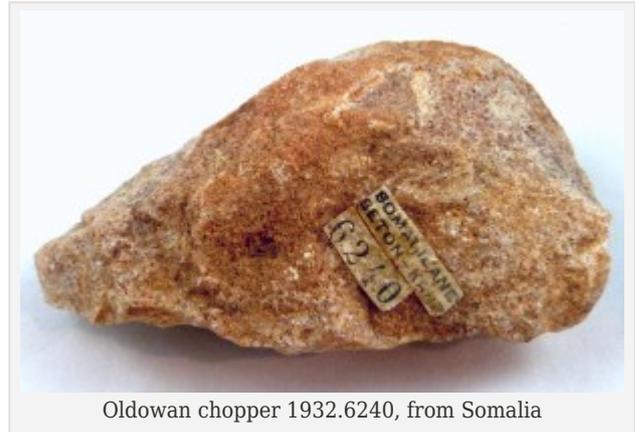


If you thought the last one was old... try this!

While looking out some unprovenanced stone tools this morning, I was intrigued to find a rather unusual stone tool. Removing it from the box, I saw that its label said that it was from Somaliland (now Somalia) and recalled that the Accessions Register for Letchworth Museum records the donation of six stone tools from there. The most striking aspect of this tool is that although it is clearly a product of human workmanship, it is quite unlike any other stone tool I have ever handled.

The tool is not made from flint or from any of the igneous rocks sometimes employed (especially for making polished stone tools in the Neolithic and Bronze Age) but from a highly granular quartz-rich pinkish rock. It has been very roughly shaped from a river pebble to produce one rough cutting edge. From these characteristics, I could tell that it is probably an [Oldowan](#) tool. These are the oldest stone tools we know that humans made and date from about 2.6 to 1.7 million years ago. It seems to be associated with the earliest representatives of the genus Homo ([Homo habilis](#) and [Homo ergaster](#)) and perhaps with [Australopithecus garhi](#).



Oldowan chopper 1932.6240, from Somalia

So what is it doing in the collections of North Hertfordshire Museums? The Accessions Register notes that it was donated by [Heywood Walter Seton-Karr](#) (1859-1938), a soldier, explorer and big game hunter who, as an amateur archaeologist, discovered the African Palaeolithic. In a series of publications in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, he explained that they had come from a low hill on the right bank of a sand river, the Issutugan, roughly mid-way between the port of [Berbera](#) and the town of [Hargeisa](#) to the south-west. This is arid, inhospitable country that was part of the [British Protectorate of Somaliland](#) from 1888 to 1960.



The hill where this tool was found is in the centre of the photograph

Heywood Seton-Karr seems to have collected many hundreds of flints, which have ended up in [museums all over the world](#). Although some of his ideas now appear repugnant to us today (he left a bequest to the [Eugenics Society](#)), he was a man of his time whose discoveries in Africa convinced him that all humans shared a single origin (although he wrongly assumed it to have been in the East) and were thus a single race.

Even though it is not relevant to the archaeology of North Hertfordshire, it is exciting to have this sort of object in the collection, as it provides a tangible link to the very origins of human behaviour. It stands a good chance of being our oldest

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