COLLECTIONS OF LOWER PALAEOLITHIC ARTEFACTS FROM ABBOTS LEIGH, SOMERSET (1991 - 92)

Brian Hack

The collections were made at Chapel Pill Farm, Abbots Leigh, the most artefactually prolific Lower Palaeolithic site yet known in the area designated as ‘The Bristol Avon’. The site on which the collections were made covered an area of c.16 hectares and is centred at NGR ST 543758. Artefacts recovered during the period 1991-92 were the subject of two previous published reports (Hack & Cornish 1991; Hack 1992) and as demonstrated in these reports a variety of stone tools may be recovered here. Whilst the handaxes found here present few categorisation problems, many of the other stone tools found in association with them, and which are in many cases in similar physical condition, defy easy ‘pigeon-holing’ by comparison with other published British Lower Palaeolithic assemblages. It seems likely that the stone tools which are recovered at Abbots Leigh may be representative of several widely separated prehistoric periods.

HANDAXES

Many handaxes were found, the majority of which were formed from the rather poor quality chert pebbles and cobbles which are an element of the local gravels. Most of these handaxes had been subjected to considerable wear, having sustained rounding to their edges and to the ridges between their struck facets. There were a few examples which have been made from flint, and as would be expected these displayed a better quality of workmanship. Two examples of handaxes had been made from quartzite, one of these is illustrated in this note. The second example has been recorded previously (Hack 1993). This example, together with some 50 artefacts from this site was recently donated to the Donald Baden-Powell, Quaternary Research Centre at Oxford.

CHOPPERS/CHOPPER CORES

More than 150 examples of chopper/chopper-cores were recovered. These included both unifacially and bifacially worked examples. Chopper/chopper-cores are recorded as elements which appear in many prehistoric stone-tool assemblages, and whilst they often display an archaic aspect too much reliance should not be placed on their seemingly ancient appearance. Many examples of these artefacts which display extremely archaic aspects have been recovered at the littoral site at Hill Head, in Hampshire. (Hack 1999, 2000). The occurrence of this artefact type appearing as it does at many sites where handaxes are recovered is deserving of further research.

BURINS/GRAVERS

Stone tools that can be typologically classified either as a burin or as a graver are a possible element of any lithic assemblage, and its appearance is not confined to any particular period. The recognition of the burins capability as a precision implement where its employment has resulted in
many artistic examples of engraving or carving is more easily recognised when work attributable to the Upper Palaeolithic period is being considered. However, the recognition of the burin as an element of the stone-tool assemblage in Lower Bed 1, at Olduvai Gorge (Leakey 1971) and its utilisation in the form of a tool employed for working shale during the Romano/British period (Calkin 1953) serves to illustrate the extremities of its long record. Approximately 15 burins have been noted among the material recovered at the Abbots Leigh site. They are rare here but their occurrence suggests that the requirement for a protruding tool with a short cutting-edge did occasionally arise. By comparison with the elegant examples which are typical of the Upper
Figure 2: Artefacts from Abbots Leigh. Top left: Burin on local chert. Top right, middle and bottom: choppers/chopper cores made on local chert.

Palaeolithic burin/graver, the examples found at Abbots Leigh appear coarse and primitive. They are basic in form often being fashioned on a naturally occurring protuberance of a pebble or cobble or a broken stone fragment. They are not suggestive of a requirement to fulfil any function which might demand great precision. The examples from the site were mostly large in size, and ranged in weight from 340g to a small example on a struck flake weighing only 20g. One example had been formed on a rough truncated handaxe, whilst another was double-ended. All of the tools had two or more burin facets struck from either a naturally broken or a struck platform.

CONCLUSION.

It remains a disappointment that no further information, or indeed a sustainable hypothesis can be offered in support of these somewhat stark occurrences at this site. The latest and most ‘definitive’ thinking concerning the site at Abbots Leigh can be found in (Wymer 1999). Wymer examined
many of our finds from this site when he was collecting material for his ‘English Rivers Palaeolithic Survey’. That typological comparisons might be drawn from recorded artefact assemblages which occur outside Britain does not present a worthwhile platform from which observations might be made at the present time. It is anticipated that the results of any future investigative scientific work, undertaken by those who will undoubtedly be better informed and equipped to throw light on the current confused but stimulating picture presented by the contents of the gravels at Abbots Leigh, will be enthusiastically received.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.
I am grateful to ‘Joe’ Cornish for his help and companionship at the site, and for his encouragement in the preparation of this note. Thanks are due to L.W. Lavington for granting access and permission to collect at Chapel Pill Farm. Material recovered from the site has been donated to The North Somerset Museum, Weston-super-Mare, a small representative sample was given to the Axbridge Archaeological & Local History Society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY