LSS excursion to Priory Bay, Isle of Wight

Francis Wenban-Smith

Priory Bay, Isle of Wight (NGR SZ 635901), was visited by a party from the Lithic Studies Society on Sunday 16 September 2001. The visit coincided with fieldwork directed by Francis Wenban-Smith, assisted by Gilbert Marshall and Julian Tipper, aimed at investigating whether there is a significant Lower Palaeolithic site at Priory Bay under imminent threat of destruction by coastal erosion. Over a thousand artefacts including several hundred handaxes have been recovered from the beach at Priory Bay since the late 19th century. Pleistocene deposits eroding at the cliff-top above the beach have been identified as the likely source of this material. Southampton University was commissioned by English Heritage in January 2001 to investigate whether the deposits at Priory Bay contained significant Palaeolithic evidence threatened by coastal erosion. Field investigations were carried out on several occasions between January and September 2001.

Priory Bay is situated at the eastern corner of the Isle of Wight, to the north of Bembridge Harbour between Nodes Point and Horestone Point. The land beneath the cliff top slopes down to sea level as a staircase of rotational slumps at a shallow gradient. This collapse zone is well-wooded with thick undergrowth, woodland development having been encouraged from early in the 20th century to help stabilise the slumping. Priory Bay was one of the first Lower/Middle Palaeolithic sites identified on the Isle of Wight, and has since become the most prolific. A handaxe was found on the beach off Horestone Point in 1888, and over the next twenty years c. 150 further artefacts, mostly handaxes, were found on the Priory Bay beach and in the collapsing sediments above the beach, as well as occasionally in situ in the Pleistocene gravel at the top of the cliff face (Poulton 1909), which was identified as the source of the artefacts from the beach. Several of the specimens obtained in situ directly from the gravel face were in mint condition, although some were rolled, suggesting two assemblages might be present — one undisturbed, possibly representing an in situ occupation horizon, and the other derived. Further substantial collections were made at the site by Poole between c. 1910 and 1930 (Poole 1924, 1932, 1939).

In 1986 a section was cut into the Pleistocene gravels at the top of the cliff face. Loose gravel slumped against the face was cleared and screened for artefacts and the exposed section was cleaned. Thirty-eight flakes were found from c. 1–2m³ of sediment cleared and one handaxe and some flakes were found in situ in the section, approximately halfway down in a bed of coarse gravel (Loader 2001).

The excursion members met near the ruined St Helen's Priory and walked up to the site through the woods around Nodes Point. The work being carried out at the site involved the exposure and excavation of wider sections of the Pleistocene deposits capping the cliff edge near the location of the 1986 section. A good view was seen of the sequence of deposits in this area, which mostly comprise horizontally stratified fluvial gravels. In places these are overlain and truncated by solifluction gravels, and both these gravel units are overlain by fine-grained alluvial sands and silts. Despite the small quantity of sediment
excavated, the excavations have produced over 110 Palaeolithic flint artefacts from the Pleistocene sediments. Many of the artefacts are in fresh or mint condition, and they include nine handaxes, several of which were also fresh and unpatinated, and one of which was a fine twisted ovate specimen 135mm long. The artefacts from within the gravels are mostly well-rolled, but those from the gravel surface and within the overlying alluvial deposits are mostly in fresh or mint condition, suggesting the possibility of an undisturbed Palaeolithic archaeological horizon. Further investigations are being planned to establish whether this is the case, and to understand more fully the deposits revealed in the first season.

The excursion was relatively well-attended, with eight members present (besides those already involved in the excavations), despite the difficulties of reaching the Isle of Wight. In fact a special mention is due to Mr. Doug Stables and friend for devotion to duty in support of the LSS in travelling down to the meeting from Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, a round trip of almost 600 miles!

REFERENCES CITED


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks are due to Caroline Thackray, Tony Tutton and Robin Lang of the National Trust for allowing and facilitating work on the site, and to Andrew Palmer owner of the adjacent Priory Bay Hotel on whose land some work also took place. Thanks are also due to Paul Roberts and Helen Keeley of English Heritage and to Jonathan Larwood and Andy Gordon of English Nature for supporting the project, to Frank Basford and Becky Loader from the Isle of Wight Archaeology Service for helping set the project up and for much surveying, and to all the students from the Departments of Archaeology at the University of Southampton and University College London who participated in the project. Among many other individuals too numerous to name, the contributions of Martin Bates, Gilbert Marshall and Julian Tipper have helped to ensure its success and smooth running.