New Lower Palaeolithic Finds From Gravel Pits in Central Southern England.

R.J. MacRae

Introduction

Locations in Britain where early Palaeolithic artefacts may be found become increasingly rare - one envies the afficionados of the first half of this century, who rescued handaxes from the hundreds of small gravel pits in the river valleys of the southern and eastern counties, even if they so often omitted adequately to record their provenances. Now, the very small band of those concerned with fieldwork in the Lower Palaeolithic operate in probably no more than a score of working pits, or are re-excavating old and overgrown sites. We should be grateful for the work carried on at Boxgrove, Barnham, Beeches Pit at West Stow, Pontnewydd Cave and Stanton Harcourt. Blessed, meanwhile, are the meek, the fieldwalkers, the Mesolithic buffs and those who get handsome subsidies for amassing bits of discarded Iron Age crockery, for they are inheriting the earth (from the surface to one foot down).

The troglodytes and the Upper Palaeolithic devotees, I admiringly admit, are doing fine work in their sphere, though there are still not enough of them. John Wymer, in his Southern Rivers Project (a long-overdue essential exercise), is closely identifying all known, lost or forgotten Lower Palaeolithic sites. A dedicated handaxe-hunter like John must be feeling frustration, even sadness, that so much evidence had been obliterated. All is not gloom, however, and this informal note briefly records the Lower Palaeolithic recovery situation in 1992, in three important locations, each being exploited by one or more enthusiastic amateurs, who have encouraged me to report their work. I am grateful to them for their help, and for the information they have so generously provided. The Ridge Pit (in the Solent region of Hampshire) has not previously been published; Abingdon (Oxfordshire) has been briefly mentioned (MacRae 1988, 132), but needs to be updated; Wolvey (near Nuneaton, Warwickshire) has also been published (Saville 1988), but more handaxes have been accumulating. There may be other recent finds from elsewhere, or which I have not heard, and I would be glad to know of them, if so.

The Ridge Pit (Hampshire)

The Southampton/Romsey area has yielded many hundreds of handaxes in the pits. I had a bonanza there myself in the 1970s with many fine implements from the Test Road Materials and Chivers pits, both now gone.

Figure 1: Ovate Handaxe from Ridge, 1990. Illustration by Terry Hardaker.
It was then that I first encountered John Keeving, who collected spasmodically in the area, and about five years ago the opening of a new pit at Ridge gave a lot of impetus to his activity. He showed me a promising assortment of flint bifaces. In the past year, usually searching the fairly small pit several times a week, he has brought his total to 120 complete or fragmentary handaxes, with numerous primary flakes (but few handaxe trimmers). He has kept in touch with the Donald Baden-Powell Quaternary Research Centre at Oxford, and lately brought the whole collection of bifaces there for preliminary analysis.

Derek Roe suggested that the collection perhaps fell into two distinct groups, though this could not actually be demonstrated in the absence of finds made in situ. Half of the sample almost certainly represents an earlier industry (my opinion, cautiously supported by Derek): the handaxes in this group are thick, hard-hammer struck, chunky implements, varying between 10-20cm in length, made of the local grey and black flint, which is not of the best flaking quality. Some are fairly sharp, others moderately rolled, and some trihedral forms are included. I dared to breath "Fordwich" and "Kent's Cavern" over them, but there was no response - all were found on reject heaps in the pit and had forgotten their stratigraphic identity. Their planforms tend to be narrow and the commonest shapes are irregularly pyriform. Some have very rough butts, with little more than a worked tongue-like tip, and there are no fircs and no cleavers.

The second group consists of ovates and ovoids of varying degrees of refinement. A dozen or so are beautifully fashioned, thin, true ovates, from 10-15cm long, showing skilled soft-hammer working. There are ao acutely pointed shapes amongst these, and some have 'square ends', making them 'ovate cleavers' - not really like the classic divergent Middle Acheulian cleavers of sites like Baker's Farm (Bucks) in style, but perhaps intended for similar functions. Most of the ovates are fresh and a few almost mint. The whole Ridge Pit collection is one of the most exciting I have seen for a long time (figs 1-3). Derek Roe drew our attention to the finds made by the late J.B. Calkin and others, mainly during the 1930s, in gravel pits near Corfe Mullen in Dorset (Calkin and Green 1949, 21-31), where a similar combination of crudely-made narrow handaxes and fine broad ovates, often square ended, was obtained.

