

Cambridge: a Famous City

Cambridge is a small English city on the edge of the Fens, yet is famous throughout the world. Why is this so? First and foremost, Cambridge is renowned for its ancient University and beautiful colleges. In recent years, it has also been transformed into a world centre for science and technology. This has led to huge growth in the city.

A World-Class University

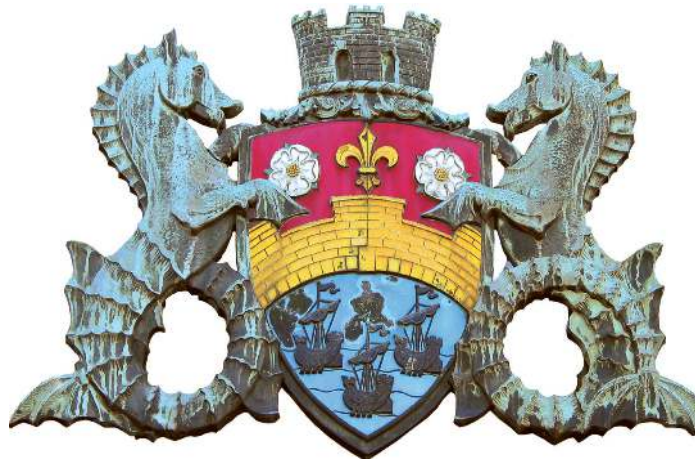
Cambridge University is one of the world's leading universities. Founded in 1209, it is more than eight hundred years old. This makes it the fourth oldest surviving university in the world (after Bologna, Oxford and Salamanca). The University has produced some of the greatest scientists, mathematicians, writers and thinkers of their times, and continues to attract some very bright minds.

From Market Town to High-Tech City

Although Cambridge owes its present fame to the University, it was a thriving riverside port and centre for trade long before the first university scholars arrived. In Roman times Cambridge was a military fort and riverside settlement on Castle Hill. By medieval times it was a flourishing market town and port, renowned for hosting the famous Stourbridge Fair, one of the largest fairs in Europe. Since the 1970s, the city has become world famous for its science and technology industries. The sudden and phenomenal growth in these industries has been described as the 'Cambridge Phenomenon'.

Historic Buildings and Landscapes

Cambridge is celebrated for some of the most stunning buildings, gardens and riverside meadows in the world. The thirty-one colleges which make up the University occupy a large area of the city. The colleges' turrets, spires and



The Cambridge City coat of arms, displayed on the Guildhall. The shield shows the river, bridge and castle, important features of the historic town. The seahorses supporting the shield are symbols of the town's river link to the sea.

King John first granted a royal charter to the Town of Cambridge in 1201. This makes the 'Town' older than the University (or 'Gown') by just eight years! In 1951, Cambridge became a city.



pinnacles combine to create a distinctive city skyline. There are many spectacular landmarks, such as King's College Chapel and the Wren Library at Trinity, which back on to grassy riverside stretches known as the Backs (or 'backs of the colleges').

Left: The Bridge of Sighs at St John's College, one of the best-known bridges on the Cam. It is named after the Bridge of Sighs in Venice, also an enclosed bridge of stone, which it is supposed to resemble.



The historic heart of Cambridge, with St John's College (in the foreground), Trinity College (middle) and King's College Chapel (on the skyline). Facing King's is the tower of Great St Mary's Church, which marks the city centre. The River Cam (which flows to the right of this picture, not shown here) was once key to the town's early growth and prosperity. Today, the University dominates the city. The riverside port has long since disappeared.

Cambridge and the Fens

The Fens were once a flooded and marshy landscape, dotted with islands where settlements such as Ely grew up. Cambridge lay on the fen-edge. Since the seventeenth century the fenland has been drained, making it one of the richest farming areas in Britain.

