WORTHINGTON GEORGE SMITH (1835–1917)

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ABSTRACT

Worthington Smith was an important member of the group of archaeologists whose work established Palaeolithic Archaeology as a discipline in Britain. He observed, meticulously recorded and published traces of some of the best Acheulian sites ever to come to light in England. While his overview of the Palaeolithic period has inevitably not stood the test of time, his publications remain of great value for the factual information they contain, and for his fine illustrations. Most of his artefact collections also survive, well-documented in spite of the loss of many of his written notes, and these too are important.


Keywords: WG Smith, Palaeolithic Archaeology in the 19th century, Caddington

INTRODUCTION

I first came across the work of Worthington Smith in 1962, soon after I began doctoral research at Cambridge University on the British Lower and Middle Palaeolithic, with particular reference to handaxes. I was utterly unprepared for the encounter: there had been little active research interest in the British Lower Palaeolithic for many years, and there was no recent text book, which might have mentioned him. My supervisor, Charles McBurney, was more than happy to hand over to me ‘as a useful starting point — completing it ought to take you about three weeks’, a file of cards collected by the Council for British Archaeology, which had decided to carry out period surveys for Britain, based on local records of sites and artefact collections held by museums. McBurney had been talked into taking on the role of secretary, a duty for which he had little time to spare, and, after some patchy initial local enthusiasm and the return of about 300 cards, the project had pretty well ground to a halt. Working on the card index indeed proved an excellent starting point, even if it eventually took me over five years to complete it and produce the CBA’s British Lower and Middle Palaeolithic Gazetteer (Roe 1968) by contacting and actually visiting museums myself. However, it was from cards originally sent in to Charles McBurney by James Dyer, and filed under Bedfordshire, that I first became aware of Worthington Smith, the site of Caddington and Smith’s remarkable book Man the Primeval Savage (W.G. Smith 1894). Charles McBurney, famously absent-minded, may or may not have looked at the CBA cards that were returned to him, but, when I asked him, he denied ever having heard of Smith’s work, and was much impressed, for at least a few minutes, with what I told him. It was not long before I had found myself (for less than a pound) a copy of Smith’s book, which I still have.

The early 1960s were pre-computer days for archaeological research students: pre-
internet, pretty well pre-information-technology of any effective kind. One can tell present-day research students that, and they may listen politely, but I doubt that they can really have any conception of either the constraints or the wonderful benefits of research that depends on working through the whole body of the literature and making notes by hand, in libraries open only for limited hours on weekdays, checking, for example, through long runs of the endless national and local journals, and then going to study at first hand the actual collections of material. The fact is that, in the early 1960s, we were by necessity not very far removed from the scholarly working methods of Sir John Evans or of Worthington Smith himself, so perhaps we were meeting such figures on their own ground, even if we had the advantage of a much broader overview of the Palaeolithic and the Pleistocene. I wonder, however, whether general awareness of Worthington Smith is much higher now than it was then, and how many of today’s younger researchers have read his book — I mean actually read it, as opposed to listing it in a bibliography because someone else had referred to it. There seems little current appetite for consulting books more than a few years old, and that is a shame, because some of the 19th century publications contain the only first hand accounts of important sites that no longer exist. Perhaps some may actually find the title Man the Primeval Savage offensive — something that would never have occurred to its author, whose imaginative reconstructions of life in Lower Palaeolithic times envisaged roles of equal importance for men and women, even in the matter of stone tool manufacture: his sketches show women flaking stone (1894: 45–59, 263–4, Figs. 196–7, and Figure 4 in this chapter). Perhaps the short account offered here will encourage a few to look more closely at Worthington Smith’s work and publications.

I would like to end this brief introduction with a grateful acknowledgement of the work of James Dyer, who has been studying Smith’s life and achievements for more than 50 years, and has written the two most substantial biographical accounts (Dyer 1959, 1978). He has also very kindly provided the photograph of Worthington Smith, which appears as Figure 1 and commented on a draft of this text.

