

# The Archæologist in the Field

(PART 1)

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OUR present knowledge of pre-historic and Roman Cheshire is pitifully meagre. Many discoveries have been made from time to time but only a few were properly recorded. Dr. W. J. Varley, before the war, carried out a valuable series of excavations on the hill forts of Eddisbury and Bickerton; and the Roman Fortress and mediaeval city of Chester has, until recently, been under the eagle eye of that indefatigable archaeologist, the late Professor Newstead. Apart from these valuable contributions, Cheshire has not received any serious archaeological attention since the last century and it is significant that the most valuable account of Roman Cheshire, although it contains many errors, is still that of Watkins, published in 1886. "PREHISTORIC CHESHIRE" by Varley and Jackson, is more up-to-date and accurate, but a study of these two accounts will quickly reveal the unhappy state of ignorance which exists on these early phases of the history of the county. This state of affairs was not altogether due to any lack of material evidence. Cheshire has been as intensively occupied since the Middle Bronze Age as any adjacent area, but there have been insufficiently interested and observant persons to record and report any discovery made. The History Committee of the Rural Community Council has for many years tried to develop and encourage a system of field workers but with only moderate success.

These notes have been prepared to help would-be archaeologists to play their part in gathering together the evidence which people with a wider experience and background can use to build up the story of the past. At the Grosvenor Museum, Chester, a complete set of 6 inch to the mile maps of Cheshire is kept on behalf of the Archaeological Branch of the Ordnance Survey. The Curator is responsible for plotting on these sheets all discoveries which come to his notice and he is prepared to help field-workers to identify objects and pottery they find.

There are two kinds of things to notice; (a) structural remains and (b) objects. Into the first class fall a large number of earth-works, ranging from the complex defences of a camp to the simple burial mounds, and only a trained or experienced eye can discern the main characteristics which permit deductions to

be made, but the inexperienced worker can do a valuable service by measuring and describing such earth-works and there must be some in Cheshire as yet unknown and unrecorded.

The main task of the field worker will always be that of looking for the material remains of antiquity. These range from flints and stone implements and scraps of domestic pottery to the more exciting coins, brooches, beads and similar objects. These may be found anywhere as excavations, however shallow, may turn over occupation levels of previous centuries. One of the most useful ways discoveries can be made is by following the plough; this can be an exhausting and tiring job and at times most unrewarding, but by traversing the fields in one's vicinity it soon becomes apparent if there has been any intensity of occupation in a particular area. Once one is known to be on the look-out for antiquities, people who have found objects which they think may be of ancient origin will usually bring them along for your inspection, hoping for an authoritative opinion. A friend of ours, not so long ago, was startled to see in the window of a cottage in a small village, a fine geranium growing out of a Bronze Age cinerary urn. Anxious enquiries soon revealed a few more. They had been found some time previously in quarrying operations, and the cottager thought they would "do nicely as flower-pots."

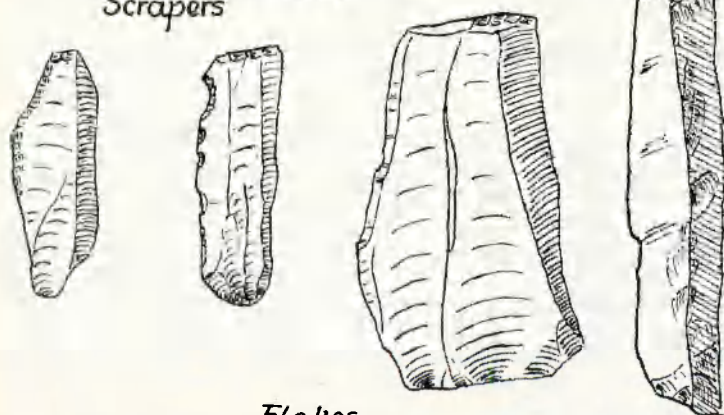
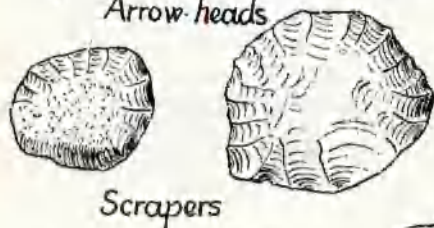
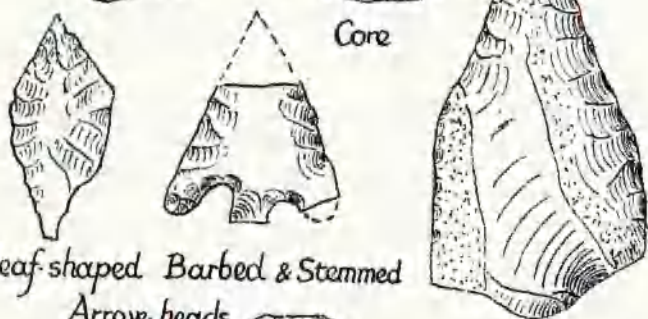
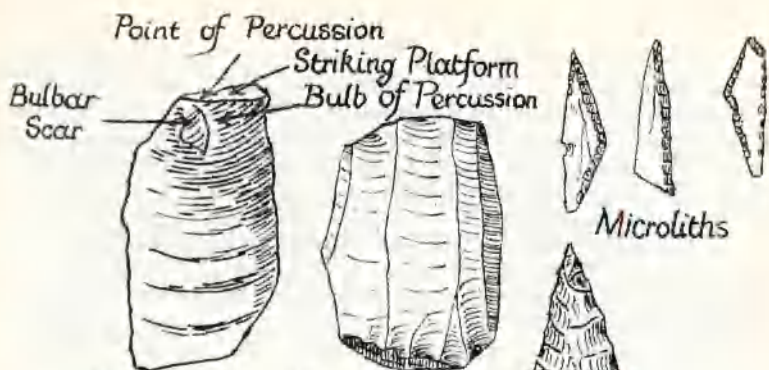
Most families have a little junk-box which may contain anything from odd buttons to foreign coins passed in change, but here and there are other things lying unrecognised. Another friend of ours once found an old man in Cheshire sharpening his knife with a fine polished stone axe and was thought queer in the head when he offered half a crown for it.

