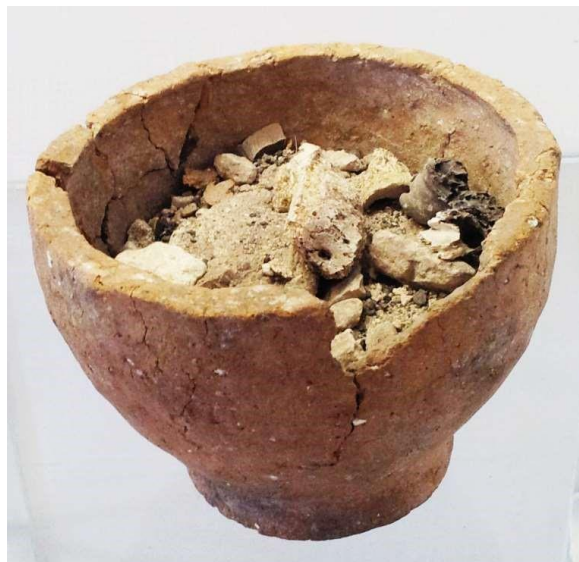


HITCHIN MUSEUM: SOCIAL HISTORY & ARCHAEOLOGY

July 2, 2012 Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2012, Museum Archaeology Archaeology, Bronze Age, Hitchin, Hitchin Museum, North Hertfordshire District Council, Social History



A Late Bronze Age cremation urn from Gosmore, south of Hitchin: no-one would quibble about this being a display of archaeology © North Hertfordshire District Council

My third post is about Hitchin Museum, the second of the two run by North Hertfordshire District Council. When the council was established in 1974, it took over museums from the former Letchworth Urban District and Hitchin Urban District Councils. Rather than duplicate the coverage in both places, it was decided that Letchworth Museum would concentrate on Natural History and Archaeology, while Hitchin's permanent displays would deal with Social History and Costume (to which were subsequently added militaria, in the form of the Hertfordshire Yeomanry collection, and a Victorian pharmacy from the old Perks and Llewellyn's shop in Hitchin, together with the collection of the Hertfordshire Pharmaceutical Trust).

A few years ago, I decided to add some archaeological material to the social history gallery that deals largely with the history of Hitchin. To that end, I put on display some Lower Palaeolithic

hand axes, Neolithic tools, a Bronze Age cremation urn and a group of Late Iron Age and Romano-British pots from cremation burials. This created a case dealing with the period before the town began to develop. A second case already contained some medieval material (most notably an attractive encaustic floor tile from St Mary's parish church and a ridge tile decorated with a three-dimensional horseman from the former Brotherhood guildhall on Bancroft, dating from 1475); to this, I added a late sixth-century globular jar from Gosmore and a skull from one of the sixth-century burials excavated on Queen Street in 2001. This, strangely, is the period when Hitchin seems to have developed as a community.



A medieval ridge tile from The Brotherhood (2-4 Bancroft, Hitchin), depicting a rider on horseback: fifteenth century in date, but is it archaeology or social history? © North Hertfordshire District Council

Adding these last items to an existing display raised all sorts of questions for me. Why were the tile and horseman considered social history objects rather than archaeological? There are other contemporary items (such as some attractive fifteenth-century wooden ceiling bosses from Hitchin or a ninth-century silver linked pin) that have made their way into the archaeological collections (and are consequently currently on display in Letchworth Museum). Why were they not seen as items that illustrate the social history of the town? After all, the linked pin is

contemporary with Æthelgifu, a wealthy local woman, whose still extant will records gifts to the church in Hitchin, which she refers to as “my Minster“.

It comes down, in the end, to specialisms. In archaeology, we are beset by the problem of period specialisation. We have people who deal with Roman pottery, with Bronze Age metalwork, with post-medieval tile (well, perhaps not so many of the latter), whose professional lives rarely bring them into contact with each other. Such specialisms are a necessary evil – we need experts to deal with different classes of material – but they lead to a compartmentalisation that can make the labels we apply to the past appear more clear-cut than they really are. Nobody woke up in 2200 BCE and decided that they were no longer in the Neolithic and that therefore everything had to change. Nevertheless, we retain these labels because they are useful: Neolithic societies were different from those of the Bronze Age, but not in the sense that they changed overnight from one to the other.



A twentieth-century object, a mug commemorating the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953: few would disagree with classing this as social history © North Hertfordshire District Council

It is the same in museums. We have specialisms within museums. The Keeper of Fine Art may be responsible for the fine post-medieval ceramics (such as collections of Royal Doulton), while the Keeper of Social History may be responsible for the local earthenwares. Unless, of course, these items were found during excavations, in which case they will most likely be the responsibility of the Keeper of Archaeology. This highlights the artificial nature of these divisions. Is Social History just Archaeology with documents, or is Archaeology just Social History with objects? Either way, museums tend to use objects to illustrate both Social History and Archaeology because that is the nature of museums: they are repositories for objects (which may include documents, but that is very much a secondary function).

So, where does archaeology fit into a museum like Hitchin Museum? Insofar as the history of the town extends back to a period before any records survive, we can only deal with its social history through archaeological data sets. In the majority of places, the earliest centuries of a community's existence lack all documentation and can only be reconstructed using the surviving material culture and other archaeological evidence. By separating this off from "Social History", though, we create an impression that there are fixed dividing lines in the past and, more worryingly, that the true "history" of a place only begins when we have surviving records. I get the impression that archaeologists still have a long way to go before we convince historians, let alone the general public, that this is not the case.