

Prehistoric and Roman Leyton: some comments

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I WOULD like to comment on the prehistoric and Roman archaeology mentioned in the article on the 'George Mitchell School Playing Fields', hereafter referred to as the 'Playing Fields Site'. My interest in the area and the site is as the specialist cited as 'dating the prehistoric artefacts' (p. 410) and as the excavator of the site at 57/59 Church Road, Leyton, E10 (p. 398)². I will discuss the prehistory of the area in forthcoming surveys of north-east London and of the Iron Age in the London region³.

With reference to the Neolithic (*sic*) and Palaeolithic hand-axes (p. 398), those interested in the relatively abundant Lower Palaeolithic material from the area should refer to Wymer's *Palaeolithic Sites of East Anglia* and his recent article on the Lower Palaeolithic in the London area⁴ in which he describes and discusses the hand-axes and other worked flint from Leyton. The Greater London Sites and Monuments Record contains references to a wide range of prehistoric material from the area as do the records and collections of Vestry House Museum, Newham Museum Service, the British Museum and the Museum of London⁵.

Much has been written on Roman finds from the area by various antiquarians, largely summarised in the *Victoria County History*⁶ and in my article on Church Road². The massive foundations from the gardens of the Grange (Fig. 1 and p. 398) are reported by many authors such as Morant and Ogbourne (and ultimately Kennedy) who also mention Roman and Saxon coins and modern materials. I am sceptical about the dating of these remains and am intrigued to know what was really found. The reader is best advised to read these accounts and make up his or her own mind about the nature and date of these remains.

On the reference to the Church Road excavations in 1978 (p. 398), I would like to point out that the ditches (with much pottery and other finds) date to the late Roman period, and that there were no

medieval ditches² although there were some medieval sherds in the modern ploughsoil/topsoil.

With regard to the 'Early Iron Age' evidence from the Playing Fields Site (p. 401), the dating given in my archive finds report of 1993 for the prehistoric pottery was 'probably early Iron Age', 'fabric type early-middle Iron Age', 'fabric type later prehistoric, possibly early Iron Age', 'fabric possibly early Iron Age' and 'fabric type possibly early Iron Age'. In the concluding paragraphs I wrote:

"This small collection of finds does not appear to belong to a single period; some of the patinated flint implements may be earlier than the majority of the finds. A single piece of late stoneware may have entered the context (140) during later agricultural activity.

The bulk of the worked flint is of sufficiently low quality to match the possible dating of the pottery which has a range of fabrics such as that found in the early Iron Age, somewhere in the timespan 700-400BC. It is not conclusive that the pottery belongs to this period, there being so little found, but this appears to be the most likely dating".

There is little early Iron Age pottery reported from the lower Lea valley and so comparisons had to be made with material further afield. The dating then was a cautious one, argued out in the archive report. A possible dating was reached on the basis of the sandiness of some of the fabrics, though, as I stated then, with so few sherds this dating cannot be secure. The site produced some 12 prehistoric sherds including fresh breaks, weighing 88g, representing no more than 5 vessels, from 3 contexts. When I saw the illustrations in the *London Archaeologist* (Figs. 4 and 5) I discovered that apparently two of these contexts (140 and 400) were fills of the same pit: pit 306. Therefore most of the finds and all but one sherd (in 3 fragments) appear to have come from this one feature, concentrating the scarce dating evidence even more. One group (*continued on p. 439*)

1. N. Truckle, P. Moore and P. Thrall 'Excavations at George Mitchell Playing Fields, High Road, Leyton, London E4' *London Archaeol* 7, no. 15 (1995) 397-402, 410.

2. P. Greenwood 'The Excavation at Church Road, Leyton, 1978' *Essex J* 14 no 3 (1979) 15-70.

3. In preparation for the *London Archaeologist* 1996.

4. J. Wymer *Palaeolithic Sites of East Anglia* (1985); J. Wymer 'The Lower Palaeolithic Period in the London Region' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 42 (1991) 1-15.

5. Newham Museum Service Records.

6. *Victoria County History Essex III* (1963) 155.

deposited during land reclamation on the Thames during the period. From coin evidence and dendrochronology it has been possible to establish ceramic phases, on which the dating of the artefacts could be based. This is followed by a section devoted to harness fittings: bits, bridle bosses, buckles, hasps, strap hooks, pendants, mounts and stirrups. Their function is clearly explained and the section is well illustrated.

