

IDENTIFICATIONS OF WOOD AND CHARCOAL FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES.

Types of samples.

Wood and charcoal (i.e. burnt wood) occur commonly on archaeological sites. Charred wood consists almost entirely of carbon, and therefore does not suffer biological degradation. It is affected by mechanical breakdown only. However, unburned wood provides a suitable substrate for the activities of decay organisms such as fungi and bacteria. Therefore it is only preserved in unusual circumstances. On some sites, timber is preserved by waterlogging, as at Carlisle. On other sites, wood is preserved where it has been in contact with a metal such as iron or copper, as at Chertford, Wicken Bonhunt, and Mucking.

Preparation and identification of samples.

The degree of success in identification of wood depends mainly on its state of preservation. The structure of burnt wood is often perfectly preserved, and identification may be made by observation of a freshly fractured surface under reflected light. The condition of unburned wood is much more variable. The structure of waterlogged wood may be well preserved, but sometimes apparently well preserved wood displays very little structure at a microscopic level.

It is usually necessary to obtain thin sections of wood to allow identification. These can be very difficult to obtain when the material is very soft. It is often possible to harden the wood sufficiently for sectioning by soaking in 70-90% IMS.

Waterlogged wood is often compressed and distorted. The structure may be revived sufficiently for identification by treating the sections on the microscope slide with strong sodium hypochlorite solution, followed by washing with distilled water. This treatment was successful with the Catterick wood, but over treatment results in destruction of the sample.

Occasionally, the wood (usually dry samples) is very hard. It may be softened by boiling a small cube of the wood about 0.5cm. square in water until it sinks, and then soaking in 50% alcohol (eg methylated spirits), 50% glycerine for about 72 hours.

Wood which has been preserved by contact with iron is often extremely difficult to identify. The iron corrosion products may completely mask the wood structure. It may sometimes be possible to remove some of this iron with EDTA. However, often there is no wood remaining, as they have been completely replaced by iron corrosion products. Very little microscopic detail is preserved, and identification is correspondingly difficult. It is virtually impossible to section this iron impregnated wood, so identification must be based on the appearance under reflected light.

It is to be hoped that future work with the newly acquired scanning electron microscope will help overcome some of the problems mentioned above.

Interpretation of results.

It is extremely difficult to reconstruct past environmental conditions from a list of wood identifications. This is because wood was often selected for a particular purpose (eg lighting a fire, making artefacts). Therefore, the sample often will not directly represent the proportions of species once growing in the vicinity of the site. Also, the introduction of timbers from further afield cannot be ruled out. However, it is sometimes possible to make tentative environmental suggestions, particularly when many large samples are identified (see Grimes Graves, environmental series 12/74), or when the identifications may be considered in the light of other environmental evidence.

Wood has often formed part of an artefact (eg at Mucking, Carlisle, Little Waltham).

Identification of these samples therefore yields technological information. Occasionally, it is possible to obtain some idea of the type of structure which a few wood remnants once formed a part of (eg. at Chelmsford).

Information is sometimes obtained indicating the selective use of different timbers for lighting and maintaining a fire. (for example, at Gussage All Saints).

Wood identification may be of practical use; for example, at Westow, identification of the burnt timbers of an Anglo-Saxon house allowed a copy to be built, utilising the correct timbers for each part of the structure.

ANCIENT MONUMENTS LABORATORY

MATERIAL CHARCOAL

MOOR GREEN 1961

SITE: (DATE:

1

SHEET:

AM No	X-Ray No	Photo No	Description and Report	Ref No
	"small pit in ancient surface, S. section."		Oak	① (14' fr. LXX 19' 9" fr. L)
735960			Oak	② sample 1
735961			Oak	② sample 2
735962			Oak	② sample 3
735963		"from pit E. cutting N. face Ancient A1 horizon"	Oak	② sample 4
	Oak		② sample 5	
735965	"west trench, surface scatter."		Mostly pine Few oak fragments	③
The charcoal in sample ③ is largely twiggy. All of the other samples consist almost entirely of charcoal from larger timbers.				
Carole A. Keegan				