

Stoke Tunnel SSSI



Lake Ipswich

A long time ago - 210,000 years before the present day - this place was the muddy shore of a freshwater lake or river. The climate was slightly warmer than the present. The coldest stage of the ice age is over, although further freezing will follow this warm interglacial time.

Let us spend an imagined day here in this beautiful valley, watching the drama of the hunters and the hunted.

It is night-time and the sky is full of stars but their patterns are different to those we know because it is so long ago. It is very still just before sunrise, but with the first light of dawn, the quiet time is broken by the early morning chattering of birds. The day begins. A herd of large wild oxen start the show, visiting to drink water. There is a scuffle at the edge: some of the bulls are beginning to fight.

As the sun comes up, lions begin to roar, first one, then others, as the local Stoke pride keeps in touch.

Other animals are moving. Wild horses are the next to quench their thirst. They have come from an area of shorter grass, where they felt safe to sleep at night. They are in small family groups but there is also a group of young stallions. They drink as fast as they can, for they have seen a mother lioness by a tree in the distance. She is enjoying a stretch while her cubs play with her tail. One of them nips the tail but a cuff with mother's paw soon puts a stop to it. A timid horse bolts in panic, risking being ambushed by lions.

The day is warming up; the air is full of the buzz of insects and the perfume of flowers. A bear next visits the shore. Sudden ripples on the surface of the water tell us that a water vole is looking for food. A freshwater tortoise swims leisurely by.

Later, the lions come to drink. The pride is predominantly a group of related lionesses - sisters, cousins and aunts. Further away is a group of adult males not yet old enough to challenge for a pride of their own. All wonder where the older adult male is. The lions are not in a hurry and take up to 20 minutes each in lapping the water. What is that noise? Is it one of them purring? It is time for their siesta.

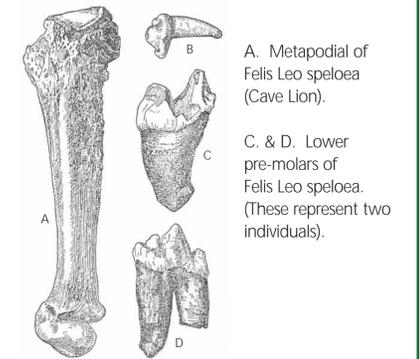
Further away, a rhinoceros gives its resting position away by raising a small cloud of dust as it breathes.

Some mammoths - elephants with large curved tusks - come to drink. One of them has a good scratch against a large sandy sarsenstone. A sad sight nearby - a mother mammoth and her calf have died. Could they have been killed by the lions, or by the next visitors to the lake?

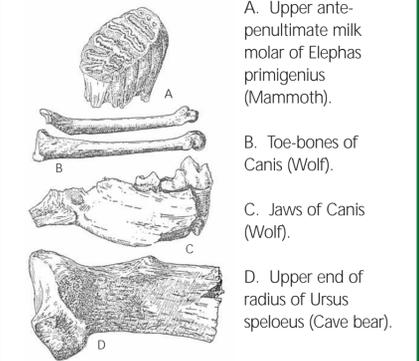
It is mid-day and some humans arrive. They are carrying flint tools for hunting. They made them by chipping a block of flint, but how, exactly? They know the answer but we can't communicate with them. They don't speak any language that we know. Nearby, a group of old bulls rest in the long grass in the early afternoon. They no longer live with the main herd of oxen, but would still be formidable foes for any lion or human hunting them.

There was a great deal of excitement on this spot in the late 1840s. When the approach cutting to the railway tunnel through Stoke Hill was dug, numerous teeth and bones of fossil elephants were found. Further excavations in the early 1900s revealed an uncut tooth of a baby elephant, bones of a large bear, foot bones and teeth of a large lion and portions of a shell of a freshwater tortoise - these fossils, from a 210,000 years old lake or river bed, are now in Ipswich

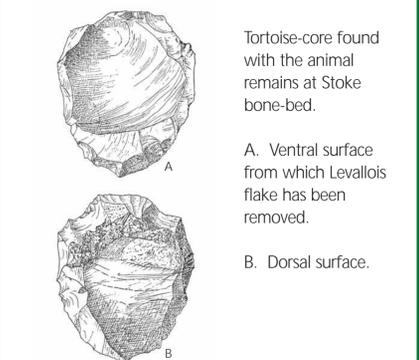
Museum. This site is now protected as a national Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI) for future generations and for research.



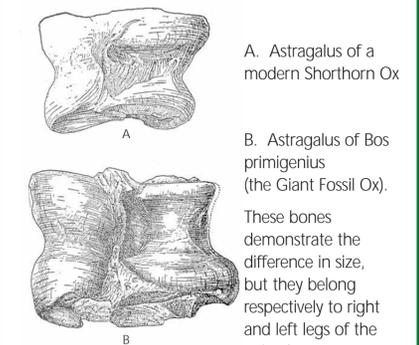
A. Metapodial of Felis Leo speloea (Cave Lion).
C. & D. Lower pre-molars of Felis Leo speloea. (These represent two individuals).



A. Upper antepenultimate milk molar of Elephas primigenius (Mammoth).
B. Toe-bones of Canis (Wolf).
C. Jaws of Canis (Wolf).
D. Upper end of radius of Ursus speloeus (Cave bear).



Tortoise-core found with the animal remains at Stoke bone-bed.
A. Ventral surface from which Levallois flake has been removed.
B. Dorsal surface.



A. Astragalus of a modern Shorthorn Ox.
B. Astragalus of Bos primigenius (the Giant Fossil Ox).
These bones demonstrate the difference in size, but they belong respectively to right and left legs of the animals.

As the shadows lengthen in the early evening, more large animals search out the water. Deer arrive, followed by four straight-tusked elephants. One is a big male with enormous tusks. Ears flapping, each drinks about 150 litres of water, sucked up the trunk 9 litres at a time, and squirted into its mouth. They have come from their feeding grounds, three from the Chantry woodland and one from Dales wood, having wandered some 6-7 kilometres during the day. A rhinoceros also comes down to drink and wallow.

A deep red sunset tells the humans to head for a safe place for the night.

With the light not quite faded, howls from a pack of wolves suggests that they will soon be hunting. Dusk falls and the hunted must be even more watchful.

High overhead the myriads of stars appear again. But the night here belongs to the lions - the hunters. Elsewhere in the darkness, helped by a little moonlight, eyes peer nervously to pick up the slightest movement, noses twitch and ears listen for the rumbles of prowling lions. Sometime after midnight the three hunting lionesses from the Stoke pride burst from their hiding places and in three or four strides death comes quickly to a horse - even its speed did not see it through the night.

The lions are still feeding when a red glow in the eastern sky heralds the beginning of a new day.

How well would you survive the last 24 hours?

