Wiltshire Archaeological & Natural History Society
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Archaeology Field Group

Tilshead Nursery School, Wiltshire: A Neolithic Pit

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Report on archaeological investigations at Tilshead Nursery School on 30th and 31st July 2009. Sue Teale carried out the initial investigation and Lynn Amadio undertook the post excavation investigation.

Tilshead Nursery School, Wiltshire: Neolithic pits

Contents

Illustrations

Acknowledgements

The contributions made by Ros Cleal and Nick Snashall were hugely valuable and very much appreciated.

Tilshead Nursery School, Wiltshire.

Summary
An extremely hurried rescue intervention identified two pits of Neolithic date. One of the pits being extremely productive, yielding pottery, antler, bone, struck flint, hazelnut shells and sarsen stone.

Location and Geology
Tilshead is situated in a steep sided valley on the south western side of Salisbury Plain (see fig. 1). Being approximately 10.5km north east of Stonehenge.
The Nursery School is situated behind the church, on the scarp next to a drove way leading from the main road onto Salisbury Plain. The site is at a height of just under100m above sea level.
The underlying geology is chalk (Geddes 2003).

Background
As construction work was in progress on the site of Tilshead Nursery School (SU03514810), fig. 2, Mrs Susan Teale carried out limited fieldwork (on 30th and 31st July 2009) and made observations of archaeological features. No watching brief was in place.

Previous Field Work and Investigations
Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Societies (WANHS) Archaeological Field Group (AFG) at various times during the period 2004-6 carried out field work and excavation in the field to the west of the current investigation. The site consisted of an enclosure with extant earthworks and evidence of an Iron Age settlement. A linear feature runs eastward from this site, a few metres north of the present site (Holley forthcoming).
A watching brief was undertaken during construction work on the school immediately to the south of the Nursery School in 2008. No archaeological remains were found on this site. During the original construction of the school (late nineteenth early twentieth century), the site had been levelled, which involved cutting a platform into the chalk, destroying any features which may have been present (Heaton Assoc. 2008).
Grave digging within the Church yard in 1947 produced a crouched inhumation and Late Bronze Age pottery (Underwood 1947). Many other skeletons have been found in area of the Church, but these are largely undated.

The area around Tilshead is rich in archaeological sites, including a number of long barrows.