WORTHINGTON GEORGE SMITH: HIS LIFE AND CAREER

Smith was born in 1835 (a date which makes him just pre-Victorian) in Shoreditch, then a residential area on the northern edge of London, with open country beyond. ‘Worthington’ was actually his mother Sarah’s maiden surname, and ‘George’ was his father’s first name. It is important to note that his father was a Hertfordshire man, born in 1804 in Gaddesden Row in the north of that county, near the border with Bedfordshire; he moved to London, after marrying, to take up a Civil Service post, but made frequent visits to various relatives living, and in some cases farming, in the Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire villages that were later to become the scene of Worthington Smith’s most important archaeological discoveries. That area was thus one with which the latter was closely familiar from childhood, and where he always felt at home.

For altogether fuller details of Worthington Smith’s life, the reader is referred to James Dyer’s excellent account (1978). My purpose here is simply to pick out some of the events and circumstances which seem likely to have shaped his approach to archaeology, and defined both its strengths and weaknesses; the same factors also need to be borne in mind when we come to compare him with his peers, some of whom are the subjects of other chapters in this volume. If we start with the matter of education, the family was not wealthy and Smith’s schooling was unpretentious; there never seems to have been any question of his going to University. He spent little time studying languages, and
evidently gained no thirst for foreign travel. In spite of those things, he had (and retained throughout his life) the natural scholar’s willingness to devote himself with great energy to finding out about those subjects which particularly interested him — in his case, in early life, these included history, antiquities, architecture and various aspects of natural history. He also possessed from the start a real talent for drawing. All these interests came together in his choice of architecture as a career after leaving school; one should remember that the styles of architecture in England in the mid 19th century were essentially backward looking, as the name ‘Gothic Revival’ implies, and the interest in Gothic was itself a reaction to strong continuing classical influences. Decorative architectural detail often incorporated motifs taken from the world of plant life, demanding from its designer quite detailed botanical knowledge. Smith excelled in drawing plants; he was also sent by his employers to the British Museum to draw classical antiquities, particularly sculpture, and thus early on absorbed some of the atmosphere of the place. He also added the skills of wood-block engraving to those of drawing.

He showed real talent as an architectural draughtsman, and received many commissions, but the routine side of working for a firm of architects which was more often concerned with dilapidation and drainage systems than with grand buildings led to disillusionment, and in 1861 he abandoned the profession in favour of life as a free-lance draughtsman and illustrator, specialising in buildings, antiquities and plants. This was no small decision, for by then he was married to Henrietta White, whom he had met at Dunstable, where her family home was, and the second of their children had just been born. There was plenty of work for him, and he could make enough money to keep the family going, but with little to spare for luxuries — a situation which never really changed for the rest of his life. His success in botanical illustration became a route to two important new interests, in plant and crop diseases and in mycology, and he became and remained a respected and widely consulted authority on both, writing a number of books and papers, and becoming a member of various leading national societies.

Those who know Worthington Smith only as an archaeologist may be surprised to discover how well known he also is to botanists and mycologists, even though knowledge in both fields has moved on since his days. This is not the place to go further into this side of Smith’s career, but a number of points are relevant, notably that he spent much time working at, and for, the British Museum of Natural History; this, and his membership of the national societies, brought him into contact with people interested in Natural History generally, some of them major figures in the world of scholarship, at a particularly exciting time, just as the work of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace, with all its implications, was coming to the notice of the scientific world. Smith was also becoming familiar with the task of communicating his work to others, through his publications and through occasional lectures which he was invited to give.

If we now turn specifically to Worthington Smith’s involvement with Palaeolithic archaeology, it is easy enough to see how, moving in the circles just described, he would come to hear of the startling discoveries in France of humanly worked stones in undoubtedly ancient fluviatile deposits which also contained the bones of extinct animals, and of the growing awareness that such finds could also be made in the river gravels of southern England. However, the availability of knowledge on these matters was dramatically increased in 1872 by the publication of John Evans’ extraordinary 640-page book, The Ancient Stone Implements, Weapons and Ornaments of Great Britain (Evans 1872). Smith himself tells us (1894: 189) that it was this
work which first alerted him to the fact that early stone tools had been found close to where he lived, at Hackney Downs and Highbury, and he was not the man to leave such information lying idle. No doubt he was just as interested to read Evans’ comments (1872: 479–485) of the finds made by James Wyatt and others in his beloved Bedfordshire.

