THE ORIGINS AND FIRST 30 YEARS OF THE LITHIC STUDIES SOCIETY

Alan Saville

ABSTRACT

The background, beginning, and development of the Lithic Studies Society are briefly outlined. Conferences, publications, and other activities are described, together with listings of the founder members and the officers of the Society 1979–2010.


Keywords: Lithic Study Group, Lithic Studies Society, conferences, publications.

INTRODUCTION

This brief paper follows more or less the form of the presentation of the same title which I gave in February 2010 at the Oxford conference “Past Lives from Cold Stone: 30 Years of the Lithic Studies Society”. Inevitably it is a personal view and will suffer from some gaps in my recollection of events, and also from occasional confusion over precise details of the “who did what when” variety. Nevertheless, and conscious that some of our original members are now retired or no longer with us, I am pleased to have the opportunity to set down a history of a sort for the LSS, and believe that the existence of this account will make it easier for others to come forward with their own, perhaps fuller and more nuanced, versions.

With hindsight one can see that the initiative to establish a grouping like the LSS was firmly rooted in, and almost an inevitable outcome of, developments taking place in archaeology in the late 1960s and 1970s. The rapid growth in the number of people involved in archaeology — as students, amateurs and professionals — and the excitement and sense of mission created by the New Archaeology and the development of rescue archaeology, spawned all sorts of initiatives including a burgeoning of special-interest groups of many kinds.

As for lithic studies, various individuals throughout the UK and Ireland were attempting in the 1970s to get to grips with the description, meaning, and potential of stone tools. There was a strong feeling that, when it came to postglacial prehistory, the field of artefact studies was unfairly biased towards ceramics and that stone tools offered more, and deserved more, than the treatment they were then receiving. And the opportunity was there to do something about this, stimulated by the increasing number of archaeology students wanting to do research and the huge growth in the number of lithic assemblages becoming available with the expansion of excavation and field survey.

AN EARLY INCARNATION: FROM LITHIC STUDY GROUP TO LITHIC STUDIES SOCIETY

Against this background the ringleader in bringing together a disparate group of people interested in lithic studies was Mike Pitts. In the later 1970s Mike was a postgraduate student at the Institute of Archaeology in Gordon Square, London, actually working on flint and stone axeheads (Pitts 1981), but also at the cutting edge of exciting research into the potential of flint assemblages which resulted in a series of seminal papers (Pitts 1978a & 1978b; Pitts & Jacobi 1979). Mike wrote in the earlier part of 1978 to friends and acquaintances he knew to have “an interest in flints” about the ideas he had for developing lithic studies (Pitts 1980). I am unsure of the precise sequence of events after that, but I have a note that on 11th July 1978 Mike came to stay with me (I was then in Cheltenham) and, although my note gives no details, I assume we plotted a way forward for establishing an active group of enthusiasts. Anyway, 16 people volunteered or were cajoled into putting their names down as founder members of what was called the Lithic Study Group (Table 1). An inaugural meeting was held in Room 306 at the Institute of Archaeology in London on 8th November 1978, with Mike Pitts as Convenor.

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at which 12 of the 16 conspirators were present (see Table 1; Hilary Howard also attended and took the minutes).

Table 1. Founder members of the Lithic Study Group (*=not present on 8th November 1978).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lawrence Barfield</td>
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<td>John Burton</td>
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<td>Stephen Green*</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Healey</td>
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<td>Frances Healy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roger Jacobi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Terry Manby*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hazel Martingell</td>
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<td>Mark Newcomer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pat Phillips*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mike Pitts (Convenor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiona Roe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan Saville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve Shennan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robin Torrence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caroline Wickham-Jones*</td>
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Initial aims were: to establish a forum for discussion of matters of concern to those interested in lithic studies, primarily by arranging a regular series of seminar meetings for group members; to produce a specialist newsletter as an outlet for writing on lithic topics and to keep members of the group informed; to produce occasional specialist publications; and to “spread the gospel” of lithic studies by lecturing, participating in conferences, and collaborating with other archaeologists and groups interested in artefact studies. An ambitious pattern of seminars was launched, with meetings in 1979 at the Institute in London on 17th January, 16th May, and 17th October, at Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum on 27th March, and at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, on 30th August. The only publication ever associated with the LSG name was circulated for free in June of that year (Saville 1979).

A business meeting of the LSG, attended by 10 members, was held at the Institute on 13th June 1979 (probably in the basement tearoom, which acted as LSG/LSS HQ in the early days). At this meeting the decision was taken that the group would be better served by reconstituting itself as a formal society. A draft constitution was drawn up (by me, using that of the Quaternary Research Association as a model) in October 1979, and the first meeting as the LSS — rather than the LSG — was held at the Institute on 28th November 1979, when the topic was Robin Torrence’s research on lithic technology at the Melos obsidian quarries (an indicator of the fact that the LSS was never parochial in its interests or outlook).