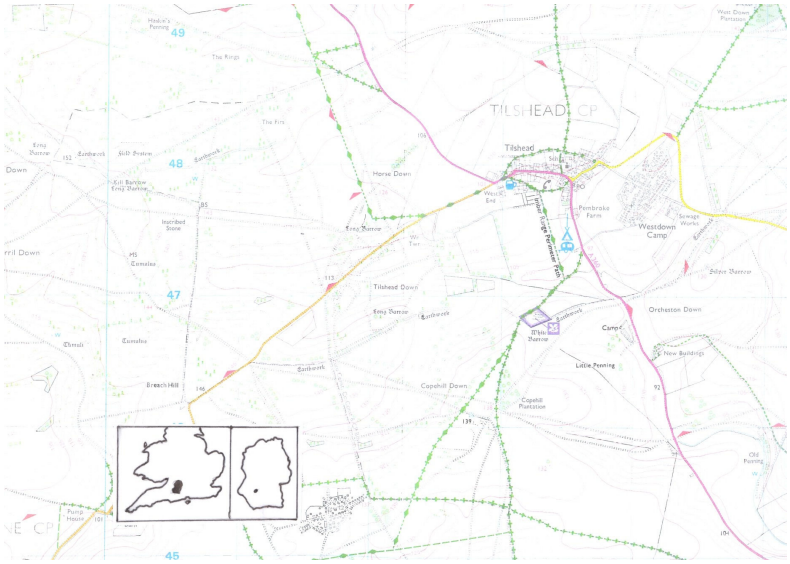

Fig. 1. Location map of Tilshead

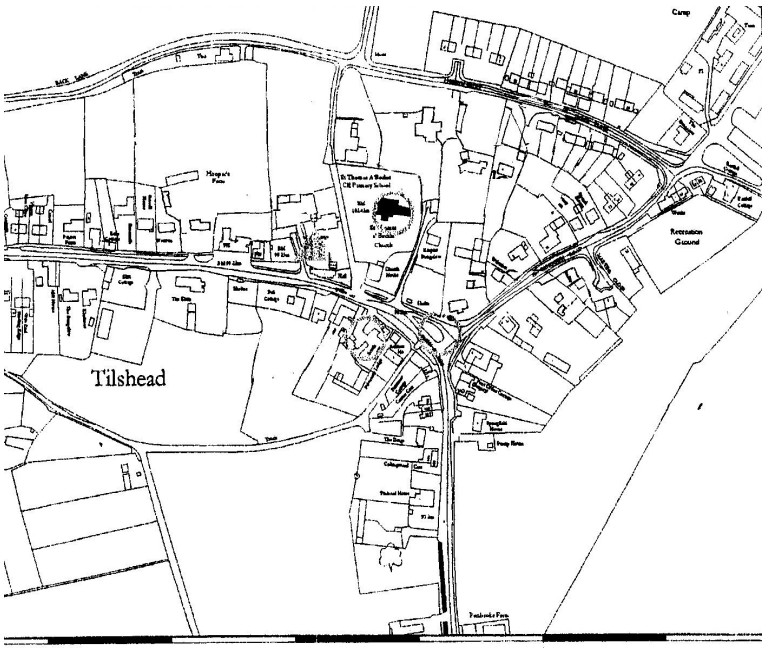

Fig.2. Map of Tilshead indicating location of Nursery School.

Methodology

Due to the urgency and lack of time available (field work could only be carried out for a few hours after construction work finished on the 30th of July and before work commenced on the 31st), the formulation of a research design was not possible and therefore no strategies for excavation or environmental sampling were in place. However, soil samples were taken, artefacts and ecofacts collected when opportunities presented themselves. Observations were made and photographs taken.

The Site

A trench, approximately 10.1m (east to west) x 6m (north to south) and 0.50m deep, had previously been cut with foundations added for the first temporary classroom, this

was cleaned following the demolition of this structure prior to the new building being constructed.

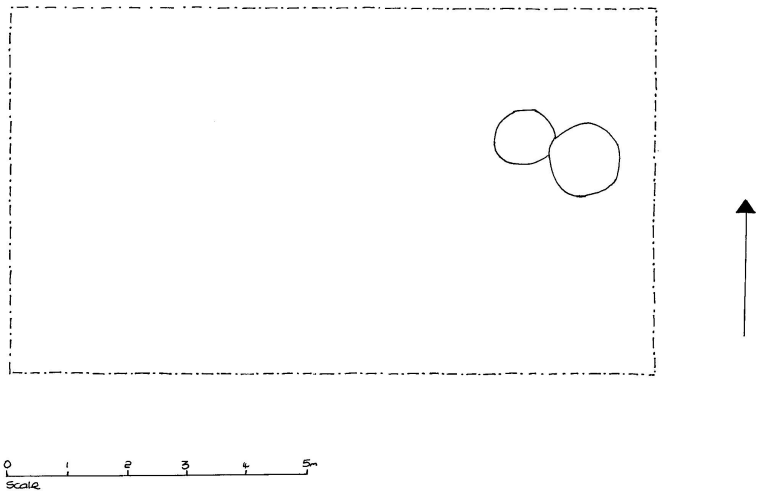

Fig. 3. Sketch plan of the trench

Fig. 4. View of the north west corner of the trench (photograph S.Teale)

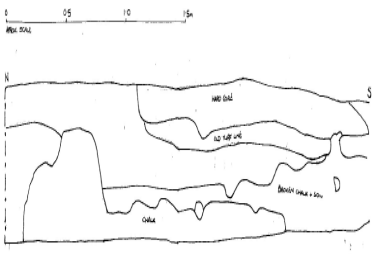

Fig. 5. Sketch section of the eastern bulk of the trench

The eastern section shows the natural chalk, sub soil and soil with a turf line below a hard core layer which had been placed on the surface, probably when the first class room was erected.

Fig. 6. North east corner of trench (photograph S.Teale)

Raised Chalk Features

Figs. 6, 7 and 8 show chalk features within the bulk, the lack of time available for fieldwork prevented investigation of these features. Investigations on the western side of the drove way (Holley forthcoming) found an enclosure with a bank leading away from it to the east. This bank is likely to be the chalk feature described here. The bank cut across the trench in an easterly direction and is approximately 0.75m north of the pits.

