

## THE HUMAN TEETH FROM PICKEN'S HOLE

by

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### ABSTRACT

A catalogue listing and brief description is given of the twelve human teeth recovered from the excavations at Picken's Hole. One lower premolar was submitted for 14C dating and returned a date within the early Neolithic period.

### DISCOVERY AND DISCUSSION

Twelve human teeth were found and catalogued. These were all found at the beginning of the excavations, in an 8-day period between 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> August 1961. All finds were made on the eastern side of the initial trial trench but cannot be located more closely, no 3D recording system being in use at that stage of the excavation. It can however be inferred from the site excavation diary that the finds probably came from the northeast part of Square B and/or the southeast part of Square C (see Apsimon *et al.* pp 239-244 this volume).

Of the 12 finds, 10 were recorded as being found in material described as badger spoil, material dug out from badger tunnels, which is described in the diary as 'disturbed' and 'mixed'. Entries in the diary suggest that 6 specimens (M30.12/7-12) were found on 6<sup>th</sup> August, and 4 specimens (M30.12/3-6) on 7<sup>th</sup> August. Pieces of blue roofing slate and two very small sherds of Iron Age or Romano-British pottery were also reported, but were not kept. The teeth were attributed to at least 4 individuals of varying ages. The remaining two teeth were recorded as being stratified, one, a mandibular incisor (M30.12/2) was attributed to Unit 3, the other, a mandibular premolar (M30.12/1) was attributed to Unit 3 context E13, a context in which decalcification of limestone clasts had left a sandy matrix.

In assessing this material, it should be noted that whereas over 1,000 animal tooth specimens are catalogued from the stratified deposits on the site, with at least as many animal bone specimens also catalogued, not a single fragment of human tooth or bone was found in any other part of the stratified deposits. The only claimed example, a phalanx (M30.1/1) from Square F, was re-identified as wolf by Dr. Kate Scott. This must cast doubt on whether the two teeth recorded as stratified were so. It seems more likely that they were all intrusive or re-worked by badgers. The circumstances of the beginnings of the excavation suggest that the excavators could have been mistaken. In any event it seems unwise to base any substantial conclusions on such uncertain evidence. The radiocarbon date of  $4800 \pm 55$  bp, calibrated to 3695-3500 yr BC (86.8% confidence) (OxA-5865) reported for the premolar (M30.12/1) indicates an early Neolithic date; however, there was nothing else, finds or contexts, to suggest a Neolithic date, unless the tiny pottery scraps (reported to be fine sand tempered) were not Iron Age or Romano-British but Neolithic. Schulting *et al.* (2013) note that the early Neolithic burials at Hay Wood Cave, less than 10 km west of this site also had no associated material culture found with them, although both earlier, Mesolithic, and later, Romano-British, finds were made there.

Scott and Turner (1997) point out that “it is not unusual to find isolated [human] teeth when the rest of the skeleton has long disintegrated.” However, it is surely highly unlikely that later human corpses disintegrated *in situ* when the same site has preserved so much earlier faunal bone.

The origin of these teeth, assuming that they are all of one date, is unknown. However the circumstances of a dozen teeth from both upper and lower jaws of several individuals of varying ages being found fairly close together in a small area and apparently without identifiable cranial or post-cranial bone, though some unidentified animal bones were found, suggest some possibilities. As selective deposition of loose teeth from a number of individuals seems unlikely, the teeth probably represent early post-mortem loss from corpses still articulated which were then removed, still articulated, after decomposition of the soft tissues. Exposure on a raised timber platform has been inferred for other early Neolithic burial sites in Britain and seems possible here (see for example Smith, 2005). Barnett and Edmonds (2002) draw attention to some of the skeletal elements from the chambered tombs at Parc le Breos on Gower and Ascott-under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire, having calcite adhering to them, suggestive of initial excarnation in a cave context. These possibilities were not considered at the time of excavation; hence no search was made for evidence. There was no reason to do so until the Neolithic date was obtained, long after excavation work had ceased.

**Table 1.** *Catalogue listing of the Human teeth from Picken’s Hole.*

Cat.No.	Description	Comments
M30.12/1	Lower premolar	Submitted for dating. <i>Probably adult, due to the amount of wear.</i>
M30.12/2	Right lower incisor	Probably 1 <sup>st</sup> . Young adult. Lingual lateral ridges fairly well developed
M30.12/3	Right lower 1st incisor	Short root. Small tooth, Age at death about 30. <i>Certainly adult, difficult to be more specific on age.</i>
M30.12/4	Left lower 2nd incisor	Marked lingual lateral ridges & cingulum. Rather splayed crown distally. Age at death about 20. <i>Teenager or young adult.</i>
M30.12/5	Left upper 2nd molar	Crown only formed. Aged about 8. <i>Juvenile</i>
M30.12/6	Lower premolar, probably 2nd	Reduced to root by attrition
M30.12/7	Lower premolar, probably 2nd	Reduced nearly to root by attrition
M30.12/8	Upper 1st premolar	Very extensive attrition buccally
M30.12/9	Upper incisor	Traces of calculus at neck
M30.12/10	Probably lower 2nd incisor	Edge to edge bite
M30.12/11	Lower canine, probably left	Root grooved
M30.12/12	Upper 2nd incisor	Calculus adherent labially extending on to root

The specimens are listed in Table 1. The comments are extracted verbatim from the catalogue, where they were originally written by Tratman. Where it has been possible to independently verify these comments, they have been accepted as correct. Some additional comments appear in italics (S.J. Field *pers. comm.*).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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