The large numbers and diversity of horseshoes found in the city is covered in the fourth section. The typologies, chronologies, statistics and cataloguing may appear to be somewhat esoteric to all but the specialist. However, the introduction imparts fascinating facts and figures concerning horseshoes, using evidence from historical sources and information on shoeing practice and terminology. The study involved some 360 horseshoes and fragments, half of which could be firmly dated. It was thus possible to establish a chronological sequence for their typology.

(continued from p. 435)

of crumbs of fired/ burnt clay may have been a sherd, a fired clay object or a piece of daub.

The prehistoric pottery is generally undiagnostic, being of sandy fabrics or, in two cases, flint-tempered. In the article it is described as 'flint-tempered and sand-tempered' and later 'flint- and shell-tempered' (p. 401). I deliberately used the term sandy fabric because the sand/quartz element is relatively fine and, therefore, probably a natural inclusion already present in the local brickearths and clay⁷. With regard to the 'shell-temper', there were some very rare angular voids that may have been shell in two sherds from the same vessel. The fabric itself is not a shelly fabric. Such fabrics may not have had shell added deliberately as it is found in clays from the Woolwich Beds and in alluvial clay⁸. Shelly fabrics of such an early period have not yet been reported in this area, though they do occur from the late Bronze Age and especially in the early Iron Age in the Southend area⁹ and probably also from the late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age in the Upminster area¹⁰.

Unfortunately, the only two sherds of any size and form are from plain, open bowls, a type that is

7. For example H. Hamerow *Excavations at Mucking Volume 2: the Anglo-Saxon settlement* (1993) 28-31, and S. Hamilton 'Fabric analysis of selected first millennium pottery types' in T. Wilkinson *Archaeology and Environment in South Essex East Anglian Archaeol* 42 (1988) 75-86.

8. See, for example, S. Hamilton *op cit* fn 7, 76.

9. N. Brown 'Later Bronze Age and Early to Middle Iron Age Pottery' in J. Wymer and N. Brown *North Shoebury: Settlement*

The next section, spurs and spur fittings, is excellently illuminated by the historical evidence, especially the work of the spurmakers. Apparently many of them wandered about all day, and only started work when they were "drunk and frantic", making them unpopular with the neighbours! The book concludes with a small section on curry combs and the skeletal remains of horses from London sites.

The horse, whether for riding or as a beast of burden, was a major factor in London's life and economy right up to the last century and must have touched upon the lives of all medieval folk. It is good to see a publication which specialises in equestrian equipment, instead of just a passing mention. The book brings together much information, not only from the excavations but from documentary and pictorial sources too. It is extremely well illustrated and referenced, with an extensive bibliography. It should appeal to horse-lovers and archaeologists alike. Denise Schreve

found in the early Neolithic, the Bronze Age and into the Iron Age, thus not being a great help in the dating. To sum up, the dating was based on the nature of the pottery fabrics and their sandiness, but with the caveat that their quantity was so small¹¹, the sherds so scrappy and the forms so undiagnostic that dating was not secure.

Some of the worked flint — a serrated flake and an edge-trimmed flake — might be older, perhaps Neolithic or Bronze Age. Worked flint on its own in two of the contexts may not be residual/redeposited, *pace* Truckle *et al.*, (p. 401). Again the quantity of worked flint from the three trenches is not large — 11 items including 3 scrapers — and of poor quality and limited range. There is the possibility of this being a multi-period site. Four waste flakes without further working are hardly good evidence of 'tool-manufacture *in situ*' (p. 401). There is an absence of cores and other debitage.

Full dating of the few prehistoric finds should wait until a larger area of the Playing Fields Site is excavated and a sufficiently large and diagnostic assemblage is recovered. The dating in the article in the last issue of the *London Archaeologist* is perhaps over-optimistic in its precision.

and Economy in South-East Essex 1500 BCAD 1500 East Anglian Archaeol 75 (1995) 77-83.

10. P. Greenwood, Hunts Hill Farm, Upminster finds archive in preparation.

11. See the guidelines on the quantity of pottery required for reliable dating in Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group *The Study of Later Prehistoric Pottery: Guidelines for Analysis and Publication* Occ Paper 2 (1992) 5.