



AN OCCASIONAL NEWSLETTER

June 2021

*In the beginning...*



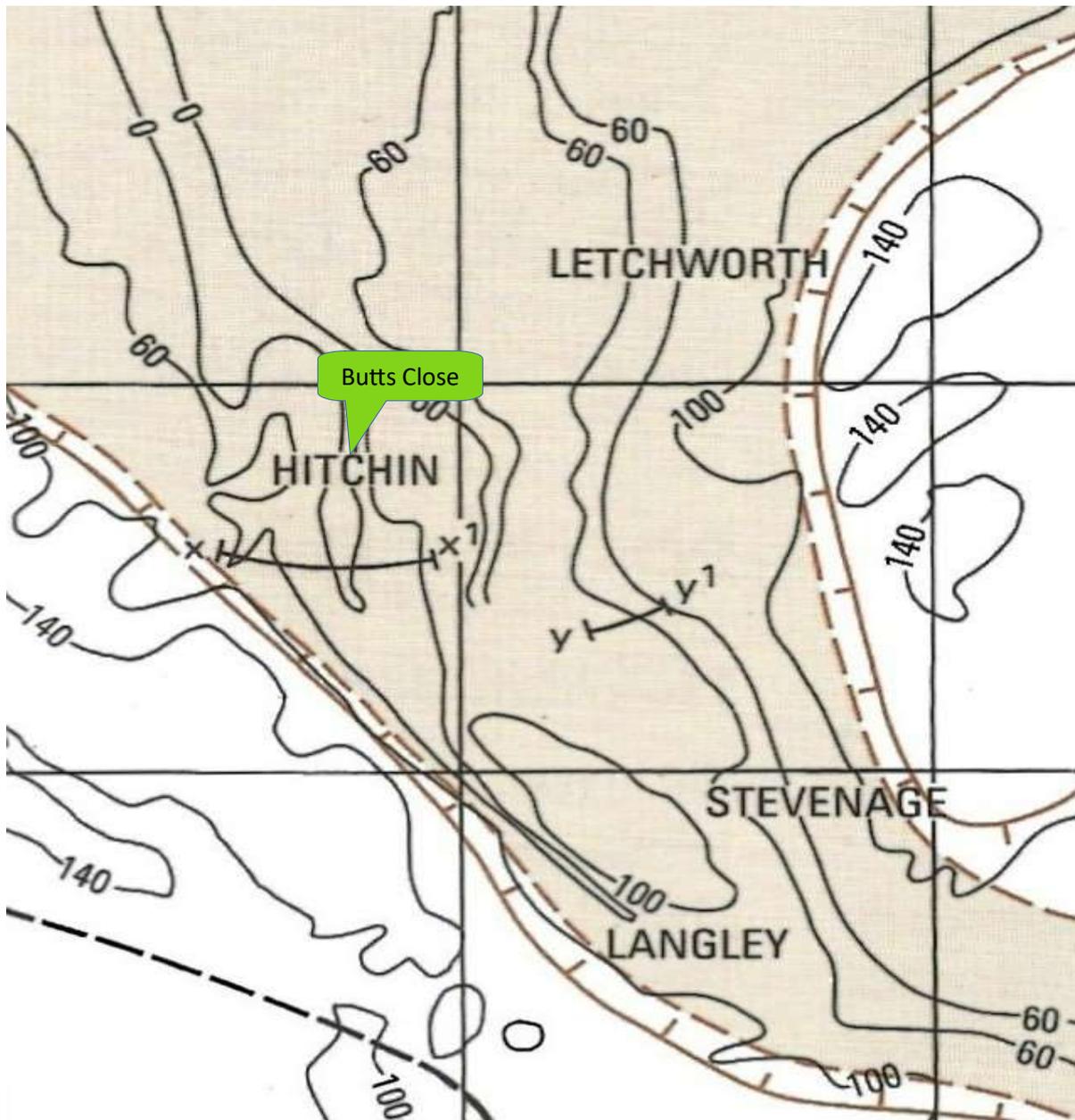
I had been pulling together the snippets of Butts Close history that I've put in the newsletters over the last eight years, ranging from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century to the present. But I then decided to go much further back, to its geological beginning, and to the (probable) first people who stood on its earth<sup>1</sup>.

That earth was laid down on the old chalk bed below, deposited by a retreating ice sheet and the meltwater of a glacier that had flowed south through the Hitchin Gap (the break in the Chilterns), created during the Anglian glaciation of the Ice Age, around 470,000 to 425,000 years ago<sup>2</sup>. The ice sheet ground away the hills and gouged out a new channel, around thirty metres deep, that filled with gravels as the ice retreated, and left behind a series of lakes that slowly dried out. This included what is now Butts Close, with its chalky clay soil overlaying the Lower Chalk bed.

