NEW FINDS OF PALAEOLITHIC handaxes FROM LINCOLNSHIRE

T. William Bee

ABSTRACT

Lincolnshire is at the northernmost limit of early hominin occupation, and until recently very few handaxes had been recovered. However, since a more targeted programme of investigations was begun in the 1990s, the number of discoveries has increased dramatically. This paper reports on six recent discoveries, and reviews the sum total of Lincolnshire handaxe finds to date. It is clear that, when left to chance, Palaeolithic remains may be overlooked, but that targeted investigations pay dividends.


Key words: Palaeolithic, handaxes, Lincolnshire

INTRODUCTION

A previous paper in Lithics (Bee 2001) has drawn attention to the presence of Lower Palaeolithic handaxes in Lincolnshire, despite its position north of the imaginary line across Britain from the Bristol Channel to the Wash, previously taken as marking the limit of destruction of any Lower Palaeolithic remains by the last glaciation (Roe 1981). The purposes of this paper are to review the recorded Palaeolithic handaxe find-spots in Lincolnshire (Figure 1) and to draw attention to six new handaxe find-spots.

REGIONAL GEOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY

The geology of the region has already been reviewed in the earlier paper (Bee 2001). To recap briefly, Spilsby Sandstone covers most of the area, with pinnacles of elevated ground formed by outcrops of the hard rock Roach and Carstone Formations. Concerning Drift deposits, the area possesses extensive spreads of pre-Ipswichian glacial tills (Straw 1961), as well as pockets of Devensian till (Jukes-Brown 1885). It is probable that these tills, which have settled in and over the hollows of the hard rocks where the handaxes lay, have been instrumental in protecting the artefacts. The high Wolds however may not have been fully covered by the Devensian glaciation, in which case if any artefacts had been dropped and left there since the previous glaciation, they would not have moved very far.

Some Pleistocene terrace deposits are also present. At Laughterton, the Eagle Moor terrace seems to stretch from Lincoln in the north to Newark in the southwest, associated with the River Trent.

The River Lymn, where there is perhaps an important cluster of finds becoming apparent, is situated at the southern end of the Lincolnshire Wolds about 4km northeast of Horncastle (Figure 1) where the waters which contribute to the Lymn percolate from the High Wolds of the Bluestone Heath down into the valley to form some of the uppermost tributaries. The river

Stainton Lane, Scothern, Lincoln, LN2 2UR
then flows out of the Wolds in a southeasterly direction across the East Marsh and Fens to join the Steeping River, which then empties into the Wash.

Figure 1: Site locations and search area
LITHICS 26

LINCOLNSHIRE HANDAXE FINDS

Previous finds

The first Palaeolithic handaxe from Lincolnshire, discovery of which must have been a relief to some of the academics of the time, was found in 1897, not in situ but out of a load of railway ballast from a quarry at Skellingthorpe, Lincolnshire (Roe 1968: 191; Sites & Monuments Records, Lincoln), and was presented to the British Museum in 1922. By the 1950s, the late Tom Baker and his team had a record of ten find-spots (Baker 1954; Table 1: Finds #1–10).

Between 1969 and 1973, three handaxes and a flake were found in the gravel pit at Welton-le-Wold, 6km west of Louth, not quite in situ but securely provenanced to a horizon sandwiched between gravels (Alabaster et al. 1976; Wymer & Straw 1977; Figure 2; Table 1: Finds #11–13). At least two separate glacial tills were visible at the quarry faces, at least one of which is post-Anglian. This post-Anglian ice sheet probably occurred around 150,000 or 250,000 years ago in MIS 6 or 8, corresponding to the Saalian glaciation of mainland Europe.

![Figure 2: Composite section of the sequence of deposits in the former quarry at Welton-le-Wold (drawn by Dave Hopkins based on work by Prof. Allan Straw)](image)

