

North Herts Museum is always happy to offer work experience placements for interested young people; many of us got our first taste of museum work in a similar way. Last week, Tom, a student from [St Christopher School](#) in Letchworth Garden City, spent some time looking at the finds from an old excavation. The finds were deposited with the Museum Service more than ten years ago but no-one had had the opportunity to look at them since then.

I was interested in looking at the finds because they were excavated from a site at the east end of Works Road in Letchworth Garden City, only a few hundred metres from [the henge in Norton](#) that I have been investigating recently. The original work was carried out between 1997 and 1999 by the Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust (now [Archaeological Solutions](#)), who discovered important Late Neolithic features, dating from about 3000 to 2000 BC. These included a [hengiform monument](#) with the crouched skeleton of a teenager at its centre, some deep shafts, a curious banana-shaped pit and an L-shaped ditch. A report on the flints found compared them with those found at [Blackhorse Road](#), a site excavated between 1957 and 1973 by Letchworth Museum, just 200 metres away. I wanted to see for myself how similar they were to the flints from the henge and, perhaps more importantly, to see how their small quantity of pottery compared.

As expected, the types of flints were very similar, with some rather nice scrapers and [denticulated blades](#). By the end of the week, Tom had learned how to spot the difference between scrapers, blades, débitage (waste flakes from striking the flint) and cores. He also spotted some stone objects that were rather more unusual, which had me puzzled at first. Two of these objects consisted of flat slabs of a gritty sandstone-like material, about the size of my hand. One surface on each had been polished smooth and, on one of them, a polished groove had been worn into the centre of the stone's long axis. There was also a cube of stone with one face polished and a pebble with a pointed end that was damaged as if it had been used as a hammer, which is what I thought it was at first. Then I spotted that it was also worn along one edge and that it fitted into the groove on the slab almost perfectly.



Smoothed slab with a groove along the centre



This was the clue I needed to answer the puzzle. The slabs were hand-held palettes, used for grinding something, while the other stones were the grinders. The cube had not worn into the face of the slab, but the different shape of the pebble had gradually worn down a groove. Unlike larger querns, slabs that were used for grinding flour from grain, these were designed to be held in the hand for grinding small quantities of something. Palettes have been recorded in the Neolithic of other parts of the world - the decorated [cosmetic palettes of Egypt](#) are well known - but they are not widely reported from Britain. I suspect that the pair from Letchworth Garden City were used in a similar way to the more decorative Egyptian examples, for grinding pigment to use as cosmetics, perhaps for religious ceremonies rather than general beautification. To have two together is really quite unusual, if my identification of them is correct.



A palette and grinder from the same layer in the banana-shaped pit

The discovery of these palettes has turned the site at Works Road from one that is merely interesting to one that looks to be rather significant. With the early henge only 300 m away, flint mines closer still and a hengiform monument on the same site, this is a complex to rival many better known sites. It goes to show that important discoveries can be made away from the site, by people who, like Tom, are not trained archaeologists. Thank you, Tom!

Share this:

[Email](#)

[Print](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Pocket](#)

[WhatsApp](#)

[Pinterest](#)

[Reddit](#)