

A Prehistoric artefact Assemblage from Hadleigh Essex (Field survey 2017 - 2019)

Background

In 2017 the site was inadvertently discovered whilst walking. A flint scraper was found on the ploughed field surface [in Hadleigh]. This initiated a series of field trips, which yielded abundant artefacts indicating a site of archaeological importance.

The material is in an 'unrolled' condition (i.e. from that location and not deposited there by geological processes). Unrolled material is important as it indicates that the artefacts were made at this location and not brought there by other processes. Unrolled material is identified by sharp edges and limited abrasion to the surface.

We only collect material found on the surface, as this is out of archaeological context and has been brought to the surface by ploughing or natural processes. Undisturbed material should be left to be excavated by archaeological techniques in order to record and preserve information. I suggest this project be deemed as 'rescue' archaeology as the location is a prime site for development (unless a preservation order exists) and because the flints could be removed unethically (e.g. without recording their location and/or sold for financial gain).

[The farmer] kindly granted permission to field-walk this area except during the crop growing season. As requested we avoided an area of designated archaeological interest, which is considered to be a Roman site.

It should be noted access to this site is restricted and dependent on permission. It should be noted that the farmer's livelihood is of primary concern.

(All stone tools were collected by Mark Peterson and David Carr by field walking)

Location of site

The site is in Hadleigh, Essex and consists of a number of fields.

Current use of the site

The site is normally used for arable farming; a number of different crops are planted throughout the year providing animal feed. This area of land has been farmed since at least the late 19th century.

Importance of the site

The aim of this project is to add to the history of Hadleigh but also to the prehistory of Britain. Its geographical location makes it a significant site in particular in regards to early human migrations and settlement. The Thames valley is a natural corridor for both humans and animals. River valleys are ideal for temporary or permanent habitation providing a convenient water supply, a resourceful area for hunting (including fishing). The River can be used for transportation and also for hunting. Currently no boat remains have been found in this area but only a few miles away at Canewdon (Essex), a Bronze Age wooden paddle was found. We know from other sites that Mesolithic boats existed, so probably were used on the Thames near Hadleigh. Rivers provide natural barriers; the elevated terraces allow surveillance, useful both for hunting and watching out for the arrival of other tribal groups. As populations increased, so would competition for resources and so it is likely human conflicts became more common.

At this site we have found Palaeolithic to Early Bronze Age artefacts, but the majority of it is Mesolithic. We have only found a few Palaeolithic items, although some of the material still needs to be catalogued. The age and quantity of the tools found make it a site of historical importance.

During the Mesolithic period, tribal groups were nomadic and would have followed herds during migration. The site would have been re-visited over a number of years and seasons. During the early Mesolithic Britain was still part of mainland Europe. The River Thames would have been a part of a much larger river system including the Rhine. It was only during the latter part of this period that, due to rising sea levels, Britain started to become an island; the final submergence was brought about by a tsunami. This tsunami would have devastated Mesolithic settlements, in particular those established along the coastline.

Suppositions on this site are based solely on flint artefacts because other materials have perished. It should be noted that flint artefacts only represents a small percentage of their material culture. At other sites in Britain where conditions for preservation are more favourable, other materials survived including leather, bone, antler, fibres and wood. As flint is normally the only material that survives, to create a more accurate image of these peoples an educated imagination needs to be employed, using data obtained from other sites. These tools are probably all that has survived to represent a person or group so they should be treated with respect. It is likely that their descendants still walk amongst us.

Flint due to its chemical composition is resistant to most chemical processes; it is a sedimentary form of quartz. Its physical nature means that it can be worked to create various tools with sharp edges; it is physically and chemically similar to glass.

Artefacts are predominately made for practical purposes but I consider them as 'sculptures' created by a mind from a past landscape. Some flints appear to have been chosen for their aesthetics and over-worked beyond practical

requirements. Flint knapping shows ingenuity, forethought and a knowledge of the materials used. As an example, sharp edges where fingers are placed are blunted to prevent cuts and natural lumps are utilised ergonomically to provide a firm grip. My appreciation for these knappers increases the more I become familiar with these artefacts. I still get a 'buzz' when I find a tool; I feel that it has been actually 'handed to me' rather than found, and the difference in our time periods becomes almost insignificant.

