THE QUIET MAN OF KENT: THE CONTRIBUTION OF F.C.J. SPURRELL TO THE EARLY YEARS OF PALAEOLITHIC ARCHAEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In the 1880s, Flaxman C.J. Spurrell discovered two of the most important British early Middle Palaeolithic sites: the “chipping floor” at Crayford; and the Levallois sites of the Ebbsfleet Valley, later to be known as Baker’s Hole. However, little is now known of his wider work, and he has sadly slipped into obscurity. This paper reviews the work, contemporary impact and ongoing legacy of this quiet man.

INTRODUCTION

Flaxman C.J. Spurrell (1842–1915) remains, to some extent, a shadowy figure around the margins of early Palaeolithic endeavour, but the sites he discovered still dominate research into the earlier Middle Palaeolithic of Britain. A diffident and somewhat cautious researcher, his publications are regrettably few and terse in tone, striving as he did always to present the “bare facts” of his investigations. In fact, his reserve can be seen as reflecting surprisingly modern concerns with the integrity of the material with which he dealt; whilst others sought to establish sequences (O’Connor 2007: 100) Spurrell urged caution when faced with the immense variety apparent at individual sites (cf. Spurrell 1883: 93). Instead, he concerned himself with the particular — with questions of taphonomy, of context, of methods of artefact manufacture — and sought, through experiment and refitting, to understand the evolving mind of “man”. In this article we outline Spurrell’s contribution to Palaeolithic archaeology in the late 19th century, drawing upon his publications, extant correspondence, and society reports of field trips and meetings.

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Spurrell shared his interest in all things archaeological and geological with his father, Flaxman Spurrell, a medical doctor from the poorer side of an old Norfolk family. Dr. Spurrell’s own interest in geology, and natural history more generally, reputedly began by collecting fossils from
the cliffs at Cromer, near the family home at Bessingham (Caiger 1992). His eldest son was actually christened Charles John Flaxman Spurrell, in an effort to placate his maternal grandfather, a wealthy London businessman who disapproved of his daughter’s marriage to her less well-off cousin (Caiger 1992). However, following the old man’s death in 1866, Spurrell junior changed his name to Flaxman Charles James, and together with his mother, inherited the wealth which would allow him to devote himself to his geological and archaeological studies (Caiger 1992).

Spurrell never seems to have worked, describing himself in various censuses as a “medical student” (1871 — though he never completed his studies), “geologist” (1891) or simply listing “no occupation” (1881). However, at no point does he appear to have been idle. Spurrell and his father were active participants in several newly-formed learned societies. Spurrell senior was a founder member of the West Kent Natural History, Microscopical and Photographic Society (hereafter WKPS) and served on the committee until his death in 1892, acting as president between 1864–5. He was especially interested in fungi (“Cryptogamic botany”; WKPS 1893), an interest he shared with his son who stood in for him at West Kent Cryptogamic field meetings when he was unwell (WKPS 1889: 5). An early and ongoing archaeological interest of Spurrell junior was the investigation of “deneholes” — deep shafts cut to extract chalk for field liming (Le Gear 2008). He explored and recorded many such features, pioneered the use of magnesium flash photography in their depths (see NMR FX501), and even lowered members of the Geologists’ Association down them (Holmes 1882: 400). An early photograph shows father and son (age 24, holding a ruler) reclining at the entrance to a denehole, together with Spurrell’s brothers and other members of the WKPS (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: The only known photograph of Flaxman C.J. Spurrell, together with his father, at the “four pillared pit, Stankey, Bexley” (1866, FCJS); from left to right: FJS [Spurrell senior], FS [Spurrell junior], AS [Alfred Spurrell], Capt. Popperwell [a demonstrator of chemistry at the Royal Naval College, fond of creating explosions at the WKPS], HS [Herbert Spurrell] and Sir J.M. Wilson. [ms NMR/FX/501, reproduced with the kind permission of English Heritage]](image_url)
Spurrell and his father certainly shared an interest in Pleistocene fauna and collected numerous fossil bones from the Crayford and Erith Brickearths, close to the family home in Belvedere. Whilst A.S. Kennard (1944: 9) suggests that most of the fauna from the brickearths was collected by Spurrell’s father, the Geologists’ Association attributed the material to C.J. Spurrell Esq. (Spurrell junior) in 1872 when they visited the collection at their Belvedere home (Morris 1872: 229). Spurrell seems to have been hit hard by his father’s death in 1892; the Proceedings of the WKPS for that year records that he read a paper on “True and alleged stone implements of the North Downs” on the 22\textsuperscript{nd} April 1892, but not even an abstract is provided, in contrast to papers read by others in that year.

