The first sentence “The Kennet is one of the more significant rivers of southern England” immediately provided, to this reviewer, a striking and somewhat parochial contrast with Bridgland’s (1994) opening: “Few rivers of so modest a size...” concerning the much larger and indisputably much more significant Thames. After this slightly shaky start, my enjoyment of the book increased as I progressed through it. The main focus of the book is a detailed analysis of the prolific undisturbed Long Blade flint scatters excavated at the site of Avington VI between 1972 and 1981, where almost 15,000 artefacts were recovered from one horizon (including c. 10,000 chips/spalls below 2cm long) within an area of 5 x 7m. Supplementing this are relatively brief reports on relatively small surface collections of technologically/typologically similar material from the nearby sites of Wawcott XII and Crown Acres.

Four of the chapters are devoted to Avington VI, and the mammoth third and fourth chapters are the heart of the book. The former provides an extensive technological and typological analysis of the site, including excellent sections that describe and illustrate the main technological and typological categories present, such as cores, points/microliths, endscrapers, and bruised blades. The section on the latter is particularly interesting, and, in contrast to the generally descriptive nature of the majority of the book, involves some original work that relates the positioning of bruising on bruised blades to the optimum striking area if they are being used to chop downwards, holding one end. I was wholly convinced that this interpretation is correct, and that this is how they were used and how these artefacts acquired their characteristic bruising. I was not, however, convinced by the further interpretation that this was due to flint-on-flint contact relating to the preparation of striking platforms whilst knapping. Other work (e.g. Barton 1986) has suggested that similar bruising can result from chopping bone or antler, and others (Fagnart & Plisson 1997: 105) have also suggested “use of hammers on stone” although not for actual knapping. As a reasonably experienced flint knapper, I cannot conceive how/why a sharp flake or blade could be usefully used for knapping; the sharp edge would get damaged at impact rather than remove a flake, and the uneven weight distribution would make it hard to strike the right point precisely, particularly when used in a rotational manner; it would be interesting to hear the views of other knappers on this point. If this interpretation is to be accepted, it should be possible for modern knappers to replicate this usage; this reviewer will continue to find this interpretation unlikely until I’ve seen it done. Another possible explanation is that perhaps the damage is due to an anvil, and that some soft tissue is being chopped, perhaps in relation to subsistence at the site, for which we have no information, biological remains being absent.

In Chapter 4, supported by extensive illustrations, eighteen major refitting groups are in turn lovingly dissected, almost blow by blow. The illustrations are all the work of the author, and a big positive throughout the book. Although slightly diagrammatic, after the French style as exemplified for instance in Bordes’ typology (1979), they clearly indicate both a love of flint and a good understanding of flint-working technology. They allow the reader to unpick the sequence of reduction, should he/she be so-minded, and thus to engage with the intentions and frustrations of the knapper’s/knappers’ progress from raw flint nodule to waste core, in course of application of the spectacularly wasteful and over-engineered Long Blade knapping...
strategy. It seems that at most 5% of the blades produced from each sequence were taken away as end-products, often only two or three from a particular flint nodule, and the smaller (less than 10cm long) rather than the larger ones (reaching over 20cm in some instances). There was much interesting information on the distribution of refitting sequences within the site, and there seemed to be a clear pattern for reduction of specific nodules to be split between the two main scatters within the site, with early phases of reduction being generally associated with one scatter, and later phases the other — although this pattern is reversed in one instance. This immediately brought to mind the work of Pigeot (1990) at Etiolles, concerning the differentiation of that site into areas of expert and novice activity, and raised questions over whether different levels of knapping skill or reduction difficulty could be detected in the different scatters at Avington. However in this instance (as in several others) the facts are presented, but little interpretation ensues.

Overall, there is perhaps not enough attention to interpretation, or to discrimination between useful and gratuitous empirical data. Of course one person’s gratuitous data is another’s vital information, but, and this goes for lithic analyses in general, if one is going to go overboard on the minutiae of size data such as the “triangular co-ordinates for blades” (cf. Table 3.5, pp28), which appear to represent a somewhat esoteric arithmetical approach to measurement of their length in relation to their thickness and width, broken down by both the incidence of cortex and the degree of cross-flaking, then it is incumbent upon an author to make a case for the relevance of these data to an interpretive issue. I had to pore through the text to seek out nuggets of logistic organisational information such as the degree to which flint nodules were preliminarily worked or tested before being brought to the site for knapping, or the absences in the refitted sequences that represented (presumably) the desired end product — the information is present, but is not given the emphasis it deserves, being presented (it seemed) as a supplement to the descriptive work rather than the point of it.

There are a number of other areas where the wealth of original data and the extensive analyses seem to demand further discussion within a wider context. There didn’t seem to be sufficient consideration of the dynamics of the wider adaptation in which these Long Blade sites, and the other Long Blade sites distributed between northern France and southern Britain, played a role; nor, from a more theoretical archaeological viewpoint, of how (or whether) the distinctive typological/technological characteristics of sites that we today characterise as distinctively “Long Blade” might have been part of a more widely varied expression of lithic material culture, that we are recognising in other broadly contemporary sites with a predominance of finished tool-types (perhaps for instance as Creswellian or Federmesser industries). Similarly, it would have been nice to have had more discussion of how the presence of the Long Blade makers in the Kennet Valley related to the Loch Lomond stadial (before/after/during?) and, on an associated theme, on the transition to the early Mesolithic, one of the earliest English manifestations of which occurs at nearby Thatcham (Wymer 1962).

Despite this minor carping, Froom is to be congratulated on bringing to fruition what has obviously been a labour of love. As pointed out by Cook in the foreword, he has worked as an independent researcher with a local focus. I suspect, and hope, he will readily accept such criticisms as I have made, and be resting on his laurels for a job well done, leaving it to others to pursue the higher interpretive levels and wider contexts alluded to above. I highly recommend this book as a vital addition to the library of anyone interested in late prehistoric flintwork and flint knapping, and as a mine of data for anyone seeking to explore more behavioural and dynamic interpretations of Late Glacial and early Holocene lithic-dominated sites.
References


Francis Wenban-Smith