Cambridge has been closely linked to the Fens through many centuries of river trade. Goods were transported by boat to and from Cambridge via the large seaport of King's Lynn. Cambridge still has special links with Ely, its cathedral town since 1109. Cambridge's fen location has given the modern city its nickname 'Silicon Fen' (see page 163).



Cambridge sits on the southern edge of the Fens. This expanse of flat, low-lying land stretches north from Cambridge to the Wash. Most fenland rises no more than a few metres above sea level.

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Prehistoric Cam Valley

The earliest human remains in the Cambridge area have been found along the banks of the River Cam and its tributaries. This area is known as the Cam Valley. Stone Age people moved along the river valley, hunting and foraging for food. Later, during the Neolithic and Bronze Age, early farmers began clearing forest and shrub, and settling in more permanent farming communities. They built monuments such as henges (circular enclosures for rituals) and barrows (earth burial mounds), connecting their communities to fixed places in the local landscape.

Although there were many Bronze Age settlements along the Cam, the first settlement considered to be 'Cambridge' was an Iron Age village on Castle Hill. This was settled by Celts from about 500 BC.

Early Humans: the Old and Middle Stone Age
(900,000–4000 BC)

The prehistoric people of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic times (Old and Middle Stone Ages) lived nomadically as hunter-gatherers. At various times, these early people faced extremes of climate: temperatures in Britain plummeted and soared as the climate changed from glacial to subtropical. There were long periods when the country became uninhabitable and covered in sheets of ice. When it became too cold, the early hunter-gatherers were forced to leave. They migrated to warmer places in mainland Europe. Continual human occupation probably did not begin in Britain until about 10,000 BC.

The Big Chill

The Ice Age began about 2.6 million years ago. Numerous climate cycles of extreme cold (glacials) were followed by warmer periods (interglacials). During the glacial periods, large areas of Britain were covered in ice. Animals that were adapted to withstand the arctic temperatures, such as steppe bison, giant deer and brown bear, would once have roamed the frozen plains of East Anglia.

In 2018, road-builders working on the A14 near Cambridge were astonished to stumble upon the tusks of a giant woolly mammoth and bones of a woolly rhino. These fossils are thought to be at least 130,000 years old. Rhinos and mammoths, with their thick fur, layers of fat and massive ridged teeth, were ideally adapted to grazing on the tundra.

The last big ice age in Britain peaked about 20,000 years ago and lasted until approximately 8000 BC. By about 6500 BC, temperatures increased and the sea level rose once more, flooding Doggerland (which is now submerged under the North Sea). This made Britain an island once again.

During the glacial spells, the sea level dropped as water became locked up in ice, and Doggerland emerged. This was a wide tract of land, or land bridge, that connected East Anglia to mainland Europe. Stone Age people, including those in the Cam Valley, would have been able to migrate across the plains of Doggerland with relative ease. As the climate warmed, the frozen plains of Doggerland became marshland, grass and woodlands. They were some of the richest hunting and fishing grounds for Mesolithic hunter-gatherers in Europe.

Cam Valley Hot Spot

Between spells of extreme cold, the temperature soared. About 125,000 years ago, Britain basked in a very hot and balmy climate. At this time, the River Cam was much deeper and wider than it is today. It was home to giant plant-eaters, including straight-tusked elephants, rhinos and hippos. These megaherbivores wallowed in the river and grazed on the grassy banks, sharing the grasslands with herds of aurochs and deer.

In 1910, archaeologists revealed Stone Age fossils on the original river bed of the Cam at Barrington, including this backbone of a hippopotamus.



Who were the earliest humans in Britain? The very earliest trace – a trail of footprints – was discovered in 2013 in East Anglia. They were made by a family group from a species of very early human, *Homo antecessor* (or ‘Pioneer Man’). The imprints, preserved in the mud around 800,000 years ago, are the oldest known human footprints outside Africa. They were found at Happisburgh in Norfolk, a tantalisingly short distance from the Cam Valley. The group may have been searching for food such as shellfish along the muddy river floodplain. Within just two weeks, the precious discovery was washed away by the tide.

