LETTERS AND NOTES

A LOWER PALAEOLITHIC HANDAXE FROM FOXHOLES FARM, HERTFORD.

A.M. Slade

ABSTRACT

The Palaeolithic record of Hertford is sparse, with only five artefacts being recorded within TERPS. This note presents a detailed description of a handaxe from Foxholes Farm, Hertford, recently redisplayed at Hertford Museum, suggesting that this area of the Lea Valley remains curiously under-researched.


Keywords: Palaeolithic archaeology, Acheulean, handaxe, typology

INTRODUCTION

The artefact (Figure 1) was recovered from a multi-period site on gravel at Foxholes Farm, Hertford (Figure 2) in 1983 (Partridge 1989). It was recovered whilst cleaning a cut feature exposed in the edge of one quarry face. This note is first detailed description of this artefact, in the context of the sparse Palaeolithic record of Hertford.

BACKGROUND

The Foxholes Farm specimen; HETFM 2007 92-110, was described as being a typical Middle Acheulean handaxe (Gibson 1989: 147). Clive Partridge mentions that the Palaeolithic handaxe was in the gravels of the river terrace (Partridge 1989: 7). The Foxholes site rests on the gravel capped, chalk escarpment bordering the south edge of the Lea Valley; overlooking the flat valley bottom known locally as The Meads (Figure 1). The modern River Lea is approx ½ mile away.

This note represents the first complete report of this handaxe; in fact, Hertford’s Palaeolithic record is not well represented at all. This specimen was missed off The English River Palaeolithic Project (Wessex Archaeology 1996), in which a total of only five Palaeolithic artefacts are reported, and John Wymer neglected to mention Hertford at all in his follow up publication (Wymer 1999). However, W.G. Smith recorded the discovery of Palaeolithic implements in the gravels of Hertford and Ware from as long ago as 1878.

He also found his first finds in shipments of gravel brought up the River Lea on barges and around Hertford; two of which were close to the Lea and the other Smith recorded as being 130 – 140 ft above OD (Smith 1894:184). An implement from Ware was found in a new road being laid in Tottenham which is now in the British Museum (Smith 1894). Smith maintained that this area was consistently yielding Palaeolithic implements — not only from Hertford, but also the surrounding towns of Ware, Bengeo and Amwell. Sir John Evans

¹ Centre for the Archaeology of Human Origins, University of Southampton, Avenue Campus, SO17 1BU.
Email: alan.slade@gmail.com
also recorded stone implements from Hertford and surrounding areas (Evans 1872).

DESCRIPTION
The handaxe is almost complete, the tip being missing, broken off in antiquity, and displays a fairly asymmetric form. The handaxe is of the pointed type with thin edges and a heavy butt, very characteristic of the Acheulean. The butt exhibits a fair amount of cortex on the surface. This is evident on both faces but much more so on the obverse face (Figure 2). The obverse face displays the shallow scale-like flaking which made the straight, working edges and the delicate points, missing in this instance. The reverse face (Figure 3) shows the thin relatively wide flakes that were essential for finishing handaxes of this type (Wymer 1968: 51–55).

The flint is a very dense creamy yellow patina on heavily abraded material, the raw material and condition of the handaxe sound very similar to the specimens previously mentioned above. An interesting comparison could be made between the other material in the Hertford Museum, the implements in the collections at the British Museum, and this specimen. The obverse face has the appearance of being much straighter and hence flatter. This can be seen much clearer in the profile illustration in Figure 4. I suggest that the knapper decided that the process of removing the cortex was proving too problematic, or could not be bothered as the finished tool had all the attributes of a fully functional handaxe. The maximum length of the handaxe is 104.5 mm and the missing portion of tip would have been between 20–30 mm long, suggesting an overall original length of approximately 130 mm. Its maximum width is 68.5 mm; with the
DISCUSSION
This is one of the first dedicated reports of a Palaeolithic handaxe from Hertford and its immediate area. I believe this area of the Lea Valley worthy of further investigation and I hope that this report can help rekindle interest in the Palaeolithic period of Hertford. Although the provenance of the handaxe is open to debate (redeposited within a Holocene cut feature), the specimen improves the Palaeolithic archaeological record of Hertford and adds an element to our overall understanding of this period. The handaxe is now on display in the newly refurbished Hertford Museum.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
I would like to thank East Herts Archaeological Unit and especially Hugh Borrill for their encouragement during my early years as a field archaeologist in Hertford. I’m particularly grateful
to Sara Taylor the Assistant Curator of Hertford Museum, for all her help in tracking down the handaxe and allowing me access to the object on numerous occasions. Thanks also to Nicholas Ashton of the British Museum Quaternary Section at Franks House for access to the English Rivers Palaeolithic Project reports.

REFERENCES


