

FONTANI - CHILD OF OUR DALES

GeoSuffolk Notes
64. RM '16.

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The site of present-day Suffolk: 12 million years ago.

A modern-day visitor to this ancient world would be impressed by many things - the warm climate, the deciduous broad-leafed and laurel forests, herds of mastodons and three-toed horses, and the sound of flint being chipped. In places the surface of the ground was covered by chipped flints, but their very high-angle flaking would appear very strange to a modern-day archaeologist.

It only takes a short time to find the source of the chipping. A group of quite short people (apes?) are responsible for these characteristic flints. Only two are on the ground at this activity; there are others in a tree, two eating fruit and another quite happily suspended in an upright position, but all watching proceedings. The most skilful flint-chipper seems to be the young female, and quite beautiful in a Miocene way. She speaks a form of archaic Suffolk and is that her name, Fontani? She has a relatively large triangular nose, projecting forwards of her cheek bones which give a slope to the upper part of her face; there is no projection to the lower part of her face. Her wrists and elbows are very mobile, well adapted to making implements. Quite surprisingly, when one of the group yawned, it was possible to glimpse that the third molars were quite small, quite different from most early apes.

Far away the African tectonic plate was pushing into Europe. The Gulf of Lenzham was slowly being destroyed by the rising mountains of the Weald. It was time for Fontani to move southwards. Perhaps a hundred generations had lived and died in Miocene Suffolk. The high-angle flaked flints made by those myriad hands still lay in abundance on the land surface until the great Trag seas of the Pliocene swept all before them as they transgressed across our area.

Meanwhile, far to the south, Fontani's children had left for another continent, and there at Oldoway in their new world they made their home. It took Africa over 60,000 centuries for their brain capacity to grow and to invent the low-angle flaking hand-axe technique. 900,000 years ago they had re-entered Europe and the time was ripe for them to again reach the gates of Suffolk. For a long time the great northern Ice Sheet dominated their lives. Centuries and dynasties and beliefs would come and go during human history until one day in the reign of King Edward 7, Mr R--d J-m-s of Ipswich unearthed our story down, the lost world of Fontani, beneath the Trag in a brickpit in the Dales of Ipswich.

Note 1: 'Fontani'. From Dryopithecus Fontani of St Gaudrens, S. France.

Note 2: the Trag flints were, quite correctly, not made by Pliocene Man, but by Miocene Fontani.