

## ANTLER BIOGRAPHY

Picks made from the antlers of red deer were often used in the Neolithic flint mines at Harrow Hill, London and Grimes Graves, Norfolk. Many have been found in the mines, left behind as if placed intentionally. They were also used to knap flint implements in the final stages of creating the cutting edges. The one, shown below, shows signs of being used for knapping. It was found as part of a 9 piece group during ploughing in the 1960s. They were found at Langwood Fen, quite near to the Neolithic barrow cemetery at Block Fen and the find site of the Chatteris Bronze Age shield and spear head. The finder, Mr A. Sole, described them as being clumped very close together, as if they had been placed in some form of bag that had subsequently rotted away. These antlers have been assessed to be from the Mesolithic to Copper Age [10,000 > 2,000 BC,] and to show definite signs of being worked on by humans. The one on display is in the Neolithic section of this exhibition, reference CHSCM:1993.500.4



**Antlers\*** are extensions of the skull grown by members of the deer family. They are true bone structures that usually grow in symmetrical pairs. In most species, only the male grows antlers and their primary function is to increase his

likelihood of sexual selection by attracting females or helping him fight other males. In many temperate zone species, antlers are shed and regrown each year. Antler has been used since prehistoric times as a material to make tools, weapons, ornaments, and toys. It was an especially important material in the European Late Paleolithic, when it was used to make carvings and engraved designs. Antler headdresses; 21 antler "frontlets" apparently for wearing on the head, and over 10,000 years old, have been excavated at the Mesolithic site of Starr Carr in Yorkshire.

From prehistoric times a large deer antler from a suitable species (e.g. red deer) was often cut down to its shaft and its lowest tine and used as a one-pointed pickaxe. Antlers have sharp points and make perfect digging tools. See 1993.500.5., below. They could be used in the mines to pick away at joints in the chalk and hook out loose rubble. They could also be used to punch off or knap, flint pieces to make the sharpened edges needed for chopping and cutting tools.

Antler tools are mainly manufactured from deer antlers, which were acquired while hunting or it seems more usually collected when the animals seasonally shed them. The discovery of antler tools in settlements remote from the habitats of deer is evidence of the use of deer antlers as an exchange material between communities. The exceptional elasticity and resistance of deer antler was particularly appreciated by Neolithic man who manufactured a plethora of different implements from the material: adzes and handles or hafts for stone knives, drills, awls, chisels, adzes and hammers. The hafting of tools presupposes the partial or complete removal of the spongy material inside the deer antler.

We thought the 9 segments found at Langwood Fen were red deer antler and albeit very old looking not as old as Dr Emanuela Cristiani of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at the University of Cambridge has been able to establish for us. "I would say Neolithic or Copper age for the intermediate tool. As for the antler with grooving traces, [1993.500.1], they could be the same age or even earlier, [i.e. Mesolithic.] I would exclude later periods as during the Bronze age (or later) they used different techniques for partitioning the antler beam (as they used metal)."

Note: \*The use of this data is for educational purposes only

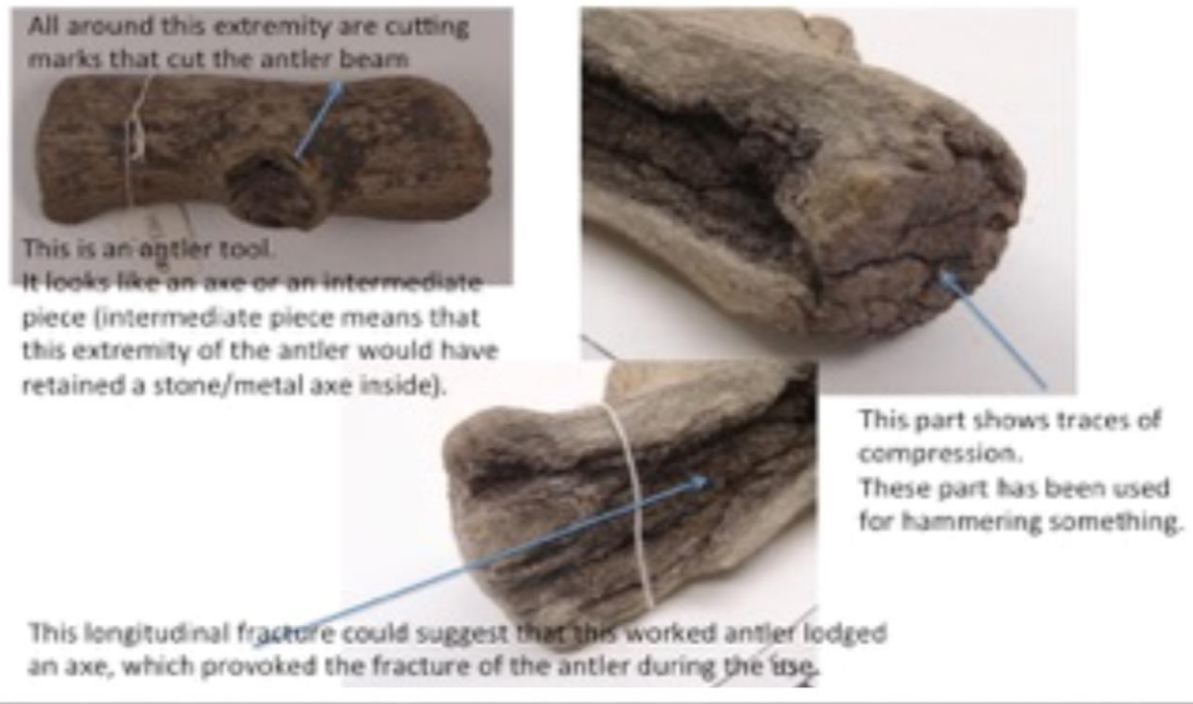
Below are the photos we supplied Dr Cristiani and her notes on them. NOTE: anthropic = "of, or relating to human beings, or the period of their existence on earth."

### 1993.500.1



Grooving marks. This can be considered a manufacturing waste. The grooving marks indicate an action aimed to obtain blanks of antler compact tissue. This compact tissue would have been later transformed into a tool.

### 1993.500.3



All around this extremity are cutting marks that cut the antler beams

This is an antler tool.  
It looks like an axe or an intermediate piece (intermediate piece means that this extremity of the antler would have retained a stone/metal axe inside).

This part shows traces of compression.  
These part has been used for hammering something.

This longitudinal fracture could suggest that this worked antler lodged an axe, which provoked the fracture of the antler during the use.

1993.500.5



I cannot see grooving marks (like in the first 1993.500.1) at this magnification but this fracture might be anthropic.

1993.500.6



Are these striations? I cannot see whether they are striations or marks left by rodents



### No Number 1



This piece of antler looks like a manufacturing waste. In the circle are either cutting or chopping marks (I cannot see very well, maybe they look more like chopping) aimed at partitioning the beam

### No Number 2



It looks to me that this part shows use-wear traces. I cannot be sure about this from the photo.

With thanks to Dr Emanuela Cristiani of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at the University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge

Ian Mason, Chatteris Museum – December 2015