Obituary: Last Brandon Gunflint Knapper Dies

Ben Ruhe

The last of the gunflint knappers in the English town of Brandon, once the British headquarters for the trade, has died. Fred Avery, 63, succumbed to liver cancer after a very short illness; he had been working at his daytime trade, bricklaying, only three weeks before his death on April 24th 1996. Avery’s illness was not associated with doctors with his four decades of knapping, rather with a long-time addiction to smoking.

After a Church of England ceremony attended by hundreds of relatives and friends, he was buried in the cemetery at St. Peter’s Church in the heart of Brandon, resting place of many of the hundreds of flint knappers who made the town famous in the 19th century. During the Napoleonic wars, Brandon had the exclusive contract to supply the British army with gunflints for its muzzle loading rifles and at one point was making several million gunflints a month to supply the demand.

A black powder rifle enthusiast who attended the rites fired a salute to Avery with his muzzle loader over Avery’s coffin, and then placed the once-used Avery flint in the grave.

Avery is survived by his widow, two sons and four grandchildren. The eldest son, Steve, 43, received some training in knapping from his father and is considering attempting to take up the part-time knapping business Fred Avery left behind, but feels he may not have enough skill to do so. Steve’s wife Margaret comments that when Steve and his brother Dale were growing up, flint was already so scarce and valuable their father really couldn’t give them the lengthy grounding in knapping they needed, since it is such an inauspicious process.

There are other gunflint knappers in England, able to supply the demand for gunflints by muzzle-loader enthusiasts around the world, but for Brandon, which was once underlain by vast seams of the finest flint in England, and perhaps the world, not to have a knapper continuing the Fred Avery tradition seems a small tragedy of history.

Editor’s note: A cover story on Fred Avery and the Brandon gunflint industry appeared in the second issue of Volume 7 of Chips last year.

Newly discovered Pleistocene deposits at Swanscombe: an interim report

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Introduction

In late March 1997 an archaeological field evaluation took place on a site to the southeast of Swanscombe village in advance of the construction of a new school, the Swanscombe Community School (SCS). According to British Geological Survey mapping, the site (at TQ 608738) was located on Thanet Sands about 300m to the south of the southern edge of the Boynt Hill/Orsett Heath Pleistocene gravel formation (BGS New Series, Sheet 271), and so was not thought likely to contain a stratified sequence of archaeologically rich Pleistocene gravel deposits (Figure 1). Towards the end of the excavation, in which a number of trial-trenches were dug and some Roman remains were identified, it became clear that the underlying geology of the site was more complex than suggested by the BGS mapping. A Palaeolithic handaxe and three flakes were recovered from a deposit of probable Pleistocene gravel gravel into which a Roman feature had been cut, and probable Pleistocene sands and gravels were also observed in the base of several other trenches over the site area. Therefore a further, Palaeoarchaeologically orientated evaluation was undertaken by the writers and Canterbury Archaeological Trust in accordance with a specification prepared by Kent County Council’s Heritage Conservation Group. The Palaeolithic evaluation involved the machine excavation of several deeper test-pits across the site (Figure 1: A, D, E, F, K, L and P), the recording of the geological deposits encountered and the sieving of samples of the deposits for Palaeolithic artefacts and faunal remains. This is a brief report on the results of the Palaeolithic evaluation, full details of which will be published in due course along with the results of the ensuing mitigation work when that is also completed. The work is being funded by Kent County Council’s Education Department.

Previous research

Despite the suggested absence of Pleistocene gravel deposits, the site has produced occasional Palaeolithic surface finds over the last 100 years. Wymer (1968: 354) mentioned a Swanscombe handaxe in the Stopes collection as being provenanced to “Hop Gardens ’at the end and side of orchard next to the Mansion H’” at TQ 608738, and suggested that this is the same location for two handaxes from Swanscombe in the British Museum Jones collection provenanced merely to "Hop Gardens". Roe (1968:182) also mentions two handaxes from Swanscombe from "Manor Farm", just to the west of the SCS site (TQ 608730). Finally, Carreck (1972: 61) described a loan-filled channel “about 17 feet in depth and about 1200 feet in width“ visible in a north-south quarry section immediately to the east of the SCS site. According to Carreck, the southern margin of this channel lay about 300 m to the south of the SCS site, but the northern margin was obscured by tipping. Carreck was unable to make a close observation of the channel fill due to it being exposed at the top of a high vertical face above deep water, but speculated that it was an exposure of the Boynt Hill terrace due to its similar elevation OD.