As it turned out, a remarkable opportunity awaited him almost on his doorstep. At this stage of his life, Smith and his family lived in Mildmay Grove, Shoreditch, and by the 1870s a wide area of north and northeast London was beginning to be turned from open countryside into residential suburbs, with large numbers of terraced houses and their associated services being built. Apart from the making of roads and the digging of drainage trenches, many of the new houses had basements, which meant foundations deep enough to reach the deposits of Pleistocene age which overlay the London Clay. Some of the gravel, sand and brickmaking clay needed for the building operations was brought in by rail, but much was obtained in extraction pits dug locally. Before long, Smith himself was finding worked flints: he spent all the spare time he could inspecting the gravel heaps and watching and recording any exposed sections, whether in drainage trenches in the new roads beside Stoke Newington Common, or newly dug graves in Abney Park Cemetery. The workmen were puzzled by his interest, but happy enough to humour him for such small financial rewards as he could afford, though later on, after his reporting of his finds had attracted other collectors with deeper pockets, they ceased to be so cooperative. He read a paper on his initial discoveries to the Anthropological Institute in 1878, which was published the following year (W.G. Smith 1879). Over the next few years he became convinced that there were widespread occurrences over north-east London of a buried ancient land-surface on which abundant Palaeolithic artefacts lay in extremely fresh condition, sometimes including refittable pieces, and often accompanied by organic remains: animal bones, shells, plant remains and wood. He called it ‘the Palaeolithic floor’. The deeper sections showed that the ‘floor’ was overlain by ‘contorted drift’, and sometimes other beds of gravel occurred below it, which also contained artefacts, though not in such pristine condition. Smith further described the floor in a detailed paper read in June 1883 to the Anthropological Institute and subsequently published (W.G. Smith 1884); a good general account of his work, and his thoughts about the floor’s nature and significance, can also be found in Chapter 15 of Man the Primeval Savage, profusely illustrated with his own drawings (W.G. Smith 1894: 189–298).

To us looking back on Worthington Smith’s career nearly a century after his death, it might almost seem as if Fate had selected him for the arduous but rewarding role of being the right man in the right place at the right time. In these early days in north London, he had developed all the right interests; he also possessed abundant patience and energy, willingness to learn, a natural instinct to make accurate records of his observations and the technical training to measure and draw not only his finds but their stratigraphic context. His drawn sections may often be composite and diagrammatic, but how many of his contemporaries drew sections at all? In the same way, a few years later, still in the early days of photography, but having a son who had made it his professional career, he was quick to perceive the value of photographic records of his observations and the technical training to measure and draw not only his finds but their stratigraphic context. His drawn sections may often be composite and diagrammatic, but how many of his contemporaries drew sections at all? In the same way, a few years later, still in the early days of photography, but having a son who had made it his professional career, he was quick to perceive the value of photographic records of archaeological sites. He also became a quite exceptional draughtsman of flint artefacts, and one who clearly understood how they had been made.

By the end of the north London period of his life, Smith’s discoveries, and the obviously high quality of his work, had made him a welcome member of the distinguished group whose work and writings essentially established Palaeolithic Archaeology in
Britain over the next few decades. It must be remembered that those amongst them whose interests were principally archaeological (as opposed to geological or palaeontological) were all operating as amateurs, albeit in very different personal circumstances. At one end of the scale, John Evans (Lamdin-Whymark, this volume) or General Pitt Rivers had abundant private means to support their efforts, to travel, or to amass collections from all over the world. Figures like Worthington Smith, the freelance professional illustrator, or Benjamin Harrison (McNabb, this volume), the village store-keeper, had no such advantages. Yet in the field, or the lecture room, social status mattered little. There might be radically different views, sincerely held, on matters of interpretation, but for most of those involved the main concern was simply to gather knowledge and to pioneer a brand new field, and mutual respect and cooperation were the order of the day. They also shared in their different ways the unstoppable, consuming, fervent energy which amateur archaeologists have always shown, and they were living in times when almost everything was still awaiting discovery. Anne O’Connor, in her book Finding Time for the Old Stone Age, gives an excellent summary of Smith’s career and achievements, and a well documented assessment of his relationships with his contemporaries (O’Connor 2007: see especially pp. 86–91).