The oldest human remains found in Britain, some fragments of fossilised bones, were discovered at Boxgrove in Sussex. These hominin fossils, about 500,000 years old, probably belong to a second ancient human species, *Homo heidelbergensis*. This species may have replaced ‘Pioneer Man’.

Around 60,000 BC, as the climate warmed and the ice retreated once more, the Neanderthals, or *Homo neanderthalensis*, arrived in Britain. These are our closest (and now extinct) human relatives. The Neanderthals were skilful hunters. They followed herds of large wild animals such as reindeer and



Cutting edge: a flint handaxe, the essential Stone Age tool. This one was found at a Neanderthal site near the River Thames at Swanscombe. It was made about 300,000 years ago. The rounded base of the flint would have fitted neatly in the hand. It could be used for many tasks, such as stripping meat off carcasses and extracting marrow from bones. Fragments of Stone Age handaxes have also been found on Castle Hill in Cambridge.

aurochs (wild cattle) across the low-lying, grassy plains of East Anglia. Evidence of their hunting skills comes from the surviving tip of a two-metre spear, known as the 'Clacton Spear'. This was found at the Essex sea-side town, just 60 miles from the Cam Valley. The 400,000-year-old spear, made from yew and whittled to a sharp point, is in fact the oldest wooden spear found in the world.

The Neanderthals lived in Britain intermittently until about 40,000 years ago. At about that time *Homo sapiens*, or modern humans, arrived and ultimately replaced them; the fate of the Neanderthals remains a mystery.

Our human ancestors were hunter-gatherers. They migrated along the fertile Cam Valley, building temporary shelters or structures (similar to 'bender huts'), grouped together in camps. Like the Neanderthals, early modern humans hunted for meat. The forests were abundant with fruit, roots and nuts, whilst the river and marshes provided fish and fowl. In an age before metal-working and pottery, Stone Age people relied on tools made from naturally occurring materials, such as flint, stone, wood and animal bone.

The New Stone Age: the First Farmers (4000–2500 BC)

About 6,000 years ago, there was a tremendous change in Britain. Family groups shifted from a nomadic way of life and became farmers. The early farming ideas and practices came from continental Europe. They may have spread slowly over hundreds of years or been brought by migrants. Neolithic (New Stone Age) people – as the early farmers are known – began to clear forests to grow cereal crops such as emmer wheat and barley. They kept domesticated animals, including pigs and goats. Animal dung was used to manure the newly cultivated fields. The people supplemented their diet with wild plants and hunted meat. In the Cam Valley, family-based groups lived in small, shifting settlements every few miles along the river valley.

The Neolithic Britons made a dramatic and lasting mark on the landscape. They constructed one of the world's best-known prehistoric monuments: the massive stone circle at Stonehenge in Wiltshire. They also built hundreds of burial monuments, or barrows. These were often in prominent positions on hills or overlooking rivers. Two Neolithic barrows, dating from about 3700 BC, were recently discovered near the River Cam at Trumpington. Once piled high with earth, these burial mounds would have been visible for miles around.

The Bronze Age People: the First Metal-Users (2500–800 BC)

Around 4,500 years ago, technology in Britain was transformed, as metal (first copper and later bronze) was used for making tools, farming implements and weapons. Bronze was made by mixing copper with tin to create a harder metal alloy. The crucial skills in metal-working were brought to Britain in about 2400 BC by a new wave of migrants from Europe known as the Bell Beaker people. They were named after their distinctive bell-shaped pottery cups, or beakers.

The Beaker settlers moved westwards from Central Europe, arriving in Britain about 4,500 years ago; their ancestors had originally come from the Eurasian Steppe. Recent DNA evidence suggests that the Beakers almost completely replaced Neolithic people, whose fate is unknown. The Beaker people brought with them new cultures and practices, as well as new technologies.



