

SUMMER 2008

CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Borras Dig



BORRAS DIG 2008

Traces of a Neolithic or 'New Stone Age' settlement were discovered during topsoil stripping for an extension to Tarmac's sand and gravel quarry at Borrás, just north-east of Wrexham in the summer of 2008. Quarrying was temporarily suspended to allow archaeologists from the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust to excavate the site. The remains date to a period between about four and a half to five and a half thousand years ago.

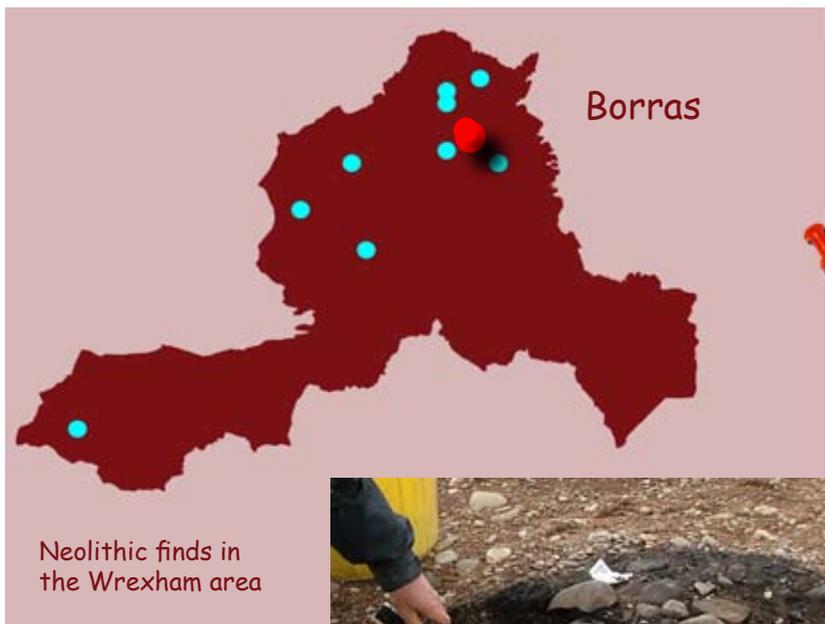
Early in 2008 work began on extending the sand and gravel quarry at Borrás in the community of Holt. As the topsoil was being removed prehistoric pits dug into the surface of the gravel began to appear. Fragments of decorated Neolithic pottery were found in some of the pits, showing that what had been revealed was potentially one of the earliest settlement sites known in the Wrexham area.

Between late June and the end of July Tarmac called a temporary halt to work in part of the quarry to allow archaeologists to fully investigate the site before it was lost.



Above: aerial view of part of the sand and gravel quarry at Borrás in 2008.

Left: excavations in progress on the Neolithic pits discovered during topsoil stripping.



Neolithic finds in the Wrexham area

Right: one of the distinctive Neolithic 'cooking pits' dug into the gravel surface at Borrás, filled with charcoal and fire-cracked stones.



By the end of the dig about 30 'cooking pits' as well as many other features had been found. Some contained large quantities of charcoal and fire-cracked stones and seem likely to represent an ancient method of cooking by which heated stones were packed around a pot in the middle of the pit then sealed over to allow the food inside the pot to cook slowly. Some pits of this kind may also have been used for firing pottery, though there is no direct evidence that this happened at Borrás.

The pits fell into a number of distinct clusters suggesting several different house sites though no clear trace of original buildings themselves were identified. The buildings are likely to have been roundhouses built of wooden stakes which left little trace in the loose gravel surface.

A number of other Neolithic finds have been found by chance in the the Wrexham area, including polished stone axes from Holt and the neighbouring communities of Rossett, Gresford and Acton. The Borrás site is important in being the first time that an actual settlement site has been identified in the area.

The dig caused a flurry of interest in the media over the summer, being covered by ITV Wales, S4C, BBC Radio Wales, BBC Radio 2, as well as a number of papers including the Wrexham and the Chester Evening Leader, The Wrexham Leader, Wrexham Mail and the Liverpool Daily Post.

Richard Hulse, Tarmac’s Estates & Geology Manager for the North West commented “We are delighted to have facilitated the discovery of a site of such important archaeological significance during the course of our operations. This finds demonstrates how close cooperation between Tarmac and our consultant archaeologists has enabled us to record and assess the site as part of our environmental management commitments”.

