MAHG

Maldon Archaeological and Historical Group

Maldon Essex

SITE HANDBOOK

INFORMATION AND PROTOCOL FOR DIGGERS

This handbook is designed to give those new to our site and / or archaeology an idea of what is going on and also how we are going about things.

Included in these pages you will find a mix of articles and information.

We have some pages about pottery in general and some about the types of pottery we hope to find on a site.

A lot of folks have difficulty deciding if flint is worked or not and so a simple guide to lithics is included as well.

Finally there are the health and safety pages. Please read them and take note. They are for the benefit of all of us.

If you have no digging experience at all don't worry. There are loads of people in MAHG who have qualifications and even more folk who have years of experience. There will always be someone available to teach / advise you if you need it. Just ask. For folk who have been digging before the same help is offered if you need it or maybe you can tell us a thing or two?

Where possible you will be given an area of trench to call your own so that there is some continuity. Obviously, for example if you are going to be away for a while, we may not be able to adhere to this policy at all times, but whoever takes it on will be able to report back to you. You may also check the site notebook. We try to have a chat at lunch time about what is going on to keep everyone in the picture. It's also a good idea to go around each week and have a look at trenches other than your own. Please remember 'digger's manners' and don't go into, and never ever start digging holes in someone else's bit of the site without asking first.

Pottery: The basics:

The study of pottery is huge, and it is not possible here to tell you how to identify every piece of pottery you might find. This is a brief resume of the main features of the types of pot for the periods that you are likely to encounter on site.

Although pottery has gone through hundreds of changes in style, decoration and manufacturing technology over the last few thousand years, the basic material has not changed – clay. It comes in different colours, and can have different properties for example how sticky it is, or how large the particles are.

The basic processes of making pots are:

1 The clay is dug and cleaned

2 Clay is mixed with other material such as shell or grit to make it stronger. This material is called 'temper'.

3 The clay is formed into shape using hands or a wheel.

4 The clay is left to dry until it is 'leather hard'.

5 Any decoration is added such as designs pushed into the clay, or drawn on the surface.

6 The pot is fired in a kiln. The environment affects the colour of the pottery. If air has been allowed to circulate around the pots in the kiln, they will have an orange colour and are known as 'oxidised' pots. If the air has been kept out of the kiln, the pots will be black and are known as 'reduced' pots.

Pottery manufacturing techniques

There are a number of ways in which pottery has been shaped in the past.

The simplest pottery was made by hand, and in this country, until the Iron Age all pottery was hand made. Coil pottery is when a base is made from a slab of clay, and the sides built up using rolls of clay. When the pot sides have been built up, the coils can be smoothed together. It is only possible to make simple shapes with this method. Slab pottery is where flat slabs of clay are simply joined together to create very basic vessels. Wheel thrown pottery is much finer, and a far greater range of forms can be created. Virtually all pottery from the Roman period onwards was wheel thrown. You can tell that a pot has been thrown on a wheel by the fine grooves that run around the inside of a pot or sherd. In fact, if you only have a small sherd you can tell which way up it goes by feeling for these lines.

Neolithic

Pottery was first made in the Neolithic period between about 4000BCE and 2000BCE. It was made by hand using the 'coil' technique, and was very crude. The people who made it were not able to fire it to a very high temperature, and this meant that it was very brittle. It could be either oxidised or reduced. It is not usually decorated, but any decoration there is will be similar to that seen on Bronze Age pottery.

Bronze Age

The Bronze Age is the first period where pottery began to be an everyday item and the earliest pottery we have so far found on our sites. The production techniques has improved slightly from the Neolithic pottery, though it still appears very crude to modern eyes. Bronze Age pots are usually oxidised and in a soft orange/brown fabric. The best way of identifying a Bronze Age pot, apart from it crude appearance, is through its decoration. Part of the charm of Bronze Age pottery is the decoration is individual to each pot. The decoration was pressed into the pot using twigs, feathers, string and even fingernails. The pots also come in a limited variety of forms – beakers, food vessels and collared urns.

Ancient potsherds

Iron Age

Although much better quality than earlier pottery, it seems to have been functional first and decorative second. It is often reduced, and the most common forms were larger storage pots, bowls and jars. It was commonly made using shell as a temper giving the pottery a white speckled appearance. Because of this, it can sometimes be difficult to tell it apart from Anglo Saxon pottery.

Roman Age

Pottery is by far the most common find from the Roman period, and it was at this time that pottery became truly disposable commodity. Coarse wares were so readily available that every household would

have been able to afford to have many pots, and would not have been to upset if any became broken. The most common type of Roman coarse ware is called 'Greyware'. It was very cheap to mass produce and would have been made locally. As the name suggests, the pottery is grey, although it comes in a great variety of shades. Some of the better pieces were slightly decorated, but the vast majority of pots are plain.