Whether or not Fate was writing the script, no sooner had Worthington Smith published his second paper on the Stoke Newington floor, than the circumstances of his life changed. He found himself suffering heart problems, and his doctor recommended a move to the countryside. It is hardly surprising that the area eventually chosen was Bedfordshire, the home of his forebears, or that his wife suggested Dunstable specifically; the move was made in 1885, and he was to live there, at 121 High Street (unfortunately since demolished), for the rest of his life. He did not lose his London connections, however, travelling up frequently by train to continue his work for various publishers and for the Natural History Museum. His friends and colleagues remained in close touch, notably Evans, soon to be knighthed, who lived not far away in Hertfordshire. Smith became heavily involved in the archaeology and local history of Dunstable, and of Bedfordshire generally (see Dyer 1978), and for the rest of his life finds of many ages were constantly being brought to him by local people for his opinion, but it is with his work on the local Palaeolithic sites that we must concern ourselves here. It seems likely that Smith would have contrived to find at least a few Palaeolithic artefacts wherever he had moved to from London, but what he discovered in Bedfordshire and the adjacent parts of Hertfordshire was material of outstanding quality, and the discoveries were all the more remarkable, because they were made in what he regarded as a most unlikely situation, and one where few would have bothered to look: the high Chalk and Clay-with-flints country of the Dunstable Downs.

There is no space to tell the story fully here, and it is available anyhow in Worthington Smith’s own words (1894: 60–175), but it began in 1888 with his finding a few artefacts in gravel which had been brought to Dunstable for road-making from a number of different sources. With typical patience, Smith methodically checked all the pits, travelling as ever on foot for the considerable distances involved, and after a year he finally found the true source at Caddington, high on the Chiltern downs (Figure 1). Here were several brickmakers’ clay pits, exploiting patches of brick-earth filling hollows in the Clay-with-flints and overlain by contorted drift, which was largely reworked material from the latter. Although there were derived artefacts in the contorted drift, the important discovery was that in places the brick-earth contained undisturbed floors with implements and abundant waste flakes in extremely sharp condition. Smith’s experience of the Stoke Newington floors made him the ideal person to make this
discovery at this time, and over the next several years he continued energetically to gather artefacts at Caddington and record them in detail, also drawing sections (Figure 2) as he had in north-east London. Soon he found that refittable (or, to use his own term, conjoinable) flakes were present: he was familiar with the remarkable work of F.C.J. Spurrell (1880a, 1880b) on conjoining at Crayford, and indeed had himself made a few conjoins at Stoke Newington. By 1894, after working through his entire Caddington collection, he had over 500 conjoins, including some substantial refitted blocks, several examples of implements with manufacturing flakes replaced (Figure 3), and one of refitted trimming flakes from a handaxe that was not present, though he could reconstruct much of it, using plaster of Paris (1894: Figs. 113–4). He argued (1894: 126), very justifiably, that he had found ‘the actual spot at Caddington where implements had been manufactured in Palaeolithic times’ and noted the presence of piles of selected struck flakes, abandoned cores, heaps of nodules collected for knapping, punches and possible anvils.

Figure 1: Worthington Smith at Caddington, an undated photograph by his son Arthur Smith, now in the archive collection of James Dyer

Unlike Stoke Newington, Caddington did not yield animal bones or other organic remains. Smith, however, offered a reconstruction of the Palaeolithic setting, envisaging a marshy area at the foot of gently sloping hills, with small lakes or large confluent ponds offering a constant supply of water, and habitable firmer ground forming their shores, the surrounding higher ground having been subsequently removed by later erosion. The principal report of the work at Caddington was published in 1894 in *Man the Primeval Savage* (W.G. Smith 1894); although he continued to recover material there sporadically for several more years, it seems likely that by 1895 the clay extraction had passed beyond the area where the main concentration of Lower Palaeolithic artefacts had been (cf. Sampson 1978: 7–8, 145).
As it turned out, Caddington was only the first of several primary context Lower Palaeolithic sites which Worthington Smith found after his move to Dunstable, the others being Round Green (Luton, Bedfordshire), Gaddesden Row (Hertfordshire) and Whipsnade (Bedfordshire), the first two of these sites again being ‘floor’ situations with artefacts in pristine condition, including refits although, like Caddington, lacking any accompanying organic remains. Ramridge End, Luton, also produced traces of a floor: material collected by Smith survives, but there is no detailed written account. Having in mind the unfortunate effects of his early publication of the Stoke Newington finds — the ruthless activities of collectors, the hostility of the workmen, and the development of a substantial trade in forgeries — he kept these latter sites more or less secret until he had finished his work, publishing the first two only late in his life.
Great Prehistorians: 150 Years of Palaeolithic Research, 1859–2009 (Lithics 30)

