This volume is nothing if not long-awaited; the discoveries at Lynford Quarry, in 2002, and subsequent excavations by Norfolk Archaeology, caused something of a splash in the British Palaeolithic world. The previously meagre British late Middle Palaeolithic (cf. White & Jacobi 2002) was expanded exponentially by the discoveries, previously being represented by a handful of small sites containing few artefacts, and a plethora of stray individual handaxe (bout coupé) finds. Not only did Lynford provide a wealth of lithic material, but also well-preserved faunal remains, and an exceptional palaeoenvironmental record. The gestation period for British Palaeolithic monographs, however, is somewhat protracted, leading to a 10 year delay between the end of excavation and publication.

The resulting hardbound monograph is thick and produced to an extremely high standard (bar a few irritating typographical errors); colour plates and illustrations are used throughout, and the provision of long, pull-out sections provides a useful overview of site stratigraphy. Chapter 1 comprises a presentation of the site and excavation/record- ing methodologies employed. The subsequent four chapters deal with stratigraphy and dating (Chapter 2), environmental evidence (Chapter 3), deposit and formation processes (Chapter 4), and the archaeological assemblages (lithics and faunal remains; Chapter 5). The monograph concludes with a discussion (Chapter 6) by Gamble and Boismier. These six chapter make up the meat of the volume (296 pages), but are followed by an additional 202 pages of appendices — for instance, conservations notes and the context concordance. Given the prohibitive price of the hardback volume (£100), perhaps costs could have been saved by archiving such information electronically (through the Archaeological Data Service, or English Heritage’s own website?). However, the entire monograph is actually available as a free downloadable PDF from English Heritage (www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/neanderthals-among-mammoths/) — a laudable initiative.

Chapter 2 begins with a detailed description of the stratigraphy and sediments of the Lynford site, set within regional context (Lewis). Having been excavated using a recording methodology appropriate to complex urban stratigraphy, over 300 individual context numbers were assigned in the field. These were subsequently combined into 39 groups (sensu Harris), and then divided by Lewis into five broad depositional facies (associations A-E), reflecting the manner in which the fluvial deposits at the site accumulated. To the archaeologist, the primary unit of interest is Association B — a channel incised around 71.7 KBP and infilled with fine-grained organic sediments until around 47.2 KBP. Boismier then provides a detailed description of the constituent elements of Association B, which is divided into three main phases — Bi (channel), Bii (channel cut off) and Biii (channel shifts, incising into sediments of cut-off). Archaeological material (fauna and lithics) was predominantly recovered from sediments deposited within the channel-cut off (Association Bii). Detailed information from soil micromorphology, soil geochemistry, compaction studies, and dating (OSL, C14 and AAR) are included within this section. This chapter is firmly aimed at a specialist quaternary audience, and perhaps would have benefitted from a concluding “executive summary”, foregrounding the most significant conclusions for readers wishing to skip ahead to the archaeological chapters and discussion. Excellent introductions in this vein are provided to each chapter. Similarly, chapter 3 includes specialist environmental evidence
from throughout the sequence (beetles, mollusc, pollen, plant macros and vertebrates), and would again have benefitted from a concluding section which brought together, combined and compared these different classes of evidence — or even an overall summary table or figure.

Chapter 4 explicitly focuses on the taphonomy of Association Bii and the archaeological material contained therein, largely based upon archaeological clast (lithic and bone) size, distribution, orientation, and spatial patterning. Unsurprisingly, given the sedimentary context of the material, it does not appear to represent an elusive pristine occurrence, but a capture point of near primary context, receiving vertically displaced material reworked directly from the surrounding banks and through trampling. Chapter 5 picks up the material contained within Association Bii, and seeks to reconstruct the human actions through which they were originally deposited — and specifically, to disentangle to degree of Neanderthal involvement in the accumulation of the numerous mammoths carcases at the site. Given that this represents a (to some degree) time-averaged assemblage, the patterns picked up within Schreve’s faunal analysis are intriguing, suggested repeated activity at a particular place — a point reinforced by White’s analysis of the lithic assemblage. The 11 mammoths are primarily represented by cranial elements and ribs, with the under-representation of meat-bearing limb bones being ascribed to export by Neanderthals. The age profile is not suggestive of a living herd structure, perhaps suggesting a degree of selection, and pathologies (especially injuries to the ribs) are common. Schreve tentatively suggests that these might result from previous, unsuccessful attempts by Neanderthals to bring down these individuals — an intriguing suggestion. As at most probiscidean butchery sites (including ethnographic and experimental examples) cutmarks are absent. Given the differential weathering of the megafaunal assemblage, this assemblage either represents the residues of a curious subsection of the mammoth community with a propensity to repeatedly die in the same place, or a deliberately targeted sub-set.