Fig. 7. Section showing chalk bank, looking east (photograph S.Teale)

Fig.8. Chalk feature, looking west (photograph S.Teale)

Pits, features [001] and [002]
On the eastern side of the trench two circular features were visible on the surface of the chalk. The chalk bedrock had previously been cut to produce a platform; this had also cut into the features, effectively removing the upper portions. These pits are described below.

Pit [001]
Shown in the photographs (figs. 9-13, 15 and 16) as being cut by pit [002], time spent investigating this pit was very limited, a soil sample was taken. The depth of the pit could not be ascertained in the time available and also no contexts were identified, the fill of the pit have been assigned the number (013)
The sample produced 128 fragments of bone (41% of all the bone fragments from both pits), 7 fragments of antler, 20 pieces of hazelnut shell and 10 pieces of flint which may have been worked.

Fig. 9. Features [001] and [002] in trench, looking north
(photograph S.Teale)

Fig.10. Location of features in trench looking to the northeast (photograph S.Teale)

Fig. 11. Pits [001] and [002], looking east (photograph S.Teale)

Fig. 12. Eastern side of trench with features [001] and [002] (photograph S.Teale)

Pit [002]
This pit was approximately 1.22m wide, 0.50m deep and was approximately 0.60m from the eastern bulk. The base was saucer like. Fig. 13 shows an almost circular dark patch on the present surface of the pit. Time didn't allow for the pit to be excavated, however, soil samples were taken from what appeared to be different contexts. The pit yielded 233 pieces of bone, over 200 pieces of antler, 36 pieces of pottery (mostly tiny sherds), over 600 hazelnut shell fragments and possibly 58 pieces of worked flint. The dark patch yielded 30% of the hazelnut shell. The pit also contained pieces of sarsen stone, flint (a lot of strange shaped nodules) and chalk. The stone appeared to line the pit. Antler tines appeared to have been placed with in the pit representing an erect phallus. All the contexts contained artefacts and ecofacts except context (010).
Each of the samples has a different soil matrix with very visible colour differences.
The pit contents will be discussed later.


Fig. 13 The pits (photograph S.Teale)


Fig. 14. Pit [001], eastern bulk
(photograph S.Teale)

Fig. 15. The pits (photograph S.Teale)

Fig. 16. Darker material in pit [002] (photograph S.Teale)

Fig. 17. Antler in pit [002] (photograph S.Teale)

Fig. 18. Antler in [002] (photograph S.Teale)

Fig. 19. Antler in [002] (photograph S.Teale)

Fig. 20. Stone lining of pit [002] (photograph S.Teale)

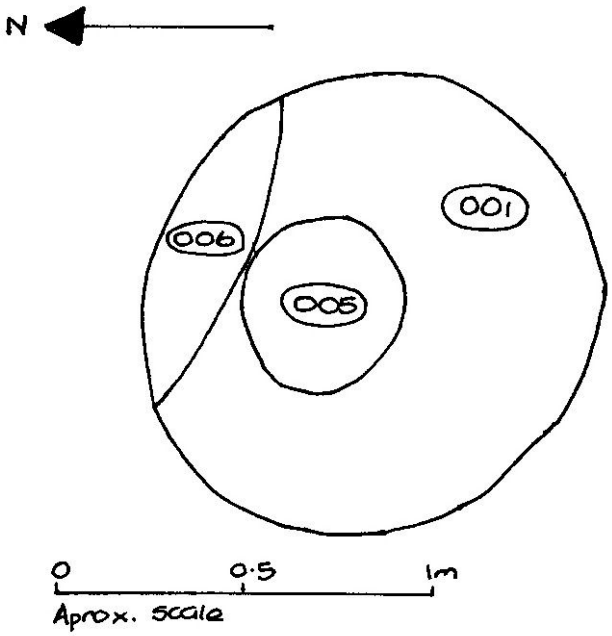

Fig. 21. Sketch plan of pit [002] (L.Amadio)

