

When someone says Stone Age to you, what do you think of? Perhaps it is the remains of skulls with heavy brows, or people attacking woolly mammoths?

Actually the term Stone Age belongs to a great reach of history since mankind first began, right up to the time where people began finding ways of using metals. Scientist think that could easily be over two million years.

So did things change over this time? The very earliest people - who lived in the earliest part of the Stone Age - had the world to themselves. There were not many of them, and they could collect ripe berries or edible roots, and sometimes catch fish and even animals. So if food became scarce in one place they could wander off to somewhere else. Those people are called nomads or hunter-gatherers.

And it worked for millions of years. It was a short life because there was no medicine, and people got attacked by animals. So people only lived probably into their early twenties - just about the time when you might now go looking for your first job! So lifespan then and now was amazingly different.

Over time, people spread all over the world and lived in much the same way. It was a bit harder in the cold lands away from the equator, and as ice ages came and went, sometimes people in the north had to retreat south until the ice age was over.

A really long time ago people in the Stone Age also made some fundamental discoveries. They discovered how to make fire. Once they had done this they could cook food that had previously been inedible, they could keep warm in winter if they lived in northern areas, and they could use fire to keep wild animals away. They could even use fire as a lighting source and go deep into caves and paint pictures of their world.

They also discovered that some materials could take a sharp edge. That was pretty important because it means people could cut things and shape things. Materials that take a sharp edge were made by knocking rocks like flint together. But any brittle material will do the same job. Put a flake of sharp-edged stone on the end

of a pole and you have a spear or an arrow. It was a world-changer.

So gradually they had food, fire and tools to cut things. So why didn't people carry on in this simple way? It's the age-old story - the number of people in the world grew. The more you can make use of food, such as by cooking, the easier it is to live and so the numbers of people grow.

But it gets tricky. In places such as the Middle East between Asia and Africa, it is near desert, and so food is less available than many other places. So it was in places like this that food began to be a problem first.

There is nothing like a problem of survival to get people to be inventive. So in the Stone Age people learned to cut down the wilderness - where they could only eat some of the food - and plant things they could eat, such as the seed from wild grasses. And that was the first - and easily the most important - farming revolution.

Gradually ideas of clearing land and starting farms spread. Before this more or less everyone spent all of their time hunting and gathering. Once they could grow crops they found they actually had time over. And in the Middle East it meant that they could build homes, and put them together to make cities, relying on the food from fields nearby.

Once you start to live together, all sorts of other things become possible. You can do things together, such as build religious monuments like the earliest part of England's Stonehenge. But in the Middle east they were streets ahead of this. They made cities, developed ways of bringing in water, and built huge structures on which to place temples.

And so the later part of the Stone Age was a time of great sophistication in some places. The first part of the Ancient Egyptian civilisation, for example, belongs to the Stone Age.

Look what else had developed in that time. People had found out

how to spin and weave and so make cloth. They had developed writing, they made mud bricks, they fashioned pots from baked clay and all manner of other things.

Of course, having lots of people about caused them to group together, and so tribes and kingdoms became normal. Then people sometimes started to look to take over more land to make things more comfortable for themselves. War is a very old feature of civilisation, I am afraid.

The Stone Age is simply a time before people started to learn how to use metals. When they made the first metals it was called the Bronze Age, which is the time of the Egyptian pyramids.

Summing up: The Stone Age happened everywhere, but developed at different speeds in different parts of the world. And you can do a lot in a world with just wood and stone and fur from animals - after all, what do we make our houses from even today? Stone, brick and wood. So what has happened since the Stone Age is that we have added more materials and more techniques where they were needed, But we have never discarded what our ancestors learned in the Stone Age. Just added to them.