

The Stone Age - past and present

Ken Taylor (2022)

Living in the Silicon Age, it's hard to mentally strip away all the electronics that bring so much to our lives, and it's even harder to think back to a time before plastics entered our lifestyle. Yet some of us grew up with more horses working in the fields than tractors.

The pace of change has become so rapid that it's impossible to keep up with it all, which inevitably leads to a fractured, disjointed society. The gravest challenges our society awaits lie in the future, but fortunately there are lessons we can learn from the past to guide us through these pivotal times.

Silicon - the raw material of the chips that power our phones, computers, cars, watches, and toys - is a crystal. It's a stone. Highly refined, yes, and painstakingly developed to do the tasks we want done. But it's still a bit of rock and, like those that fuelled the revolution of the Stone Age (which arrived in Britain roughly 250,000 years ago) we can use these minerals wisely or indiscriminately.

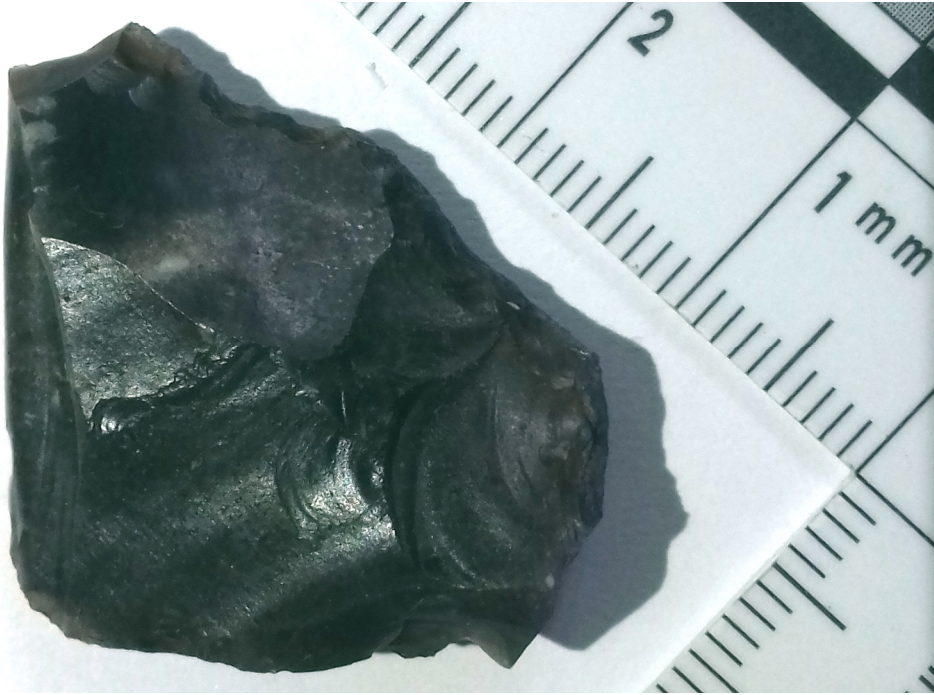
When broken, stones can produce sharp edges - the first cutting-edge technology. A knife made of wood is, well, a blunt instrument in comparison. And stone endures - the time it takes to make a tool is small in comparison with the useful life-span of the tool.

Naturally, some stones are better than others, and by the New Stone Age (Neolithic, roughly 4,500 BCE to 2,500 BCE) flint had become the stone of choice. Its edges can be razor-sharp, but precision comes at a cost - the sharpest blades wear out most quickly - so people had to become ever more delicate in using them. Technological advances generally require more careful handling.

Old Stone Age (Palaeolithic) tools, dating from around 100,000 years ago have been found at St Anne's, and similar tools have been found on the high ground to the north of Hicks Gate. The Brislington Meadows lie on the slope of the ridge between those sites, so it's practically certain that people - nomadic hunters - trod the earth of these fields in the relatively warm periods between the Ice Ages.

Natural climate change has been a recurring feature of our planet's journey, but the last 10,000 years have enjoyed an uncommonly long period of temperature stability. The huge leaps in civilisation from the end of the Old Stone Age to the advent of the Silicon Age have all occurred in this unusual period of calm. Indiscriminate use of our natural resources has infamously brought a premature end to that reliable cycle of seasonal weather - man-made global warming. This misjudgement, along with others by this self-styled "wise" species - homo sapiens - has been called the Anthropocene extinction event.

In geological terms, the rise of humanity has been a brief affair - perhaps 2.6 million years compared with the 4.6 *billion* years of the age of our planet (itself about a third of the age of the known universe). But science tells us the universe is young, and new stars will continue to ignite for another 10 *trillion* years.



Not much to look at, but this little lump of stone
was cherished - not discarded - when it broke and broke again...

One particular piece of flint found on the Brislington Meadows site invites us to share in this longer-term view of our lives. The black rock wasn't from around here, it needed chalk geology for its formation, so it was brought to Brislington - probably from Salisbury Plain - by a New Stone Age trader who slept many a night under the stars bringing it here, and sought appropriate payment for his/her troubles. The details of the find were published in the Bristol Post (04-01-2022), and it showcases how the tool-maker's mind worked.

In a society of farmers, this unknown flint knapper knew how to make the best of a difficult situation. The fragility of flint means that using the tool will inevitably break it - but this weakness was accounted for, and the craft-person's skills meant that at least two further uses were brought into play as the ever-smaller fragments were re-purposed to tasks that were just as important as the first.

Philosophically, we too need to prepare for some things to be broken (no matter how carefully we manage the climate now, some damage is already done, and there will be long-term consequences). But we can adjust things so they serve a renewed purpose. Anything less is to allow a set-back to become a catastrophe.

Must we still be developing green field sites such as Brislington Meadows, breaking their living link with nature's immemorial past? With so many alternative solutions to our housing needs, covering Brislington Meadows with concrete and asphalt because it's a cheaper option seems, well, you think of a word (and let the planning authorities know).