



Flag Fen
Archaeology Park

Flag Fen: A Monumental Discovery

Information for Teachers

Depending on the session you have booked, much of the information here will be relayed to the children during their time at Flag Fen but we hope the following will also be useful to you prior to your visit as background information. Please use what information you think would be useful to the children as a way of introducing their upcoming trip.

Flag Fen is famous for its prehistoric wooden causeway and platform. This is a man-made structure that was hidden underground for thousands of years until it was discovered in 1982. The massive wooden causeway and platform were used by prehistoric people as a way of moving through the landscape and potentially served as an important ceremonial place.

As part of the Exploring Prehistoric Life session or the Dig It! session, you will see the wooden timbers in situ – they remain where they were found by archaeologists and are kept damp to slow down decay. Remember you are looking at a small section of the whole structure. The causeway stretches for 1km and the platform was comparable to the size of Wembley stadium.

How Flag Fen was discovered:

On a foggy November morning in 1982, archaeologist Francis Pryor stumbled over the tip of a piece of wood whilst walking along the Mustdyke (Padholm drainage Ditch). The wood turned out to be a post with ancient tool markings. He immediately knew he had found something special.

Within 3 weeks of closer inspection of the area, one post turned into 500 similar pieces. Before long, they estimated around 2 million timbers were beneath their feet. Radio carbon dating confirmed that these were Bronze Age timbers.

Careful plotting and excavation of the area pieced together a jigsaw revealing a 1km long wooden causeway intersected by a platform of gigantic proportions. By their calculations, this made it one of the largest upright Bronze Age structures in Europe.

Wooden Treasure

Built by lots of people, thousands of years ago, the causeway and platform at Flag Fen survived until its rediscovery. Archaeologists found amazing and everyday objects ranging from scabbards and swords to seeds and pollen.

The causeway and platform was built during the period called the Bronze Age. Around 2500BC people discovered how to make tools and weapons at first using copper, then later bronze (a mixture of copper and tin).



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The causeway was built at a time when Tutankhamen reigned Egypt and Ancient Greece had not yet been established. And the Romans would not come to Britain for another 1500 years!

Survival of this ancient monument is due to the unusual environment Fenland Peat Bogs provide. The anaerobic alkaline conditions means that air is excluded and without air most insects and fungi that eat away organic remains cannot survive.

It is rare to discover Late Bronze Age sites. It is even rarer to discover organic remains such as wood, seeds and pollen. This means we can reveal a lot more about what life was like for our ancestors. The entire Flag Fen site has been planted with plants that we now know were growing here 3500 years ago.

The importance of the site has been recognised as it is now a scheduled ancient monument. It is believed to be one of the best preserved pre-Roman religious/ceremonial site in England.

The causeway was 1km long from where the power station is today (on the outskirts of Peterborough city centre) to 200 metres east of the hamlet of Northey.

Towards Northey the causeway expands to a platform the size of Wembley stadium. It took approximately 2 million timbers to build the causeway and the platform. The causeway was built over 400 years, the same length of time as from today to Shakespeare times.

There is evidence for people using the causeway and platform until the end of the Iron Age. It was in use for 1300 years. To put this into context, it is worth noting the current Peterborough Cathedral has been in use for 900 years.

The causeway was built at a time when water levels across the Flag Fen basin were making it difficult to move across the landscape.

There is overwhelming evidence that this site has a religious or ceremonial purpose too. Thousands of valuable objects were carefully placed around the causeway and platform. We know that watery places were considered spiritual for prehistoric people because we have seen similar depositions elsewhere.

Flag Fen Archaeology Park as a visitor attraction

Without Francis Pryor's amazing discovery this area could simply be flat farmland broken up by dykes and drains. Many of the features you see on site today are a result of the discovery of the causeway and platform.



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Mere

The lake which surrounds the museum and education room is artificial. It was constructed in 1987 to preserve waterlogged conditions across part of the Bronze Age timber platform and causeway. With the Flag Fen site being declared a Scheduled Ancient Monument, every possible care has to be taken to preserve what remains.

Hudson Barn

A barn donated by the Hudson Foundation of Wisbech and built as a wood laboratory. Timbers from Flag Fen and many other sites including Seahenge and a timber circle found at Holme-next-the-Sea in Norfolk have been cleaned, studied and preserved here. It is currently used to conserve up to eight prehistoric log boats which you may find out about as part of your day. It is exciting to think what other prehistoric finds will be housed and conserved in this building in the future!

Bog Garden

This is where Francis Pryor discovered the first posts as part of the causeway and platform.

Roman Road

The section of Roman Road that you can see is part of the Fen causeway which provided a link to the fens from the Roman town of Durobrivae, close to modern-day Peterborough. Construction of the road began after the Boudiccan revolt in AD60. It provided a link to East Anglia and improved communication routes for the army and trade. It also meant that troops could be sent to quickly stop a rebellion from the Iron Age people. After the defeat of the Iceni tribe, led by Boudicca, the fens were controlled by the state of Rome and any wealth made from Fenland agriculture and salt production was likely to have been taxed by Roman officials based at Durobrivae.

Bronze Age droveway

The reconstructed droveway is based on evidence of one laid out nearby approximately 4000 years ago. The droveway would have been used to lead animals to the open summer grazing without disturbing other animals in surrounding fields. The droveway is lined by a ditch and a mixed hedge of native thorny shrubs to help provide a barrier.

Lie of the Land

Flag Fen Archaeology Park is positioned in the Flag Fen basin, a low lying area within the Fens. Today the Fens comprise of a vast flat landscape of one million acres mostly blanketed by rich dark peat. In the past it has been a changing landscape of open water, rivers and peat bogs, silt and islands of clay, gravel and sand.

The Flag Fen basin has been home to people for thousands of years. Each generation inhabited a different landscape and adapted to their environment accordingly. On-going archaeological practice within the area, such as the dig at Must Farm, keeps adding to our understanding of this period and area. There is so much still buried and undiscovered!



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Around **6, 000 years ago** (Neolithic Period 4500-2500BC) the ground level was several metres lower than it is today. People began to use the rich land of the basin to graze their animals.

3, 300 years ago (Bronze Age 2500-700BC) it had become too marshy and difficult to cross and the causeway and platform was built. Reed swamps, alder and willow dominated the landscape.

By **2, 000 years ago** continual flooding meant silt covered the area and the causeway and platform were hidden from view. The Romans built a road across the fens.

Today we have reconstructed the Bronze Age landscape at Flag Fen based on information revealed at excavations.

We hope you enjoy your visit and please let us know if any other information would be useful as pre-visit information.