

The Maple Avenue Horse Mystery

By Mike James and Stephen Vincent

The fields that once formed Maze Green lie between Bishop's Stortford College on Maze Green Road at the foot of the slope and the Fire Station on Hadham Road at its brow. In the 19th century Maze Green supported a dairy farm, which came up for development (a familiar story!). In 1909 the site was cleared for building and landscaped for the Maple Avenue roadway. During site preparation the local builder, Joseph Dorrington Day, unearthed uphill from Maple Avenue a complete horse skeleton.

At this time, archaeological and geological investigations were flourishing because, as our Museum testifies, the glacial and gravel soils in our region contain much animal and human evidence of our prehistory. The Rev. Alex Irving, Vicar of All Saints Hockerill, was a local naturalist often writing to the newspaper about excavations and findings and was fascinated by the discovery. Thus photographs were taken and the terrain investigated.

Irving found that a spring had cut back into the London Clay beneath, its banks had subsided and (he reported) ponded back the water in early post-glacial times, producing a bog in which the horse was uncovered. A 'Holocene molluscan fauna' was discovered in the bog silt, so indicating an age of up to 10,000 years or so. However, within this silt was a complex mixture of Palaeolithic and Neolithic flint implements and cores, fragments of baking tiles, pottery (Neolithic and Bronze periods), primitive bricks moulded by human hand and an ingot of crude bronze. Later landslips had buried the animal, including the vegetable contents of the paunch, reduced to the state of peat. At first Irving believed this was a prehistoric horse with similarities to other ancient remains. His findings were presented to the British Association in 1910 and 1911. A further belief was that the horse was Iron Age in date and it was on this understanding that it was displayed for a time at the Natural History Museum, London.

The discovery prompted the following verse to be printed in the Globe newspaper*

Do not repine because you're dead,
You are a lucky quadruped.
In finishing before the frost,
You've gained much more than you have
lost.

If you had lived until today,
Untouched by Bishop's Stortford clay
(which is described as pliocene),
Oh, How unhappy you'd have been!

Ask each contemporary horse,
My words he quickly will endorse:
Unlike pre-glacial days of old,
To-day would leave you in the cold.

You used to boast of strength and speed,
My ancient pliocenic steed,
Who never heard, embalmèd brute,
The equine knell, the motor's hoot.



In his later publications, Irving back-tracked on the evidence. The skeleton is now in Bishop's Stortford Museum. It is of a horse that would have stood 4-5 feet tall at the shoulder. The bones are stained and old, but robust and - judging by their condition - appear Mediaeval rather than prehistoric. How the horse come to end up where it did is entirely a matter of speculation.

The horse skull is currently on display at the Bishop's Stortford Museum in the Rhodes Arts Complex.

*Thursday Evening 20 May 1909, p1: "Nature Studies. The Pre-Glacial Horse.
[The remains of a horse of the pre-glacial period have been found embedded in the pliocene clay at Bishop's Stortford.]"

Researched and written by Stephen Vincent and Mike James.

Stephen is retired and has volunteered at the museum for five years, and worked for another museum prior to Bishop's Stortford. He has a lifelong interest in geology, archaeology and history and over the years has undertaken extensive fieldwork and associated research.

Mike has volunteered at the museum since 2009, helping to catalogue the collection among many other things. He has written articles about local history for the Herts and Essex Observer, contributed to the book 'Stortford Histories' published in 2012; and most recently helped to revise the Town Trails available from the Tourist Information Centre in Market Square.