(William G. Smith 1916), while Whipsnade was reported by Reginald Smith of the British Museum (R.A. Smith 1919) after Worthington Smith had died.

Worthington Smith continued to live an active life right to the end, in spite of periods of illness for both himself and his wife. They both died within the space of four months in 1917. In 1902, he had been awarded a Civil List pension, on the recommendation of his old friends Sir John Evans and Lord Avebury (the former Sir John Lubbock), and the following year he became the first Freeman of the Borough of Dunstable, honours which delighted him, though he had never sought such things himself. He lived for more than 20 years after the publication of Man the Primeval Savage, a period during which Palaeolithic archaeology was only one of the many fields in which he was carrying out research, lecturing, producing publications or conducting detailed correspondence with friends and colleagues. His work at Caddington had ended, but it was during this time that he faithfully and quietly recorded, and eventually published, the excellent Acheulian sites of Round Green and Gaddesden Row, mentioned above.

During this same period, the ‘eoliths’ controversy reached its height in Britain (see also McNabb, this volume), and Worthington Smith steadfastly maintained his view that the eoliths were not human artefacts, as did Sir John Evans (who died in 1908), though Joseph Prestwich (who was knighted in January 1896, barely six months before the end of his life), was a strong proponent. Feelings ran high in some quarters as the debate progressed (cf. Wenban-Smith, this volume), but Smith always remained calm and kept a sense of humour about the whole affair, especially in his personal correspondence with Benjamin Harrison, whose interpretation of his discoveries in Kent, guided by Prestwich, provided the principal battleground (Roe 1981a). It is hard to imagine Smith acting otherwise: he seems to have been courteous to all, throughout his life. Benjamin Harrison was a good and valued personal friend, whom he had first visited as early as 1878, and they remained in touch for almost 40 years, right up to Smith’s death: several of the letters he wrote to Harrison are quoted in Harrison of Ightham, a biographical volume compiled by Benjamin Harrison’s son, Sir Edward Harrison (1928).

ASSESSING WORTHINGTON SMITH

It is time to turn from this brief and selective look at Worthington Smith’s life to an assessment of his significance. There are, perhaps, two aspects of the latter: on the one hand, how important was his contribution during his own lifetime to the birth of Palaeolithic Archaeology; and on the other, do his actual discoveries retain sufficient importance to be of real interest to us a century or so later?

Smith played an extremely active role for some 45 years in the crucial formative period of British Palaeolithic Archaeology. Though he consulted widely and shared his findings freely with other workers, his best contributions were made as a talented individual field worker, largely self-taught. By tireless solo effort, using carefully gathered local knowledge, he located, observed and meticulously recorded some of the best-preserved Lower Palaeolithic sites that have ever come to light in Britain, first in London and afterwards in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire. He was particularly interested in the artefacts, applying innovative techniques to his study of them, such as refitting, and seeking always to reconstruct from them the activities of their makers and the nature of the human occupation at each individual site (Figure 4).

The sites themselves he recorded with great care, drawing sections and illustrating their locations and settings, and making early use, with his son’s help, of photographic recording. In his lectures and his writings, he
communicated to his peers and to a wide public the facts of what he had discovered and his vision of human life in the early Old Stone Age. All these things he did with insight, accessibility and a light touch allied to rigour of detail. I have not referred here to his archaeological contributions to periods other than the Palaeolithic, but they were numerous and valuable; in Bedfordshire, he was the complete local Antiquary, patient, generous, widely respected and available to all. He saved and recorded the Palaeolithic artefacts he found, with great care and perception, marking every piece in some detail and further listing them in his handwritten catalogue (which fortunately survives, though his journals and many other records were destroyed during bombing in London in the Second World War). Many pieces he retained in his own collection, but he also gave them away freely to other collectors, notably to Sir John Evans. Today, much of his material survives in Luton Museum (which also has many of his original drawings) and in the British Museum. Few of his contemporaries saved the items of knapping debris they found, as well as retouched tools, as Smith did, with important results, notably at Caddington and Round Green. At Caddington he also had the foresight to preserve some artefacts embedded in substantial pieces of their containing brickearth deposit.

