

Snail stuff

Why Snails and Molluscs?
What's the Snail About?

If you want to know about snail sampling and analysis services I can provide then please look at land snails under the AEA Services page. If, however, you just wish to know more about snails and me, then read on.

Those who don't know me may ask what's all this about snails. My email is 'escargots' and the domain name is 'themolluscs' – and the snail logo?

There are about 118 species of snail (and slug) in the British fauna. They frequent different habitats, and although no individual species is habitat-specific, the examination of an assemblage (palaeo-faunal collection), may enable the nature of the past vegetation cover, and thus the landscape characteristics, to be determined. We can define the broad differences between open country, rock rubble and woodland habitats, but detailed analysis (including a good pedological/sedimentary record may allow us to distinguish between arable land, short-turfed (ie, grazed) grassland pasture, meadowland, long/ rough pasture within in the open country class. We can distinguish between open woodland and full canopy closed woodland, and deciduous woodland with leaf litter on the other hand. Changes in these environments may represent clearance or abandonment (vegetation regeneration) which provide the important setting for prehistoric activity.

It is also possible to define if ditches or pits held water, and if water-courses held fast flowing well-oxygenated water over clean stony beds, or were slow flowing sluggish streams with muddy reedy beds.

The analysis of land snails can be a powerful tool in interpreting human activity in the past, and for placing sites and activity into the contemporaneous landscapes. But normally this requires the collection and processing of a number of samples, the extraction of shells (ideally in excess of 100-200 per sample), their identification, analysis and interpretation. The snails and fragments of snails are microscopic so take up little space; a single sample of 1kg (size of bag of sugar) can hold between nil and as many as several thousand shells! But every archaeological shell fragment is irreplaceable – so care is taken to identify, count and bottle up each set of specimens.

Other Snails

So it takes lots of snails to do this work. Although I bred the edible snails (*Helix pomatia*) for while, many years ago, I do still have a couple of pet 'wild' ones in our garden today. But the garden and house are 'crawling' with other snails. These vary from a large variety of wooden, glass, ceramic and metal snail ornaments, to coasters, mugs, pictures, beanie toys, books (academic, antiquarian and children's), toys, napkin rings, condiment sets, wine stoppers, slippers, stickers, notepaper, fridge magnets, plates, bowls, clocks, lights, candlesticks and drinking straws. Even the garden and summerhouse have concrete, ceramic or metal snails in the form of garden ornaments, plant pots, solar powered lights and a snail bell for the summer house and even a commissioned sculpture in the garden!

Eating Snails

As alluded to above, I did used to farm the edible (apple or Roman) snail, to sell to the restaurant market in southern England (London and Sussex). Although I no longer run this enterprise, snails are still a favourite delicacy – fresh cooked with garlic and basil, and with a glass of a good sturdy red wine (a burgundy to accompany the burgundian snail!)

Other snail stuff can be found on the Conchological Society website. This includes their trips and lectures and identification information as well as fun pages of cartoons and jokes. Their newsletter 'Mollusc World' has included how to make marzipan snails!

The Snail Logo

The AEA logo was originally designed by David Allen for my dry valley excavation project at Ashcombe Bottom in 1984 (offprints for sale see AEA shop). It was inspired by my obvious interest in snails in archaeology, and by the sculpture of an ammonite at the mouth of the Cuillfail Tunnel, Lewes that was locally known as 'Brian the Snail'. Signs to the excavation bore purely the snail logo so as not to encourage the general public to the excavation and to cross private farmland. The logo was used on project stationary and information sheets. Since then it was re-instated with on new signs to point visitors to our wedding breakfast and wedding celebrations over nine years ago. The signs have subsequently been used to direct visitors to gatherings at home, and this year (2007) returned to Ashcombe Bottom where I lead a guided walk for the Sussex Archaeological Society and The Prehistoric Society.

More about land mollusc analysis in archaeology

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