Popular culture of the past portrayed prehistoric peoples as 'primitive' but this is inaccurate and dismissive. These peoples had a wealth of knowledge allowing them to survive and thrive in a variety of environments. We might never know what these people's thoughts were but without doubt they had their philosophers and innovators. If we had an opportunity to chat with these peoples I think it would highlight common traits not differences.

It is important that this material is retained and displayed for educational purposes; it should be preserved for the people of Hadleigh. As science evolves so will our interpretations of these peoples; if these sites are lost without recording their history, it will be lost forever.

Topography and geology of the site

The landscape of this area and the British Isles generally would have dramatically changed during the prehistoric period, from severe ice-age conditions to a Mediterranean type climate. In addition there were significant changes in sea-levels, impacting on the coastline resulting eventually in the submergence of Doggerland (Landmass joining Britain to continent). Some changes would have occurred within a short period whilst others required prolonged periods of time. As the landscape altered so would the fauna and flora; this changing environment would create challenges for our predecessors but their success highlights their abilities and ingenuity.

Chronology of site

Artefacts collected indicates occupation from the Palaeolithic to the Early Bronze Age. Our dating of this material has been supported by the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS); for further details see [link to the site below](#).

Flint source

Most of the flint tools from this area would have been made from nodules of flint, which occurs naturally as part of the Thames river bed or scattered across the land. Flint was only really mined in the Neolithic but even during this period it was probably more convenient to utilise nodules. Nodule flint is normally of a poor quality compared to mined flint as it has been exposed to chemical and physical alteration.

Artefacts attribution to time period

Much of the material is stained with iron-oxide from being deposited in the river gravels. The staining provides evidence of being deposited for a considerable period of time consistent with the Mesolithic and earlier periods. The Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) report below classified these finds providing periods and types of tools present. The Mesolithic attribution is based on the type of tools found, e.g. tranchet axe, a type tool of this period.

Origin of the flint

Flint occurs in bands within chalk. In the Essex area this chalk has been eroded away leaving the more resistant flint. Due to weathering process this flint appears in the landscape as boulder flint.

Burnt flint

A quantity of burnt flints have been found, which archaeologists consider to be indicative of a prehistoric cooking site. It is thought that these flints were heated in a fire then placed into a vessel of water to cause it to boil for the purpose of cooking. The resultant flint has a white and crackled cortex, created by the heat. I do wonder if the same effect could be achieved when flints are inadvertently burnt when farmers burn stubble (a practice no longer permitted)

Flint pendants

We have found three pendants at this site attributed to the Mesolithic. They have naturally formed holes that show additional re-touch. One pendant is particular interesting as it appears to be coated in a pigment, probably haematite or something similar. If this claim is substantiated then it might be classified as a work of art which is incredibly rare and it would become one of the oldest art objects found in Essex.

Recording finds

Each artefact is given a label that provides the year of discovery and a grid reference. On some I have added the GSP reference; this is obtained by taking a photograph of the object at the spot where found. The location details are automatically provided under the image.

Future research

It is hoped that the material we have found will provide the basis for future research. Most of the land in this area has been cultivated but it is hoped pockets may exist that are untouched, which could provide good archaeological data.

The farmer has said that a deposit of sand exists under the soil in this area which was not mined because it was not large enough and so uneconomical.

This sand might be able to provide both important geological and archaeological value.

This site has been reported to Sophie Flynn of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (Colchester) and Maria Medlycott, Senior Historic Environment Consultant (Chelmsford).

Type of Tools Found

For the variety of tools found please click on the link below to the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

<https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/944416>

The artefacts on this web-page only represents a small amount of the tools that we have found. The other material still needs to be analysed and catalogued.

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Mark Peterson 25/06/2019