Whilst Spurrell’s father clearly had an important impact upon his developing interests, his closest friend was the renowned Egyptologist Flinders Petrie. The pair first met in 1876 when Petrie, then only 22, exhibited measured drawings of Stonehenge at the Archaeological Institute (Caiger 1992). Spurrell was deeply impressed by Petrie’s methods, especially of recording, and sought to imitate his technique:

“Thank you very much for your card and promises of a plan — It is perfectly astonishing — the way you measure — I have with great trouble planned the camp & a thing or two near — but slowly and ill — & really you took my breath away.”

(Spurrell to Petrie 18.04.79, ms PMA/WFPI/16/5/1 [5])

Spurrell and Petrie surveyed many Kentish enclosures and monuments together, Petrie teaching Spurrell “three rod surveying” (Petrie to Spurrell 04.03.80, ms PMA/WFPI/16/2/10). On one occasion Spurrell was sent back to an enclosure near Swanscombe to finish the work, pick up the pegs, and search for a sieve mislaid by Petrie (Petrie to Spurrell 02.11.80, ms PMA/WFPI/16/2/10). Petrie frequently described his friend as “infuriating” and “provoking”; Spurrell rarely seems to have been capable of turning up anywhere on time, if at all, and appears to have been painfully shy. At Petrie’s wedding he acted as best man, though only once assured that:

“there will be no social ceremonies and performances of any kind[...\{\}You won’t be in for any more than in witnessing a will or a lease[\{\}so don’t be scared.”

(Petrie to Spurrell 22.09.97, ms PMA/WFPI/16/2/1 [3])

Once Petrie devoted himself to fieldwork in Egypt, his friend proved an invaluable asset back in England; writing cheques on Petrie’s behalf (Petrie to Spurrell 03.11.92, ms PMA/WFPI/16/2/1 [3]), receiving and storing finds (e.g. Petrie to Spurrell 17.4.80, ms NOR), as well as refitting and writing up any flint artefacts (Petrie to Spurrell 12.09.93, ms PMA/WFPI/16/2/1 [3]; Spurrell 1894). However, whilst Spurrell may have learned much from Petrie in terms of method, Petrie seems not to have acquired a reciprocal interest in the Palaeolithic; he makes no response to Spurrell’s urging that he look out for Palaeoliths when he first went to Egypt, and when invited down to view Spurrell’s floor at Crayford, makes no mention at all of it in his next letter — instead praising the “Roman Camp” at Abbey Wood they had visited on the same day. In fact, there are hints that this friendship with the supremely confident and ebullient Petrie had an adverse effect upon Spurrell, who frequently compared himself unfavourably with his friend:

“I can hardly express the obligations under which I lie to you in an antiquarian sense for the kindness & attention that you have given to my wants. Your method has given me a great insight into some requirements for the useful & trustworthy study of very difficult remains, & I feel much disappointed with myself in consequence of much that I do not do — I shall avoid matters in future that are too much for me.”
This extract comes from a letter written to Petrie within two weeks of his discovery of the floor at Crayford, and suggests that Spurrell was overwhelmed by his find — and fearful of not doing it justice. Indeed, he begged Petrie to visit the floor “as a competent observer” (Spurrell to Petrie 04.03.1880, ms PMA/WFPI/16/5/1). Given Spurrell’s apparent shyness and lack of self-confidence, it is perhaps unsurprising that he published so little, whilst doing so much.

SPURRELL AND THE “OLD MEN”

Whilst Spurrell’s archaeological and scientific tastes were wide-ranging, his work as an early Palaeolithic archaeologist stands out not only because of the sites that he recorded, but the approach he took to investigating the material he recovered. He experimented with flint knapping (Spurrell 1884), and appears to have been the first person to investigate how artefacts were made by refitting them (Spurrell 1880a, b). He was a careful and assiduous observer, and, like his west London compatriot John Allen Brown, was wealthy enough to devote his time to the detailed study of his immediate area, observing changes in accessible quarry faces and the material that came from them. For instance, when leading an excursion of the Geologists’ Association to Dartford Heath in 1891, Spurrell urged the party to travel on to Little Thurrock; the pit there was being infilled and this visit might represent a final chance to view the exposures (Spurrell 1891: 194).

Spurrell, along with other noteworthy characters such as Brown, Benjamin Harrison and Worthington Smith, was one of a new breed of Victorian enthusiasts. The latter part of the nineteenth century witnessed a mushrooming of local societies devoted to all manner of scientific endeavour (O’Connor 2007: 76) and several societies of which Spurrell was a member formed during this period: the Kent Archaeological Society (1858); West Kent Natural History, Microscopical and Photographic Society (1859); and the rather less spectacularly named Essex Field Club (1880). Whereas previously Evans and Prestwich had urged these Victorian scientists to seek implements from British gravels on a par with those from Abbeville (O’Connor 2007: 83), by the 1880s the antiquity of man was widely accepted. Such artefacts — and evidence for this distant period — were highly prized by members of these learned societies. Individuals like Spurrell, who were able to devote themselves to Palaeolithic research during its earliest years, were in a privileged position, and were greatly appreciated by those who relied on their conclusions; in his Geological Memoire of London, Whitaker fully acknowledges his debt to “those useful local observers” (Whitaker 1889: 382). Fully mechanised quarrying was years away, and quarrymen themselves became adept at recognising artefacts, which could be sold as a valuable financial bonus. The late nineteenth century therefore witnessed the discovery of many of the sites which still dominate Palaeolithic research in Britain.

Two of Spurrell’s best-known sites — Ebbsfleet (Spurrell 1883; 1884) and Crayford (Spurrell 1880a, b) — are still particularly important to early Middle Palaeolithic research, and he is most closely associated with his discoveries at Crayford. Spurrell and his father had devoted much time to searching the brick pits of the Crayford–Erith area for fossils, but the first artefact to come from them was a single flake published by the Reverend Osmund Fisher in 1872 (Fisher 1872). Flakes from these deposits were important at the time because the “trail” which caps the brickearths was assumed to be glacial in origin, and thus they demonstrated the existence of “Pre-Glacial Man” (O’Connor 2007: 40). Spurrell had noticed flakes within the Crayford brickearths before 1880, but had dismissed them as being derived from
elsewhere:

“Believing from their shape, colour, and mineral condition that they had come from another stratum of the river deposits”

(Spurrell 1880a: 544)

He was extremely concerned with establishing how particular bones and artefacts became incorporated within ancient deposits; this preoccupation with context appears repeatedly in Spurrell’s articles and letters.

On the 4th March 1880, Spurrell wrote excitedly to Petrie to tell him of a new and very different find:

“suppose a cliff of chalk; — above a flint mine, — below a beach of hard sand, on the sand a layer of beautiful flakes. As this lies now, the river has covered up the flakes with more sand and bones of extinct animals — the whole is like a picture. — No time is to be lost for the men of the pit are desirous of carrying off the bones & the sand is falling over the flakes[...]for the next 3 or four days I must keep watch on my remarkable find as I have written to ask John Evans to come & see them.”

(Spurrell to Petrie 04.03.1880, ms PMA/WFPI/16/5/1)

Petrie was one of the first people to visit the site, and whilst not personally very interested in it, urged Spurrell to ensure that others visited — mentioning, as well as Evans (whose presence Spurrell had already invoked): Franks, Tylor, Braebrooke and Lane-Fox (Petrie to Spurrell 09.04.1880, ms PMA/WFPI/16/2/1). Spurrell may have taken photographs in an effort to record the site; an archive photograph at the British Museum, Franks House (Figure 2) shows the densely-packed layer of flint sloping down from the chalk cliff within the brickearths, the section having recently collapsed. Spurrell was certainly a keen photographer, and an album of his photographs is held by English Heritage (ms NMR/FX/501). Almost
immediately, Spurrell began refitting the material he collected from the site. By mid-April, refitting was fully underway, and Spurrell continued to revisit the section; indeed, Petrie felt obliged to return to Spurrell a flake he had carried away to aid the process (Petrie to Spurrell 17.04.80, ms NOR).

Spurrell was swift to publicise his find, and scrupulous in his descriptions of it; he presented his results to the Geological Society four months after he first made the discovery (23rd June 1880) and then to the Archaeological Institute (1st July 1880). Both papers give very detailed descriptions of the site; a hard sandy “beach” below a chalk cliff, adjacent to a band of flint weathering out of the chalk and used as raw material.

Spurrell’s observations are meticulous, and he was careful to lay out all he had seen before drawing conclusions. These papers indicate an explicit concern with understanding site formation processes:

“All the edges are perfectly sharp; this would not have been the case had they been rolled or rubbed over each other”

(Spurrell 1880b: 296)

Spurrell also suggests that the cliff was repeatedly visited as a “chipping ground” where flint was available, noting that other layers, apart from his main floor, were visible above and below it (Spurrell 1880a: 546; 1880b: 297). His concern for accurately establishing context extends to the fauna from the site; Spurrell noted the co-occurrence of “warm” and “arctic” species at Crayford, but emphasised that in order to understand the landscape occupied by the “Old Men”, one must only consider those recovered in direct association with the flaking floor (Spurrell 1880b: 298) — and not conflate remains from throughout the sequence.

The site at Crayford was visited again later in the summer of 1880, this time by members of the Geological Society, some of whom were only convinced that the site was an in situ occurrence after digging flakes out “with their own hands” (e.g. T. McKenny Hughes, in Spurrell 1880a). By November (the end of the summer quarrying season) Spurrell seemed quite worn out by the whole affair:

“In a manner with my “Old Man” (as the Cornish people say of the prehistorics) of Crayford has given me much exercise — along with the Thames above. I have had numerous geologic friends to visit the site and many remarkable ideas have been propounded — I have for instance involved myself in sundry “faults” &c.”

(Spurrell to Petrie 04.11.1880, ms PMA/WFPI/16/5/1 [7])

However much trouble Spurrell’s “Old Man” may have given him, he discovered a second major early Middle Palaeolithic site the following summer; Spurrell was the first person to recover material from near the area of the Ebbsfleet Valley later celebrated as “Baker’s Hole” (Smith 1911: 515), a discovery first noted in a letter to Petrie:

“This Ebbsfleet Valley is extremely interesting — elephants, rhinoceros, flint flakes &c. are found at the top & bottom of it at vertical distances of nearly 100ft! & and if you go you will get flakes by the cart and see an elephant’s head in situ &c &c. I should like to shew you them”

(Spurrell to Petrie 07/1881, ms PMA/WFPI/16/5/1 [7])

Although Spurrell assured Petrie that he was writing up this site for publication, it was not until 1883 that Spurrell published details of the Ebbsfleet site, again describing the material as coming from a “kind of a beach”. He may have deliberately not revealed the location of this site to other collectors (Spurrell 1884: 111), perhaps as a result of the trouble he himself had been put to over the Crayford find, or perhaps to protect the site from less scrupulous collectors (O’Connor 2007: 86). If he hoped to refit
material from here, as he had at Crayford, then he could not allow flakes to be carried away.

