

## **“Early Settlers in South West England”**

**Dr Paula Gardiner  
Archaeology Department  
University of Bristol**

### **A joint meeting with the Cirencester Archaeological and Historical Society**

Dr Gardiner has researched three Mesolithic sites in Somerset. The first two sites were on the Mendip hills near Cheddar. The third site was on top of Exmoor where two valleys lead down to the sea near Porlock. All sites were occupied by Mesolithic people from 12000 to 7000 BC.

This was a period of great environmental change. The landscape changed from open tundra to forests. Rising sea levels cut Britain off from the continent. Large mammals, such as mammoth and elk, were replaced by smaller wild cattle, pigs, and deer. Shellfish, salmon and dolphins flourished in the warmer seas, providing a regular and abundant diet for the population. Stone tools became smaller and more sophisticated and these are characteristic of this age. The bow and arrow became an efficient weapon for hunting. People were moving around their territory using wood and skin shelters.

The overall picture was of small groups of people living in the valleys during winter and hunting on the hills during summer. The pothole caves on the Mendips were also used as burial sites for their dead. The Exmoor site contained thousands of flint chippings, which suggested it was a “tool factory” to which the stones had been brought up from neighbouring beaches below. There is also evidence that these tools were traded with other groups, as identical tools are found in South Wales across the Bristol Channel.

These Mesolithic settlements appear to have been abandoned in the following Neolithic age, when farming people settled permanently in the fertile valleys.

*Given on Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> March 1012 at the Royal Agricultural College*