

Find of the month

December 2009 Here is a find of relevance to the festive season. It also challenges some perceptions about the past. It is generally thought that grave goods (i.e. items placed with individuals at burial) are not expected in Christian burials. However, experience is beginning to demonstrate that there were still throwbacks to pre-Christian traditions regarding burial rites. In this case it would appear that someone had been buried with a book - probably a bible. The item is a book clasp.

November 2009 As an archaeologist you can never predict what is round the next corner. Generally most of what we deal with is in poor condition. It was a surprise to come across this Worcestershire barn which not only contained the press and mill for making cider/perry, but had still been in use until a few years ago. Whilst not a rare find - it is refreshing to see historic structures still being used for the purpose they were originally intended.

October 2009 One of the fascinations with archaeology is how new discoveries can challenge our previous understanding of past structures and events. The cathedral barn is a case in point. Here is a building that has been dated to the 13th century (probably starting life as a high status aisled hall). It appeared to have had its roof (right) replaced at a later date but still reused from a medieval building in the area. However, it was always believed to have remained in situ. However, the recent discovery of what appears to be a 13th century stone wall underneath the building has brought these previous interpretations into question. Could it be that the barn was reassembled in the 17th century on this site using elements from two nearby - but high status buildings. Investigations continue ...

September 2009 Sometimes we find things that even we don't have the chance to see. This is particularly the case when it comes to geophysical survey. On many occasions tantalizing glimpses of our past can be mapped out using the various techniques, but for various reasons no further investigation takes place. The company has established a reputation as a bit of a pioneer in that field. One particular survey was undertaken on the Castle Pool in Hereford to identify the likely location of leakages. However, whilst the survey was relatively successful in this respect it also located a feature of potentially high archaeological significance. Previous excavations on the north side of the moat (the right of the picture) had identified a medieval road leading to the castle (on the left). The survey in this case also located a solid structure projecting from the left bank into the moat. This is likely to be the drawbridge abutment on the castle side of the moat and was previously not recorded. It lines up perfectly with the medieval roads found in 1999.

August 2009 Occasionally the company can be asked to undertake some quite unusual projects. In August the Historic Buildings Team was commissioned to record a collection of wall paintings on an old Sunday school wall in South Herefordshire. The pictures included alternating images of animals and plants. The plants appear to be copies from botanical texts, not least because in some cases they show different stages of development of the plant. The picture of the monkey with the razor blade (above) is interesting. It could well refer to the folk tale of the same name where a barber accidentally cuts off a monkey's tail the indignant monkey demanding the razor blade in return for the damage. The monkey then goes on to offer a string of what on the face of it appear to be good deeds, but result in the unsuspecting "benefactors" losing their possessions, until the monkey goes on unsuspecting victim too far and gets eaten for its pains. Education nowadays just isn't what it used to be!

July 2009 Archaeological Investigations Ltd. has been back to Shrawley this month, providing expert supervision to the local History and Archaeology Society as they continue their excavation of Oliver's Mound - a 12th century castle. More substantial walls have been revealed as well as a fine assemblage of medieval pottery. Fragment of a pottery fire guard known as a 'curfew' (from the French 'cours feu'). The large domed instrument was used to cover the fire at night to reduce the risk from sparks without the need to extinguish the fire. This is believed to be the derivation for the modern use of the word curfew. This example dates to the late 13th or early 14th centuries. Rim sherd of a 14th century jug. The stub of the handle is visible. Green glazed, decorated 14th century pottery with CAD reconstruction of vessel (inset). 14th century pottery sherd with roller stamped decoration. This sherd is glazed on the inside to make the vessel impermeable.

June 2009 Since 1998 we have been working at the County Hospital in Hereford, excavating in advance of the numerous building projects that have taken place on the site. The area now occupied by the hospital includes the position of the former St. Guthlac's Priory following its relocation here from its original site on Castle Green, in 1143 or thereabouts, until the dissolution in 1539. Much of the site was occupied by the priory burial ground, but substantial masonry was also revealed, which is thought to be the remains of the monastic church. These fragments of decorative stone were found within a robber trench on the site, and clearly formed part of a high status building. The first fragment (above) is from a foliated capital, depicting two clusters of berries or grapes and flowing foliage reminiscent of Fleur de lis or possibly a volute. It has been dated to the 13th or 14th century. The second fragment is also from a capital and has been dated to the 13th century. It exhibits a 'dog tooth' (also called incised nail-head) design, with narrow beading to the top and bottom.

May 2009 How old do you think this hand axe is? Answer - Less than a year! This copy of a Palaeolithic hand axe was worked by Karl Lee, a professional flint knapper. Dale, one of our Project Officers, attended a workshop held by Karl and had a go at knapping himself. Apparently it's not as easy as Karl makes it look. Perhaps the 'find' here is not the axe itself, but rather an appreciation of the skill that our distant ancestors possessed to create such beautiful and practical objects out of such an unforgiving material. The axe also illustrates the value of 'practical archaeology' and its role in advancing our understanding of prehistoric technologies.

April 2009 During May 2008 an excavation was conducted by Shrawley Local History and Archaeology Society, at the site of Oliver's Mound, Shrawley (Worcs.). Archaeological Investigations Ltd. provided supervisors for the excavation and analysed some of the finds recovered. Oliver's Mound is believed from records to be the site of a castle built in the second half of the 12th century and was in use until around 1334AD, after which the castle went into decline. A number of

pieces of architectural stone were recovered from the excavation. The block above is believed to have formed part of a capping course, topping off a wall or parapet, possibly even part of a crenelated building.

The slightly curving moulding pictured above most likely came from an arched doorway or window. This type of moulding is believed to post-date 1200AD and fits comfortably with the known occupation dates of the castle. March 2009 An otherwise uneventful trial trenching project carried out in Hereford revealed a small circular pit. Beneath a layer of burnt stones filling the pit, a number of pottery fragments were revealed. The pottery is typical of the Beaker culture that occupied parts of the British Isles around 4500 years ago. The culture gets its name due to the funerary practice of cremating the dead and placing the ashes into a pot called a beaker. Surprisingly the feature containing the pottery looked as though it might relate to a domestic site rather than part of a burial complex. Whilst burial sites of this period are relatively common, occupation sites are very rare with only a handful of identified sites in the country. Carbon 14 analysis of material taken from the pit fill was undertaken and was dated to between 2120BC and 1890BC. The pottery is an important addition to the evidence for early Bronze Age activity in Herefordshire. The evidence is currently very limited, with only a handful of finds. It is thought to be the only example of Beaker pottery found within the city of Hereford. February 2009 This is one of the rarest discoveries made by the company. Back in 1998 during work on the construction of the riverside restaurant, La Rive (Hereford), this spear head was recovered from one of the pile holes. The archaeological project for this site meticulously sieved tonnes of soil recovered during the piling programme. The find itself is that of a Saxon spear with distinctive pattern welding. The spear head had been bent in a similar fashion to the only other example known from Herefordshire, which was also recovered from the river Wye. Scholars believe that these objects may have been deliberately bent and then thrown in the river during some sort of ritual. This type of "ritual destruction" of possessions has been well recorded in remote tribes by anthropologists over the past century or so. It is usually viewed as imbuing a high status on the individual who once owned the object. In the adjacent image the pattern welding is very clear. Whilst the metal was hot the socket for the spear was repeatedly hammered against the spear head using a number of diagonal strikes.

January 2009

Excavation to the rear of Church Street (Hereford) revealed 13th century deposits containing fragments of black cooking pot and metal working debris. These deposits were cut by a large 16th/17th century refuse pit containing fragments of a clay mould and copper alloy fragments. The finds suggest that brass or copper cooking pots were being made in the vicinity and illustrate the change in fashion from the 14th century onwards towards using metal rather than ceramic cooking vessels.

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