Refitting flint flakes was one way Spurrell sought to understand how flint artefacts were made, but he also experimented with flint knapping himself (Spurrell 1884: 112). He used his experience to help him interpret the artefacts he collected — although his technique (the wild swing of a cylindrical flint hammer) was somewhat unorthodox. His early publications of the Crayford material describe two major refitting sequences from the site (Spurrell 1880a, b), but he clearly succeeded in refitting more of the material over time, and interpreted how they had been worked in different ways (e.g. Spurrell 1884). As a knapper, he explicitly noted deficiencies in the available raw material and the subsequent difficulties these presented:

“The blocks of weathered and bruised flint were obstinate and flawed, and great difficulty was experienced getting good pieces to work upon[…]betokening great necessity and very little art”

(Spurrell 1880a: 294)

Although Spurrell interpreted this particular sequence as relating to the manufacture of a broken “Hâche”, and not, as is now apparent, as the products of Levallois flaking (Scott in prep.), his knapping experience did lead him to consider what was missing from each sequence, as well as what remained. He noted that the least complete sequences are on better quality raw material — the desired pieces having been carried away (Spurrell 1880a: 298). Others he assumed may have “whirred off” to distances of over 40 feet away when struck (Spurrell 1884). His writings show that he was thinking through reduction sequences, and the processes and problems which impact upon artefact variability. In his 1880 papers, he describes a second sequence from Crayford as reflecting the production of flakes “for smaller implements, such as arrow-heads, knives, &c”. Interestingly, in these early papers he viewed the facetted ends of flakes as evidence of use, but changed his mind after experiment and refitting. By 1884 he correctly interpreted the faceting as a “detail of manufacture”, observing that:

“when placed together, the trimming above described passing continuously across the base of both of them; thus they were chipped in a preparatory way more or less, or not at all, as occasion required”

(Spurrell 1884: 112)

It is also likely that examination of material from the Ebbsfleet site allowed Spurrell to better understand the Crayford assemblage. He does not seem to have refitted many artefacts from Ebbsfleet, but nevertheless provided a technological reading of how the artefacts were produced, and an accurate description of the classic Levallois method:

“A mass of flint was trimmed from the sides, and worked roughly into a rounded form at the top. This worked part was then detached at a single blow[…]leaving a turtle-back flake”

(Spurrell 1883: 107; see also Spurrell 1884: 113)

The Levallois technique had first been described in relation to J. Reboux’s (1867) find from the Paris suburb after which it is named (and also, arguably, by Boucher de Perthes, though with little impact — cf. Schlanger 1996). Although Spurrell does draw some comparisons between some scrapers he collected and the “Cave” implements of France (Spurrell 1883: 97), his description of the flaking method is seemingly drawn from the material he studied, rather than a comparison with a continental description. He further sought to understand how particular retouched forms were made and used, and it is around this question that a notable difference between Spurrell’s approach and that of his contemporaries emerges.
By the late 19th century, early Palaeolithic researchers had amassed a notable corpus of Palaeolithic artefacts, especially from the terraces of the Thames. The question now arose as to how these riches were to be arranged and interpreted. Evans, for instance, classified handaxes into three types by form, and by 1860 sought to understand their distribution throughout the “River Drifts” (Evans 1863: 75; O’Connor 2007: 80). Worthington Smith sought order through three “classes” of Palaeolithic implement (see O’Connor 2007: 86–97), but Spurrell urged caution in trying to tease out such patterns. Firstly, he was concerned about taphonomy; only in the highest, oldest deposits might it be possible to identify a “type” indicative of relative age — the further one descended, the more likely it became that material of a variety of dates was conflated. Whilst relative abrasion was sometimes helpful, it could not be relied upon:

“The determination of relative age in types cannot then be safely made in recent deposits, but old types must be made out in old deposits which cannot contain late ones. Wear and rudeness of manufacture are no proof of age, and peculiarities of work and shape without the assistance of geological position are fallacious guides”

(Spurrell 1886: 76)

Spurrell felt that only in situ occurrences — like his Crayford floor — might give any picture of precisely what the “Old Men” were up to at any one time (Spurrell 1883: 93). He urged others to seek similar situations, suggesting to Benjamin Harrison that he concentrate on:

“Find[ing] the implements in situ, in a deposit sufficiently deep or marked to prevent all doubts that they are not mere surface[…]entanglements”

(Spurrell to Harrison 25.06.1891, ms MBA/RW/“life” 165)

Not only should such contexts be sought out, but care taken in their investigation; he berated the excavators of caves — perceived by him as similarly undisturbed contexts — for their “haste and carelessness” during excavation, and for not attempting refitting work themselves (Spurrell 1884: 110).