Ridge, as the name implies, lies on a high gravel terrace near Romsey. The rivers Test and Blackwater have scoured their beds on either side to a depth of over 100 feet. Roe, Wymer and Bridgland have visited the site, and all are agreed that the shallow gravel capping the Greensand is of fluviatile origin. The artefacts must be regarded as derived, but their unknown source seems unlikely to have been very far away. It is interesting to note that frost-cracking is rare on the artefacts, but the gravel itself is heavily affected by it. Speculation as to age is, at the moment, just speculation. The site is well worth closer investigation, and finds continue
Figure 3: Quartzite biface from ARC Pit, Sutton Courtney, 1989. Illustration by Jeffrey Wallis.

Figure 4: Bout Coupé Handaxe from Oday Hill, Abingdon, found by B. Beveridge 1987. Illustration by Terry Hardaker.
to be made, with John Keeping rightly in sole charge of the work.

Abingdon (Oxfordshire)

For many years, Jeffrey Wallis (that master of lithic illustration) has haunted the gravel pits around Abingdon, a few miles south of Oxford, though he has receive scant acknowledgement of his efforts. He has lately increased his finds to 19 quartzite bifaces and chopping tools and 8 flint bifaces, thereby adding substantially to the tally of Upper Thames Palaeolithic material (fig 3). The quartzites alone have reinforced my own insistence (tediously reiterated!) that this material was regularly used in a flint-scarce environment. Recoveries in the Oxford region are slow just now, because of pit closures, by Jeffrey (a palaeomaniac if ever there was one) keeps his eyes on the ground.

From a different source comes news of three 'bout coupé' (flat-butted cordate) handaxes picked up some years ago by Brian Beveridge of Gloucester, at one of the Abingdon pits. This makes seven MTA bifaces from the river gravels here - perhaps relics of a single fleeting visit by a band of Mousterians, who knows? Middle Palaeolithic evidence is rare indeed in the region. Jeff Wallis and I have seen and recorded these three, of which one is illustrated here (fig 4).

Wolvey (Warwickshire)

It was a cause for wonder a decade ago that numbers of flint and quartzite handaxes were being picked up on the surface of ploughed fields in what seemed a most unlikely place: the border of northeastern Warwickshire with Leicestershire. The late Professor F.W. Shotton (1988) dealt fully with the geomorphology of the region and argued that these Achellean artefacts, which include scored of flakes as well as the handaxes, had been transported by a glacier, subsequently incorporated in outwash deposits and later brought by erosion to the surface, where the discoveries have been made by Mr R. Waite. The original source area is thus somewhere north of Warwickshire, and the Pleistocene deposit, on whose surface the artefacts now occur around the village of Wolvey, is the Wigston Gravel.

Alan Saville (1988) has fully described and illustrated Mr Waite's Lower Palaeolithic finds, along with a number of modified quartzite pebbles and other pieces, not necessarily of Palaeolithic age. Since then, Mr Waite has added to his collection, so that the assemblage now totals about 20 quartzite bifaces, 30 small crude flint bifaces and 30 or so of the chopper-like quartzite tools, plus numerous flakes. Mr Waite carefully records and sketches his finds, and he keeps in close touch with Warwick Museum and with myself.

Acknowledgements

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References


16, The Tennis, Cassington, Oxon.

STOP PRESS: A handaxe from the Stanton Harcourt Interglacial Channel.

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No sooner had I completed the preceding article for this number of Lithics, than an important new find was made. Dr Kate Scott, Research Associate at the Donald Baden-Powell Quaternary Research Centre at Oxford, who is directing the excavations in the new interglacial channel at Stanton Harcourt (Oxfordshire), brought me, with un concealed excitement, a fine flint handaxe, 170 x 90 mm, found there the day before. The implement was discovered, in situ in the channel deposits, by her assistant Sharanij ("Paddy") Paddam. The new handaxe closely resembles, in style, colouring and condition, the larger of the 50 bifaces I have collected over the years.