

Prehistoric Activities at Boston Spa

Since the group was formed in 1999, Boston Spa & District Community Archaeology Group has been conducting field work near the village on a prehistoric lithic-working and settlement site that is rare in lowland West Yorkshire. The group has recorded flint artefacts that suggest temporary or permanent settlement activity from the hunter-gatherers of the Mesolithic period (8000-4000BC) to Neolithic (4000-2000BC) and early Bronze Age (2000-1000BC), plus thousands of pieces of burnt flint and waste pieces from flint tool manufacturing. Among the artefacts are a flint barb from a Mesolithic fishing harpoon, a Neolithic axe fragment made of Langdale stone, barbed and tanged, leaf-shaped and oblique flint arrowheads, scrapers, cores and blades from various periods, as well as awls and piercers.

The prehistoric flint, which is good quality, blacky-brown and semitranslucent, must have been very important to the people using the site, as it was brought all the way from the east coast, though there is a tiny amount of poorer quality Yorkshire Wolds flint. Some of the coastal-till flint (13%) has developed an off-white, blue or grey patination through chemical action in the soil. Unusually, a very few metal-knapped gun flints have been found, crudely made from material of a particularly fine quality which seems to have come from another source (perhaps even Thorp Arch flint mill, which obtained its flint from the south of England).

The percentage of worked flints varies from 1.9% on the main discrete flintknapping area, which has a high proportion of manufacturing waste, to 9%, 11% and 17.5% on the larger field scatters, where activity seems to have taken place from Mesolithic through to Bronze Age times. Indeed, one of the fieldwalking plots on a river terrace of approximately 2500m² produced a total of 170 flints of which 23.5% were worked, including 7 microliths and 1 Mesolithic, 2 Neolithic and 1 Bronze



Age cores; the remainder, consisting of 23 blades, 3 cores, 2 scrapers and 1 awl, were undiagnostic. On the site as a whole blades (59%), scrapers (14%) and cores (10.5%) tend to dominate the worked assemblage.

Other finds from fieldwalking at the 100 acre site near the River Wharfe come from later periods, including a small amount of Roman and medieval pottery and masses of post-medieval field-manuring material. By the end of 2001, 45,473 finds had been collected and processed, of which 6766 are flint and 17,863 burnt flint. Another 18,415 pieces of burnt flint were recorded in situ, which provided an overall plan of the distribution of burnt flint and an indication of settlement activity across the site.

One of the members has completed an archaeo-botanical survey of the woodland on the site which suggests that it is remnant ancient woodland and that one of the perimeter hedges is approximately 1000 years old and others 400 years plus. In medieval times the area was an outlying part of the parish of Clifford and the monks of Kirkstall Abbey owned some of the woodland and pasture there. Excavations have been carried out on an internal woodbank and an unusual earthwork feature.

Recently the group's chairman has been out in the field prospecting for other prehistoric flint sites in the locality in order to see how the site fits into the wider prehistoric landscape, investigating several more sites on river terraces near Linton, Wetherby, Boston Spa, Thorp Arch and Smaws. The group is also gradually plotting the background distribution of flint on arable fields away from these flint sites. The Boston Spa site is significant because of the amount of manufacture that took place there, reflected in the high proportion of flint debitage. Further work is planned by the group, including excavations and geophysical surveys.

The group reports its findings to the Sites and Monuments Record at WYAS and provides information and occasional exhibitions of finds in the Boston Spa and Wetherby libraries.

Malcolm Barnes

Chairman

Boston Spa and District Community
Archaeology Group

Further details of the work of the group's activities are available by writing to the Boston Spa and District Community Archaeology Group, c/o Malcolm Barnes, 2 Rievaulx Terrace, Boston Spa, West Yorkshire, or by phoning Malcolm on 01937 572515.

ARCHAEOLOGY, MATHS...

