

Unlocking the Past – School Packs

Glossary for the Geography of River Settlements

Term	Explanation
Aggregate Quarrying	The extraction of sand, gravel and crushed stone, usually minerals which have been carried or eroded and deposited by marine or river action, and used for construction purposes.
Arable	Farmland used to cultivate (grow) crops.
Archaeology	The study of human history and prehistory, by recording physical remains in the landscape.
Artefacts	Objects modified by humans, composed of clay, stone, wood, metal, or of other natural materials but used for specific purpose. Also known as 'finds' which inform much of our understanding of human cultures through time.
Brine	Water saturated or nearly saturated with salt. It is used to preserve vegetables, fish, and meat and, because it occurs naturally, as springs, its extraction has been an important marine and inland industry since the Iron Age, when its possibilities were first recognised.
Bronze Age	The period in history after the Stone Age, characterized by the development of bronze and its use, especially for weapons and tools. In Britain it is characterised by the emergence of the first farming communities living in enclosed, more permanent homes
Brook	A small stream that crosses between two other bodies of water (thus "brooking" them). It is usually small and easily crossed.
Burnt Mound	Low mounds, usually 10 to 15m across, composed of heat-shattered stone, charcoal and ash. They have been found in the Midlands in archaeological contexts which indicate a date of late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age.
Ceramic	Objects made of clay hardened into a durable material by firing. Pottery and tile are the most commonly recovered artefacts in the archaeological record.
Crop marks	These are light and dark marks visible in growing and ripening crops, especially via aerial photography, which reflect the differences in the subsoil beneath. For example, parched lines of grass may indicate hidden stone walls or packed stone layers and much greener grass may be growing over pits, ditches or gullies.
Dip slope	A slope of the land surface that conforms approximately with the dip of the underlying rocks, such as within a valley landscape.

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Drainage	The natural or artificial removal of surface and sub-surface water from a given area. Many agricultural soils need drainage to improve production or to manage water supplies.
Earthworks	Often used as an archaeological term to define mounds and hollows and banks and ditches which are made of earth (clay and soil), often representing collapsed structures.
Escarpment	Similar to dip slope: a geological term, defined by tilted strata.
Fabricator	A rod-shaped tool used for making sparks. In the prehistoric period such objects indicate fire-making from worked stone (often made of flint)
Fertile	Areas of land or soil where crops can be grown successfully.
Firing	The act of heating in a kiln, pit or bonfire, to produce the required temperature for clay or glaze, in order to make a ceramic object, such as clay, tile or brick.
Flint	Hard glassy rock which flakes easily and can be worked to produce a sharp cutting edge. Used in prehistoric times for the manufacture of tools and weapons such as scrapers and arrowheads.
Floodplain	A flat, low-lying area near a river or stream which is subject to flooding, usually as a result of too much rainfall, or by natural changes to the water table.
Glacial	Usually defined by a substantial period of time when substantial areas of earth were covered in thick, but moving ice sheets, and generally referred to as an ice age because of the prolonged cold climate.
Hand	A stone tool made, and used, for up to three million years by Palaeolithic communities. The teardrop-shaped axes are also known as 'Bifaces' and were multi-functional.
Historic	Belonging to, or existing in, times during recorded history. In Britain this usually refers to all periods from Roman settlement onwards.
Hunter-gatherer	A human whose lifestyle is based on subsistence, i.e., a diet of wild plants and animals, gained from a mobile existence.
Impervious	A material, usually defined as rock (but there are many substances) which are unable to absorb fluids; most commonly water.
Inter-glacial	A period between two prolonged spells of cold conditions when the climate is relatively warmer.

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Iron Age	Age the period following the Bronze Age and before the Roman period when the working and use of iron becomes evident. It is characterised in Britain by the construction of large fortified hill forts and the full exploitation of the landscape with farmsteads and extensive field systems.
Linear	Long and narrow with roughly parallel sides - for example a river, track or boundary.
Livestock	Farm animals, such as beef cattle, dairy cows, sheep, pigs, chickens, geese and turkeys, usually reared to produce food, either for subsistence or trade.
Mesolithic	Archaeological period immediately following the end of the last Ice Age. The way of life was based on hunting animals and gathering plant foods but there is suggestion, in the archaeological record, that communities were developing knowledge of cultivation and beginning to domesticate animals. Also known as the Middle Stone Age.
Microlith	A small stone tool, characteristically used in the Mesolithic period, as a projectile point or blade.
Neolithic	The period during which hunter-gatherer cultures began to develop a sedentary/agricultural lifestyle by cultivation of crops and domestication of animals, but stone was still the principal material used to make tools. Also known as the New Stone Age.
Palaeochannel	A former riverbed formed at a time when the geology and climate of an area was different, with generally higher rainfall. Subsequent changes have seen the river bed, which would be mostly sand and gravels, buried by a further cover of sediment.
Palaeolithic	The stage in human society when people obtained their food by hunting, fishing and gathering wild plants, as opposed to engaging in settled agriculture. Also known as the Old Stone Age, the period is often split into Lower, Middle and Upper.
Pastoral Settlement	A farming community which moves livestock around larger areas of land according to seasons and availability of water and feed, but retains a base for domestic living.
Pasture	Grassland used to graze livestock, especially sheep, cattle and horse.
Porous	A material, usually defined as rock (but there are many substances) which is able to absorb fluids; most commonly water.
Prehistoric	Belonging to, or existing in, times before recorded history. In Britain this usually refers to all periods prior to Roman settlement.
Raw materials	Natural products in the landscape, such as clays, stone, woods and metal ores, which are used as the base for making usable objects and tools.

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River terrace	An accumulation of river deposits along the sides of a river valley which were deposited when river levels were higher, sometimes formed by glacial action.
Romano-British	The term is used to distinguish native sites in use at the beginning of, and during, the Roman occupation.
Saline	A solution of salt and water.
Saturation	The point at which a feature such as a river plain can hold no more water.
Sediment	Organic or mineral material transported and deposited by wind and water, usually composed of soils, such as sand and gravel.
Sickle	An edge tool for cutting grass or crops, such as wheat. The tool usually has a curved blade and a short handle and was made of stone in the prehistoric period, and chiefly of iron or steel in the historic period.
Soil type	For example: clays, sands and silts, and defined by the size and proportion of grain particles within the soil.
Spring-lines	A natural source along which fluids such as water or brine flow where surrounding deposits (usually rock) of porous character formed where porous meet impervious substances.
Strata	Layers of rock or soil deposited in successive, natural episodes (such as cyclical growth and decomposition of vegetation or organic material) or as a result of deliberate animal activity, particularly by human communities.
Sweat Lodge	A tepee covering a hole dug into the ground into which stones, heated in an exterior fire, are placed to provide hot, moist air, for cleansing. A prehistoric sauna!
Tributary	A body of water which flows along a smaller course into a larger channel, such as a brook which flows into a river, although small rivers can also be tributaries serving larger or longer rivers
Water table the	Level at which the water stays. It is the very top of the zone of saturation, the point of which is directly affected by the geological character in a given area and by the periodic changes in the amount of ground water.
Watercourse	A natural or man-made channel with bed and banks within which concentrated water flows continuously, frequently or infrequently.