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<sup>1</sup>If you are a geologist or an archaeologist, look away now. I am neither.

<sup>2</sup>Hopson, P et al. *Geology of the country around Hitchin*. British Geological Society HMSO. 1996.



The map shows the advance of the Anglian ice sheet south through the Hitchin Gap, and the approximate position of Butts Close. (Map E, p. 102, Hopson P, op cit.)

The Anglian ice sheet reached south beyond Knebworth and east beyond Stevenage, and when it retreated it left clay-capped valleys, almost all of which now carry streams. But whereas the streams and rivers just south of Hitchin (such as the Beane and the Mimram) flow towards the Lea and thence to the Thames, Hitchin's flow north, ultimately joining the Ouse. This includes Capswell Brook, which flows east from Capswell Pond on the Close through culverts to join the Hiz at the corner of Bancroft Car Park near Sainsbury's. This meanders north through Ickleford to join the Ivel, then the Great Ouse and on to the North Sea at the Wash<sup>3</sup>.

The retreat of the Anglian Ice Sheet was followed by millennia of warmth<sup>4</sup>, supporting fauna such as rhino, elephant, giant deer and bison, as well as the smaller mammals (even monkeys) common to our time.

And humans followed. There is no direct evidence of their footprint on the Close some 400,000 years ago, no equivalent of our own litter, cans or graffiti. But there is good evidence from archaeological sites in and around Hitchin and elsewhere that this was home to people<sup>5</sup>. They could control fire, they built shelters and hearths, made superb hand axes, and may well have made spears<sup>6</sup>. They even used toothpicks! They have first place in human evolution.

Anthropologists labelled them *Homo heidelbergensis*<sup>7</sup>, the forerunners of both *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens*, ourselves. Different, but similar. Their brain size was not so dissimilar, their height around 1.75m (5' 9") and their weight around 95kg (210lb). But they did not look just like us: their forehead had the large brow which we typically associate with Neanderthals. This is clear from the image on the front page, a reconstruction from fossil evidence.

Did they speak? They had the physical and aural structures that facilitate speech, and the cerebral left-right differentiation that appears to support its development.

<sup>3</sup> In 2016 four local friends canoed from the Hiz at Ickleford to the Wash to raise money for charity. See <https://www.thecomet.net/news/canoeing-quartet-row-from-ickleford-to-the-wash-to-raise-5344330>

<sup>4</sup>The Great Interglacial, or Hoxnian period, lasting from 424,000 to 374,000 years ago.

<sup>5</sup>e.g. Fitzpatrick-Matthews K & Fitzpatrick-Matthews T. *The Archaeology of Hitchin* NH Museum & Hitchin Historical Society 2008 and Boreham S & Gibbard P, *Middle Pleistocene Hoxnian Stage...Deposits*. Proceedings of the Geologists' Association, 106, 259-270. 1995

<sup>6</sup>See for example Stringer, C. *Homo Britannicus*. Allen Lane. 2006.

<sup>7</sup>The convention is to assign a label giving the place of first discovery, in this case, near Heidelberg.

But it has been suggested that even if they had evolved language, since their culture seemed to remain stagnated for millennia a British Stone Age conversation might be:

“Nice axe you’ve got there”	“Yep.”
“Looks like rain”	“Yep.”
“Nice axe you’ve got there”	“Yep.”
“Looks like rain”	“Yep.”

– repeated *ad infinitum*...

Then the cold returned. *Homo heidelbergensis* left Hertfordshire, and indeed Britain. In Europe Neanderthal culture continued, again for millennia, enduring further Ice Ages. But this developmental stagnation did not continue in Africa. Modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, evolved there, and spread north, east and west to populate Europe and Asia. There was significant interbreeding with Neanderthals, and we carry between 1% and 4% of their genes.

But if there were early modern humans walking on Butts Close, of them so far there is no trace.

### ***In other news...***



Photo: Stuart Howarth

Last month’s weeding around the saplings paid off, with a pile of couch grass and other nasties removed. No doubt not the last time this will be necessary.

Removal of graffiti and tags from the Close is now on the District Council’s list of actions. And James Bliss, Manager of the Swimming Centre and Archer’s, has no objection to planting ivy against the wall of the pool as one way of deterring the return of tags there. But so sad that the benches have also been treated that way.

Tony Riley  
for Friends of Butts Close  
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Contact Friends of Butts Close at [buttsclose@gmail.com](mailto:buttsclose@gmail.com) and Hitchin Forum through [www.hitchinforum.org.uk](http://www.hitchinforum.org.uk)