The temper used in the pots is fairly fine, and you will often have to look hard to even see it. The pottery is quite distinctive despite its plainness, and if you find a sherd of plain grey pottery, the chances are that it is Roman greyware.

Roman Greyware

The Romans also produced some very elaborate and expensive pottery. Perhaps the most famous of these fine wares is Samian Ware. This was produced in southern France and exported across the Empire. It is identifiable because of the shiny red slip (a layer of thin liquid slip) that is applied to the surface, and also because of the fine raised decoration that is applied to some vessels. When found in large quantities in fields, it is usually indicative of a villa site.

Some Roman pottery comes in a cream coloured fabric, most commonly flagons, round bodied vessels for pouring liquids, and mortaria, shallow bowls for grinding food. Mortaria are particularly distinctive as they have grit fired into the inside of the base.

Anglo Saxon

After the quality and variety of Roman pottery, Anglo Saxon wares can seem to be a retrograde step. The most commonly found Anglo Saxon pottery form is the cremation urn. These are often reduced with no visible temper, and often have stamped and incised decoration scratched into the surface. Other pots could be oxidised and have a shell temper.

Medieval

In the Medieval period, pottery becomes far more common again. This period sees the introduction of a new decorative technique – glazing. This is the application of a hard shiny coating to the inside and/or outside of the pot, which makes it water tight.

The most common colours for glazes were green and brown, though they come in a variety of shades. This period also saw the introduction of larger vessels than had been used previously.

Post Medieval

Obviously Post Medieval pottery, everything from the 16th century to the present day, is found all over a site and is generally easy to recognise. Most of it excluding modern plant pots, is glazed and, the later the sherd the more recognisably Post Medieval it becomes, think of Willow pattern for instance.

Although not as exciting as earlier artefacts it is still valuable to us as a dating aid for the context and should always be treated as a 'find'.

A selection of post medieval finds

Bones

Most bones are animal bones and are usually the remains of someone's lunch.

Human bones can only be excavated under licence from the Ministry of Justice and should be left where they are found.

Glass

Glass has been about since Roman times. Roman and Medieval glass is very thin and after being in the soil for centuries has a fluoresce coating of degraded glass and is very fragile.

Bottles from the 17th century are thicker and of different colours, dark green, blue and clear. Although sturdier they too can have a coating of degraded glass.

Metal Artefacts.

The photograph below show a selection of metal artefacts found during field walking or excavations. Mostly agricultural bits and bobs with the odd Roman coin but most are modern ie within the last 200 years.

Metal finds includes iron nails, horse shoes, lead for window panes and musket balls, bronze and rarely silver and gold in the form of coins and jewellery.

Selection of metal finds from medal detecting

Roman key with a bronze head

Lithics

Archaeologists use this term to refer to artefacts made of stone. Organic materials such as bone and textiles are rarely preserved so the most common type of artefact found on a prehistoric archaeological site is worked stone. These may be prepared tools such as handaxes and scrapers or the tiny flakes of stone called debitage which resulted from the construction of those tools.

A 'geofact' is a piece of rock that has been naturally broken, as oppose to one that was broken by purposeful human agency. Artefacts are the products of humans, while geofacts are the products of natural forces.

It is likely to be an artefact rather than a geofact if.

There are four or more flake scars. A flake is what archaeologists call a tiny fragment of stone broken off a larger stone. A flake scar is the dent made on a piece of rock from where a small fragment was removed.

Flake scars can occur naturally, when rocks bang against each other in a rock slide or within a streambed; but more than four flake scars on one piece of flint begins to look intentional.

There is platform preparation. Precise control of stone flaking is an important part of stone tool manufacture. Evidence that a flat place was created on a piece of stone form which to knock off additional flakes is a sure sign of human activity

The flake scars do not occur randomly on the rock. Flaking scars made on stone by human beings are likely to be patterned, rather than random.

The flakes scars are weathered at the same rate. Weathering is the effect of long-term exposure to climatic events. All exposed surfaces of an untouched stone should weather at the same rate.

It takes many centuries or millennia for weathering to be apparent. If a stone has several differently weathered flakes removed you know there was a large quantity of time passed between flaking events, and so not likely human.

You're found a bit of broken flint.

The first thing to look for is a smooth, slightly curved surface on one side of the flint. This is the side that was attached to the flint nodule. On this smooth side will be the evidence of the 'strike'. The action of breaking off a flint flake causes shockwaves to run through the flint. These shockwaves leave distinctive marks on the surface.

