around Burton was fully settled and densely populated. Iron technology replaced bronze for everyday tools and weapons, allowing for more efficient clearing of heavy clay soils and advanced crop cultivation. The local inhabitants of the Burton region during the Iron Age were part of the Corieltauvi tribal confederation, which held sway over much of the East Midlands, with neighboring lands to the west influenced by the Cornovii.

The Iron Age landscape around Burton was dominated by agricultural enclosures, open settlements of timber roundhouses, and occasional defended sites. Cropmarks and rescue excavations ahead of quarry expansions have revealed extensive ditch networks marking field boundaries, stock enclosures, and deep grain storage pits lined with basketry or clay. Finds of ceramic jars, saddle querns for grinding grain, loom weights for weaving cloth, and metalworking slag show that these farmsteads were largely self-sufficient, producing domestic crafts alongside food.

Defensive earthworks and hillforts also featured in the wider regional territory. Promontory forts and enclosed high ground overlooking the Trent Valley served as territorial markers, safe havens, or centers for tribal assemblies. Within the valley itself, river crossings became strategic points of control. Iron Age metalwork found in the region includes ornate brooches, iron sword fragments, and wheel-thrown pottery, reflecting active trade connections with neighboring regions and the wider European continent prior to the conquest.

The pre-Roman era in the Burton area reached its climax in the 1st century AD as the shadow of Rome expanded across Britain. Far from being an uninhabited wilderness, the 10-mile radius around modern Burton upon Trent was a dynamic, well-populated landscape characterized by managed fields, thriving farmsteads, riverine trade routes, and deep-rooted ritual traditions developed over thousands of years. When the Roman military advanced into the Midlands around AD 47, establishing forts and major roads like Ryknild Street through the valley, they encountered a sophisticated Iron Age society built upon the rich prehistoric foundations laid down by the flint-

knappers, early farmers, and bronze-smiths who had called the Trent Valley home for millennia.