

AWG meeting, Worcester Woods, 29th June 2019

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The UK Archaeobotany Work Group (AWG) spring meeting was held in Worcester Woods Country Park on 29th June 2019, hosted by Liz Pearson, Senior Environmental Archaeologist at Worcestershire Archaeology. This was a hands-on meeting with the theme of plant textiles and dye plants which got us all thinking about what stages of fibre production or dyeing we might recognise in archaeobotanical samples. Liz is a keen allotment cultivator, spinner and textile crafter, as well as an active member of the AWG, and had brought along a range of tools and plant products associated with textile production, including bundles of flax which had been dew retted (bought from Flaxland <http://www.flaxland.co.uk/>) and home grown flax Liz had water retted herself in a water-butt; water retted flax produces a paler colour, while dew retted is more silvery. Members of the group had at a go at breaking or 'beetling' the retted stems (all using the dew retted material), followed by scotching and combing, then Liz demonstrated wheel spinning and we struggled with hand spinning. At each stage we thought about the by-products and products as well as the tools used.

The stages of flax processing are well established, but it was interesting to hear from Liz some different terminology, in part reflecting geographical differences. The stages as given by Pals and Dierendonk (1988) are shown in the table with local terms in italics.

Process	Purpose	Product/Waste
Pulling	Harvest	
Drying	Stiffening up the fibres	
Beating	Removal of capsules	Crushed capsules, seeds, weeds and their seeds
Rippling	Removal of capsules with a comb	Whole capsules, seeds, weeds and their seeds
Retting (dew or water)	Breaks down pectin in the bast by bacterial action	Retting pits with water – detritus rotting flax remnants, water plants; settlement noise
Drying		
Breaking, <i>Beetling</i>	Separation of the wood parts from the bast fibres	Bast remnants; wood parts ("scheven", "shive" or "boon")
Swingling, <i>Scutching</i>	Cleaning out bits of stem by beating and combine	Bast remnants; wood parts ("scheven", "shive" or "boon")
Hackling	Cleaning and carding (combing)	Dust and small wood particles. Fibres include the <i>strict</i> or <i>line</i> (combed line flax) and <i>tow</i> (short lengths of line flax).
Spinning, weaving, dyeing etc	Fibres can be spun from a dressed distaff held over the shoulder, or from the lap. Lengths of fibre can be <i>spliced</i> together using water or saliva	

After lunch there was a microscope session: Gill Campbell showed the group a range of animal and plant fibres under the high powered microscope, demonstrating the differences between animal and plant fibres, and we had time to show each other mystery seeds and get help with identification. It was an extremely hot day but terrific fun, and it was really useful to be able to visualise the various stages and the by-products/products they produce. Many thanks to Liz, and to Worcester Woods Country Park.

References

Pals, J. P. and van Dierendonck, M. C. 1988 Between Flax and Fabric: Cultivation and Processing of Flax in a Mediaeval Peat Reclamation Settlement Near Midwoud (Prov. Noord Holland) , *Journal of Archaeological Science* **15**,237-251

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