Warwickshire in the Ice Age

Had you been at this spot nearly half a million years ago you would have found yourself standing in the bed of a powerful river, which geologists now call the Bytham River.

▲ The Bytham River valley might have looked like the view in this picture. Copyright 2019 Steven Cheshire (Steven Cheshire Graphic Design)

Ice Age Rocks

Geologists call the river deposits the Baginton Sands and Gravels. They formed during a warm interval in the Ice Age. The climate then began to get colder and a large ice sheet advanced from the north-east into Warwickshire laying down the Thrussington Till on top of the sands and gravels. When the climate began to warm again ice melted intermittently, depositing Wolston Clay in temporary lakes.

You can see the continuing effect of the geology on the present-day vegetation. Bubbenhall Wood is found on Thrussington Till and Ryton Wood on Wolston Clay. These woods survived as the clays were too heavy to be worked by medieval farmers.



The Bytham River flowed along a wide valley stretching from here to Baginton, running north-eastwards into the North Sea. Sands and gravels that were deposited by the river were once quarried here.



You can see the three Ice Age deposits in the slope above Pagets Pool. **Ryton Wood** Wolston Clay Thrussington Till Sand and Gravel old sand and gravel quarr

Wolston Clay consists of grey stoneless clay and silt, deposited in water.

B Thrussington Till (boulder clay) is a red/brown pebbly clay two or three metres thick, deposited by ice.

C The Baginton Sands are made of yellow to orange grains. The Gravels consist of well-rounded pebbles up to 20mm in size and are mixed with coarse sand, both deposited by the Bytham River.

▶ The axes have been beautifully fashioned, some from hard volcanic rock that possibly came from the Lake District, like this example found in Waverley Wood sand quarry. © 2019 Warwickshire County Council.

Lower Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) hand axes have been found in the sand and gravel pits. They tell us that Heidelberg Man (Homo heidelbergensis), possibly one of our distant cousins, lived here about half a million years ago. Just like Ice Age versions of the Swiss Army Knife, the axes were multipurpose tools used for cutting, crushing, scraping and chopping.



Bones have been found which show that the area was home to many animals such as straight-tusked elephants, horse and bison. These would have been a source of food for Heidelberg Man, hunting and scavenging the 'big game'.







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Early Man



The first evidence of Heidelberg Man was a jaw bone found in 1907 in a sand quarry near Heidelberg in Germany. They lived between 700,000 and 300,000 years ago.

 This reconstruction of an adult male Homo heidelbergensis on display in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History is based on the Kabwe skull © 2019 Tim Evanson (CC BY-SA 2.0).

Elephant neck bone © 2019 David Gosling. 2 Elephant tooth © 2019 Brian Elllis. **3** Piece of elephant tusk © 2019 Brian Ellis.



Examples of hand axes and fossil bones from the local quarries can be seen in Market Hall Museum, Warwick and at the Visitor Centre here at Ryton Pools Country Park.



Straight-tusked elephant

The males could reach as much as four metres tall. Although the tusks curve, they are straighter than those of the mammoth. These elephants became extinct in Britain about 115,000 years ago when the climate became colder.

▲ Palaeloxodon antiquus Eofauna Scientific research figure © 2019 Shu-yu Hsu

Quarrying and restoration

The Baginton Sands and Gravels were quarried as raw materials for aggregates, concrete manufacture and horticulture. When quarrying ended the quarry below was restored to become Bubbenhall Meadow next to Ryton Pools Country Park.





Straight-tusked elephants probably lived in small herds up to 15 strong and may have been matriarchal like modern elephants.

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