The Bradwell axe

A Neolithic axehead lay in marshy ground near Bradwell Brook for 5-6000 years, until it was found by my grandfather, Edwin Hall. Like many men of his age in Bradwell, his formal education in the village school ended early, but his skills and interests ranged far and wide. As old technology gave way to new in the early years of the twentieth century, Edwin turned the family smithy at Hall's corner into a motor engineering business, built his own car and radios, ground lenses and mirrors for an astronomical telescope, bought and used a microscope, and collected an impressive array of well-thumbed books on science and archaeology.

He often took solitary walks looking for artefacts, and I can still hear his distinctive way of saying this word: art-te-fact! Knowing that I shared his enthusiasms, Granddad entrusted the axe to me in the 1960s and I've kept it ever since, even taking it to America for four years, as a precious link to very deep roots!

The axe is small, about 9cm long, and considering its age is in remarkably good condition. It is made of a dark greenish-grey volcanic greenstone, with bands of lighter mottling and some rust-coloured streaks. Factual description and photographs can't convey the tactile qualities of this beautifully worked piece of stone - in the hand it feels heavy, smooth and warm, and it's a delight to handle.

Surprisingly, the most likely origin of the axe is not Derbyshire but Cumbria, where such axes were produced in large numbers at a 'factory' in a spectacular location on Langdale Pike. Polished greenstone axes from Langdale are found throughout Britain but were especially popular in Lincolnshire and the East Midlands. They were roughed out first by knapping, then laboriously smoothed and polished by grinding against harder rock. It's been estimated that the polishing process, which wasn't essential to the production of a functional tool, would have taken nearly 100 hours.

There are intriguing parallels between the Bradwell axe and polished greenstone axes found elsewhere. Many are found in wetlands, like the marshy ground by the Brook. And some, like the Bradwell axe, have lost a large flake, in a way which is not typical of ordinary wear and tear.

Archaeologists[†] interpret this information to suggest that some polished greenstone axes were more than mere tools. They were traded over considerable distances and their possession probably conferred status. In some cases, their fate was to be a ceremonial offering, perhaps to the spirits of ancestors thought to live in water, after being defaced to emphasize their separation from common use. The idea that such damage was deliberate, and significant, is further supported by the finding of flakes from greenstone axes carefully interred with other valuable goods.

The Bradwell axe has a story to tell us. It's entertaining, especially for those of us from old Bradwell families, to speculate about relationships to the individual who was important enough to acquire this desirable status symbol. After all, DNA analysis has recently linked the bones of an ancient Briton found in the Cheddar Gorge to a teacher who still lives nearby!

Coming back to earth, we can say with some certainty that the axe is evidence that the community of this 'Bradwell' man was not isolated in its remote Peakland valley, but

was linked into a network of trade and beliefs spread throughout Britain in the Early Neolithic.

[†]Francis Pryor: Britain BC. Harper, 2004.

Submitted by Christine Skerrow