

Palaeoecology Research Services

**Assessment of biological remains from excavations at
Lea Green Farm, St Helens (site code: LG76)**

by

Deborah Jaques and Allan Hall

PRS 2002/38

*Palaeoecology Research Services
Unit 8, Dabble Duck Industrial Estate
Shildon, County Durham DL4 2RA*

**Assessment of biological remains from excavations at Lea Green Farm,
St Helens (site code: LG76)**

by

Deborah Jaques and Allan Hall

Summary

Excavations of medieval and post-medieval deposits at Lea Green Farm, St Helens produced a small assemblage of cattle horncores, a large antler fragment, and horn, which were submitted to PRS for an assessment of their bioarchaeological potential. Several small pieces of wood found amongst the bone fragments were also examined.

The wood fragments from Context 389 included oak and willow and a member of the rose family (cf. Pomoideae). No further analysis is warranted on these remains.

Deposits from Lea Green Farm yielded an interesting collection of vertebrate remains, clearly associated with a number of possible craft activities. The horn cores had all been deliberately removed from the skull, presumably for the use of the horn, and the presence of the horn itself within Context 308 supports this theory.

The potential of the vertebrate assemblage is constrained by its small size and poor preservation, however, further analysis of the remains may provide some zooarchaeological and archaeological interpretations.

KEYWORDS: LEA GREEN FARM; ST HELENS; ASSESSMENT; MEDIEVAL; POST-MEDIEVAL; VERTEBRATE REMAINS; WOOD; HORN WORKING; ?ANTLER WORKING

Contact address for authors:

Palaeoecology Research Services
Unit 8
Dabble Duck Industrial Estate
Shildon
County Durham DL4 2RA

Prepared for:

National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside
Field Archaeology
GWR Building
Mann Island
Liverpool L3 1DG

13 November 2002

Assessment of biological remains from excavations at Lea Green Farm, St Helens (site code: LG76)

Introduction

Excavations at Lea Green Farm, St Helens, were undertaken by the Field Archaeology Unit of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside in August and September 2002. A number of cattle horncores, several horn tips and an antler fragment recovered by hand-collection from medieval and early post-medieval deposits were submitted to PRS for an assessment of their bioarchaeological potential. Several small pieces of wood found amongst the bone fragments were also examined.

Methods

Vertebrate remains

Following excavation of the waterlogged deposits at the site, the vertebrate material had been kept wet. On receipt, the material was air dried. Records were made of the hand-collected vertebrate remains concerning the state of preservation, colour of the fragments, and the appearance of broken surfaces ('angularity'). Other information, such as fragment size, dog gnawing, burning, butchery and fresh breaks, was noted, where applicable.

Fragments were identified to species or species group using the PRS modern comparative reference collection. The bones which could not be identified to species were described as the 'unidentified' fraction. Within this fraction fragments were grouped into two categories: large mammal (assumed to be cattle, horse or large cervid), and totally unidentifiable.

Results

Wood

Area XVII, Context 389, Small find 344

The wood fragments constituting this small assemblage were:

cf. Pomoideae (part of the rose family, including hawthorn, rowan, apple and pear): a single irregular-shaped roundwood fragment (to 120 mm).

Quercus (oak): some of the larger chunks, including some (typically for oak) very hard and fibrous material (max. dimension 35mm)

Salix (willow): one of the irregular fragments (to 50 mm)

In addition there were two or three indeterminate wood fragments (they might be identifiable with some further expenditure of effort but were not deemed worth identifying at this stage) no more than 20 mm in maximum dimension. Single fragments identified as cf. *Calluna vulgaris* (L.) Hull (?heather, ling) root/lower twig (to 40 mm) and a rachis (leaf-stalk) of a fern, perhaps *Pteridium aquilinum* (L.) Kuhn (bracken), though rather slender and with only two rather distantly-spaced side branch insertions (fragment to 20 mm), were noted. There was also a single fragment of oak charcoal (to 15 mm).

Vertebrate remains

The vertebrate remains recovered from this site were almost exclusively cattle horncores. Additionally, a single red deer antler, a number of horn tips and several large mammal shaft fragments were recorded. The

assemblage represented only three deposits, Contexts 308, 318 and 389.

Ceramic evidence suggested a provisional 13/14th century date for Context 381. This deposit produced a single large mammal shaft fragment showing very poor preservation. The original surface of the bone had been completely destroyed.

Context 389, a 15/16th century pitfill, produced the vast majority of the remains, including all the cattle horncores. Approximately ten horncores were recovered, together with 62 small horncore or cranial fragments. Preservation was extremely poor and the fragments were mostly very brittle and easily broken. None of the horncores were complete, most comprising the basal portion and associated cranium. Where fragments of the same horncore were suspected, their fragile nature prevented any attempt at reconstruction. Almost all the cores showed evidence of removal from the skull. Typically, they were chopped at the base of the core and removed with varying portions of the adjacent frontal and parietal bones. No juvenile individuals were noted, all the fragments representing adult or elderly animals.

The single, poorly preserved antler fragment from this deposit was identified as red deer (*Cervus elaphus* L.). It had been naturally shed and included the burr, part of the main beam and the brow tine. No chops or knife marks or evidence of 'working' were observed.

Worthy of note were 11 horn tips recovered from Context 308, another pitfill, provisionally of late 15th to 18th century date. Although horncores are frequently recovered from archaeological sites, the horn sheath itself rarely survives. The horn tips showed a layered appearance and were quite fragile with eroded, flaky edges. They may represent a deposit of whole horns (the rest of the horn sheath, being thinner, not surviving) or the tips of the horns may have been deliberately removed and deposited separately.

Discussion and statement of potential

Wood

No further comment is required, except to remark that the material was mostly very well preserved by waterlogging (with the exception of the single charred oak fragment). The material has been stored in labelled bags so that further work can be related to identified specimens; note that most specimens now bear some modern marks resulting from the cutting of sections with a razor blade!

Vertebrate remains

Deposits from Lea Green Farm yielded an interesting collection of vertebrate remains, clearly associated with a number of possible craft activities. The horn cores had all been deliberately removed from the skull, presumably for the use of the horn, and the presence of horn itself within Context 308 supports this theory. The manufacture of tools and artefacts from antler may also have been undertaken in the vicinity, but evidence for this was, at best, scant.

The potential of the vertebrate assemblage is constrained by its small size and poor preservation, however, further analysis of the remains may provide some zooarchaeological (type of cattle represented based on morphological and metrical characteristics of the horncores) and archaeological (interpretation of pit function) interpretations.

Recommendations

A basic archive of the remains is recommended, which should include biometrical data. Morphological characteristics of the horncores (i.e. shape, curvature, size) should also be recorded where possible.

Archive

All material is currently stored by Palaeoecology Research Services (Unit 8, Dabble Duck Industrial Estate, Shildon, County Durham), along with paper and electronic records pertaining to the work described here.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Andy Towle of National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside for providing the material and the archaeological information.