

Find of the month 2007

December 2007 This month's find goes to local residents in Dorstone, Herefordshire, who found an almost complete jar whilst digging in their garden. Archaeological Investigations Ltd was approached because the owners were having trouble finding anyone that recognised the vessel. Archaeological Investigations Ltd have researched the provenance and date of the vessel with the help of Steve Clarke of Monmouth Archaeology. It is a 17th century jar in a Malvernian fabric that has been so heavily fired that the calcareous inclusions have all melted – making it difficult to identify. It is a sandy fabric with a band of glaze on the inside rim (possibly where a lid would have fitted) and a thin wiped glaze or wash in the base.

November 2007 During a project undertaken on the north side of Hereford a very large linear hollow was discovered. It is not clear what this feature was but in true archaeological fashion it contained material that has created a bit of a controversy amongst prehistoric pot specialists. On the left of the photograph is a small sherd of pottery with a shoulder that has been decorated using finger impressions (like a pie crust - except half way up the pot rather than on its edge). There was also a small piece of dome shaped clay that all specialists agree was probably a spindle whorl. So why the controversy? Well so far the pot has been looked at by three specialists. The first thought it was Iron/Bronze Age, the second - Neolithic, following which we showed it to a specialist in Neolithic pottery who commented that it was almost certainly Bronze/Iron Age. So the votes fall in the latter category. Watch this space because we have commissioned two Radio-carbon dates.

October 2007 This month we have an environmental theme - no not plants and the like - recycling (or more specifically reuse). Here is an example of a glass vessel dating from around the 14th-15th century AD. It would appear to be some kind of wine glass. Clearly the base broke off one and the top off another and the two stems were tied together using copper wire. It just goes to show the lengths that people went to even 600 years ago to have a drink on the Left Bank of the Wye in Hereford.

September 2007 Sometimes archaeologists discover finds in their primary place of deposition. Most finds are in secondary deposits (i.e. if you dropped a bowl on the floor and it broke and you just left it there then that would be a primary deposit. However, normally you would pick it up and throw it away - in medieval times in a pit for example - this would be secondary deposition). The instance shown here relates to a discrete event - in this case the burning down of a building. We can not establish the exact circumstances of the fire but we do know it was so rapid that there was no time to remove some possessions. What is shown in the photograph is a line of loom weights that were made of clay (fired in the house fire and thus preserved). When the wooden loom burnt the weights fell onto the clay floor beneath where the loom had stood. From a radio carbon date we can establish that the date of the fire was around 900AD. Interestingly the site lay just outside of the castle and was sealed beneath a road that later lead to the bridge over the moat into Hereford Castle. It is a very rare example - a similar discovery was made in London.

August 2007 Archaeologists can get excited about the strangest of things. This month's find is quite unusual - an imprint of a Roman hob nail boot in a bit of cow dung! It was also unearthed at the excavation of a Roman site at Alcester, Warwickshire. Obviously one unfortunate person didn't look where he was going, which is lucky for us as we now have this well preserved foot print! The cattle bones found on the site show clear butchery marks - faced with that prospect the cows are likely to leave plenty of dung on the road!

July 2007 The Roman site at Alcester still seems to produce little gems as we work through the finds from the site. Normally gaming pieces turn up on sites, but in this Warwickshire town we can see how the pieces were manufactured. The bone seems to have been cut into flat squares first. The patterns for each Individual piece would then be scribed – perhaps using something like a drill – before being cut out. There is plenty of evidence from other Roman excavations in Britain that they spent much of their free time in this cold outpost playing a variety of board games. One very popular board game was ludus latrunculorum (the game of little soldiers or mercenaries), which was similar to chess. Ancient Roman writers have recorded how they competed in public Latrunculi championships, played on wooden boards with either wood, stone or glass pieces (calculi).

June 2007 This was uncovered during work on the Hereford flood defences for the Environment Agency. Within the first minute of excavation of an archaeological trench through the medieval defences, and lying on top of a gravel deposit, a coin was discovered. This was a Halfpenny of George I (1714-1727) and is very similar in layout to the coin shown beside it that dates from 1718. It doesn't look in very good condition so why is it so special - coins provide good dating evidence and in this case as the last documented use of the feature being investigated was 1645 a coin dating from c. 1718 provides a good indication that the levels beneath it are going to be significant. Admittedly it could have still been in circulation any time up until 1860 - but it is always very helpful to find something that assists in deciding where to stop using a machine and start more careful hand excavation.

May 2007

Awaiting consent - watch this space!! April 2007

Some of the rarest and most unusual discoveries require quality specialist work. This month's find is probably one of the most uncommon to be featured on this page yet. It's an animal bone - and as such belongs to one of the most common classes of archaeological materials recovered from excavations. So what's so interesting about that? In this case it is Medieval (c 13th century) and from a bear!! But that's not all - one bone would be exceptional - but two!!! The plot thickens. These bones were found on the site at Bath/Gaol Street in Hereford. One is a toe bone (the more common of the two as sometimes toe bones are left in bear furs). However, the other is a humerus or upper arm bone (as demonstrated by the bone specialist here) - and this is incredibly uncommon during the medieval period and is strong evidence for a real live, walking (?dancing) bear entertaining the people of Hereford 700-800 years ago.

March 2007 The restoration of a number of properties near Hereford's river front at what is known as 'Left Bank Village' resulted in the need for the excavation of holes to act as underpinning for the existing buildings. They were sinking because beneath them was a deposit of peat. One find from this deposit was a round wooden object - thought to be a wheel. Initial thoughts were that it must have been modern in date due to its good level of preservation (wooden objects don't survive for long). However, leaving nothing to chance the Archaeological Investigations team had the object dated

using dendrochronology (tree ring dating). This works because slight changes in climate from year to year result in changes in growth of the trees, so one year there might be a wide tree ring the next a narrow one. Measurement and comparison of the tree rings in this case dated the latest ring to be 1125AD. However, because the last ring measured wasn't at the edge of the tree archaeologists needed to estimate how long the tree carried on growing after this ring had been laid down. In this case a period of 25 years was arrived at giving a date for the felling of the tree from which the object was made as being 1150AD.

What was it? One possibility is a medieval wheelbarrow wheel. February 2007 During the replacement of Hereford's water mains back in 1998 a digger driver had a sudden shock when he thought he had just found an unexploded bomb. Luckily he called in the Archaeological Investigations' team before ringing the bomb squad. The water main he was laying was on a road called Mill Street in Hereford. This is next to where St Owen's Gate once stood, a medieval entrance into the city. Although we can not be sure, it is possible that this large stone object (the rock type deriving locally from around Mordiford) may have been a counter-weight associated with the gates, drawbridge or portcullis. It measures over 0.5m in diameter and weighs nearly a quarter of a tonne. January 2007 A variation on the adage: 'all that glistens is not gold'- ALL WE FIND IS NOT OLD!! Staff at Archaeological Investigations Ltd (AIL) have been involved in an evaluation and monitoring of groundworks associated with the conversion into apartments of a Victorian umbrella factory in Birmingham. 'The Brolly Works' (as the development will be called) is in the northern part of Digbeth, very close to the Bull Ring where extensive medieval and later remains have been found in recent archaeological excavations. There is no evidence that the plot was occupied before the 19th century, however, just before Christmas a construction worker on the site found a sundial bearing an inscription 'only count your sunny hours' and a date of 1661. Objects bearing a date are rare finds on archaeological sites and AIL were very grateful to Mansell Construction Services Ltd for passing the find on. However, alarm bells started ringing when a member of staff saw a very similar dial with a date of 1757 for sale in a Gloucestershire garden centre. Field Officer Sam Porter emailed a picture of the dial to Christopher Daniel of the British Sundial Society and he identified it as 'typical of the mass-produced garden ornaments of the 20th century!' So, we no longer have evidence for a 17th century garden on or near the site, but we are still left with an intriguing question. Just how did a 20th-century garden ornament end up buried beside a manhole cover in the courtyard of a Victorian factory building? Other work in Birmingham can be found at - www.birmingham.gov.uk/archaeology