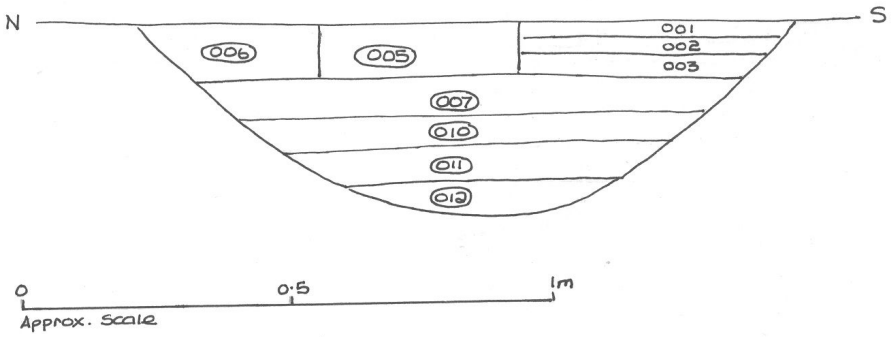

Fig. 22. Sketch section f pit [002] (L.Amadio)

Environmental
By Lynn Amadio

Methodology
Soil samples were collected by Sue Teale, these were floated for the recovery of both artefacts and ecofacts, and their residues sieved to 0.5mm as part of the process. All samples were wet sieved to the following fractions >10mm, 10-5mm, 5-2mm and 2mm-0.5mm. Each of the fractions was scanned and sorted.

Results
The table below represents the results of the wet sieving (fig.23)

	Bone	Antler	Pottery	Hazelnut	W/flint
003.1	24	3		24	
003.2	4	125-225		68-118	4
005	35	12	1	154+	4
006.1	29	19		108	
006.2	36	3		85	3
006.3	10		30	23	
007	23	8		64	15
010					1
011	23	7		14	8
013	128+	7		20+	10
Totals	312	184-284	31	460-510+	45

Fig. 23.Results of the wet sieving.

The artefactual composition of each context/soil sample is very similar, (one context (010) was devoid of artefacts) all the contexts contained bone, hazelnut shell was found in all and antler was found in most. The quantities of artefact and ecofact varied. Each context has a different soil composition and a visual individuality. (005), the almost circular dark patch was probably an organic container, producing a lot of bone and the highest number of hazelnut shells. Each deposit was placed in the pit within a relatively short space of time; the bone is in relatively good condition and shows no evidence of having been gnawed by dogs or other scavengers.
The majority of bone, antler and pottery from these samples are small fragments and largely unhelpful for diagnostic purposes. But indicate the productive nature of this pit.

The Finds

	Bone	Antler	Pottery	Hazelnut	Worked flint
001	8	26	5	9	3
002	6	11		6	12
012	8				2
Total	22	37	5	15	17

Fig. 24. Artefacts and ecofacts recovered from contexts not wet sieved.

Totals	Bone	Antler	Pottery	Hazelnut	Flint
Excavation	22	37	5	15	17
Wet Sieving	312	184-284	31	460-510	45
Totals	334	221-321	36	475-525	62

Fig. 25 Totals of artefacts and ecofacts recovered from the site

The majority of finds were retrieved from wet sieving, due to the rescue nature of the investigation, soil samples were hurriedly collected and it is not possible to estimate the percentage of soil retrieved from each context.

Pottery
Ros Cleal kindly studied the pottery and made notes for the author.

The pottery came from four different contexts within pit 2. Context 001 contained 5 sherds of Peterborough ware, (005) and (006) produced very small sherds. The larger sherds were part of an oval bowl similar to one found at Heathrow by Grimes (1960) in 1944 (see fig. 26 + 27), also found in a pit.

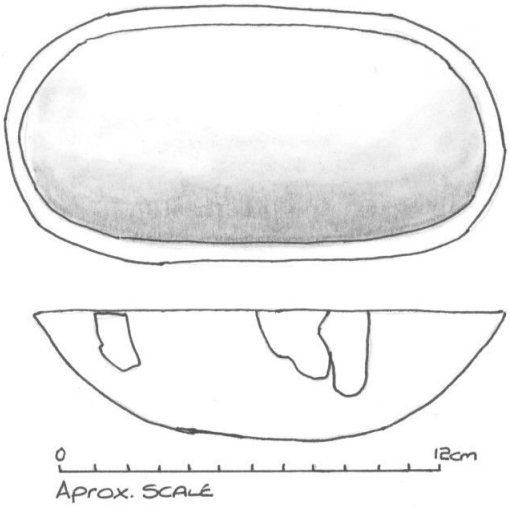

Fig. 26. Oval Peterborough Ware bowl from Heathrow (after Grimes 1960) and position of pieces from pit [002] (L.Amadio)

