

Are these Britain's oldest handaxes?

Callum Wilson, UCL visiting researcher at Torquay Museum:

Among the many objects cared for by Torquay Museum are artefacts found at the nearby site of Kents Cavern.

The cave system contains layers of sediment that include the remains of human activity stretching back thousands of years: to the Romans, Neolithic farming people, and even before the last ice age, a period known to archaeologists as the Palaeolithic-old Stone Age.

During the 1870s, William Pengelly and a team of local excavators systematically dug up these sediments by candlelight, discovering many bones of now-extinct animals like scimitar-toothed cats and cave bear, in association with unmistakably human-made stone tools.

This was proof of mankind's presence in deep geological time.

These artefacts include a group of large cutting tools used in butchery that archaeologists confusingly call handaxes.

Handaxes are the iconic artefact of the Acheulean stone tool industry, made and used by

Callum Wilson, UCL visiting researcher at Torquay Museum

ancient humans for close to a million years.

While handaxes conform to a basic shape, each is unique in exact form.

Nonetheless, during the British Palaeolithic several shapes occur frequently at sites.

Due to Britain's changing status as an island or peninsula in the deep past, many groups of ancient humans came and went before the last ice age.

During cold periods when much of northern Europe was covered by ice sheets, Britain was uninhabited.

Handaxe-making groups occupied Britain during several of the intervening warm periods.

Recent research has shown that during each occupation, there was a preference for a particular shape when making their handaxes, with preferences akin to the popular



The Kents Cavern handaxes on display in the Ancestors Gallery

Picture: TORQUAY MUSEUM

fashion of today: oval handaxes were all the rage in one warm period, while in a later period pointed shapes were the talk of the town.

In the beginning, hand-axe using groups spread across Europe rapidly, bringing with them new technologies like clothing, hunting weapons and stone tools like handaxes, as well as less tangible social developments affecting their way of life.

These technological and social innovations are thought to have allowed these ancient humans to confidently adapt to the environments they encountered and endure the harsh climate of ancient Britain.

Yet the earliest securely-dated handaxe sites in Britain are

500,000 years old, roughly 100,000 years younger than the earliest sites in northern France.

Using the knowledge of handaxe fashions established in Britain's handaxe record, and a 3-D laser scanner, it seems this mysterious gap is being filled.

The handaxes in Torquay Museum from Kents Cavern are much older than most of the handaxes in the UK.

Around 450,000 years ago, a great ice sheet covered most of Britain.

The ice-free south didn't escape the cold and was a freezing Arctic desert.

During this time, the handaxes left by a group of ancient humans became worked into sediment which accumulated in Kents Cavern.

Results from my research suggest that the handaxes found in Kents Cavern were likely lying at the surface for much longer than originally thought.

Comparison with handaxes from other sites older than 450,000 years ago suggests they were made by a group in Britain 600,000 years ago, meaning they reflect the earliest occupation of handaxe groups in Britain.

The handaxes from Kents Cavern held by Torquay Museum therefore date back to first arrival of handaxe groups in Britain, at over half a million years old, they provide a link to the wild, cold world inhabited by some of the earliest Britons.

These handaxes are currently on display in the Ancestors Gallery.

Second plaque to honour Peter Cook - this time, his lifelong support of Torquay United Football Club

Having found and spoken to Ian Hislop, editor of Private Eye and presenter of TV's Have I Got News For You, he kindly provided me with the private telephone number of Peter Cook's widow, Lin.

This led to my first meeting with Lin in London to organise our first blue plaque to comedian and writer Peter at his birthplace Villa Shearbridge, today Kinbrea, in Middle Warberry Road, Torquay.

On re-meeting Lin again in Torquay and with the first plaque unveiled, later in London we started to discuss a second plaque, although on this occasion I knew it was unlikely Lin would be able to join us at Torquay United Football Club for the ceremony to honour Peter, a one-time chairman of the Gulls' Junior Football Sports Club.

As a lifelong supporter of the football club, Peter would often be seen on television sporting the famous yellow scarf and, on one occasion in 1989, even joining the fans at the Wembley Stadium for the Sherpa Van

Torbay's blue plaques by Ian Handford, chairman of Torbay Civic Society. This week: Peter Cook

Trophy final against Bolton Wanderers.

Peter Edward Cook was born at Shearbridge on November 17, 1937, the first of three children of Ethel C Margaret and Alexander Cook.

His two sisters Sarah and Elizabeth later confirmed: "Peter was incredibly idealistic... very tense but brilliant and that brilliance was magnetic. We lived together in a single room in this defunct old pub and gave dinner parties where it was non-stop monologue with Peter having everybody rolling around."

But Peter Cook was also a loner, wanting nothing more than being the centre of attraction without which as he said - 'he was nothing'.

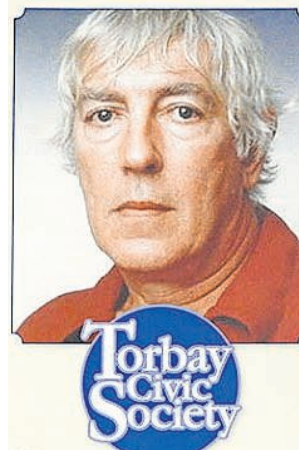
He married three times, Wendy Snowden, then Judy Huxtable, who was 'a living sex symbol he now owned' who actually divorced him and said of this: "I recognised this was a punishment for challenging what he wanted and his control over me."

Then finally, Lin Chong, who, unlike his other wives, accepted Peter's 'funny quirks' and knew he would always be attracted to pretty young women, which is why they lived separately in properties 100 yards apart in London.

Lin first came to Torbay in 1989, when she and Peter attended Oldway Registry Office for the wedding.

Afterwards, they remained in Torquay for a week, on honeymoon. Years later, Peter penned a limerick to Lin, which I think is worth including:

*There was a young lady called Lin
The nicest that ever has bin,
She wasted her life, being*



Torbay Civic Society's Peter Cook pamphlet

*Peter Cooks wife,
But that isn't really a sin.
The atrabillious man from
Torquay*

*Was affected by melancholy,
But his bile and his spleen and
the bits in-between
Felt much better with wife
number three.*

With the second blue plaque, details agreed in London and Worthing, Lin and her daughter visited us there, as Pat and I gave a whole day for that visit, before returning them to their London train.

Sadly, we could not know, this would be the last time we would ever spoke to her, as sometime later Lin suffered a stroke from which she never recovered.

The plaque unveiling ceremony was undertaken by the chairman of Torbay Council Ray Hill and his escort on November 21, 2015.

All attending were then allowed into Plainmoor before refreshments were served.

The pamphlet 'Peter Cook and Torquay United' is available by sending two second class stamps and a stamped addressed envelope to Torbay Civic Society, 4 Palace Avenue Business Centre, Paignton TQ3 3HA