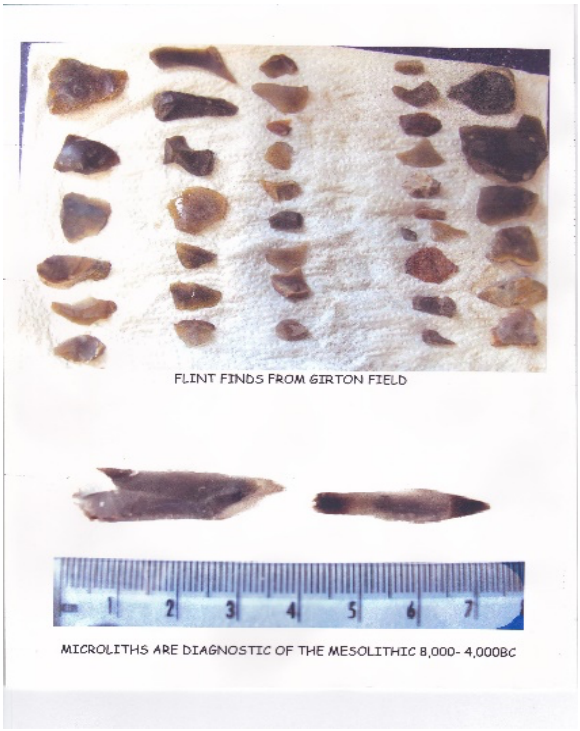
The second thing to look for is the bulb of percussion. This occurs at the point of impact and will be a smooth, round bump on the flint. This will often be associated with a striking platform – a flat surface created to strike the flint cleanly. Next are the ripples running out from the point of the strike, which are best seen when reflecting light. Sometimes the force of a strike will be such that it will leave fissures – small cracks radiating outwards from the point of the strike.

Once you have determine that a piece of flint has been worked, you need to decide what period it is from, and what it was used for, if anything. Some pieces of worked flint are just waste flakes from the production of a tool.

There are two broad types of flint tool – core tools and flake tools. Core tools are earlier, and a more wasteful way of making tools. The piece of flint is whittled away to leave the tool, in much the same way as a wood carver might make a sculpture.

Flake tools came later, when people had become better at flint knapping (the term used for making flint tools).

This is when each flint is taken off a flint becomes a tool in its own right. As you can imagine, a block of flint that would produce one core tool could perhaps produce a dozen or more flake tools.



A selection of flints.

Health and Safety on Site

Excavation can involve hard physical work and the use of potentially dangerous equipment.

Learning to use tools and lift heavy objects correctly and bearing in mind a few common-sense rules will help to minimise the risk of injury to yourself and others. If you are given specific instructions regarding safety on site please take notice of them.

Too much weight too close to the edge of the trench can cause the section to collapse which may result in injury to people working in that area.

*Keep heavy objects eg wheelbarrows, tools etc away from the edge of the trench.

*Don't sit on the section or walk close to it unless it's necessary.

*Don't allow the spoil heap to creep too close to the trenches.

*Don't pile excavated stones on the edge of the trench – take them to the spoil heap.

When working a deep trench:

*Wear a hard hat.

*Don't work alone, especially in a deep, narrow trench. There should be someone at the surface to help in case of collapse.

Remember that previously solid sections can become unstable following heavy rain.

You should be aware that it is possible to contract some illnesses through contact with soil. You should ensure that your anti-tetanus vaccinations are up to date and should try to keep cuts etc clean.

Lifting

Lifting heavy objects incorrectly can cause injury to your back. When lifting you should:

*Bend at the knees one foot slightly in front of the other.

*Keep your back straight.

*Lift by straightening your legs.

*If something is obviously too heavy for you to lift ask someone to help you.

Use of tools

Excavation is hard work but there are things you can do to avoid wasting energy and staining muscles.

*Learn to use tools correctly and try to work at a steady pace which you can maintain.

*Empty the bucket before it gets too full.

*Don't overfill wheelbarrows at the handle end.

*Take care if planks are needed on the spoil heap, especially in wet weather.

*If in doubt as to where to deposit spoil ask Excavation Director.

*Take care to avoid causing injury to others by careless use of tools.

*Don't leave tools lying around where someone could fall over them and leave shovels etc face down so that they don't swing up is stepped on.

*When using picks, mattocks etc be aware of people working around you.

*Don't throw tools around – this can cause damage to people and the site.

*It there is a mechanical digger present, ensure that you keep well out of its reach at all times.

Accidents

*First aid kit equipped to deal with minor accidents is kept in the site supervisor's car.

*Anyone giving first-aid should wear gloves as a precaution against blood-borne infections.

*In the event of a serious accident, inform a supervisor immediately.

*All accidents must be entered in the site Accident Book kept by the Site Director.

Security

You are responsible for your possessions. Neither MAHG nor the landowner can accept any responsibility for them.

And Finally

Wear clothing, especially footwear and headgear, which is appropriate for the job and the weather.

Most importantly and, in spite of this seemingly endless list of health and safety items, please remember that, although MAHG take archaeology very seriously, it is a hobby – so please have fun.