

## Two Prehistoric Axes

About 40 years ago a local fisherman was working in the Prinsted channel to the east of Thorney Island; when he brought his dredge to the surface he noticed a strange stone lying on the top so picked it out and took it home to look at it. It was roughly 5”(127mm) long by 2”(51mm) wide and about 1”(25mm) thick, with rounded ends which tapered to a sharp edge. Someone he knew identified it as probably Neolithic, now confirmed as a polished axe about 6,000 – 7,000 years old, in fairly good condition but with a large chip off the cutting edge. It would have been mounted on a wood or bone handle fastened on with raw hide which would shrink and hold it firm. A lot of effort had been put into making this tool, not just in working it to the desired shape but rubbing it on another rock over a long period of time to smooth it down. It must have been a valuable possession which was ruined by the large flake coming off the edge.

A few years later the fisherman was again in the Prinsted channel dredging nearer to the bank. The water was fairly clear and he saw what he thought might be another axe lying on the surface of the mud. He picked it out but thought it was a rather poor specimen as it was fairly roughly shaped with a lot of chip marks and not polished like the Neolithic one. Again he took it home to clean and gave both axes to his grandson to take to school, after which they ended up in a drawer for several years. When he retired he asked for them back so that he could give them to the Emsworth Museum and their provisional identification as Neolithic and Palaeolithic respectively was confirmed by David Rudkin, the former Director of Fishbourne Roman Palace.

The second axe is of great interest – it is roughly heart-shaped and measures 4.5”(114mm) by 4”(101mm) with a width of about 1.5”(38mm). It is heavily patinated from lying in the river water, the iron content of which has coloured it a warm brown. Two flakes were broken off by the dredge when it was lifted but otherwise it is in good condition. This type of Lower Palaeolithic axe was produced around 500,000 BC, the date of the discoveries at Boxgrove to the NE of Chichester, and by the same type of human (*homo heidelbergensis*). A lot of skill was involved, first of all to visualise the shape required from a large lump of rough flint and then to remove large flakes in a methodical way to achieve the desired tool – actions requiring intelligence and planning. It was



*Figure 2: Lower Palaeolithic Axe  
(approx. 500,000 years old)*

hand-held, could be used for cutting or scraping and sharpened by the edge being re-flaked when it became dull.

These two axes put us in touch with people who lived in this area an unimaginable time ago, and to hold one is a privilege. We should be grateful to the fisherman whose sharp eyes noticed them and for his generosity in giving them to the Museum for everyone to see.

*Dorothy Lawson*