

# Prehistoric Woodworking in the Fens

by Maisie Taylor

It seems strange to have two such diverse sites as Etton and Flag Fen covered together in one paper. First of all Etton is Neolithic (p. 8) and the people who lived and worked there would have been as distant in time from the people at Flag Fen (p. 10) as the Romans are from us now. The next point is that Etton is a causewayed enclosure, whereas the site at Flag Fen is a man-made island. Etton is located on the gravel of the river Welland and subject to seasonal flooding; peat was already growing at Flag Fen when the platform was being built. The wood that we have dug up at Etton represents only a tiny fraction of the whole site whereas we don't even know what proportion of Flag Fen has been examined so far, as we haven't been able to define its edges yet. A final important point is that Etton was a carefully planned and executed excavation with minute and careful retrieval and recording. Flag Fen, on the other hand, was found unexpectedly and had to be salvaged in the worst weather of the winter with freezing fog for days on end, and all equipment carried for twenty-five minutes along the dyke side, night and morning.

Given all these differences, it is not surprising if we find that the wood from these sites is completely different. The wood from Etton is almost entirely composed of fen species, with willow, alder, birch, hazel, poplar and very little oak (perhaps the debris from small-scale woodworking activity). There are large numbers of rods, up to 15mm in diameter, some with bark, some without, and some showing where they were detached from the stool. At present I think that these may be rejects from building requirements, as the longest ones are about 1.5m long which is about the shortest sensible length for making wattle walling of any quality. One of the great excitements of last year for the diggers was the wooden haft for a stone axe (fig. 4) which we successfully lifted (although it was extremely soft) and which is now being conserved at the British Museum. I have been luckier, because, going through our 1,000 pieces of wood in the laboratory, I have found several things which have been exciting, not least a scatter of wood-chips which could be joined back together again, to show us what sort of stake it was that had been sharpened on the side of the ditch four thousand years ago.

The wood from Flag Fen is totally different, but for most people, visually much more exciting because it is so big (fig. 6.). It is also worked in a way that everyone can identify: there are planks and beams, mortises and wedges of oak and ash with smaller pieces of other species. The great problem for me is actually manhandling it. The wood is strong enough to pick up and move around, but if it is touched too much, or if the surface is allowed to dry out, it soon starts crumbling. It also has to be supported constantly as it may snap under its own weight. If a piece is dropped (not happened so far, fingers crossed), then the only way to pick it up again is with a shovel and dustbin liner. At the moment I think that the timbers used to build up the platform in Flag Fen were taken from some kind of structure that was demolished. It is very hard to guess what kind of structure we might be talking about as there are no Bronze-Age wooden structures still standing in this country for us to use for comparison. Luckily, however, I have recently been working in Holland where they occasionally dig up houses in their waterlogged areas. My first impression is that there are enough similarities between our wood at Flag Fen and the structural wood of known use from the Dutch houses to suggest that what we have may be comparable.

After all these differences it may seem surprising that these two sites are being considered together in one short article. They do have one important fact in common: they are both *waterlogged* sites. We think that they are probably the first of many to be found but at the moment I find it hard to look ahead and speculate, as I am fully occupied trying to process the wood before we start digging again. The great thing that these sites give us is a glimpse of the extraordinary range of material and activities which we may have suspected before, but for which we have never had much evidence. We have just begun a very important phase in our understanding of the prehistoric people who lived in this area two, three or four thousand years ago, or even further back in time. This time next year I shall probably have completely different views about what the wood means, such is the rate of our progress. Everything that we dig up is giving us new insights, new ideas, and new directions in which to turn our thinking.

## Bibliography

Taylor (1982) M. Taylor, *Wood in Archaeology*, 1982.



*Fig 6 A small part of the wooden platform at Flag Fen. Note especially the mortise-hole in the plank on the extreme left. The scale-bar is 1 m long*