Deposits with extinct megafaunal remains are also known. The River Bain is just over the next hill where at Kirkby-on-Bain in the 1950s mammoth remains were an embarrassment to the owners of the quarry, because every time part of a skeleton was found, work was delayed whilst the mammoth remains were recorded. Whilst searching the spoil heaps in the 1980s I found two complete mammoth teeth and one broken one. I donated the best of the specimens to the City and County Museum, Lincoln, now called The Collection.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Find #</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Grid Ref</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Details of discovery</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Skellingthorpe</td>
<td>SK 97 SW (E)</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>Found in Railway Ballast</td>
<td>Balderton Sand &amp; Gravels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Legbourne</td>
<td>TF 3450 8510 (E)</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Walking. Surface find</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Whisby</td>
<td>SK 9086 6703 (E)</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Professor Swinnerton</td>
<td>Gravel Pit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Thorpe on the Hill</td>
<td>SK 905 655 (E)</td>
<td>Pre-1937</td>
<td>Swinnerton &amp; Baker</td>
<td>Balderton Sand &amp; Gravels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Holton-cum-Beckering</td>
<td>TF 1216 8235 (E)</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Found by Mr R. Shanks. Surface</td>
<td>Glacial Gravels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Thorpe on the Hill</td>
<td>TF 0858 5036 (E)</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Found by Mervyn Thornton</td>
<td>Gravel Pit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Holton-cum-Beckering</td>
<td>TF 0858 5036 (E)</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Found by Mervyn Thornton</td>
<td>Gravel Pit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Atterby Carrs</td>
<td>TF 0164 9408 (A)</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>By the River Ancholme. Surface</td>
<td>Sand &amp; Gravel Deposits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Barlings</td>
<td>TF 071 753 (E)</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Parish of Barlings. Surface</td>
<td>Sand &amp; Gravel Deposits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Faldingworth</td>
<td>TF 069 847 (A)</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Found by M.H.M. Backus</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Welton-le-Wold</td>
<td>TF 0146 9408 (A)</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Field Walking. Surface Find</td>
<td>Spilsby Sandstone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Welton-le-Wold</td>
<td>TF 071 753 (E)</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Parish of Barlings. Surface</td>
<td>Sand &amp; Gravel Deposits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Welton-le-Wold</td>
<td>TF 071 753 (E)</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Parish of Barlings. Surface</td>
<td>Sand &amp; Gravel Deposits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Fullby</td>
<td>TF 330 736 (A)</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Field Walking. 120m OD</td>
<td>Pocket of Devensian Till</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Salmonby</td>
<td>TF 3201 7402 (A)</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Field Walking. Surface Find</td>
<td>Clay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Tetford</td>
<td>TF 3228 7432 (A)</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Field Walking. Surface Find</td>
<td>60m Contour line. Sand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Salmonby</td>
<td>TF 3175 7470 (A)</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Field Walking. Surface Find</td>
<td>60m Contour line. Sand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Salmonby</td>
<td>TF 3190 7360 (A)</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Field Walking. Surface Find</td>
<td>Lead coloured clay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Oxcombe</td>
<td>TF 3045 7725 (A)</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Field Walking. Surface Find</td>
<td>Clay and Chalk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Thimbleby</td>
<td>TF 242 698 (A)</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Field Walking. Surface Find</td>
<td>Sand and Gravels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Laughterton</td>
<td>SK 837 760 (A)</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Field Walking. Surface Find</td>
<td>Eagle Moor Sand/Gravels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Osburnby 1</td>
<td>TF 078 379 (E)</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Field Walking. Surface Find</td>
<td>Sand and Gravels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Osburnby 2</td>
<td>TF 082 370 (E)</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Field Walking. Surface Find</td>
<td>Sand and Gravels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Handaxe find-spots in Lincolnshire
Building on these records of stray finds and incidental discoveries, a more systematic search led to discovery of four further find-spots in the 1990s in the vicinity of Salmonby and Tetford (Bee 2001; Table 1: Finds #14–17). Just one of these finds (#14), is mentioned in the English Rivers Palaeolithic Survey (Wessex Archaeology 1996).

Continuing searches in more recent years have now led to six further finds, including one from the Salmonby/Tetford cluster (Table 1: Finds #18–23), which are reported on in more detail below.

**Six new handaxes**

*Salmonby Carr (Table 1: Find #18)*

This handaxe (Figure 3) was found in an arable field above Salmonby Carr, which is a great gash in the valley floor, south of Skerryl’s Holt, northeast of Hoe Hill. The handaxe was protruding from a hole filled with lead-coloured clay and makes this find quite unusual because Spilsby Sandstone surrounds the hole. Since this hole was discovered the land has been drained and ploughed. However, below the plough soil there must still be lead-coloured clay. There are also extensive spreads of Devensian till in the area. This flint is typical of the Lincolnshire material which has many inclusions, described by Hill (1911) as having no definite shape or form. Posnansky (1963) also suggests that this describes flint from the Lincolnshire Wolds. The handaxe is a uniface and quite brown. Most flint that has been lying around in the valley for any length of time shows iron stains beginning to be absorbed into the surface. Because of the likely age of this handaxe, it could have absorbed a lot of its colouring from acids from the iron stone content of the area, especially if for a long period of time it had been submerged in a prehistoric lake.

![Figure 3: Handaxe from Salmonby Carr (found T. William Bee)](image)

*Oxcombe (Table 1: Find #19)*

This handaxe (Figure 4) was found in an arable field north of Bluestone Heath Road, Oxcombe, on the high Wolds close to the Jurassic Ridge, from an area of Chalk bedrock overlain by pre-Ipswichian Till.
Figure 4: Handaxe from Oxcombe (found T. William Bee)

**Thimbleby (Table 1: Find #20)**
This handaxe (Figure 5) was found just south of the market town of Horncastle at the foothills of the Lincolnshire Wolds, on high arable ground, mapped as sand and gravel deposits, between the Rivers Witham and Bain and could belong to either of these river systems. The River Bain flows through Horncastle at this point and was responsible for some of the most important spreads of sand and gravel deposits along the floodplain between Horncastle and Tattershall. It was between these two places where most of the mammoth remains and a rhinoceros tooth were found.

**Laughterton (Table 1: Find #21)**
This handaxe (Figure 6) was found some distance away along the Middle Trent Valley, at Laughterton, near the golf course, at the western boundary of Lincolnshire between Lincoln and Newark. It was found close to the River Trent and is most likely from deposits associated with this river system, which contains the nearest sites to Lincolnshire for Acheulian handaxe industries (the well-known sites of Hilton and Willington near Derby, and Beeston that is nearer to Nottingham) all along the middle Trent Valley (Posnansky 1963). Perhaps it is no coincidence that a handaxe was found along this stretch of river, where it could have been within the Eagle Moor sand and gravel terrace, transported by a flash flood or even human agency.

**Osbornby (Table 1: Finds #22–23)**
Two handaxes have been found at Osbornby just south of Sleaford, both surface finds from arable land on deposits mapped as sands and gravels. Osbornby 1 (Figure 7; Table 1: Find #22) was broken in antiquity, but it had not moved very far because the arêtes are still bright and sharp and have the appearance of being in pristine condition. Osbornby 2 (Figure 8; Table 1: Find #23) however is in a bad way. It has been worn extensively, perhaps due to
wind erosion, thermal damage and movement with water abrasion. This specimen is perhaps a remnant from a much more ancient river, perhaps even the Bytham River.

Figure 5: Pointed handaxe from Thimbleby (found David Lascelles; information Kevin Leahy, North Lincolnshire Museum)

Figure 6: Handaxe from Laughterton (found J. Derry)
In and around Osbournby there is an abundance of water and plenty of clay with flint, and blown sands, overlying limestone bedrock. Perhaps the proto-Trent could have carved this channel before it was diverted northwards along the edge of the ice-flow during a glaciation into its present course. The Osbournby handaxes could perhaps be associated with hunting parties traversing along the banks of the river that carved the gap at Ancaster.

Figure 7: Handaxe (1) from Osbournby (information Tim Camm)

Figure 8: Ovate handaxe (2) from Osbournby (information Tim Camm)
DISCUSSION

Since the last war there have been so many changes within the landscape from the way farms have been managed, through different farming practices with heavier machinery and bigger ploughs that started to work through into the subsoil. There is not a strict four crop rotation anymore, and this in itself has led to a greater surface erosion of finer sands and silts in many places. Alongside construction of pipeline services for water, oil and gas, there has been the building of flood barriers. Even across the Fens the riverbanks have been heightened and strengthened, especially eastwards along the Witham Valley, where millions and millions of tonnes of clay have been laid down. All of this together with the erosion of the surface from flash floods sweeping down the dip slope exposing masses of large nodules may increase the number of handaxes being found in the future.