However, even within taphonomically secure contexts, Spurrell still felt that the variety of material recovered defied easy classification; he pointed out that his Ebbsfleet site included:

“five different forms of hâche[…]all made on the same spot, with great diversity of finish, at the same time that it continued to be a flaking floor”

(Spurrell 1883: 93; see also Spurrell 1884: 113)

He therefore sought to understand how these different forms were produced, pointing out that at Ebbsfleet, the difference between a “slick” (scraper) and a hâche lay only in the decision to retouch one or both faces, and that the two forms actually morph into one another, the edges being progressively retouched as the flake dulled through use (Spurrell 1883: 107). He also reflected on how retouch must have affected the functional properties of such edges. By 1884, he had also succeeded in refitting much more of his material from Crayford, and enumerated the diverse knapping techniques undertaken:

“In some cases the whole stone was split up into long, parallel, regular flakes…In other stones the object was clearly to break the stone, but apparently without ulterior purpose as to the pieces detached, so coarse and clumsy were the results[…]Other stones were broken evidently to obtain knifelike plates[…]and this was accomplished by continual rectification of the superior (and necessary) plane of percussion from which the large flakes were struck.”

(Spurrell 1884: 110)
Spurrell’s concern with the particular factors that affect artefact variability feels very familiar today. His emphasis upon taphonomic processes and contextual integrity foreshadows the questions that must be asked of any assemblage. Whilst accepting some progression in form and broad groupings of artefacts (notably Lartet and Christy’s “Cave” and “Drift” implements; O’Connor 2007: 115), Spurrell’s real interest was understanding the mind of the people who produced this material — and specifically, their reaction to different difficulties and circumstances. Indeed, he felt that the best insights into “the progress of man’s mind” (Spurrell 1884: 110) could be obtained by re-creating these moments of individual choice, rather than grouping particular classes of implement together. Spurrell’s whole approach echoes the modern notion of the chaîne opératoire — concentrating on individual action at specific places within the landscape, and seeking to understand the mind behind the gestures he reconstructed.

SPURRELL AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

In an era where most workers sought to establish and add to sequences, the cautious approach advocated by Spurrell was never going to revolutionise Palaeolithic research. However, he was well respected by his peers for both his archaeological and geological knowledge (see Kennard 1947: 285). He more often read papers than published them, as a result of which he has faded somewhat into the background over the years. His cautious nature does not seem suited to publication, and it is interesting that whilst his nearest contemporaries, John Allen Brown and Worthington Smith, both published books on their researches (Brown 1887; Smith 1894), Spurrell did not. His Palaeolithic publications are restricted to the 1880s; Petrie suggests that after they became friends Spurrell devoted himself more to “largely Egyptian matters” (Petrie 1915).

It is not easy to assess Spurrell’s position within late 19th century networks; few letters from or to him can now be traced. He was certainly friendly with Benjamin Harrison, largely basing his 1883 “West Kent” paper upon Harrison’s Palaeolithic finds, and Harrison seems to have esteemed him as a local expert to whom artefacts could be sent for approval (e.g. Harrison 28.08.84, ms MBA/Harrison notebook 7). He initially sought Harrison’s acquaintance after seeing some of his Oldbury finds within W.J. Lewis Abbott’s collection (Harrison 08.11.80, ms MBA/Harrison notebook 2), but his attitude towards Harrison’s eolithic finds (McNabb, this volume) was more ambivalent. Spurrell seems not to have objected to the pieces themselves (or at least not all of them) so much as their geological context, and even seems to have become frustrated with Harrison’s preoccupation with surface implements when fissures (esteemed by Spurrell as contextually secure) abounded nearby (e.g. Spurrell to Abbott 02.01.93, MBA/Harrison notebook). Other workers (e.g. John Allen Brown) sought him out as an expert guide to the exposures of his area, as well as visiting the Crayford site itself.