The constitution was revised, ratified, and issued in January 1980, by which time officers and a committee had been appointed and henceforth were to be elected each year at an autumn Annual General Meeting. Table 2 lists the officers over the past 30 years; I would have liked to be able to list all the committee members as well but the mid-term resignations, co-options, and other factors which occurred over the years make that too complicated a task.

As was stated in the constitution, the object of the Society:

“shall be the advancement of knowledge of, and education and research in, lithic studies. Lithic study is here defined as the study of all aspects of the extraction, manufacture, distribution and use of cultural stone artefacts, particularly the knapped and/or polished stone artefacts of prehistoric man [sic!]. In furtherance of this object the Society shall hold meetings, seminars and Conferences, shall publish and disseminate documents, and shall act in various other ways to further the object.”

Membership application forms stated that:

“The Society seeks to further the study of flint and stone artefacts of all periods both in Britain and in the widest international context. The scope of the interests of the Society embraces all aspects of lithic artefacts including typology, technology, chronology, experiment, microwear analysis, procurement and production, raw material studies, fieldwalking, scientific dating and theory as applied to lithic reduction, traffic in lithic materials or artefacts etc.”

The first issue of a newsletter, prosaically called Lithic Studies Society Newsletter No. 1, was published in October 1980, and the first LSS Occasional Paper appeared in June of that year (Jacobi 1980). I am reminded by one of the peer-reviewers of this paper that the first LSS AGM on 29th October 1980 was followed
Chair: Mike Pitts
Secretary: Stephen Green
Treasurer: Alan Saville
(de facto Editor): Elizabeth Healey (Newsletter 1, A4)

1981–1982
Chair: Mike Pitts
Vice-Chair: Elizabeth Healey
Secretary: Stephen Green
Treasurer: Alan Saville
Membership Secretary: Martin Hemingway
(de facto Editors): Elizabeth Healey and Alan Saville (Lithics 2, A5)

1982–1983
Chair: Mike Pitts
Vice-Chair: Elizabeth Healey
Secretary: Stephen Green
Treasurer: Alan Saville
Membership Secretary: Martin Hemingway
(de facto Editor): Alan Saville

1983–1984
Chair: Alan Saville
Vice-Chair: Elizabeth Healey
Secretary: Stephen Green
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Caroline Wickham-Jones
(de facto Editor): Alan Saville

Chair: Alan Saville
Vice-Chair: John Wymer
Secretary: Stephen Green
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Caroline Wickham-Jones
Editor (post finally established formally): Frances Healy
Chair: Alan Saville
Vice-Chair: John Wymer
Secretary: Stephen Green
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Nick Ashton
Editor: Frances Healy

Chair: Alan Saville
Vice-Chair: John Wymer
Secretary: Andrew David
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Nick Ashton
Editor: Frances Healy

Chair: John Wymer
Vice-Chair: George Smith
Secretary: Andrew David
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Nick Ashton
Editor: Alison Roberts (Lithics 11 A5 with spine; Lithics 13 for 1992 the first with the new cover logo – handaxe and b&t)

1993–1994
Chair: John Wymer
Vice-Chair: George Smith
Secretary: John Lewis
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Nick Ashton
Editor: Alison Roberts (Lithics 14/15 double issue for 1993 & 1994)

1994–1995
Chair: Frances Healy
Vice-Chair: John Humble
Secretary: John Lewis
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Louise Austin
Editor: Alison Roberts; Lithics 16 (1995) edited by John McNabb & Nick Ashton

1995–1996
Chair: Frances Healy
Vice-Chair: John Humble
Secretary: Elizabeth Walker
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Louise Austin
Editor: Paul Pettitt

1996–1997
Chair: Frances Healy
Vice-Chair: John Humble
Secretary: Elizabeth Walker
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: ??
Editor: Paul Pettitt

1997–1998
Chair: Frances Healy
Vice-Chair: John Humble
Secretary: Elizabeth Walker
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Francis Wenban-Smith
Editor: Paul Pettitt

1998–1999
Chair: Frances Healy
Vice-Chair: John Humble
Secretary: Elizabeth Walker
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Francis Wenban-Smith
Editor: Pippa Bradley

Table 2. LSG/LSS Committee Officers 1979–2010.
1999–2000
Chair: Nick Ashton
Vice-Chair: David Field
Secretary: Elizabeth Walker
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Francis Wenban-Smith
Editor: Pippa Bradley
Web-Officer: Shirley Crompton