Material of the age being discussed is not thought to be readily available in the county so we have to be aware of accidental discoveries. It is surprising though, how many of the most important inventions and discoveries are made by accident. If Mr C. Alabaster hadn’t walked in the quarry at Welton-le-Wold and discovered fragmentary faunal remains, the three Palaeolithic handaxes would not have been found and the discovery of this very important site would not have been realised. We have only to look back to the movement of aggregate in the south of England along the Thames valley, way back in the late 1800s, when handaxes were easily found by workmen using pickaxes, shovels and wheel barrows. But by the time quarrying started here in the northern counties the industrial revolution had taken place and excavators were now working the quarry faces and moving up to ten tonnes at a time with every bucket full, so if there had been any handaxes they would now be lost.

Even in 1995 when the late John Wymer and Phil Harding were researching for the English Rivers Palaeolithic Survey they found a handaxe on the surface of a reject heap at the Redlands Aggregate pit, Thorpe–on–the–Hill, Lincolnshire. So it seems that they can still be found if the people who are looking know how to identify the pieces.

So it is no wonder that, through more systematic excavations and field walking, handaxes can in fact be found throughout Lincolnshire.

One of the ways the late Tom Baker, who was the curator of the City & County Museum, was able to get farmers interested about artefacts in general was to set up a couple of tables in the local Corn Exchange and show exhibits. It wasn’t long before farmers were bringing in important artefacts that had been found on their farms. All this knowledge shared has paid dividends. Whilst I was fieldwalking a farmer came to me to ask what I was doing, when I replied I was looking for worked flint from prehistory, the immediate reply was that he had a peculiar shaped piece of flint that he had been using as a paperweight for 25 years. This turned out to be a pointed Acheulian handaxe, so yet another accidental find to add to the old cliché that knowledge needs to be shared.

Most of these handaxes seem to be associated with patches of glacial till filling hollows and pockets in the solid bedrock. There has been much debate about how ice moves over a landscape, which has been shaped and reshaped by glacial and fluvio-glacial action. The Spilsby Sandstone and the Roach and Carstone formations could have resisted some of the movement out of the hollows. Any artefacts within the hollows might still be there, waiting to be discovered from the till by modern earth movements due to erosion and heavier machinery.
The surface geology of a region determines to some extent patterns of human settlement and even movement in that area. Water is the next important commodity for human settlement and would generally have been available around water holes. The spring lines along the base of the Lincolnshire Wolds and Lincoln Edge, with the Ancholme valley between them, would have created an almost ideal backdrop for the settlement and movement of early prehistoric hominins. The major rivers in this area may have been the Rivers Trent, Lynn, Bain, and Witham. Hunting parties on their excursions would have had the best of both worlds hunting along these rivers because of the increased resources. The valley dropping down from the Bluestone Heath Road (Jurassic Ridge) was potentially important: because it drops down on a south facing slope it would have been good protection for the hunters from cold north winds and would also have served them in good stead looking for game. They would have been able to take advantage of the higher ground to see further and monitor the game movements.

**CONCLUSION**

The reason the Lincolnshire discoveries are attracting attention at the moment is because they are at the periphery for the known movement of hominins and represent a very important extension to the distribution of Lower Palaeolithic occupation of Britain. The bright and sharp condition of some of the handaxes suggests they must have been brought, used, and then left in close proximity to their find spot, e.g. Thimbleby and Osbournby 1. On the other hand Osbournby 2 appears to have been transported some distance, probably by the proto-Trent or a more ancient river from the Pre-Anglian stage.

Present-day Lincolnshire is a county of high food production, food for the body; but what I have provided here is food for thought.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I owe a great debt of gratitude to the late John Wymer who was my mentor for eight years, for his advice and identification of the handaxes shown in this paper. I hope this paper will be a fitting tribute for his help and advice. A debt of gratitude goes to a number of people and organisations: all the farmers who have given permission for me walk their land in the interest of archaeology; Adam Daubney (Small Finds Officer) for all his advice; Kevin Leahy (North Lincolnshire Museum, Scunthorpe); Mark Bennet (Lincolnshire Sites and Monuments Officer) for access into their files; Dawn Heywood, Anthony Lee and all the staff at The Collection, Lincoln Museum for access to their files about the Lincolnshire handaxes; Dave Lascelles, Tim Camm and John Derry for giving me permission to record and illustrate their handaxes; and finally to Dave Hopkins, a special thank you for the quality of the illustrations and other advice.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