A chance encounter

It's not every day that a chance encounter can lead to a new educational project, but this is what happened during a recent visit which I made to Southdale School at Ossett. It was there that I met Joanna Rowling, a Primary Numeracy Consultant for Wakefield MDC, who was also making a visit to the school. We started talking. I happened to mention that I thought that a churchyard survey would be an ideal way to use the principles of archaeology to illustrate mathematical concepts and a project was born.

Weeks of hard work

Though the basic idea was simple, there was a lot of development to be done. Over subsequent meetings it was decided to concentrate on two areas: comparing average age at death at different periods in history, and looking at changing fashions in forenames at different periods of history. Data would be collected on tally sheets in the churchyard and turned into graphs and pie charts back in the classroom.

The trial run

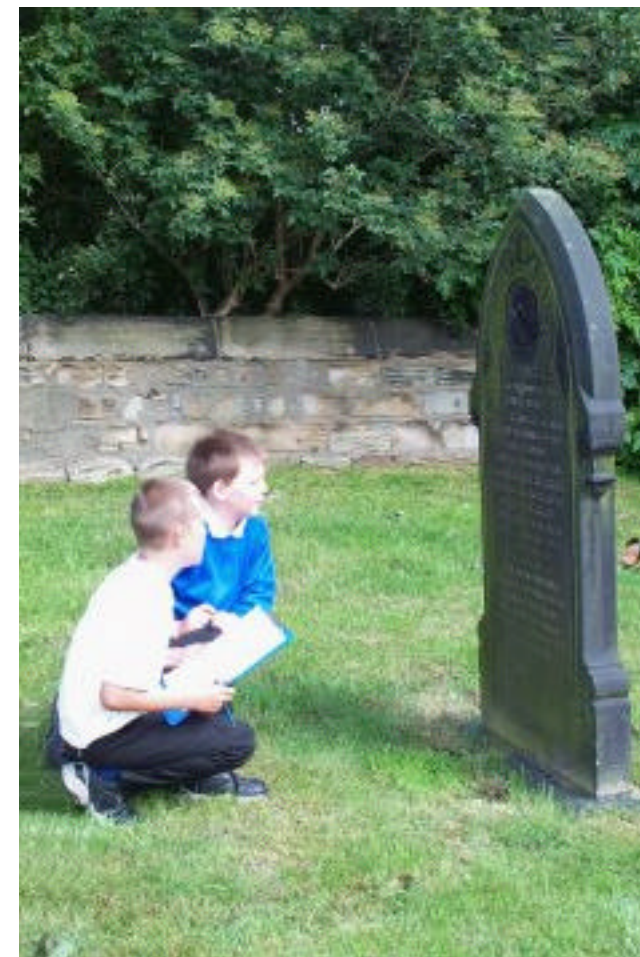
We carried out a trial run over two days with Year 6 pupils at Normanton Junior School using the adjacent churchyard. Joanna and I introduced the topic and then the children were taken out to the churchyard. Working in pairs, the children were each given a row of monuments to survey and the data were collated back in the classroom. Tally sheets were turned into bar graphs and the results discussed. We had also hoped to look at percentages and pie charts but there just wasn't time. The project had created too many mathematical data to deal with satisfactorily in one session and some of the teachers decided to do follow-up work in their IT sessions.

Looking to the future

It seemed that the churchyard project had more than met its mathematical goals. There were other spin-offs too. Talking to the pupils in the churchyard also led to some interesting discussions on attitudes to death and how monuments should best be preserved. Of course there is still more work to be done to fine tune the details, but the WYAS Advisory Service is hoping to be able to offer church surveys as a regular part of its programme of free school activities from September 2002. If you are interested, why not get in touch? I can be contacted by phone on 01924 306809 or by e-mail at dweldrake@wyjs.org.uk.

Dave Weldrake

Education and Information Officer



Health and Safety note

Monuments in some churchyards may be in a poor state of repair. When planning a churchyard activity, it is always advisable to check with the appropriate authorities to ensure that it is safe to proceed.

Acknowledgement

WYAS Advisory Service gratefully acknowledge the hard work put into this project by Joanna Rowling. We would also like to thank the staff and pupils of Normanton Junior School for helping with the pilot project.

... AND THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM