Worked Bone Objects From Trendles Field, Marcham

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Many will remember the excavations on Trendles Field and will have seen a few of the thousands of finds that were recovered - but what stories do they tell?

Over the years since the excavation the finds have been processed and sorted, many with the help of local volunteers.

One category of finds was created from animal bones, teeth and antler, which was readily available from food processing. Over 500 worked bone objects were recovered dating from the Iron Age and Romano-British periods, covering a timespan of about 1200 years. These include tools, gaming counters, jewellery, even possible clothing fasteners or toggles made from antler and cattle teeth. Decorative hairpins used to dress the hair of women or secure clothing, became fashionable from the early Roman period and were found in large numbers, showing they took care in their appearance.

Some objects were expertly crafted, beautiful to look at and very tactile. A small number of hairpins and needles were stained green to mimic their patinated bronze counterparts possibly by boiling in acidic brine in a copper vessel or by using plant or mineral dyes. Some showed evidence of being lathe turned, while others were roughly whittled, probably in the home - simple, but functional. Many were worn smooth and polished from repeated use.

Everyday Life

A variety of tool types dating mostly to the Iron Age but continuing into the Roman period demonstrate the self-sufficiency of the people who lived here. The majority were made from long bones from the feet of sheep or goats. This bone is sturdy and could have been used in a variety of ways as a multi-purpose tool. One end was sharpened either to a rounded point, possibly as a gouge or awl, or sliced longitudinally to form a flattened narrow point suitable for pushing between threads on a loom or for working with reeds, willow or ash in basketry. Some had been drilled at the opposite end, maybe for suspension or for hafting on to wood or a metal spindle. Others were simple ad-hoc tools cut from a splinter of bone to form a scraper at one end and a point at the other and were possibly used for leather working. They lack signs of continuous wear and might have been discarded once the task in hand was completed.

Sewing needles used long splinters of bone that was rounded and smoothed to create the stem, with the eye formed by drilling two overlapping holes, possibly with a small bow drill. In some the holes were further chiseled to create a rectangular slot, and they look very much like the sewing needles we use today for heavy, woollen materials. Along with other categories of objects they show that textile production and the sewing of cloth was taking place here.

Leisure Time

Evidence for leisure activities comes from and a number of gaming counters. These were rounded, flattened bone discs with a small indentation on one side, showing they

had been created on a lathe. Most had been well used, with chips and scratches around the edges and on the underside, possibly from movement across a board.

Religious Practices

The Romano-British people, like their Iron Age forebears, worshipped many gods and during the Roman period religious practices become more visible on Trendles Field. Their belief system relied on a sacred contract, with offerings and appeasement in return for rewards and protection from their chosen deity and was embedded in everyday life. Hairpins and their broken stems seem to have played a special part in this practice. The majority of the 131 hairpins, comprising a decoratively carved head above a long stem, and 213 broken hairpin or needle stems were deposited at what we believe were shrines or areas around the temple. We don't know to which god these dedications were made. They might have been dedicated to a local deity about which we know nothing, but the quantity of this type of find indicates it had significance to those making the offering. Hairpins, which are closely associated with women, implies the deity could have been female. Most were broken, with staining across the breaks similar to the rest of the stem, showing the break occurred prior to or during deposition. Polish from wear along the stem shows some had been used for a considerable time beforehand and they might represent what the worshipper could afford to offer, or they were possibly 'sacrificed' - broken at the time of deposition to render them useless.

A glimpse into the Anglo-Saxon period came during the final days of the dig when an antler comb from that period was recovered from a pit. The comb had been made from several flat plates of antler into which the teeth had been cut and the whole joined together by side plates. It was an unexpected find but one which provides a small but tangible link to the Anglo-Saxon people who were buried in the cemetery across the road from Trendles Field.