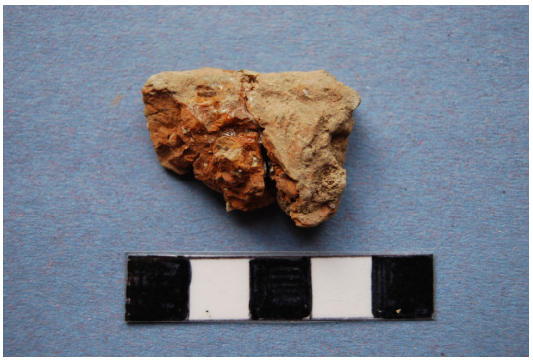

Fig. 27. The Peterborough Ware pottery from context (001), with 1cm scale (photograph L.Amadio)

The fabric is soft, brittle and slightly laminated.
The temper is sparse, small, angular and ill-sorted flint fragments (un-calcinated) <5mm, most are <2mm. There is also some find sand which is difficult to distinguish from matrix. There is a coil join showing in the break.

Fig. 28. Possibly Latest Bronze Age pottery, with 1cm scale (photograph L.Amadio)

The 5 sherds retrieved from (006) is possibly Latest Bronze Age, being well fired with a fine sandy temper (fig. 28)

Sarsen Stone

6 pieces of sarsen stone was found in the pit (figs. 29, 30 and 31), from 2 different contexts (002) and (006), 3 from each context. The largest piece was 4cm x 3.3cm x 2.1cm and the 5 others were slightly smaller. Sarsen is found on Salisbury Plain, but much less frequently than on the Marlborough Downs (Geddes 2003).
The deposition of the sarsen appears to be significant, 4 of the pieces were roughly dressed, possibly chips removed when larger stones were dressed. One piece is part of a rubber stone which has a flat polished surface, measuring 3.8cm x 3.5cm x 3.3cm (see figure 29 and 30).

Fig. 29. Rubbed surface of sarsen, with 1 cm scale (photograph L.Amadio)

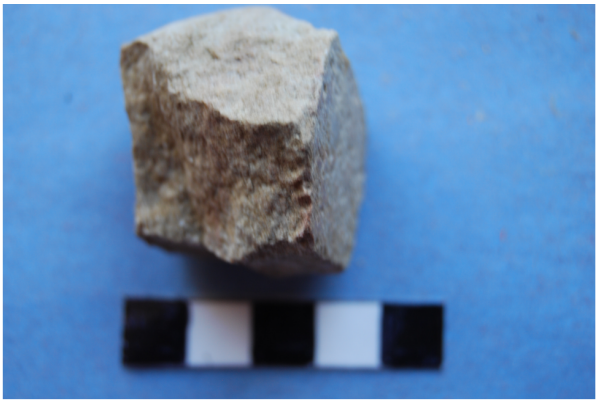

Fig. 30. Side view of rubbed sarsen stone with 1cm scale (photograph L.Amadio)

Fig. 31.All the sarsen stone from pit with 1cm [002] (photograph L.Amadio)

Animal Remains

Both pits produced a total of 312 fragments (see figs. 23 and 24) of bone, most of which is too fragmentary to allow identification. Hillson (2003) was used to identify the bones, pit 1 contained over 128 pieces which were too fragmentary to allow identification by this method, however, there are fragments which a specialist maybe able to identify.

Pit 2, 198 bones and fragments were collected from this pit, distributed fairly evenly

through the contexts. It was possible to identify sheep bone, a right and left ulna (from context 003), a right femur and right humerus (012); and a further ulna (011). Context 003 also contained a pig calcaneous. The identified bones are all limb bones; however, some of the fragments appear to be from other parts of the animals, rib and vertebrae.
All the bone is in fairly good condition, with little evidence of butchery and no sign of canine gnawing.

Mouse bone was found in context 007, this maybe a modern intrusion.

Antler
Antler fragment was found in all contexts in small quantities, although (003) contained over 125 fragments. Context (001) and (003) contained some of the larger pieces, four of which show signs of working (figs 32-36), including one complete tool, which is 4.5cm long with a diameter of 3.6cm, the end is worked into a point whilst the base is angled (fig. 32 and 33). Many of the fragments show signs of charring, prior to breaking.