A sure sign of the value of Worthington Smith’s contribution within his own lifetime is the respect shown to his work by his leading contemporaries, many of whom became close friends and regular visitors. Sir John Evans — the original inspirer of Smith’s interest in Palaeolithic artefacts — is an excellent example. Smith could not and did not aspire to Evans’ status as a scholar, to his leading position in British scientific circles or to his international role, which included travelling and corresponding widely, and attending conferences around the world. Within the first six pages of Ancient Stone Implements, Evans (1872) quotes sources in Greek, Latin, French, German and Coptic, clearly from first hand knowledge. Smith’s Man the Primeval Savage is a very different kind of book, with no such embellishments — he himself (in a letter to Benjamin Harrison in 1893, quoted in Harrison 1928: 345) described it as ‘a brief readable account of the implements and geology of this place,’ meaning Caddington, though it is of much wider scope than that. Evans and Smith operated on very different scales, for reasons touched on earlier in this chapter, but their friendship and mutual admiration were genuine. It is a nice touch that Smith’s own work is given full credit, and his book warmly welcomed, by Evans in the second edition of his Ancient Stone Implements (1897).
What, finally, should we ourselves think of Worthington Smith? The accretion of knowledge since his day has not been kind to the general conclusions he drew about the Palaeolithic period, but that is hardly surprising; he lived in the days when it was still uncertain whether early human activity in Britain was ‘pre-glacial’ or, as Smith himself believed, wholly ‘post-glacial’. He could not know anything of the Quaternary sequence as we now perceive it, or of the world distribution and the overall chronology of the Lower Palaeolithic, nor did he have at his disposal any of the analytical techniques of archaeological science that we now take for granted, when we set out to study artefacts, stratigraphy or environmental evidence in the kind of field situations that confronted him. The loss of many of his written records has also sadly undermined our appreciation of his skill and care as an observer. I once described Stoke Newington — and the same is true of Caddington or Round Green — as ‘a fine site, discovered too early for its own archaeological good’ (Roe 1981b: 175), but the counter to that is that, if Worthington Smith had not observed these sites for us, we should know nothing at all of their existence. The Acheulian assemblages he recovered from them are still well worth careful study. Perhaps the saddest thing is that, while we have no reason to doubt the general accuracy of Smith’s observations, the sites themselves have all vanished, and none of several attempts to rediscover traces of them has yet met with real success. Little now survives in north east London in the way of accessible undisturbed deposits, and the Bedfordshire sites too seem almost all gone; the Caddington brickearths were not formed in the widespread marshy lake that Smith envisaged, but as the fillings of small individual sink-holes, all worked out by the brick-makers (Sampson 1978; see also Roe 1981b: 172–5, 184–198). I myself am among those who have sought for and failed to find traces of Smith’s ‘floors’ — perhaps something will still turn up, for example during redevelopment in Luton and, if it does, we are well placed to study it in ways Smith could not even have imagined, which would be the best possible tribute to his memory. Meanwhile, for an excellent sober evaluation and reinterpretation of Smith’s work at his Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire sites, see White (1997). One can envisage that Smith himself would have read White’s contribution with great interest, though he might have been surprised at how small a role the artefacts play in it, when he himself made so much of them, something which simply reflects a century of changing interests in Palaeolithic Archaeology. It is also striking to note how far our knowledge of the complexities of the British Pleistocene succession advanced between Sampson’s (1978) re-evaluation of Caddington, and that of White less than twenty years later. That process is continuous and, as time and knowledge march on, Worthington Smith will become for us increasingly a historical figure rather than a guiding hand. For myself, however, my admiration for his insight in the early days, his energy, the scale and high standards of his single-handed achievements, and his remarkable presentation of them, remains undimmed. In such ways, he will surely always remain an example to us all.

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