

Charcoal and Wood Work Group

17th June 2023

York Archaeological Trust, Aldwark, York

Attendees: Dana Challinor (Freelance), Zoë Hazell (Historic England), Paul Flintoft (York Archaeology), Gill Campbell (Historic England), Iona Robinson Zeki (Cambridge Archaeology Unit), Mike Bamforth (Freelance), Marvin Demicoli (Museum of London Archaeology), Luke Parker (York Archaeology), Steve Allen (York Archaeology), Richard Palmer (Oxford Archaeology South), Julia Meen (Oxford Archaeology South), Angela Vitolo (Archaeology South East), Jill Thompson (University of Bradford), Roisin O'Droma (Irish Archaeological Consultancy), Hannah Pighills (Oxford Archaeology East), Andrés Robledo (IPHES, Tarragona/Newcastle University)

Online: Oriol López-Bultó (University of Barcelona), Ginevra Coradeschi (Hercules Laboratory, Portugal), Maryne Baylet (Archaeological Research Services), Megan Cameron-Heffer (University of Cambridge)

Apologies: Lucy Allot (Archaeology South East)

Meeting summary

This was the first meeting of the CWWG since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, and it was also a first for the CWWG run as a hybrid event. The group met in York to discuss waterlogged wood recording.

The day started with a tour of Barley Hall (<https://www.barleyhall.co.uk/>) (a timber-framed medieval town house in York, bought and restored by YAT in the 1980s), and finished with a visit to JORVIK (<https://www.jorvikvikingcentre.co.uk/>) an immersive visitor experience around life in York's Viking city.

GC began the main morning session with a presentation on the **Boxford Timber** – a Mesolithic timber with markings, recovered from peat deposits in the Lambourne Valley, Wiltshire. She described the stages of research, from when it was found by chance during a small-scale development, through the processes of analyses (wood identification, dendrochronology, radiocarbon dating, photogrammetric 3D recording, and drawing), to the plans for it being on display in the region. The work was funded by Historic England and involved multiple in-house specialists, of which the 3D model is available here: <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/worked-timber-boxford-29a811f7a2d4402180750e74bbddd585>.

IRZ gave a fabulously illustrated introduction to the 2015–2016 excavations at the Bronze Age pile dwelling of **Must Farm**, Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire (<http://www.mustfarm.com/>) and set out the wood recording that was undertaken on-site during that time. This included describing the benefits of certain on-site working practices; from the multiple advantages of housing the entire excavation area under

a protective tent, to photogrammetrically recording the deposits and then using the quickly-produced plans as printouts for annotated recording, interpretations etc. She also described the triaged, 3-tier system of recording, which enabled some level of recording for all the 18,000+ wood elements encountered.

ZH followed with a description of the microscopic (laboratory-based) wood identification and recording work carried out on material from **Must Farm**, focussing on the work by her and DC. She outlined some of the challenges that came from multiple specialists working on the waterlogged and charred wood material from such a large assemblage (practically and logistically), and the implications for bringing all the data together. She described the wood recording methods adopted for the material, setting the scene for the afternoon's workshop. The recording sheets that are currently available can be downloaded here:

<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/current/heritage-science/charcoal-wood-work-group/>

MD presented the results of a series of wood identifications and associated recording of post-Medieval fish traps in the intertidal zone at **Sandwich Bay**, Kent. The project was initiated by CITIZAN with volunteers carrying out site recording and subsampling, alongside study of documentary archives and social history. As well as describing the methods, results and some interpretations of the lab-based recording, he highlighted the practical difficulties associated with working in the intertidal zone. The more-detailed post-excavation work on the wood was funded by Historic England, and the report (Demicoli et al. 2022) is available here:

https://www.citizen.org.uk/media/medialibrary/2022/11/Project_8453_Sandwich_Bay_final_report_20221008_reduced.pdf

This was followed by some discussion about waterlogged wood recording techniques – what features/characteristics to record and how (methods/equipment, paper/digital), and when it is appropriate or not (depending, for example, on: the significance of the sample, the total size of the assemblage, and whether analysis is being undertaken in a commercial or research setting). Ways of dealing with challenging samples were described – including freezing (or not!), and polishing frozen wood surfaces (as used by DC to help with ring counting). The hope is to produce a series of revised recording sheets to help standardise methods between specialists [creating separate ones for wood charcoal], with specific ones for commercial and research purposes. Attendees are encouraged to contact ZH with thoughts and suggestions.

The afternoon session involved a mix of activities, including testing and critiquing the draft waterlogged wood recording sheet on samples from the Must Farm and Glastonbury Lake Village excavations. There was plenty of discussion between the participants, and it was also an opportunity for attendees to consult with others on their own problematic material that they had brought on the day.

Thanks

Many thanks to DC and PF for arranging such an enjoyable day, to PF for running it so smoothly, and to York Archaeological Trust for their generosity in hosting it and

providing refreshments. We were also fortunate to enjoy Jenny's knowledge in providing tours as a townswoman of medieval York at Barley Hall and later (as an earlier inhabitant) at Viking Jorvik! Many thanks too to those who presented and attended – it was lovely to have so many enthusiastic people back together.

The intention is for the next meeting to focus on methods for recording charcoal. If anyone would like to raise any particular themes and/or who could potentially host it, please let DC or ZH know. In the meantime, we hope to see some of you again soon at the Anthraco2023 conference in Porto! (see <https://anthraco2023.weebly.com/>)

References

Demicoli, M, Goodburn, D and Band, L 2022 (*Don't let it Slip through the net: CITiZAN investigations of fish traps at Sandwich Flats, Kent Part II: Wood analysis report* London: MOLA

Report by Z Hazell, with D Challinor