

The “Living among the Monuments” project was launched in 2006 with the aim of improving our understanding of the prehistoric occupation of the Eden valley area. Huge monuments such as the Long Meg stone circle and the Mayburgh henge (a spectacular banked enclosure near Eamont Bridge) survive from these times but we know little about the people who actually built them. Where did they live? How did they survive?

On Tuesday 13th December, Appleby Archaeology Group welcomed Mrs Annie Hamilton-Gibney, an independent researcher who has led the fieldwork aspects of the Living among the Monuments project. She brought members up to date on what has been discovered so far.

She told the group how, at the outset of the project, public lectures were commissioned to awaken local interest, a major new exhibition was mounted in the Penrith Museum, and workshops were held to spark ideas in schoolchildren of all ages. Most importantly, a small army of local volunteers was recruited to walk ploughed fields and systematically record finds.

Although “Living among the Monuments” was originally meant to be completed in 2007, the enthusiasm which developed around the project has proved sufficient to carry it forward, year by year, to the present. It is now possible to look back on the achievements of six successive seasons of fieldwalking. Perhaps the most tangible achievement has been the development of the superb new Prehistoric gallery in Penrith Museum with its interpretive video by Aaron Watson, one of the leading members of the original project. This plays on an endless loop and must be essential viewing for anyone who finds themselves with 15 minutes of spare time in the middle of Penrith.

Many of the finds made by the fieldwalkers are now on display in the new gallery. It is this material which now forms the true backbone of the project and which begins to provide the answers the questions posed at the outset.

Over 200 fields have now been “walked” and a great variety of arrowheads, blades, scrapers, and ornaments have been recovered. The earliest finds date back to the Palaeolithic period and so are at least 10,000 years old. GPS handsets were used to record the exact position of finds, and analysis of the assembled data-sets now reveals that occupation was concentrated in settlement sites, generally at some distance from the monuments. A particular “hot spot” is the area surrounding the confluence of the rivers Eamont and the Eden, other settlement areas have been identified near natural springs. It was also realised that the material for the tools – tuff, chert and flint - came from a variety of identifiable sources. Volcanic tuff flakes came from the central Lake District. Some of the chert came from local sources, possibly from Swaledale or near Nine Standards Rigg. But a distinctive blue-grey chert came from the southern uplands of Scotland. Flint came from the Yorkshire Wolds, coastal sources in Cumbria and elsewhere. Perhaps most surprisingly, what was originally thought to be a dense black form of chert was found in fact to be a form of obsidian called pitchstone. This came from the Isle of Arran in Scotland.

All of this demonstrates that there was a surprising degree of mobility and trade in prehistoric times. The Eden valley forms a natural corridor through the high ground in the north of England and it seems that traffic was concentrated here rather than on the upland ridges, as had been previously thought. Goods and material flowed steadily into the Eden valley and, presumably, goods and people also travelled in the reverse direction.

Annie told members how her experience of working with the “Living among the Monuments” finds had enabled her to re-evaluate other museum collections.

Looking to the future, it is clear that the project has found a home in the hearts of the Eden community. Let us hope that it will continue to expand our understanding of our area for many years to come. Annie was thanked for her stimulating and entertaining talk.

Appleby Archaeology's next evening meeting will take place on Tuesday January the 10th when the Group holds its AGM and members will hear talks on the "Roman Signal Station" at Brackenber and Excavations at Abbeytown. Non-members are always welcome at the Group's meetings which take place at 7.30 in the Supper Room of the Appleby Market Hall. Full details of the current programme can be found on Appleby Archaeology's website, [applebyarchaeology.org.uk](http://applebyarchaeology.org.uk)