“a groundbreaking discovery”

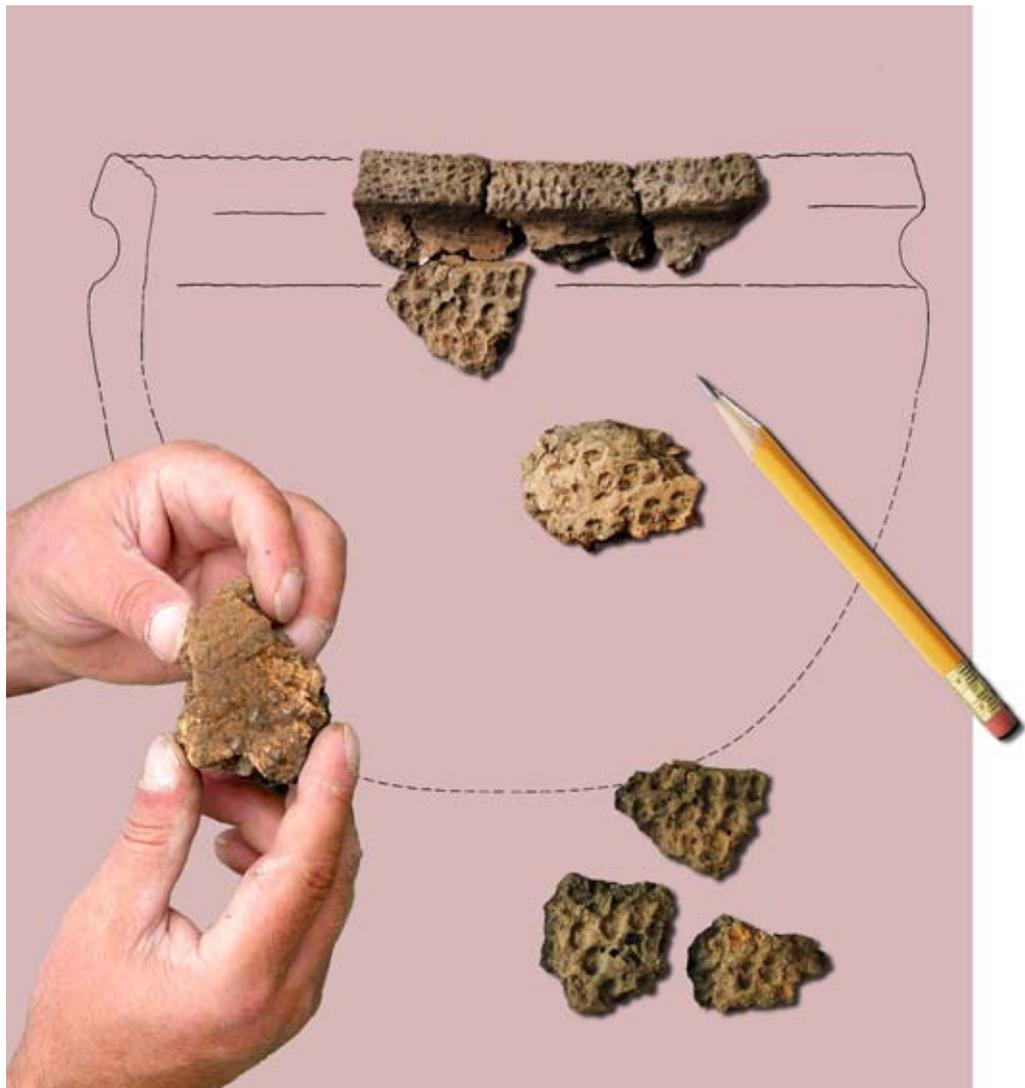
Visiting the dig the MP for Wrexham, Ian Lucas, praised Tarmac for allowing the work to take place. Talking after his visit to the site he said “It really was a fascinating visit . . . the site is a groundbreaking discovery”. Mr Lucas went on to say “I was very impressed with Tarmac’s attitude towards the site. I believe the way Tarmac has provided support for the work has proved vital and they should be commended for this”.





***Left:** Archaeologist Ian Grant of CPAT being interviewed about the Borras dig by ITV Wales. **Above:** Visit to the site by Wrexham's MP, Ian Lucas **Right:** fragments of Neolithic pottery from at Borras. The pots are decorated with impressions arranged in lines or in 'herringbone' designs.*





