The last visit of the day was to Mother Grundy’s Parlour, another cave virtually emptied during the 19th century but which has also provided important, if poorly recorded and tantalizing, evidence dating to the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic. Additionally a significant Mesolithic site has been recorded just outside of the cave’s entrance.

The nature of the artefact and faunal assemblages from each of the last three caves we visited varied considerably and it is possible that the caves were used for different purposes at different times: sometimes they may have provided dwelling places and at other times they may have been used for more specialized functions. Perhaps not surprisingly, the bulk of the evidence for human habitation comes from the caves on the northern side of the gorge: facing south, these receive the maximum warmth and sunlight. Interestingly however, the majority of the artwork was not located within these caves, but in Church Hole on the ‘dark’ southern side of the gorge, where relatively few indications of human occupation have been identified. It might be that this presents further evidence for the caves having specialized roles during these later parts of the Palaeolithic.

Time was now getting short and we quickly made our way back to the Creswell Museum and Education Centre, where Roger Jacobi showed us a collection of superb Middle and Upper Palaeolithic stone artefacts. Unfortunately, the large quantities of artefacts that have been recovered from the caves are now widely dispersed around the world and many have been lost. Nevertheless, the examples retained at the Centre proved to be a veritable typological treasure chest, with good examples of many of the major tool types from the Middle Palaeolithic to the Later Neolithic present. This allowed Roger to demonstrate, for example, such intricacies as the differences between a Font Robert point, a Penknife point, a Cheddar point and a Creswell point, pieces only rarely encountered amongst typical assemblages examined by lithic specialists in Britain. They also allowed us to gain hands-on experience of the wide variety of raw materials that had been utilized by the previous inhabitants of the caves.

Despite the emptying of most of the caves there is still considerable research potential in the old excavations’ spoil heaps, extant Palaeolithic surfaces surrounding the caves, and in deposit remnants still present in the caves. This is, and will continue to be, the focus of an anticipated long-running research programme instigated by our hosts, Paul Pettitt and Roger Jacobi, as well as many others, and further discoveries are awaited with anticipation. All that is left to do is to thank the Creswell Heritage Trust and our hosts for an extremely enjoyable and informative day, and wish them all the very best for their forthcoming work at the Crags.

Barry Bishop

LITHIC STUDIES SOCIETY 2007 AGM LECTURE

As part of the AGM, an added bonus (and likely factor in the high numbers attending) was the inclusion of a talk on the Early Middle Palaeolithic (EMP) of the Thames, as well as a lithics handling session. The lecture was a mutual presentation by Beccy Scott and Claire Fisher. Beccy’s recent PhD on the subject as well as both her and Claire’s first hand experience with the collections in question held by the British Museum proved to be invaluable in conveying the fascinating nature of this period.
The chronology of the EMP was laid out, stretching between possibly late MIS 9 to MIS 7, and the concept of Levallois as a highly mobile technology, fundamentally a long-distance transportable toolkit, was explained. The collections held at Franks House, representing most of the major London EMP sites studied by Beccy and Claire, were described, including the particulars of their history of collection at various gravel and brickearth pits. The talk focused on the idiosyncrasies of each locale, through analysis of the technological approaches used, as well as the stages in manufacture and use that they represent. The EMP shows clear differential treatment of the landscape, linked to the proximity to and availability of raw material sources. The major sites discussed are in the main essentially ‘extraction’ and ‘production’ locales, as opposed to places where the end-products, Levallois flakes and points, were used.

There were several particular highlights of the lecture. The detailed analysis of the stratigraphies of the artefact-producing pits, and the correlation of deposits between different pits were useful in understanding the depositional context of the archaeology. Intriguing technological flexibility was demonstrated at some sites, including the presence of ‘hierarchically reversed’ Levallois cores at Creffield Road, where the cores were flipped over, and the discovery that preparation methods changed throughout the reduction sequence. Possible evidence for Levallois points being hafted into spears at the same site was presented. The Ebbsfleet Channel shows interesting evidence for cyclical re-preparation of Levallois cores, with evidence for smaller flakes possibly being removed from the site, and at the same time a focus on large flakes not points. The site at Crayford was described as more similar to the nature of Boxgrove, as a ‘landsurface’ of scatters and patches of lithics. Recent fieldwork at Norris Pit using bores to identify stratigraphy was reported, as well as the analysis of the superb refitting collection from Stoneham’s Pit, collected by Spurrell. Here elongated nodules were exploited, with a strong focus on laminar technology. Some Levallois flaking surfaces provided flakes and points, which were removed from the site and only exist as negatives. Interestingly, the artefacts comprising the ‘scatters’ across the landscape are often points, providing evidence for the different locales in the chaîne opératoire.

Questions were numerous and included issues of stratigraphy and dating, and the question of bifacial technology in the Early Middle Palaeolithic was raised. Following the lecture, the unique opportunity to see and handle (under strict supervision!) some of the material in question was a real treat for those attending. The ability to engage firsthand with the artefacts made a genuine difference to many people’s understanding of the lecture, especially the astounding refitting nodules, pieced together by Beccy and Claire. The spaces where the Levallois points would have fitted before being removed from the site were quite clear to see, and a wonderfully immediate glimpse into a real chaîne opératoire in action. Similarly, the elegant blade and Levallois points and particularly the few bifacially worked pieces drew attention and admiration, as well as speculation on the true extent and nature of bifacial working during the Early Middle Palaeolithic.

Rebecca Wragg Sykes