A book about Staughton

The pre-history of the area which would eventually become the village of Great Staughton is thin on the ground, so to speak, but nonetheless archaeologists have uncovered evidence of our pre-historic forbears in the form of artefacts, principally tools and weapons, which give us elusive clues of what our area looked like some 10,000 years ago.

What is now Huntingdonshire was covered by a dense forest, a source of food, fuel and shelter for our hunter -gatherer ancestors. Agriculture had not been introduced from the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia, and besides the heavy clay soils of our area were resistant to any primitive ploughing tools that these peoples possessed. These tools were flints, sharpened by a process known as chipping or knapping and knives, borers, scrapers and flint arrow heads have been discovered in the area. One of the most interesting discoveries found on the Highway in Great Staughton was an axe, made of polished greenstone. The interest in this find was not so much the tool itself but its origin. Greenstone is found in mountainous areas and archaeologists believe that this example came from the Langdale Pikes area of the Lake District where a veritable axe factory has been unearthed. These greenstone axes were evidently highly prized for examples of them have been found throughout the country indicating the trading and communication links of these primitive Britons.

Flint arrowheads, knives, scrapers and an adze have been uncovered in the area. From c. 2700 BC, until c. 800 BC (the boundaries of the age are inexact), the Neolithic Age gradually gave way to the Bronze Age. It was marked by the arrival of a people whose origins are still the subject of much discussion – the Beaker people, so named after their distinctive pottery. It is now believed that they originated in the Iberian Peninsula, although, although forensic research has revealed that some of them came from Switzerland. They swept through much of southern and eastern England and evidence of their presence has been found in our area. The Beaker people brought with them the technique of combining copper and small amount of tin at high temperature to form bronze, thus giving the name to an era. Alongside this technological advance, agriculture began to be widely adopted. The significance of these two developments was twofold: more land could now be brought into production, which in turn could create the surpluses of crops and produce. These could be stored for the future, used as barter, or sold. It was the start of a trading economy.

With an increasingly settled population, another striking cultural change occurred: the emergence of ceremonial, perhaps religious practices, exemplified by the building of elaborate funerary barrows, in which cinerary urns (containing cremated ashes) were often interred. Several round and bowl barrows, used for burying the dead, have been discovered in Great Staughton. It was the era when huge monumental structures were being built at Avebury and Stonehenge. Ring ditches, all that now remains of the ditch that was originally constructed to surround a round barrow, have been discovered in the area.

Perhaps more interesting was evidence of the religious and burial rituals of these peoples. Round barrows have been found in Kimbolton, and a cinerary urn (to hold the ashes of the cremated dead) was unearthed in St Neots. On Staughton Highway, two Bronze Age round barrows have been excavated, and to the south of the village, two bowl barrows which were evidently part of a group of four, have been identified. It has been suggested that the bowl barrows may have been part of a much larger Bronze Age cemetery, linked to the discovery of the round barrows discovered on the Highway, a mile to the north east. The mounds did not go to waste in medieval times, when one was the site of a wind mill. These barrows were used for individual burials, especially in the case of high-status warriors or tribal chieftains, or for group burials, and were almost certainly a ceremonial and ritual focus for the community. It is possible that the barrows found in Staughton were the final resting place of some Bronze Age chieftain.

As we approach more historical times, the Bronze Age gave way to the Iron Age in around 500 BC, which was fostered by yet another incursion of a race from Europe, who were to have a decisive influence in the history of the country for more than five hundred years – the Celts. It is thanks to Roman historians such as Tacitus and Dio Cassius, the geographer and traveller Ptolemy and the soldier Julius Caesar that we know a tremendous amount about the Celts, who proved such doughty opponents of the Romans after the invasion of the island by the emperor Claudius in 43 AD. There is ample archaeological evidence for Celtic settlement in our region. In Great Staughton, the site of an Iron Age hut was discovered. An Iron Age coin was retrieved in Dillington, and in St Neots.

Elsewhere in the area, Iron Age pottery has been found in Little Paxton, Brampton, Alconbury Offord Cluny and St Neots. Perry shows evidence of an Iron Age rectilinear enclosure, and the nearby village of Hail Weston has traces of an Iron Age settlement. Perhaps the most celebrated of the Celtic warriors was queen Boudicca, who laid waste Colchester, St Albans and London in 61 AD.

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