Following the publication of his work at Crayford, Spurrell’s “re-assemblies” were widely admired, and spurred others on to attempt similar work. Worthington Smith, in particular, spent three years refitting material from his pits at Caddington, and greatly admired the work undertaken by Spurrell, commenting that; “I shall never forget reading for the first time of this remarkable achievement” (Smith 1887: 83). Others were equally impressed but less successful; the material collected by John Allen Brown from Creffield Road, Acton includes several broken Levallois points which have been forcibly glued to the butts of different Levallois products — and then bound round with tape to secure the join.

The geological difficulties of the late 19th century were a constant worry to Spurrell, and his considerations of many of the
problems that plagued other workers are thoughtful and questioning. He, like so many others, struggled to understand the significance of “the wretched boulder clay” (Spurrell to Petrie 14.10.82, ms PMA/WFPI/16/5/1 [5]) on the north bank of the Thames, as well as the “warp” or “trail” he encountered on top of and within the Crayford brickearths, in relation to whether humans were present in pre- or post-glacial times (for a detailed consideration of these issues, see O'Connor 2007: 27–71). Spurrell was inclined to accept Geikie’s (1877) picture of multiple glacial/interglacial intervals, rather than a single “Ice Age”, and Skertchly’s (1876) pattern of repeated interglacial human presence. Spurrell viewed the “trails” of the Crayford area as relating to a variety of “fits” of glaciation, but carefully searched through all available literature on arctic exploration to try and understand exactly how these deposits formed, concluding that they probably related to slope processes during cold conditions (Spurrell 1886: 82–89). He sought probable modern equivalents around West Kent, cutting sections in likely positions, carefully drawing them and measuring the angle and alignment of pebbles (ibid: 88).

His diligence as a geological observer was widely appreciated, and long after Spurrell had ceased to publish on Palaeolithic matters, he continued to be an active member of the Geologists’ Association, directing field meetings on his local patch (Higham, Crayford, Swanscombe, Dartford Heath, Grays and Northfleet) and attending those further afield. The last excursion he led was, fittingly, to Crayford and Erith in 1897 (Monkton 1899: 110). By this stage Spurrell had left the area; after his father’s death in 1892, Petrie suggests that he became melancholy and pessimistic (Petrie 1915) and when his mother died four years later, Spurrell sold the house in Belvedere and moved to Norfolk to rejoin his extended family. His final years were not without comfort; in 1912, at the age of 72 he finally persuaded his cousin Catherine to marry him (after several unsuccessful attempts), by presenting her with a ready-completed marriage licence. Spurrell was driven to church in a carriage, whilst his bride, a renowned horticulturist, wore her gardening clothes (Caiger 1992). After his death in 1915 Petrie went through Spurrell’s correspondence and retained material of interest to himself, but sadly for one who recorded so much, and published so little, the location of the rest of Spurrell’s archive is unknown.

CONCLUSION

Flaxman C.J. Spurrell’s major contribution to the early years of Palaeolithic research was as one of several diligent local researchers, who not only amassed the pre-mechanisation Palaeolithic resource available to us today, but also sought to understand how the “Old Men” might have lived. The sites he discovered, and the questions he raised, still repay investigation — the “curious mix” of warm and cold fauna at Crayford continues to confound (Schreve 2001; Scott 2009). The approach he took to investigating the Palaeolithic prefigured many modern concerns — taphonomy, contextual integrity, technology and ancient cognition. The time that he invested in refitting the Crayford assemblage is readily apparent, and many of his conclusions broadly correct, if couched in slightly unfamiliar terms. Without men like Spurrell, the Evans’ of this world would have had little to write about. It seems fitting to conclude with the words of one who knew Spurrell personally, and valued his work:

“Spurrell was a remarkable man, very quiet and very retiring, but he did know, though published but little, and his work can always be relied on”

(Kennard 1947: 286)
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