

REPORT

The Deeping Elephant

In July 1996, a field excursion by members of Stamford and District Geological Society visited the gravel pit at Deeping Bank, near the village of Deeping St. James about 5 miles north of Peterborough. The gravels are of fluvial origin and mainly date from the last (late Devensian) glacial period. However, a bed of clay and silt underlying the gravels is believed to have been deposited during the preceding (Ipswichian) interglacial, when the climate of the British Isles was substantially warmer than at present. One of the aims of the excursion was to find vertebrate remains; Pleistocene fossils had been found previously at the pit and, with 24 pairs of eyes searching, there was a real possibility of revealing more. Sure enough, Pauline Dawn unearthed an interesting bone fragment which proved to be part of the shattered tusk of an elephant.

Over the next two weeks, further digging by Society members revealed more of the skeleton, including a second tusk, unearthed by EMGS member Judy Small. When part of the skull and mandible were found, both with teeth *in situ*, Alan Dawn identified the beast as a straight-tusked elephant, *Palaeoloxodon antiquus*. This identification

was later confirmed by Dr Anthony Stuart of the Norfolk County Museums Service. Judging from the size of the skeleton, Dr Stuart has inferred that the elephant was a female between 30 and 40 years old, and therefore not quite fully grown.

The clay and silt bed was deposited in an abandoned river channel; perhaps the animal may have become trapped when crossing the river. Work is in hand on the mollusc and insect fauna and on the palaeobotany and palynology, with the aim of determining more precisely the age and palaeo-environment. Thermoluminescence dating of the bones themselves has yielded an approximate age of 117,000 years BP, consistent with the supposed Ipswichian age of the channel.

The remains have been placed in the Peterborough City Museum, the nearest and most appropriate place for them. The museum has the facilities and expertise to carry out the necessary conservation work. Although only 25 percent of the skeleton has been recovered, the good preservation of parts of the head mean that the Deeping elephant will rival in importance the well-known Upnor (Kent) and Aveley (Essex) skeletons. Conservation and casting of the bones is currently in progress, and it is hoped to put the skeleton on public display by the summer of 1999.

Alan Dawn