In these and other ways useful knowledge can be gleaned about the antiquities of Cheshire and we hope that many keen, sharp-eyed investigators will be encouraged to look around for themselves and bring notice of their finds to us.

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## PREHISTORIC ANTIQUITIES

Where written records are not available the only reliable sources of information on Prehistoric man are the material objects made or used by him in his daily life, which were often dropped and lost by him in the course of hunting, trading or husbandry. Those made of bone or wood disintegrate in course of time unless they happen to be preserved by such natural agency as a peat bog, but the ones of flint or other stone come down to us practically in the same state as when they were lost. The metal weapons of the Bronze Age are also normally in good condition but covered with a smooth green patination which adds to their beauty.



Scale 1/2

Flint Implements. found at Ashton, Chester G.A.L.



What evidence have we of man's presence in Cheshire during prehistoric times? The only object of the Paleolithic Age is a flint axe found at St. John Street, Chester, but this evidence is of doubtful character as it was found in disturbed ground mixed with later material. The nearest places where Paleolithic implements have been found are at Creswell Crags, Derbyshire, and caves in Denbighshire.

After the close of the Paleolithic period, roughly 10,000 years ago, a change of climate occurred, the arctic cold giving way to warmer and wetter conditions, and so the cave dwellers of the Ice Age had to adapt themselves to the altered conditions. They still remained hunters and collectors of food as cultivation of the soil and the keeping of domestic animals was still unknown. The most characteristic feature of this period, known as the Mesolithic, was the use of very small flint implements (Microliths) fixed on bone or wooden hafts.

These people lived and hunted over the Pennine Range and their implements can be found on the bare patches of ground where the peat has been washed away and situated between the 1,000 ft. and 1,300 ft. contours. A number of flints from a workshop at Boar Flat, Cheshire, have been found by Mr. F. Buckley and are in the Grosvenor Museum. It is therefore quite possible that at times these Mesolithic men came down into the plains of Cheshire in order to hunt. A few microliths, typical of their period, have been found at Ashton, near Chester, but it is unsafe to base too much on these few specimens as some types may have survived in use for a very long time in an area like Cheshire where good quality flint had to be imported from outside the country. At Alderley Edge,\* a chipping floor was discovered from which one or two implements having affinities with the Mesolithic ones from Creswell Crags are in the Manchester Museum, but the rest have been lost.

The coming of invaders to the south east coast of Britain from the Continent about 5,000 years ago, marks the beginning of the Neolithic period. These people introduced the cultivation of the soil and rearing of cattle, sheep, goats and pigs. Coarse pottery was made and suitable stones were ground and polished for use as axes. The dead were buried in long barrows, and ditches were constructed on the hill tops for defence and settlements. Whether these people reached Cheshire is not definitely known, so far little evidence of their presence has been found, but during the succeeding Bronze Age, which commenced about 1800 B.C., man had definitely arrived on the plains of Cheshire. The round barrows in which they buried their dead are situated in the Delamere district and in east Cheshire. One of them was partly excavated early this year at Kelsall, resulting in the recovery of a cinerary urn (p. 27).

\*"Prehistoric Cheshire" by W. J. Varley & J. W. Jackson.

