

The Happisburgh Handaxe

(Norwich Castle Museum Accession No. 2000.99.1:A)

This Palaeolithic handaxe was discovered in March 2000 by a member of the public walking his dog on Happisburgh beach and was subsequently reported to experts at the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service. The handaxe is knapped from black flint and is in mint condition, apart from an ancient break at the butt end. The handaxe measures 128mm x 79mm x 37mm and would have been used for a wide range of cutting, chopping and butchery tasks.¹

This handaxe was not the first example of the type to be discovered – artefacts of this kind have frequently been picked up on the beaches of north-east Norfolk² – but, crucially, it was the first to be discovered still embedded its original archaeological context. That context was the Cromer Forest Bed, a dark fossil-rich deposit which lies buried beneath the sands on the beach and is therefore older than the cliffs themselves. On the basis of its location and the circumstances of its discovery, a date of 700,000 years old was suggested for the handaxe, making it one of the oldest human artefacts to have been discovered in Great Britain. This date also makes the handaxe contemporary with the West Runton Elephant, which was excavated on the north Norfolk coast in the early 1990s.³

Word of the discovery spread quickly and a flurry of archaeological activity ensued in and around Happisburgh as the hunt for further evidence of early human occupation began in earnest. Subsequent excavations undertaken on Happisburgh beach by the Ancient Human Occupation of Britain project between 2005 and 2010 have recovered further flint tools and butchered animal bone potentially as much as 950,000 years old, making them the earliest evidence for human occupation so far discovered in northern Europe.⁴

Dr Richard Hoggett (Norfolk Historic Environment Service)

Dr Richard Hoggett obtained his PhD from UEA in 2007 and is the co-author, with Mary Trett, of *The Book of Happisburgh* (Halsgrove, 2011).

¹<http://www.culturalmodes.norfolk.gov.uk/projects/nmaspub5.asp?page=item&itemId=NWHCM : 2000.99.1 : A>

²Robins, P., Wymer, J.J. and Parfitt, S.A. 2009. 'Handaxe finds on the Norfolk Beaches', *Norfolk Archaeology* 45(iii), 412–15.

³http://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/Research/Collections/Geology_Collections/West_Runton_Elephant/NCC083746

⁴Parfitt, S.A., Ashton, N.M., Lewis, S.G., et al. 2010. 'Early Pleistocene human occupation at the edge of the boreal zone in northwest Europe', *Nature* 466, 229–33.