

The Meso-what? project

The Meso-what? project is the working title of my PhD research being undertaken at the University of York.

I am investigating public understanding of the Mesolithic period in Britain under the supervision of Nicky Milner at the university and John Walker of the York Archaeological Trust.

The project is being funded as a Collaborative Doctoral Award by the AHRC.

Project elements

The project involves a number of overlapping areas of investigation.

The current version of the [Research design](#) (1.0) summarises the project more formally.

The key elements of the proposal are summarised below.

Aim and objectives

Aim:

To identify and implement best practice for improving public understanding of the Mesolithic period using [Star Carr](#) as a case study.

Objectives:

1. To critically evaluate the ways in which the Mesolithic is presented to the public in [Britain](#)
2. To investigate the ways in which the Mesolithic is presented to the public in other parts of [Europe](#)
3. To identify effective ways of disseminating Mesolithic research to the public, particularly through engagement with [YAT](#) attractions
4. To implement ideas for disseminating Mesolithic research, using [Star Carr](#) as a case study
5. To measure the impact of various presentation types

Research Context

The historical, academic, institutional, cultural and social backgrounds for the project are all important. They are also summarised in the formal [Research design](#).

Research questions and methodology

In what ways is the Mesolithic presented to the public in Britain?

There are several key 'interfaces' or channels through which archaeological information gets from specialists to the public. These include [museums](#), [traditional media](#) (television, radio, newspapers), [schools](#), [popular books](#) - (fiction and non-fiction), [artistic work](#) (performances, fine arts), [direct outreach](#) (public lectures, site tours, experimental archaeology), [archaeological/historical societies](#) and specifically [web-based dissemination](#).

It will be crucial to investigate the relative strengths and weaknesses of these interfaces in terms of audience size, penetration, engagement and overall effectiveness as tools for presenting the Mesolithic.

In what ways is the Mesolithic presented to the public in other [European countries](#), particularly [Denmark](#)?

Comparisons of the use of these [interfaces](#) in other regions will help build understanding of appropriate ways to present the Mesolithic. Particularly good examples of presentation sites ([museums](#) , [archaeoparks](#), [excavation-based centres](#)) will be selected for visits and broader datasets (visitor numbers, books sales, school curricula) will be analysed. The reasons for the uneven representation of Mesolithic archaeology across Europe will be placed in a historical context.

Which [interfaces](#) are most effective for presenting the Mesolithic?

It is important to gain a detailed understanding of how various aspects of the past can be presented by spending time at YAT's visitor attractions. By comparing these to other interfaces in [Britain](#) and [Europe](#) one can build an understanding of how these might translate to the Mesolithic period. Different types of activity will be planned and implemented for [Star Carr](#) including one-off events ([public lectures](#) , [site tours](#), [experimental archaeology](#), [performances](#)), engaging [traditional media](#), using [web-based dissemination](#).

Which aspects of the Mesolithic are best suited to various public audiences?

Through the study of other periods (particularly the Vikings and Romans through the YAT attractions), and the Mesolithic in other countries it should be possible to assess if any issues have particularly high-impact with the broadest audiences: e.g. are issues such as climate change, which is at the forefront of current media, of interest when considered in the past. Further, are particular aspects more suitable for different age groups, non-traditional audiences (those from lower socio-economic backgrounds or recent immigrants). Lastly, there is an issue of whether particular '[interpretive communities](#)' have particular ways of engaging with the Mesolithic which can be utilised (or must be mitigated for): for example [flint-collectors](#), [New Age spiritualists](#) or extreme [nationalists](#).

How effective are different interfaces for various audiences?

By collating data from indirect presentations ([book sales](#), [museum visitors](#), [television audiences](#)) and detailed monitoring of [direct-engagement activities](#) (visitor numbers, questionnaires, interviews) it should be possible to assess the impact of the different interfaces as Mesolithic presentation tools. Surveys will continue to be undertaken in Scarborough in order to identify whether the site acquires a higher profile over the period of the PhD.

Timescales and workflow

The PhD will be constructed of several phases:

1. The assessment of current practices for disseminating Mesolithic research in Britain and selected parts of [Europe](#), as well as evaluating the innovative methods used for other periods, particularly through work with [YAT](#).
2. Towards the end of the first year proposals should be in place for the [Star Carr excavation](#) in the summer of 2012 (eg, on-site visitor attractions) and for further dissemination activities during the second year (eg, engagement with [schools](#)).
3. These phases will be built upon with development and evaluation of these activities. This reflexive methodology will enable relevant areas of investigation to be broadened or deepened.

The writing up should be continuous as data is collated and the thesis will consist of chapters covering evaluation of current practices in Britain and in Europe, the diverse and innovative ways of disseminating information about the past, the implementation of outreach for [Star Carr](#), and the impact of the approach with evaluations for further long term initiatives such as visitor centres.

Relevant literature

The project obviously straddles a number of relevant literatures: in addition to a broad understanding of [Mesolithic studies](#), [museum studies](#), the study of [Media forms](#), [heritage studies](#) will all have to be investigated as necessary.

Expected outcomes

1. Academic outcomes: much of the research will consider and experiment with different ways of communicating research, including innovative methods and modern technology; the project will therefore act as an important case study which can be used by other academics to enhance public value in research.
2. Public value: the local area should benefit culturally through an increase in resources and educational materials provided on-site, in local displays (in York through YAT, and possibly through the local museum) and on-line resources. Potentially there will also be economic benefit through visitors to the area, particularly during the summer when they may also use local pubs, B&B's, hotels etc.
3. Public bodies: English Heritage is in the process of writing a Vale of Pickering Historic Environment Management Framework in which public value plays a key role: the results of this PhD will be key to this on-going initiative.

Much of the focus of the PhD will be to test different approaches but it is anticipated that these will lead to further developments beyond the PhD which may include initiatives such as a visitor centre and /or a permanent museum display.