A number of polished stone axes have been found in Cheshire. It is possible that they belong not to the Neolithic but to the early Bronze Age. Bronze implements were scarce at first and polished stone axes would remain in use at least until such scarcity no longer existed. Two factories where stone axes were made are known; one at Penmaenmawr in Wales, and the other at Langdale in Cumberland. The axes were roughly chipped to shape from suitable stones in the locality and as no polished ones have been found there, it is naturally suggested that they were traded in the rough state and polished elsewhere. In "Prehistoric Cheshire" a list of 28 flint and stone axes found in Cheshire is given, two of them from the Penmaenmawr factory. There is also a list of 32 perforated stone implements and 14 bronze implements also from Cheshire. No doubt there are others in private possession so far unrecorded.

On the plains the best places to search for stone implements are fields which have been ploughed or are lying fallow, the best time being the autumn or winter months especially after a spell of rain. Naturally one should ask for permission from the landowner before walking over his fields and care should be taken that gates are not left open, crops damaged or hedges broken through. Mole heaps and rabbit warrens are worth while inspecting. A barbed and stemmed arrowhead was recently found on a mole heap at Thursaston, Wirral, and a fine flint blade on a rabbit warren at Beeston; both are now in the Grosvenor Museum. Look where ditches have been deepened and other field drainage work done, or where the soil has been recently turned up and is lying bare of vegetation; along the banks of streams, bare sandy patches with good drainage and the foreshore of beaches. A number of barbed and stemmed flint arrow-heads have been found in the past on the foreshore at Meols, Wirral. Over 200 flint cores, flakes, scrapers and a few arrow tips, a broken polished stone axe and a stone spindle whorl have been found in the ploughed fields at Ashton. No doubt other areas would yield their quota if field workers were forthcoming.

How can one tell whether a piece of stone or flint has been fashioned for use by man? Stone axes are easily determined but sometimes it is difficult to be sure whether a piece of flint has been chipped by man, as natural agencies can produce something which is not unlike human workmanship. The effect of a sharp blow or blows by a hammer on the flat surface of a piece of flint is to strike off a flake having what is termed a bulb of percussion at the butt end, leaving a bulbar cavity on the parent flint. Simple flakes show this bulb, whilst implements such as arrowtips and daggers have been subjected to secondary trimming which works out the original bulb. Many scrapers show this bulb on the flat face, having been made from the butt end of a flake. Sometimes there are secondary trimmings on the upper face and along the

edge of the flake, or they may show signs of usage along the edge. Fuller information on the subject is given in "Flint Implements" by William Watson and "Man the Toolmaker" by Kenneth P. Oakley, both books published by the Trustees of the British Museum. A good book on field work is one by R. J. C. Atkinson, entitled "Field Archaeology," published by Methuen & Co.

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## EARLY POTTERY

An attempt to describe all the types of objects likely to be found on Roman or Mediaeval sites would go far beyond the limits of a single article. Selection must therefore be made and only the more common remains considered. Metal objects usually show a considerable degree of corrosion; iron work for example, appears as an indefinable mass at first sight and bronzes have a fine green patination. The most common of all classes of objects, and the one which centuries of burial changes least is pottery. The archaeologist depends more and more on the sherds of broken crockery discarded from the kitchens.

In those distant days there was no elaborate system of refuse collection and disposal and the normal practice was for waste materials to be buried or just left lying around. As a good supply of well-made pottery was available throughout Roman times, occupation sites of this period produce quantities of pottery from all levels. The variety of shapes, fabrics and decoration is enormous and the subject very complex. For descriptions of Roman pottery one must read the excavation accounts or better still go to Museums housing a good collection and persuade the Curator to allow you to handle specimens. Roman pottery can readily be distinguished from that of prehistoric times. The paste is much harder, the vessels better finished, and made on a wheel, an operation which causes the appearance of fine rings on the inner surface of the vessel, whereas most prehistoric pottery has a very coarse, gritty texture, sometimes soft when wet and crumbly when dry, due to imperfect firing. The Romans did not normally glaze their pottery, although the well-known red Samian ware has this appearance. A characteristic which distinguishes all Roman pottery from that of more modern centuries is that it is earthenware; i.e. it is made in a low-temperature kiln and once handled can be readily distinguished from stoneware and modern china. The beginner must, however, be warned at this stage that ceramic terms used by archaeologists differ from those of the modern pottery industry in which earthenware consists of a class of low grade hard-paste porcelain. Apart from Samian ware, Roman pottery is usually buff, cream, grey or black in colour, but some vessels have black, red or chocolate-colour coatings.



POPLAR COTTAGE, WEAVERHAM.  
Photo by Miss Beatrice Tunstall.  
Reproduced by courtesy of "Cheshire Life."



TYPICAL 18TH CENTURY GRITSTONE HOUSE OF THE EASTERN HILL-REGION.  
Photo by Dr. Singleton.