A double Beaker grave, from about 2000 BC. It was excavated at Trumpington Meadows. One skeleton is that of a teenage girl, the other is of a related teenage boy. A precious Beaker vessel is carefully tucked beside each skull. As the Beaker people migrated, beakers like this appeared all across Europe.

Between about 1500 and 1000 BC, Britons adopted an increasingly settled lifestyle. Land and territory were shared out in a more systematic way. For the first time, people constructed circular homes, or roundhouses, and cleared large areas of forest to create sizeable fields and animal enclosures. In the Cam Valley, a recent discovery at Clay Farm in Cambridge has revealed a farming settlement near the river, dating from about 1500 BC. Here, arable crops were grown on a significant scale, and large herds of cattle and sheep were reared. The surplus grain was probably traded for copper and tin. It suggests that the Cambridge area was widely settled and the river was important for trade.

Around 1300 BC, there was momentous change as sea levels began to rise. In many coastal areas, Bronze Age Britons had to adapt swiftly to rising waters and flooding. Along the East Anglian coastline, dry land disappeared as large swathes were reclaimed by the North Sea. In low-lying Cambridgeshire, the Fens emerged. This was a landscape of marshland, sluggish waterways and islands of clay. Peat (partially decayed plants) started to form a spongy wet layer on the clay underneath. To the north of the Cam Valley, Bronze Age

people used the natural causeways (raised routes along the firmer clay ground) to cross the marshland and reach areas of higher, drier land. They also built timber causeways – platforms on stilts – which connected islands that were now separated by watery marsh.

In 1982, archaeologists made a staggering find at Flag Fen near Peterborough: a Bronze Age timber walkway with an island-platform midway across. It had been preserved in the bog for more than 3,000 years. With five parallel lines of timber uprights, an estimated 60,000 in total, it was a feat of Bronze Age engineering. The causeway is believed to have been as much a ceremonial site as a route across the fen. In common with other Bronze Age sites next to open water, many weapons were found at Flag Fen, some deliberately broken. They had been cast into the water, probably as part of a religious ritual or offering. The life-giving power of water, as well as of the sun, was central to Bronze Age beliefs.

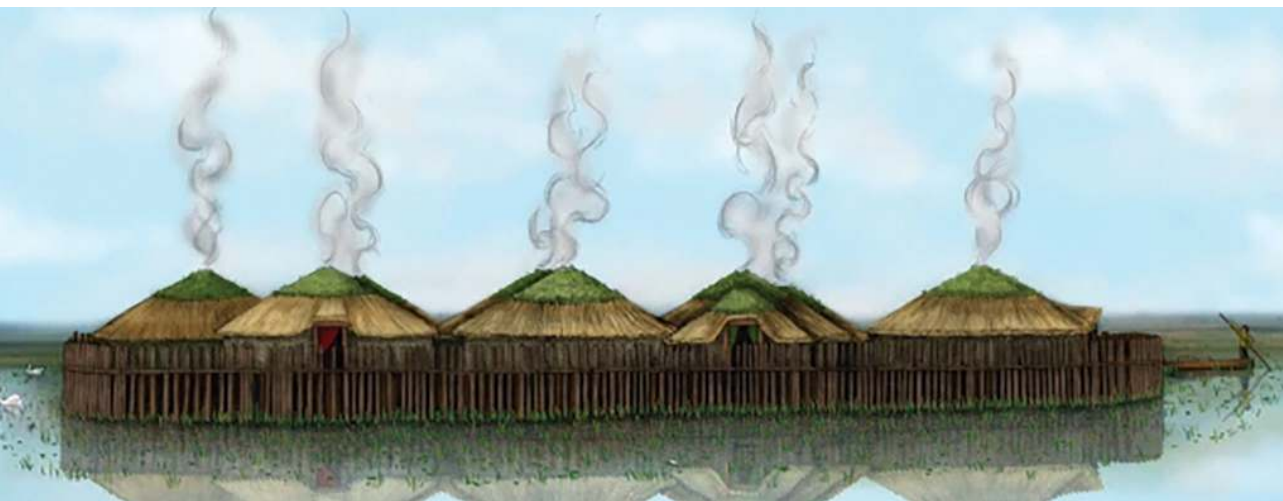
Must Farm: a Bronze Age ‘Pompeii’

