His family and friends, including many archaeological colleagues, were shocked to hear of the sudden death of Ron Waite in July 2014, killed by a train in tragic circumstances. Ron made an invaluable contribution to the study of prehistory in the Midlands, especially the Mesolithic and Palaeolithic periods, through his lifelong interest in archaeological field-walking and the recovery of surface finds, at which he was especially skilled.

Ron was proud of belonging to Nuneaton, Warwickshire, where he was born and spent his life. He attended local schools, including Arbury High, then held a variety of jobs before joining the army, which he left after a brief period due to health problems. His life thereafter was devoted in many ways to his field-walking (Fig. 1). His father’s name was also Ron, and for a while, somewhat confusingly for his correspondents, the young Ron sometimes preferred to use his second name, Barry, until after his father’s death. Throughout his life Ron enjoyed frequent and regular visits with his sister Lorraine and her husband in nearby Hinckley. He is survived by his sister and two brothers, amongst other relatives.

A kind and generous person, Ron had a keen sense of humour, albeit one which reflected his own idiosyncratic view of the world. He was a loner from childhood, content in his own company and did not socialise easily; but his friendship, while sometimes a little erratic, made a strong impact on its recipients, with whom he corresponded extensively, usually on any odd scrap of paper to hand.

Ron read widely, enjoyed popular music and took an interest in other people, whom he often attempted to categorise on his own terms. This sometimes led to ‘fallings out’ when he could not resist telling people directly how he thought of them — tact was not one of Ron’s strong points! He was very fond of animals, became a vegetarian, and admired mystical religions. He lacked any interest in worldly goods and refused to have a telephone, television or even a fridge; his kitchen cupboards and other furniture were full of prehistoric finds.

![Figure 1. Ron Waite during a visit to a gravel pit near Hopwas, Staffordshire, in 2008. (Photograph: Terry Hardaker.)](image)

Ron’s interest in archaeology was already strong in his teenage years, when he found a Romano-British site near his home. His attention moved on to Egyptology, but then to local prehistory, including finding rough-outs near the Nuneaton Group XIV axe factory (Alan Cook, pers. comm.). Through the late

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Francis Fawcett (†1972), of Nuneaton Museum, Ron met many supportive people with whom he could discuss his finds and their origins. Over the years Ron became an expert knapper, easily making handaxes from seemingly intractable quartzite cobbles, and barbed-and-tanged arrowheads and other tool-types from flint, glass or any knappable material to hand.

In 1967 the discovery of a flint blade before construction of the Bedworth Bypass started Ron’s field-walking for flints, his well-thought-out tactic being to search near a spring or elevated position as a likely early focus. With time he acquired an intuitive ‘feel’ for landscape elements likely to favour the traces of Mesolithic to Bronze Age activity, and very often he was proved correct when surface finds materialised. A November 1972 item in the local Nuneaton newspaper was headed ‘Flinthound Ron on hunt for early man’, and 400 of his finds, dated by specialists from Birmingham and Cambridge universities to periods from the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age, were exhibited in Nuneaton Museum (Struebig 1972a & b).

Thus Ron’s fieldwork extended over a period of nearly 50 years. His searches encompassed parts of Warwickshire, Northamptonshire, Leicestershire and, lately, Staffordshire. He thought nothing of cycling for miles to one of his sites, spending hours searching the field, and then cycling back again in all weathers. He had a gift for spotting an artefact at 50 paces! He labelled and recorded almost all of his finds, often noting the locations on his own sketch maps (Fig. 2) or on Ordnance Survey sheets which his archaeological contacts were pleased to supply, and which he made available to Historic Environment Records and other enquirers. He would delight in showing his latest finds, which he sometimes just gave away to those interested, while he donated large quantities to local museums. However, he retained most of his Palaeolithic finds from around Nuneaton, of which he was especially proud, along with selected other ‘specials’.