Group of Mediaeval Pottery in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester.



Group of Roman Pottery in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester.  
Photographs, Grosvenor Museum.





Part of the Saxon Silver Bullion found on Castle Esplanade, Chester, December, 1950.



Middle Bronze Age Cinerary Urn found at Kelsall, January, 1951. Photographs, Grosvenor Museum.



THE LADY LEVER ART GALLERY.

REPRODUCED THROUGH THE COURTESY OF MR. S. L. DAVISON, THE CURATOR.

At the close of the Roman occupation, the technique of making pottery on a wheel was lost, and the vessels of the Dark Ages are not readily distinguishable from those of pre-Roman periods. Their use was restricted almost entirely to cremation burial, a practice presumably surviving from earlier times, but which had ceased by the time Cheshire was colonised by the Mercians. The first vessel of this period to be found in Cheshire is the pot containing the hoard of silver pennies and bullion recently discovered in Chester. It is of thin, but well-made fabric, closely resembling mediaeval wares. Pottery continued to be scarce in the Middle Ages and the only kind of vessels found were for cooking or storage of liquids. These vessels are usually large and partially covered in a thin green or yellow glaze. Decoration took the form of stamped designs or applied reliefs and a fairly constant feature is the sagging base with thumb pressed notches round the edge to prevent the vessel from rolling over. The tendency towards the close of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Tudor period was for the vessels to be better made and more like metal ware in shape and the glaze to become thicker and of a darker green. At the beginning of the 16th century a dark brown glaze was introduced and used on a type of vessel resembling a conical glass, this kind of drinking cup, known as the *tyg*, continued to be made to the end of the 17th century, having in some cases several tiny handles and yellow slip decoration. Earthenware continued to be made and Staffordshire became a centre for the production of slipwares with a great variety of vigorous decoration. Rural potters still produce pottery with the same dark chocolate glaze on a brick red body in the form of bread panshions and having continued so long unchanged these vessels are difficult to date.

The mercantile revolution following the Reformation saw the introduction of new techniques, the Italians had invented the tin-enamel process whereby there was a thick white layer over the earthenware paste and on it were painted designs in many colours. This ware is known as *majolica* or *faience*. From our point of view the most important centre of production was the Dutch town of Delft, where great quantities of blue and white ware were manufactured and exported to Britain. In the 17th century English potters started factories at Lambeth for the manufacture of similar ware. At first producing small drug pots, but very soon plates, bowls, and other kinds of vessels with coloured decoration were being made at Bristol and Liverpool; but about 1780, Wedgwood, with his improved mass-production methods, put them out of business. At first sight *delftware* looks like modern china, but if a broken edge is examined it will be found to have an earthenware base below the enamelled surface.

Another technique which came in about the same time was saltglazed stoneware, originating in Germany. Vessels made in this way have a hard stone-like quality and the glaze, which was made by throwing salt in the kiln during firing, is usually a mottled brown which gave it the name of "tiger-ware." Examples of this ware are the famous Bellamines with a face mask. At the beginning of the 18th century white stonewares were made and Wedgwood produced fine cream dinner services, but it was said to have been unpopular as it wore out the aristocratic silver spoons.

During the 17th and 18th centuries many attempts were made in Europe to learn the secret of the manufacture of porcelain, specimens of which were coming into Europe from China. At first, the European potters imagined that the secret lay in the firing rather than in the material used, but it was not until 1708 that a German eventually made a soft-paste porcelain from a mixture of materials, giving a beautiful glossy finish. This is not the place to enter into a detailed account of the development of this industry and the eventual discovery that true porcelain is made from kaolin, a special white clay formed from disintegrated granite, but it is sufficient to say that china, as we know it today, is of comparatively modern invention and the field worker would do well to ignore examples of it and concentrate on earthenware and stoneware.

It should be the first aim of all field workers to be able to recognise the main types of pottery, as only by doing so is one able to date an occupation site. With this knowledge and with that of recognising worked flints, a great deal of useful field work can be done by merely traversing the ground. It is very important that an accurate record of discoveries should be made and pottery, after washing, carefully marked in Indian ink with some indication of the site on which it was found, for as the old Chinese proverb says, "the strongest memory is weaker than the palest ink."

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## THE CLAY PIPE INDUSTRY IN CHESHIRE

BY

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The scope offered to the archaeologist in the field is not necessarily restricted to prehistoric, Roman, or mediaeval antiquities. Whilst it is true that the recovery of the history of later times is greatly facilitated by the availability of written records, archaeology still has its part to play. Finds in the field can often supplement our literary evidence, confirm, or even disprove it.

A particular example of the way in which the archaeologist and the archivist can work closely together is furnished by the