Just three miles from Flag Fen, there was a further exciting discovery at Must Farm in Cambridgeshire. It has transformed our understanding of late Bronze Age life. The site first came to light in 1999 when a local archaeologist saw rotting wooden posts sticking out of the mud of a long-vanished river. Later excavations revealed an almost perfectly preserved Bronze Age settlement. The houses, built on platforms, had been abandoned when a fire swept through the settlement in about 1000 BC. As the roundhouses were engulfed in flames, they plunged into the river below, where they were then covered in a thick layer of silt. Because the site was so waterlogged, objects that would ordinarily have rotted away have miraculously survived, exactly how they were left. This Bronze Age time-capsule has been nicknamed ‘the Pompeii of the Fens’.

Inside the roundhouses, archaeologists have found bronze sickles and swords, wooden plates and paddles, and even cooking pots with the encrusted remains of food (which revealed a diet of, among other things, pike and nettle stew). Eels and meat would have been hung to smoke over the central fire pit. Further along the river, archaeologists have found V-shaped fish weirs (to direct the fish), funnel-shaped fish traps and, incredibly, eight beautifully preserved Bronze Age boats. Each boat was hollowed out from a single oak tree.

Although the settlers at Must Farm were river-dwellers, they also farmed on dry land. They had animal-drawn carts, revealed by the discovery of a large wooden wheel, about one metre in diameter. Inside their homes were stone saddle querns for grinding grain; outside were the remains of butchered red deer and wild boar.

The settlement was probably built on water to access (and possibly control) the all-important river trade. Far from being cut off, the community would



A settlement on stilts: how Must Farm may have looked in about 1000 BC. The roundhouses stood on a platform above the water. Wooden causeways probably connected this 'island' to dry land. The site gives a rare glimpse into an intriguing prehistoric settlement.

have been connected to the whole fenland area, deep into Britain, across the North Sea into Europe and beyond. The rivers were the highways of the day, vital for trading in tin, copper, bronze and other luxury items. The discovery of sparkling blue-green glass beads, believed to have come from Turkey or Syria, shows just how distant those networks spread.

