

Brandon – Lingheath flint-knappers

The flint mines at Lingheath, SSE of Brandon, were well described by Geological Survey Officer S B J Skertchly in 1893 and by H Dixon Hewitt\* in 1924 (Proc. Geol. Assoc.) who stated that the shafts and sections were only accessible to a miner or an athlete even when open. The series of flint beds (the 'Brandon Flint Series') are listed below: they were from 4 inches to 1 foot thick and the Chalk between the flints 4 – 9 feet thick.

'Horns' flint – small.

'Toppings' or 'Topstone' flint – 'hobbly'; persistent bed.

First Pipe-Clay – thin marl (marl bands were locally termed 'pipe-clay').

'Upper Crust' flints – used rough (not faced) as building stone; discontinuous bed.

Second Pipe-Clay

'Wall Stone' flint – 'flaked well'; discontinuous bed.

Third Pipe-Clay

'Floorstone' flint – most gun-flints made from these flints; persistent bed.

'Rough' and 'Smooth Blackstone' flints – smooth blacks were some of the best working flints but occurred sparingly.

In the early 1800s Brandon flint-knappers and miners supplied the British Army with millions of gun flints (used in the firing mechanisms of muskets). Some Brandon flint-knappers also made 'facsimile models' of flint implements; in the Gentleman's Magazine of October 1857 a correspondent (from Ipswich) mentions that flint arrows and spear-heads were being manufactured at Brandon, and that a person from Brandon ('a rogue') had been travelling with specimens, many of which he had succeeded in selling ('to collectors of antiquities'). In the 1920s Bill Basham of Town Street, Brandon, had his own method of working flint and produced the alphabet in flint (in the Ancient House Museum in Thetford) and a flint necklace (in Moyses Hall Museum in Bury St Edmunds). In the early 1960s American flint-lock rifle shooting clubs, such as the Muzzle Loading Rifle Club of Portsmouth, Ohio, still sent their orders for flints from Brandon flint-knappers. A study by A Batty Shaw (Medical History, vol.25; 1981) of the Brandon death registers between 1838 and 1937 revealed an abnormally high mortality rate from pulmonary tuberculosis, and a short life-expectancy for knappers. The condition, a form of silicosis known as 'knappers' rot' was caused by the inhalation of fine silica (flint) dust.

\*Henry Dixon Hewitt worked as a chemist at Fisons at Thetford and studied the Chalk beds of the district.

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