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The Case of the Migrating Cleaver.

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One of the delights of trampling about in gravel pits is that the most unexpected things happen. I sallied forth in the Autumn of 1989 to a new pit at Yarnton in the Upper Thames valley hoping for evidence of Middle Palaeolithic or even Upper Palaeolithic activity, both of which are pretty scarce in the Oxford region. The Devensian gravels seemed likely to be rewarding. I came away that day with a load of reindeer antlers, a bison femur and a mammoth tooth. Not at all what I wanted, but it became the nucleus of a collection of several hundred palaeontological gems now cherished by my neighbour Dr Kate Scott. Many of them have been recovered by my colleague Terry Hardaker, also a determined flint-hunter.

A day or two later, with my lucky woolly rhino tooth in my pocket and hope springing eternal, I watched the quarrymen dump their first load of washed rejects—typical floodplain stuff; chert pebbles, mudstone, oolitic slabs and measly bits of rotten Eocene flint. Right on top of the heap was a big chunk of yellow flint just asking to be liberated. The unexpected became the unbelievable!

It was a large Acheulean cleaver (19cm x 12cm x 5cm) fashioned with a clear tranchet blow on one face and two thin invasive flakes of trancheet character on the other. A few other cleavers are known from the Upper Thames: four small ones from Berinsfield; a larger one from Dorchester-on-Thames; and quite a nice specimen from Gravelly Guy. The Yarnton cleaver is much more spectacular than these, and is the only one which in size and shape approaches those of the Middle Thames, where the type is more frequent, notably from old sites at Furze Platt, Baker's Farm and Lunt Rise (D.A. Roe, pers. comm.).

It has given me permission to describe it, insisting that it is not a lithic cultural resource unit, but just an aberrant handaxe. It is moderately rolled and has the same golden staining and shallow cortical hydration decay common amongst the flint handaxes from the prolific Gravelly Guy pit eight kilometres upstream, described at some length in Lithics 11. That pit was in Stanton Harcourt gravel, Summertown-Radley terrace, Stage 6, very cold but preceded by a warm stage (Stanion Harcourt Channel). Some of the evidence points to the making of the flint and quartzite handaxes early in Stage 7, but it is quite possible they are even earlier. Does the Yarnton cleaver belong to the same series, and if so what was it doing in gravels that could be 125,000 years younger?

Those of us who tend to equate lithic with the palaeolithic are apt to get drawn into speculation, which we like to think is deductive. Was the cleaver
made at or near the most likely material source (near Wallingford) and lost or discarded on an ancient surface on a journey up the river bank? The find-spot is SP478112, in the floodplain and on the edge of a buried palaeochannel recently identified by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (Gill Hey, pers. comm). There is also gravel of the Summertown-Radley terrace close by. The present river runs about 600 metres south of the find-spot.

Could our 'alien' cleaver have been brought by a venturesome Acheulian from beyond the Chilterns into territory strange to the type? If it had lain in or under the Summertown-Radley terrace (next above the floodplain) as do nearly all the 400 or so handaxes known from the upper Thames, it is unlikely to have "drifted" from the Gravelly Guy concentration of similarly stained and patinated artefacts at Stanton Harcourt, despite the massive periglacial movements and meltwater floods the valley has repeatedly suffered.

In cases like these evidence from relevant quaternary sciences is of course brought in to help. The complex structure and the controversial chronology of the Upper Thames terraces have lately been reviewed by David Bridgland, with reference to the work of many others. "Five different climate episodes are represented within the Summertown-Radley sequence" says Bridgland.

More than we thought even a few years ago, further complicating attempts to fix origins and subsequent movements of the palaeolithic artefacts. Taphonomy is a tricky business. One recalls Wymer’s reminder that 95 per cent of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic material comes from fluviatile deposits. The problems often seem insoluble, but cautious conjecture, trying to establish the birthplace of an implement and its early travels is part of the fun of handaxe-hunting, as I know after forty years of that enjoyable exercise.

Sometimes we are apt to forget the immensity of the palaeolithic time-scale and the persistence of type traditions over uncountable generations. It is quite possible that many thousands of years may separate the Yarnton cleaver from the other handaxes in the Oxford region. In the end, it may well be that the cleaver was used and abandoned (but certainly not made) quite near its find-spot then re-worked into the Devensian deposits. It was found no more than 200 metres from the edge of potent implement-bearing sediments of the Summertown-Radley terrace, and both the gradient and the direction of stream-flow would have assisted its migration.

I have said that hope springs eternal. By 1993 the total implement bag from the now very extensive Yarnton pit, visited almost weekly by Terry Hardaker or myself, consisted of the cleaver, a small worn ovate and a much-rolled transverse scraper. Never despair, said Terry, so during 1994 he confounded prophecy by finding a shapely pointed yellow-stained handaxe; a very fine quartzite handaxe; a quartzite chopping-tool; and a partly-flaked pebble of flint - all unmistakably Acheulian. However, no Middle or Upper Palaeolithic at all. A positive charnel-house of Devensian bones has been some consolation.

The moral of this tale of seven tools is just don’t lament the current absence in the valley of commercial pits in the higher terrace gravels (though a new one is promised soon) but search with patience the floodplain pits.

Despite our appeals to the very friendly ARC gravel people who work the pit, they decline to dig in the adjacent, undoubtedly fruitful gravels on which the villages of Yarnton and Cassington stand. We feel that Yarnton could reasonably be sacrificed in the cause of prehistory, but Cassington is where I live.

References


Middle Thames type cleaver from Yarnton, Oxfordshire.
Illustration by Terry Hindle.