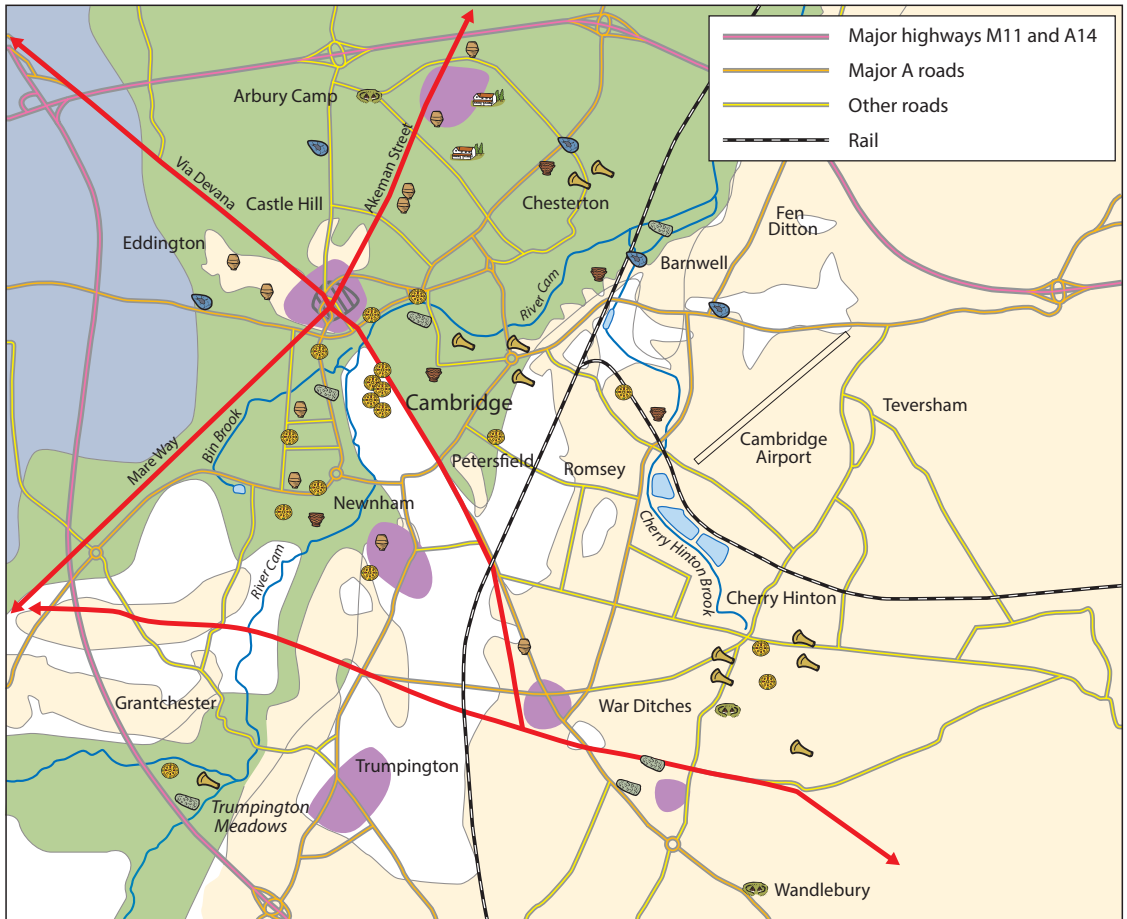
It remains a mystery why Must Farm was built, occupied and destroyed by fire, all within a single year. Whether it was a chance spark, an attack by hostile forces or a ritual act is unknown. But the scale of the fire and the fact that so much was so abruptly abandoned suggests a horrific event more than 3,000 years ago.

The Iron Age (800 BC–AD 43)

More than 2,500 years ago, iron was used for the first time in Britain, gradually replacing bronze. Bronze was still used for high-quality jewellery and weapons, but iron – which was produced from iron ore – was more readily available than copper and tin (which were both needed to make bronze). Also harder and more durable than bronze, iron was increasingly used for everyday tools and weapons.

This is a wrought iron fire-dog found at Barton. The terminals are decorated with two bull's heads. Fire-dogs were used as supports to hold up an open fire and allow air to circulate beneath the burning logs. Such a fine possession, forged from iron, must have belonged to someone rich and powerful. It was probably used between about 100 BC and AD 43, possibly for roasting meat on a spit for ceremonial feasting.





The Cam Valley

Early people were drawn to the fertile land along the Cam Valley. The waterways of East Anglia also provided settlers with an essential channel of trade and communication which reached to the North Sea and beyond.

The Icknield Way provided an alternative route overland (see map on page 26). This was an important prehistoric trackway, or series of tracks, which ran from south-west to north-east (from Wiltshire to Norfolk), following the higher, drier chalk ridgeway.

The 'Via Devana' (as it was later named) was a Roman military road. It ran from Colchester in the south-east to Chester in the north-west. A section of Via Devana (known locally as the 'Roman Road' or 'Worsted Street') probably followed a pre-existing Iron Age route, linking Cambridge to Haverhill, the Icknield Way and what is now the A11 (the main road to Great Chesterford).

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| | Stone Age find |
| | Neolithic site |
| | Bronze Age site |
| | Roman town |
| | Iron Age burial |
| | Iron Age hillfort |
| | Iron Age settlement |
| | Roman villa |
| | Roman road |
| | Roman burial |
| | Anglo-Saxon burial |
| | Chalky land |