Figure 2. Ron Waite’s sketch map of his Maxstoke Springs site, Warwickshire, as included in a letter to Alan Saville, November 1982
He never sought acknowledgement or publicity, and left it to others to analyse and publish his work, which is not to say that he had no views and ideas about the implications of his finds. On the contrary Ron had his own very firm and well-argued interpretations of how the implements he found were made and used, and what they meant in terms of the pattern and sequence of prehistoric occupation in the region. These were expressed in conversation and in his voluminous correspondence.

It is no exaggeration to say that Ron’s finds have contributed to significant rewriting of the existing records and will continue to be invaluable in the study of prehistory in central England, as reflected by the way in which the Waite collection is referenced in so many academic publications (e.g. Wise 1990: 32; Hingley 1996: 4; Wymer 1999: 178; Lang & Keen 2005: 67; Lang & Buteux 2007: 13; Myers 2007: 31; Garwood 2011: 12; Bridgland et al. 2014: 243).

Ron was virtually the first to draw major attention to the Mesolithic of the region through his contact with specialists such as the late Dr Lawrence Barfield at Birmingham University, which is how many of his find-spots came to be recorded in the CBA’s Mesolithic Gazetteer (Wymer 1977). At Honey Hill, Elkington, Northamptonshire, Ron identified a large surface flint scatter, including distinctive microliths with inverse basal retouch (Saville 1981a), with three similar and more than a dozen smaller scatters in east Warwickshire (Saville 1981b). On the basis of Ron’s discoveries, Saville (1981b) suggested the Honey Hill type of microlith assemblage represents the denser peopling of the Midlands around the time of the earlier to later Mesolithic transition (cf. Reynier 1998; Myers 2006), and Honey Hill has become a type-assemblage eponym for this variant of the Mesolithic in Britain (Reynier 2005). Ron’s contribution was finding these distinctively Midlands types of assemblage and making them available to specialists. It should also be noted that Ron had no inhibitions about collecting flint and stone artefacts he personally thought interesting, even if others regarded them as typologically dubious. In this way he brought attention to interesting aspects of the regional Mesolithic that might otherwise have been overlooked (e.g. Saville 1977a). Furthermore, blades of Late Upper Palaeolithic type may also be identifiable amongst Ron’s archive of finds (Cooper pers. comm.).

Following his Mesolithic forays, Ron next made an extremely valuable contribution to the study of the earlier Palaeolithic period in the Midlands. He singlehandedly multiplied many times over the number of Palaeolithic finds in the region with his discovery of handaxes, mostly of quartzite, but also of flint (Fig. 3) and a few of rarer raw materials such as rhyolite (Saville & Shotton 1973 & 1974; Saville 1986 & 1988; Pickin 1988; Brown 1992 & 1993a; Graf 2002, 2004, 2011 & 2013). Ron highlighted quartzite as the main locally available raw material in this flint-bearing region of Triassic geologies (MacRae & Moloney 1988) and very astutely developed the ability to recognise signs of human modification even on highly abraded quartzite artefacts. Ron also commented that ‘the … flint ones look like they have been to the North Pole and back’ (undated letter to Anne Graf received 31 May 2014), reflecting on the poor quality of much glacially imported flint in the Midlands.

Ron also retrieved a wide range of other quartzite artefacts, mainly chopper-cores, and small numbers of other tool types (Saville 1988; Graf 2004, 2011 & 2013), sometimes in significant concentrations. Whilst the handaxes and probably the chopper-cores are clearly of Lower to Middle Palaeolithic typology, the other quartzite artefacts, mostly made on cobbled raw material and usually in similar condition to the handaxes, are unfortunately undatable, though often found on a field surface close to handaxes of flint or quartzite. Their variety is perhaps best matched by finds from the Neanderthal reoccupation at Creswell Crags in MIS 3 (Graf 2004), but an open mind needs to be kept for the possibility of the utilisation of the locally abundant quartzite resource in an ad hoc fashion during more recent periods (cf. Saville 2009).
Ron’s finds have emphasised the unexpected density and extent of Palaeolithic activity across the entire landscape, the interfluves as well as the river valleys (Wymer 1999). These finds occurred over a range of local surface geologies (Graf 2004), which outside the river valleys date back to the Anglian glaciation, when the Midlands drift deposits are now known to have been laid down, a surface not subsequently disturbed by any further glaciation in Ron’s search areas. The relationship of the finds to these surface deposits has been a subject of keen enquiry by Ron, disputed with the late Professor Fred Shotton of Birmingham University, with whom he disagreed over this matter (Shotton 1988; Waite pers. comm.). Whatever the precise contexts from which the Lower Palaeolithic handaxes were derived, what Ron’s fieldwork showed conclusively and very significantly was that in parts of central England they were present as frequent surface finds.

