

# A HISTORY OF THE POT IN 5000 YEARS

July 30, 2016 Rob Hedge Archives, Commercial Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2016, Explore Posts, Finds, Historical Archaeology, Location, Museum Archaeology, Neolithic, Periods, Post Medieval, UK archaeological finds, archaeologist, Archaeology, Artefacts, Neolithic, potter, pottery

I'm Rob Hedge, and I work for Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service in [The Hive](#), Worcester. I'm a Community Project Officer, and I spend some of my time doing outreach and education work for the service, and some of it locked away in the basement working on archaeological finds. Today, I'm in the Finds Room.

I began the day by preparing to get rid of several boxes of artefacts. This goes against many people's expectations of an archaeologist's role. Shouldn't we peculiar basement-dwellers be hoarding *everything*, clinging onto dusty consignments of mysterious treasures for all eternity? Well, maybe, but the unfortunate truth is that British archaeology faces a [storage crisis](#). Besides, there's a limit to how often museum curators can feign interest in the contents of a Victorian dump.

But one person's junk is another's treasure, and I confess to being fond of the detritus of late-19<sup>th</sup> century throwaway consumerism. In this case, the finds in question were uncovered in Evesham, having spent the last 120 years in a pit. The museum didn't want them for their archaeological collections, but thankfully a sympathetic social history curator was only too keen to snap them up for their educational handling collections. So, my lovely assortment of 'Virol' bone marrow containers, beer bottles and the ubiquitous 'Camp Coffee' jars were handed over to their new home, and will once more sit proudly on a shelf.

One item that wasn't complete enough to be taken was this plate, depicting the bell tower of once-mighty Evesham Abbey. I love it because it highlights a very human desire to mark significance and local identity, and its discovery just a few hundred metres from the landmark it depicts amuses me. It's as if the tower, still standing defiant and isolated, is stubbornly outliving our attempts to immortalise it in commemorative crockery.



*Plate depicting the Bell Tower, Evesham Abbey, discarded around 1900*

From one pot to another: having set up some of our volunteers and our work experience student with their tasks, I turn my attention to a site that couldn't be further from the familiar world of late Victorian dumps. Project Officer Richard Bradley and I are working on the report for an excavation he led at Shifnal, Shropshire. It's a fascinating but elusive site: occupied in the Neolithic period around 5000 years ago, then seemingly abandoned before once again being a focus of activity in the Iron Age, about 2500 years ago. There are few finds (a common feature of prehistoric sites in this region), plenty of pits and ditches, and a tangled web of radiocarbon dates. It's a real challenge to unpick which features belong to which periods. One issue is resolved when we identify some grotty fired clay as 'briquetage': coarse Iron Age salt containers used to pack salt for transportation from the brine wells at Droitwich.

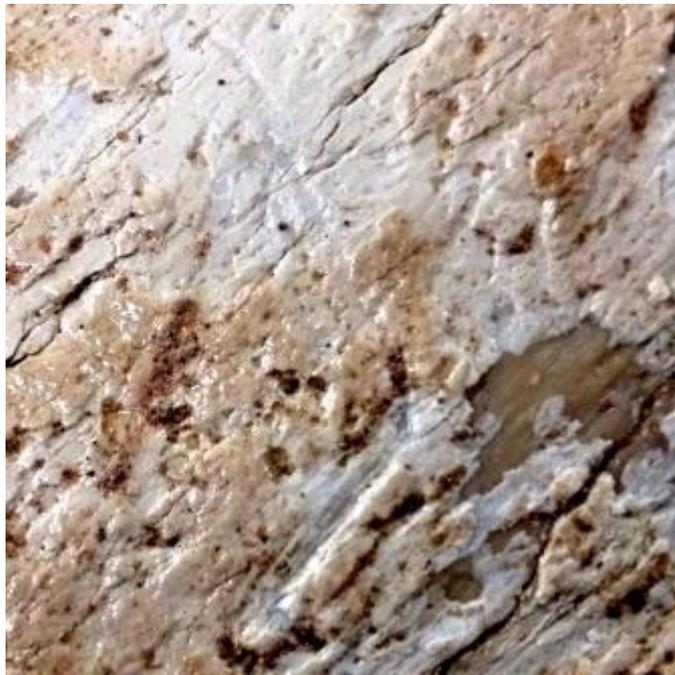
What the Neolithic finds lack in quantity, they make up in quality. Tell-tale parallel worn grooves and a smoothed, ground surface reveal a block of stone to be a rare 'polissoir', for polishing Neolithic stone axes. And a large chunk of a Mortlake style Peterborough ware bowl, around 5000 years old, displays the unmistakable imprint of the potter's fingernail in the elaborate chevron decoration. A pattern which, like the bell tower, serves as a mark of identity. Pots like this were produced across Britain, in a huge variety of designs but with strong regional trends in 'fabric' (the material incorporated into the clay during manufacture) that seem to defy purely functional explanations. Mass produced or hand-made, ancient or modern, a pot is never just a pot – it's a window on a world-view, and in this case a direct connection to the delicate, precise actions of a craftsperson across around 250 generations.



*Neolithic Peterborough Ware (Mortlake) pottery, c.3000 B.C., found in Shropshire*

Archaeologists are a merciless bunch. “Where’s the rest of it?” they tease Richard. Elsewhere, work experience student Kat is tasked with counting, weighing and piecing together an impressive assemblage of Iron Age pottery. You can see how she got on in [her own day of archaeology post](#). I welcome a group of school and 6<sup>th</sup> form students, who get to work on processing some finds from an HLF-funded community archaeology investigation into intriguing early ironworking sites in the Forest of Dean. Later, as staff and volunteers trickle home, I set up some photographs, bringing together two pots separated by 5000 years, but crossing paths on my day of archaeology.

On my way out, I pause to check on a very exciting discovery, recovered by our archaeologists from a Worcestershire quarry a few months ago. It returned from its trip to the conservator yesterday, and soon it’ll be going on display for the summer at Worcester Museum, to delight children and adults alike... can you guess what it is?



*Mystery find – watch out for it at Worcester Museum  
this summer!*