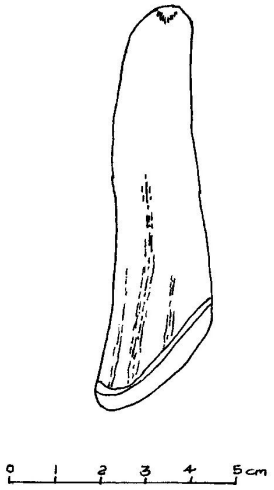

Fig. 32 Worked antler tool (illustrator L.Amadio)


Fig. 33. Worked antler tool with 1cm scale (photograph L.Amadio)

Fig. 34. Worked antler with 1cm scale (photograph L.Amadio)

Fig. 35. Worked and charred antler with 1cm scale (photograph L.Amadio)

Fig. 36. Worked antler, placed in pit to represent an erect phallus, with 1 cm scale (photograph L.Amadio)

Flint
As with the rest of the assemblage the majority of flint came from the soil samples which were wet sieved. The flint is all from a local source, a large amount had suffered heat damage, as though it had been at the edge of a fire.
The assemblage consists of a mixed set of material, none of which has been worked with care, there is no sign of platform preparation.
Quite a number of flints are patinated, indicating older material which has been gathered and redeposit.


Fig. 37. Refitted flint nodule, with 1 cm scale (L.Amadio)

Hazelnut

Over 500 fragments of hazelnut shells were found in the 2 pits, pit [002] revealed most of these. The darker circular patch (005) produced over 150 pieces, the largest amount from any of the contexts. The darker patch is likely to represent an organic container which contained the shell fragments.

Discussion
Unfortunately, due to the limited time available the pits could not be fully excavated, that is especially true of pit [001], the earlier pit which is cut by [002]. The Peterborough Ware pottery would indicate a Neolithic date, however, the sherds from (006) with a 'Latest Bronze Age' date is problematic, it is in the very highest context of pit [002] and about 0.75m south of the linear bank and ditch; and is possibly associated with this.

Thomas (2004) notes that Neolithic pits are
- Often shallow and bowl shaped
- Quickly back filled
- Not for storage
- Not for the disposal of rubbish
- Sides are generally fresh
- May be lined
- May be sacred or secular

Pits may contain
- Burnt material (but not burnt in situ)
- Debitage

- Fresh unbroken and or deliberately broken tools
- Bone pins, chalk plaques, pottery vessels of rare and highly decorated forms
- Finely crafted artefacts, often in pristine condition and sometimes deliberately broken
- Bones from meat rich parts of animals, although head and feet bones have been included
- Sea shells (in land sites), exotic stones and fossils
- Human remains (these may have been regarded as artefacts)
- Some items being brought to the pit in bags or baskets
- Remains of a feast
- Domestic accumulation, but they are not rubbish pits
- The results of a set of actions

Thomas' interpretations

- There is an increased interest in opening up of the earth and may have lead to the construction of monuments later
- Associating the place with a practice or social group

Over time the digging of these pits became more frequent. (Thomas 2004)

Tilshead Nursery School pits demonstrate a number of features similar to those described by Thomas (2004), they are shallow and bowl shaped; at least one of the pits may have been lined with stone (sarsen and strangely shaped small flint nodules). The pits fills include burnt material (antler), tools (antler), debitage, rare pottery sherds, deposit of ecofacts in a bag or basket and possibly exotic stone, the sarsen, although found on Salisbury Plain is much scarcer than the Marlborough Downs.

The pit [002], would seem to celebrate an activity, there is a large amount of antler, both tools and waste deposited. But also could be seen to represent a social group. There is a mixture of food stuffs, meat (sheep and pig) and hazelnut, fine pottery and tool manufacturing waste, mainly antler but also some flint.

The sarsen is an interesting deposit, although a local stone, it is not profuse on Salisbury Plain. Did this sarsen come from Stonehenge, people in the Neolithic often placed exotic stones in pits as well as monuments, stone is a possible identifier for people and individuals, representing the area they were born or live, it could also represent an activity, in this case the building or a visit to Stonehenge.

The Archive

The Archive will be deposited at Wiltshire Heritage Museum, Devizes. The small fragments of animal bone, which cannot be identified, will be discarded before deposition.

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