Whilst not ignoring his home area, Ron began during the last five years to focus on Staffordshire, where by May 2014 his finds total for handaxes alone, ignoring all other types, was 28 quartzite, two flint, and one other. Ron was happy to donate these finds and to have them all recorded at Birmingham Museums (Teresa Gilmore pers. comm.).

Although it is true that Ron’s archaeological interests came to be focused on first the Mesolithic and latterly the Palaeolithic periods, he did not ignore more recent archaeology and, particularly in the 1970s, he made several significant later prehistoric discoveries. Perhaps chief amongst these was his identification of the Bronze Age round barrow cemetery at Abbey Farm, Warwickshire, and the recovery of one of the richest Midland collections of Neolithic and Bronze Age flintwork from the surrounding areas (Saville 1974a; Rankama 1983; Garwood 2007). For example, Ron’s collection of flint arrowheads from around Nuneaton was one of the key indicators of the distribution of later Neolithic activity there (Fig. 4). He also made many discoveries of individual later prehistoric artefacts (e.g. Saville 1974b & 1977b; Saville & Shotton 1975; Brown 1993b; Prinsen 1997a, b & 1994) or drew attention to finds made by other workers (e.g. Saville 1975).
‘STILL COLLECTING STONES’

Ron’s death is a sad loss to his family, to all who knew him, and to archaeology in the Midlands. He had just reached the age of 65 and was continuing to make significant discoveries; his talents will be sorely missed. The importance of his Palaeolithic finds has been widely appreciated and celebrated; for example, ‘The Waite Collection from north Warwickshire and south Leicestershire is now recognised as one of the most important private collections of Palaeolithic material in the country’ (Buteux & Lang 2002: 18). It is a consolation that his name will be remembered and live on in The Waite Collection (Rann 2011; and see: http://archaeologyservicedatabase.ac.uk/archives/view/waite_na_2011/). In his final letter (to Anne Graf) he reported ‘still collecting stones’; that might well be a suitable epitaph for Ron.

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I met Ron Waite only twice, but over a period of 25 years, through my friendship with the late R.J (Mac) MacRae, who knew him well, I was aware of his work, his letter-writing and his eccentricities.

Ron was one of a number of amateur archaeologists who pursue their hobby with a passion that few professionals can match. His interest in things from the past seemed to be almost genetically embedded, it was ‘in his blood’, and was manifest from an early age, starting with his childhood discovery of Roman material near his home in Nuneaton. His ability to find prehistoric artefacts in ploughed fields developed over a period of more than 40 years, and it became his main archaeological interest.

As a result he collected one of the largest, if not the largest, assemblage of surface artefacts of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic age in his travels in Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Staffordshire and Northamptonshire. I never asked Ron what his motivation was for such compulsive activity, but it seems to have had something to do with the wonder of finding things very old, that had probably never been noticed since the day they were dropped by their makers. The potential monetary value of these finds did not enter his mind, despite a lifelong shortage of money (his letters were typically written on scraps of second-hand paper because proper stationery was unaffordable).

Working in the Midlands, his finds were most commonly made of quartzite, a material harder to work than flint that produces a different range of tools, so the authenticity of his finds often attracted heated discussion. Nevertheless he possessed an unshakeable certainty about the veracity of his discoveries, which would become even more entrenched when others expressed scepticism. I once pressed him on the specific human qualities of a particularly doubtful item. After a lot of close-focused debate, he came up with a telling phrase: “[y]ou are not seeing what I am seeing”, as if

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