2000–2001
Chair: Nick Ashton
Vice-Chair: David Field
Secretary: Elizabeth Walker/Caroline Wells
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Francis Wenban-Smith
Editor: Mark White
Web Officer: Shirley Crompton

Chair: Nick Ashton
Vice-Chair: David Field
Secretary: Caroline Wells
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Ian Herbertson
Editor: Mark White
Events: Matt Pope

2003–2004
Chair: Nick Ashton
Vice-Chair: David Field
Secretary: Caroline Wells
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Ian Herbertson
Editor: Lynne Bevan
Events: Matt Pope

2004–2005
Chair: Francis Wenban-Smith
Vice-Chair: Torben Bjarke Ballin
Secretary: Caroline Wells
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Ian Herbertson
Editor: Lynne Bevan (Lithics 25 (2004) edited by Kate Cramp & Matt Pope)
Events: Matt Pope
Web Officer: Rob Hosfield

2005–2006
Chair: Francis Wenban-Smith
Vice-Chair: Torben Bjarke Ballin
Secretary: Kate Cramp
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Ian Herbertson
Book Reviews Editor: Lynne Bevan
Events/Members Secretary: Matt Pope
Web Officer: Rob Hosfield

Chair: Francis Wenban-Smith
Vice-Chair: Torben Bjarke Ballin (stood down in 2007)
Secretary: Kate Cramp
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Ian Herbertson
Editor /Book Reviews Editor: Rob Hosfield
Events/Meetings Secretary: Hannah Fluck
Web Officer: Richard Hoyle

2008–2009
Chair: Hugo Lamdin-Whymark
Vice-Chair: Matt Pope
Secretary: Barry Bishop
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: David Tomlinson
Editor/Book Reviews Editor: Rob Hosfield
Events/Meetings Secretary: Hannah Fluck
Web Officer: Richard Hoyle

2009–2010
Chair: Hugo Lamdin-Whymark
Vice-Chair: Matt Pope
Secretary: Barry Bishop
Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Andrew Shaw
Editor/Book Reviews Editor: Beccy Scott & Andrew Shaw
Events/Meetings Secretary: Hannah Fluck
Web Officer: Richard Hoyle
Lithics 30 for 2009 edited by Rob Hosfield, Francis Wenban-Smith & Matt Pope

Table 2 (continued). LSG/LSS Committee Officers 1979–2010.
by an Upper Palaeolithic session with first-rate talks by Marcel Otte and Roger Jacobi. This set a trend, and over the years the post-AGM sessions have had an outstanding roster of speakers on a very wide range of topics. No less worthy of record have been some of the post-AGM pub lunches, which have often delayed delivery of the afternoon talks to a sleepy audience!

Group outings were inaugurated with a visit to Fengate in April 1980 and to Stonehenge and Avebury in August 1980, and outings have remained a popular, albeit erratically attended, activity of the Society ever since (Figures 1–2). Among the most memorable field trips have been those associated with LSS residential conferences. The Society’s first such gathering — “Flint and Stone in Neolithic Britain” — in March 1988, was held at Cardiff in conjunction with the Neolithic Study Group and included a field trip to the Gower (Figure 3; Healy 1987). Even more ambitious for the LSS was its two-centre conference and associated field visits based in Cork and Belfast in September 1994 (Field 1994). Visits to Creswell Crags in August 1998 (Humble 1998) and July 2007 (Bishop 2007) have bracketed the discovery there of Britain’s first Palaeolithic rock art, and numerous other excursions to sites, museums, and private collections have taken place. A recent and popular innovation has been the field meetings focusing on knapping, replication, and experimentation (e.g. Bond 2003). The Society’s two previous major conferences, in Oxford in 1993 (Saville 1992) and Cardiff in 2000 (Dunkin 2000), have both resulted in prestigious publications (see below).

**Figure 1. Field visit to excavations at Boxgrove, Sussex, July 1985.**

**Figure 2. Field visit to Barnham, Suffolk, August 1993.**

**SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS**

Much of the development of the Society over the years can be followed via its newsletter and the annual reports therein, and the variety of papers and notes published in *Lithics* makes for fascinating re-reading. One important aspect of the Society’s activities not covered in public print is its contribution to consultations initiated by the Government and other bodies. Representations and responses made behind the scenes in furtherance of the interests of artefact studies in general and lithic studies in particular have been an important part of the
Figure 3. Field visit to Cathole, Gower, south Wales, March 1988.

Figure 4. Cover of the booking form for a conference in 2003 in association with Sussex Archaeological Society and others.

