

# Lumphanan Paths Group – People and Places

## Article 2: History beneath our feet!

*by June Armstrong*

Our Parish of Lumphanan, it would seem, has been an attractive and desirable spot to live in for eons.

Archaeological field-walking on fields around the village has uncovered plenty of evidence of very early human activity in the local area. Flint tools have been found dating from around 10,000 BC, not long after the last ice-age right through to the Bronze Age, around 1,200 BC.

These early ancestors of ours would have originated from what we now know as Europe. They would have migrated across the land bridge known as Doggerland, which is now completely submerged under the North Sea. Following the herds of game animals, our ancestors progressed westwards and northwards as the ice cap retreated, eventually making their way into Scotland.

These people would have been hunter gatherers, leading a nomadic life moving across the landscape according to the seasons, fishing, foraging and hunting and setting up temporary camps, erecting hide shelters and lighting fires. They also made the only evidence we have of their presence: flint tools to assist them in their hunting and day to day life.



The beautiful and varied colours of flint

*Photo credit: Roslyn Hay*

This evidence was discovered by a small group of people who volunteer regularly with the local archaeological group, Mesolithic Deeside. They decided to field-walk some of their local fields to investigate whether there was any signs of early history closer to home. Mesolithic Deeside organises an ongoing project searching for evidence of human activity along the river Dee during the Mesolithic period. This is achieved with planned exploratory field-walking days and follow-on archaeological digs, along the lines of Channel 4's Time Team, if results indicate a need for further exploration. <https://www.mesolithicdeeside.org/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/979549128814393/>

Archaeological field-walking is done only with the express permission obtained from the farmers and landowners and, thankfully our local farmers have all been very helpful and accommodating. Groups of volunteers line up at the side of a field, spaced approximately 2m apart, similar to a police search team. They then walk back and forth across the field in orderly lines scanning the surface of the soil. This activity is usually done through the months of January, February and March; you have to be quite hardy when the fields are ploughed. Ideally, fields ploughed at the end of the previous year and left to weather for a few weeks are best. They allow any flints that might be there, to become visible. Field-walking usually stops once the fields are sown. Flints will be seen lying scattered randomly on the soil surface; there is no need to dig or disturb the soil unduly. We are looking specifically for lithics (stone tools) and debitage, the debris left lying after someone has been sitting knapping flint to make tools.



The hunter gatherers carried flint with them from Europe. There were also flint mines near Peterhead where the hollows of pits, extensively dug to extract flint, can still be seen.

*Photo credit: Roslyn Hay*

Flint knapping is an art, requiring great skill and probably only a select group within a band of people would have been responsible for manufacturing the stone tools required for hunting and gathering food. Tools were created by striking a flint pebble at specific points, with a hammer stone. This is known as percussion, or by pressure flaking with horn or antler implements, splitting off thin slivers of flint. This practice yields a myriad of tools such as spear-points, blades, scrapers and arrowheads, shaped by the flint knapper accordingly.

When each flint is found, a GPS handset is used to pinpoint the exact spot where it was lying. This information is written onto a small polythene finds bag. Once recorded, the coordinates for these flints are then plotted onto a map of that field, using a specific open-source geographic information system (QGIS). Interestingly, when one particular field was plotted, the pattern of pinpoints clearly formed several semi-circular shapes. Did that suggest that these people had been sitting in semi-circles knapping flints around their fires or perhaps working within the confines of a temporary tent shelter?

This nomadic existence slowly changed when agriculture and farming began to replace the hunter gatherer way of life and people started to settle permanently in the Lumphanan area during the Neolithic period, 8,000 - 3,000 BC.

An unusual couple of finds brings us right forward to Lumphanan's more recent history, to probably the 1700-1800's, when two musket flints were found relatively close to the Old Military Road, a busy thoroughfare at that time. These musket flints may well have been dropped and lost by soldiers, encamped for the night or resting up during some military manoeuvres. Flints were part of the firing mechanism on the gun. When the trigger was pulled, a striker or frizzen would hit the flint showering sparks onto the gunpowder in the priming pan. The ignited powder, in turn, fired the main charge in the bore, propelling the ball.



Musket flints.

*Photo credit:  
Roslyn Hay*

All the lithics and flints that have been found have to be recorded and reported to both Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service and to Treasure Trove who then add these findings to their maps to expand the records of early historic artefacts and sites within Aberdeenshire and for Scotland as a whole.

Sometimes, the serious business of discovering our distant past can have lighter moments, when we find items such as this unfortunate pair (see photo below), who would once have graced someone's front parlour, perhaps in the early years of the twentieth century and then, for whatever reason, sadly ended up in the midden and later been scattered out on the fields.



*Photo credit:  
Roslyn Hay*

Walking is a popular, healthy and fascinating pastime and definitely helps you connect to the landscape and our history. There are so many beautiful, accessible local pathways. Keep your eyes open as you meander along them; you just never know what you might spot under your feet!

Of further interest: An exhibition about Doggerland is at the Rijksmuseum until October 21<sup>st</sup>.

<https://www.rmo.nl/en/exhibitions/temporary-exhibitions/doggerland/>

The Mines at Boddam: <https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/leisure-sport-and-culture/archaeology/special-archaeology-in-the-area/flint-mines/>