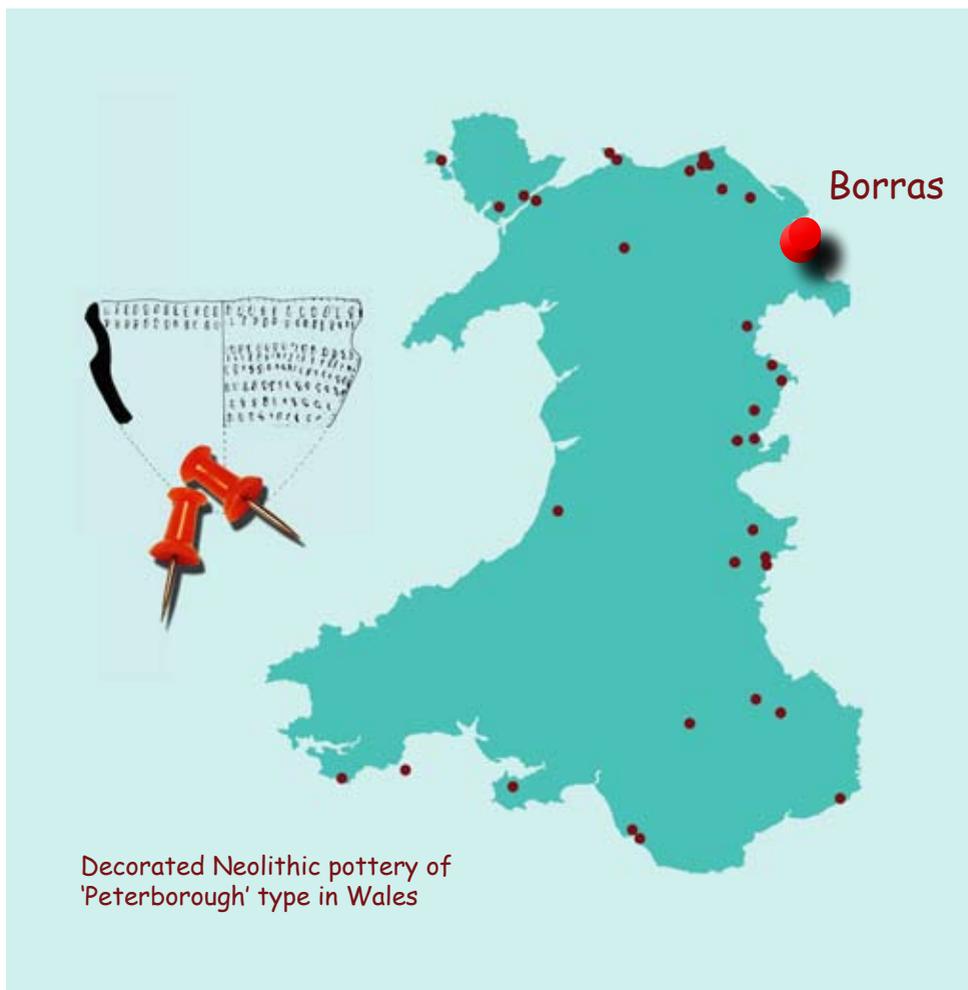
Fragments of a number of Neolithic pots were found in the pits at Borrás. These had been decorated with bird bones and either a fine comb or twisted cord arranged in lines or in 'herringbone' patterns, pressed into the surface of the damp clay before firing. These distinctive vessels – with a pinched-in neck and a thick collar around the top – are known as 'Impressed Ware' or 'Peterborough Ware', after the Northamptonshire site where similar pottery was found. This style of pottery has been shown to have been made in the middle and later Neolithic periods, between about 3500 and 2500 BC.

Piecing together the fragments shows that there were some larger pots just under 30 centimetres (12 inches) across as well as at least one smaller vessel only half that size, with

rounded bases, pinched-in necks and thickened rims. The inner surfaces of some of the vessels was very worn, suggesting that they had been heavily used, probably for cooking.

Like similar pottery found elsewhere, chips of stone including quartz had been added to the clay, probably to help them withstand being heated up when they were used for cooking. Analysis of the stone added to the clay should show whether the pots were made locally, as seems likely, or whether they were brought to the site from somewhere else.

Similar pottery is known from a growing number of sites in Wales, generally either around the coast or in the river valleys along the borderland. The distribution suggests that at this early date permanent settlements were focused on the lower-lying and more fertile soils, and largely avoided the more mountainous uplands in the heart of Wales.



Decorated Neolithic pottery of 'Peterborough' type in Wales



As usual, there was still plenty left to do after the end of the dig. Charcoal samples from the pits will be sent for radiocarbon dating, to help us date the Borras settlement more precisely. Charred plant remains will be analysed in the hope of telling us something about the natural environment in the Borras area about 5,000 years ago and about the diet of the Neolithic people living there. Study of the rock inclusions in the pottery should also tell us where it was made. We are hopeful that further exciting evidence of early settlement at Borras will come to light when the quarry is extended in future years.

The Trust is grateful to Tarmac for all the help and support it has given during the Borras dig.



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