Figure 5. Examples of the changing face of Lithics.
responsible for the failure of a worthwhile proposal that the LSG suggests that in 1994 and 1996/1997. The stglacial Lithic artefacts which emerged as a major concern was the absence of a recognized descriptive terminology for postglacial lithic artefacts in the UK. The meeting held in Cheltenham in March 1979 was specifically designed to address this, with presentations by Elizabeth Healey, Frances Healy, and myself, followed by lively discussion by all present. The outcome was the proposal that the LSS should sponsor a publication — which eventually became known variously as “The Glossary: Handbook of Postglacial Lithic Artefacts” or “Post-Glacial Lithic Artefacts: Introduction and Glossary”. This project was adopted by the LSS as one of its main aims and became the focus of debate at every AGM for almost 30 years. Precisely why the “Glossary” could never seem to come to fruition is one of those mysteries which successive Chairs and committees have been unable to unravel. The minutes of an LSS committee meeting on 16th May 1985 record that a draft of the “Glossary” was presented and received with acclaim! At the AGM in October 2003 the Chair “reported that work continues on the Glossary” (Lithics 24, 101), but by the November 2008 AGM the Chair “noted that, regretfully, all attempts at resurrecting the Glossary had now failed and that it was now time to officially abandon that particular project” (Lithics 29, 79). Thus the Society rid itself of a debilitating albatross, but many of us regret the failure of a worthwhile initiative to which considerable time and effort were devoted.

The earliest indicator of the size of the established Society of which I have a record is a list of 81 “members” to whom Lithics 2 was sent. A further record suggests that in...
1982/1983 there were 85 “members”, though the list of actual paid-up individuals for the same period has only 51 names, thus reflecting a permanent problem all small societies have in getting members to renew their subscriptions. The initial subscription was £3 per annum, then generating an income in excess of expenditure and allowing the Society to establish the reserve needed in later years for its publications. A receipt from RapidPrint (“Cheltenham’s Fast, Friendly Printer”) for producing 250 copies of Lithics 5 shows the cost to have been £280. In 1986 the annual subscription was raised to £5. At the 1988 AGM the membership was stated to number 119, and at the 1990 AGM it was 132. By 1993 the number seems to have risen to over 200. The subscription is currently £15 and membership now stands just shy of 400. In its very first year the LSS received financial support from the Institute of Archaeology, University of London, but I believe that ever since it has been self-supporting, although of course benefiting from major help in kind, particularly from the British Museum and from the unpaid input of all those involved in running the Society over the years.

THE CHANGING INTERESTS AND FUTURE OF THE SOCIETY

Apart from its publications, just as important in terms of justification for its existence, if such were needed, has been the way in which the Society has acted as an oasis and catalyst for those involved in lithic studies. This has become increasingly apparent in recent years with the success of the handling sessions accompanying meetings, particularly those held at the British Museum’s Quaternary outpost at Franks House in north London (Figure 6). It was at some point in the 1980s that the LSS switched its London base from the Institute of Archaeology to Franks House, a move that reflected an important shift in the Society’s orientation from a main focus on postglacial times to a more direct embrace of the whole story of the human use of lithic materials by quite specifically incorporating Palaeolithic studies. It was important that this should happen, since – as in all areas of academic endeavour – there are topics and subject areas which move in and out of fashion and, for various reasons, the Palaeolithic became highly fashionable in the 1980s. This was the decade when Boxgrove started to become almost a household word (Pitts and Roberts 1997) and Palaeolithic popularity has continued to the present, most recently via the AHOB project with which several members of the LSS have been closely involved (Stringer 2006).

That the Palaeolithic came for a while to dominate LSS activity completely may have raised some eyebrows but it never, as far as I am aware, became a matter for division within
the ranks. This I think reflects the fact that those studying lithic artefacts tend inevitably to take a catholic, holistic position on their subject because of the underlying necessity of appreciating lithic technology per se and the properties of all utilizable lithic materials. These aspects are germane whether dealing with Palaeolithic handaxes, Bronze Age axe-hammers, or products of the Brandon gunflint industry. This provides a firm bond amongst the members of the LSS and connects with another major strength of the Society, which is that it has never discriminated along professional/amateur lines. Ever since lithic studies, by whatever name, became part of the archaeological enterprise they have been as much the province of the amateur as of the professional, with the likes of John Evans (1872 & 1897; MacGregor 2008; Lamdin-Whymark 2009), William Allen Sturge (Clarke 1919; Smith 1931), and Worthington George Smith (1894; Roe 2009) forever setting the mould for the serious collector/enthusiast/scholar. One of the pleasures of attending LSS meetings is to escape the constrictions of formal academic discourse and enjoy the company of members of whatever background who share a common passion for stone tools, and perhaps particularly for what one of our best-known members, Phil Harding, always refers to as “the master substance” (i.e. flint). For this and many other reasons the future of the Society seems both assured and necessary as archaeology and lithic studies evolve.

REFERENCES