White’s analysis of the lithic assemblage is probably the feature of the monograph most likely to appeal to readers of this journal, and reinforces several of the features of the faunal analysis. The primary archaeological unit (Association B) produced 2,720 pieces, including technological refits and snaps. However, the most striking features is the presence of a substantial handaxe assemblage (only the second such from Britain), comprising 41 complete and 6 broken examples; these are generally cordiform, ovate and subtriangular, and include the exaggerated bout coupé form typical of the British late Middle Palaeolithic. Detailed reading of the handaxes shows that they functioned in a number of ways — as bifaces, certainly, but particular areas of the working edge were also transformed, retouched and strengthened to suit different uses — for example, notched, or scraper edges were imposed opposite deliberately blunted areas (probably to aid handling). The flexible transformation of bifaces as tool supports is a notable feature of the late Middle Palaeolithic of north-west France (Boëda 2001; Turq 2001), never before documented in detail in Britain.

White reconstructs two complementary chaîne opératoires. The flake assemblage primarily reflects the tail-end of handaxe production/reworking — thinning and finishing; large, cortical flakes such as might result from flint selection and roughing out are not present. The handaxes — and the material that refits to them — reflects use, modification and recycling within the site. Intriguingly, one large handaxe shows a distinctive break to the tip, probably caused by twisting and applying significant force (through intimate contact with the interior of a mammoth, perhaps??!). The largest and best-made handaxes from the site are the most extensively worked and rejuvenated, suggesting that they were carried in ready-made. In contrast, local cobbles and flakes were also used to produce more expedient pieces; Neanderthals at Lynford were employing both curated and expedient technological solutions. That this time-averaged assemblage attests to repeated technological practices at one place suggests that repeat visits were made to Lynford for a specific purpose that required the import of large cutting tools and their maintenance on the spot, supplemented by the manufacture of less elaborate cutting tools. If not to exploit mammoth, then what?
In chapter 6, Gamble and Boisnier bring Lynford into focus, building up a nuanced picture of how Neanderthals may have been surviving within the changeable, seasonally aggressive, environments of MIS 3 Britain. I especially loved the introduction to this section, which succeeds in doing what academic archaeologists so rarely achieve — actually painting a picture of what this place might have been like as a living landscape to the Neanderthals moving through it. The environmental evidence is brought together into a detailed reconstruction of the local and regional resource-scape, with consideration given to how Neanderthals lived within such landscapes, building towards an exploration of the socioecology of Neanderthal life. On balance, the editors and contributors just pull back from coming down on the side of mammoth hunting, and it is a curious feature of academic reaction to the Lynford site that some have sought to argue it away (e.g. Smith 2012) — to suggest that, as it is not a totally pristine, in situ occurrence (or the oft-sought Palaeolithic Pompeii), then there is nothing we can say about Neanderthal activity there. Given the quality of the evidence from the site, and the comparatively impoverished nature of the rest of the British late Middle Palaeolithic record, one cannot help but despair at the excessive expectations of fellow researchers. Archaeology is hard, and Palaeolithic archaeology especially so; it requires a realistic, but positive, approach to difficult and often impoverished data sets. One sometimes feels that, unless an actual “smoking gun” was discovered still held to head of a mammoth by a mummified Neanderthal, then no-one will hold their hands up and accept that they were hunting such prey (whilst at the same time suggesting no plausible alternative to exactly how a large bodied, active hominin survived in north-west Europe for so long!).

All in all, this is a superb volume, and the culmination of an extraordinary amount of excellent and detailed work, for which the contributors and editors should be congratulated. The open access release, as a PDF, of this monograph is to be applauded, as it gives everyone — students, amateurs, professionals, and the cash-strapped Palaeolithic community — the opportunity to make up their own minds, rather than accepting secondhand the opinions of others — myself included!

Beccy Scott

REFERENCES


LEWIS, J. S. C. WITH RACKHAM, J. 2011. THREE WAYS WHARF, UXBRIDGE. A LATE GLACIAL AND EARLY HOLOCENE HUNTER-GATHERER SITE IN THE COLNE VALLEY. LONDON, MOLA MONOGRAPH SERIES 51

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This volume sees the long-awaited publication of the Museum of London excavations at the Long Blade/Early Mesolithic site of Three Ways Wharf, Uxbridge. The site was excavated in the late 1980s and an interim report (Lewis 1991) provided a taster of the treats in store in this volume. The long gap between excavation and most of the writing and final publication has created a few problems in terms of a lack of up-to-date contextualisation in the broader discussion, however more generally the book lives up its