A feature to emerge from the 'Thatcher Years' of the late 1980s was the notion of a north-south divide. Television coverage conditioned many into believing that the distinction was real, whether seen in terms of social behaviour (beer and burgers in the north/fruit juice and museli in the south), education (one TV programme I remember contrasting the private schools of the south and state education in the north), housing and popular culture (e.g. slogans on clothing stating that, "It's Grim Up North"). But academia, archaeological fieldwork and research, lithic analysis? Surely the same distinction does not apply? The title of this volume, "Breaking the Stony Silence", suggests that it does, though various papers within the volume contradict this. The stated aim was to redress the balance in the extent to which lithic studies are documented between flint-rich southern counties (e.g. BARs edited by Bradley and Gardiner 1984 and Browne and Edmonds 1987) and the Midlands and North. Yet some of the work described here leads me to believe that lithic studies are every bit as healthy in units and departments in the north of England as anywhere else and that that owes much to a distinction going back many years. I welcome the volume as an opportunity to consider ongoing research, some of which may well revolutionise the way in which lithic assemblages, collections and individual artefacts are studied. (But why not Lithics as a source for this type of material? More of this anon.)

The papers stem from the 1988 Sheffield Lithics Conference and their rapid publication through BAR should be applauded. Reservations about appearance and the quality of production are well known and repeated ad nauseum in book reviews; thus no further comment here. As for contents, an introduction to the papers and a summary of them at the end seemed unnecessary. The introduction would have been better placed providing a background to lithic studies in northern counties or explaining the "Stony Silence" of the title. The summary on the other hand was one of the strong points in the volume presenting themes in the wider context of British prehistory, for example the transportation of flint at every stage of the core reduction process (p.188), variability in material culture and the presence and interpretation of mixed lithic assemblages. Healy draws together the various themes and ideas raised in the volume and pulls them into a coherent and (geographically) all-embracing conclusion.

What of the papers themselves? Henson, working in the East Midlands,
considers variations in lithic exploitation and the process of individualisation in society. He argues for a change in emphasis from group to individual reflected in lithic technology and assemblage composition. For example, "the beginnings of more individualised social personas occur during the... Duggleby Howe period" (3580-3210BC), coming to a head in the Overton period during which time the role of flint in the social toolkit became increasingly under threat.

Phillips (the only contributor to include FLINT ILLUSTRATIONS, though the precise form of artefacts and the nature of raw material were far from clear) looks at the question of flint procurement from the quarry ditches of Lincolnshire long barrows. While her argument is a good one, the question of flint procurement being, "one of several reasons for later excavations" is not adequately tackled. This is critical and comparison between recent rates of ditches from flint-rich and flint-poor areas would have been of interest, as would some assessment of long barrow locations vs. flint accessibility on field surfaces. Both would have added weight to the arguments which otherwise have the taste of a hunch, as yet unsubstantiated.

Brooks' paper was a highlight, although with a Phd thesis of the same date as this volume something a little less interim might have been produced. His work involves the use of micropalearontology as a method of sourcing flint. Brooks is right: "There is a great need for a widespread sampling policy of all the potential flint sources in a region" (my emphasis) and the use of micropalearontology appears one way of achieving results. This paper wets the appetite; we await a definitive statement (in Lithics?) with interest.

A second highlight was Richards' paper on blood residues. Such analyses first emerged in the mid 1970s with interest increasing into the 1980s. Much, however, remains unpublished. Two specific points of interest emerged in this paper: first, the presence of blood residues on such a high proportion of artefacts at the Thorpe Common rock shelter, including a presence on small pieces of debitage (the result of knocking accidents?). Second is the presence of blood residues on artefacts collected from surface collection (but no reference!) and on patinated artefacts. Potential is therefore great and results encouraging.

Garton's contribution on spatial analysis of artefacts in the excavated assemblage, worried me. The problem appears inherent, linked to her list of conditions through which meaning can be attributed to an artefact distribution. For example, for a distribution to be meaningful, "artefacts need to be left at the place of work". But patterning can be defined and interpreted in cases where artefacts have been moved, for example in relation to disposal, formal or otherwise. What about Binford's Mask Site for example, or the sweeping away of flint chips in areas of permanent occupation (Murray 1980)? Garton also suggests that patterns can only be meaningful if, "relative positions of... pieces to each other... survive any post-depositional processes". This statement is contrary to a substantial literature which covers 'meaningful' patterns of artefacts within what may be regarded as single sites, for example patterns surviving in the ploughsoil following cultivation (e.g. Downer 1977) and in stream beds or fluvial contexts following displacement by stream action (e.g. Schick 1986). Finally, why should the, "concentration of flints in clusters... indicate that they belonged to single episodes of activity"? Has she never experienced the lost-fork syndrome - the continued use of space for the same purpose over long periods of time? (Result: large numbers of forks accumulating in inaccessible parts of the kitchen)?

Kirk's introduction describes the paper by Guirr as a "traditional flint report" and a reason for including it here alludes me. As a flint report it is sound although the division into "implements, flakes, cores, hammerstones and natural" appears rather simplistic. Myers' contribution covers more ground than should perhaps be attempted in something other than the author's own monograph or a doctoral dissertation. That said the arguments are good, the points valid and the conclusions (I think) sound. In the author's own words, it represents an attempt to integrate, "lithic analysis and data from other categories... towards or within a common (theoretical) framework" (my brackets). Any confusion in this contribution (and I found myself lost on a few occasions) is the responsibility of the editors and my impression was that this was lifted too precisely from part of the authors thesis to be clear or concise out of context. But we are all guilty of that at one time or another!

Young's paper tackled the thorny issue of mixed lithic scatters which, for whatever reason, contain artefacts belonging to more than one cultural episode. By combining various strands of evidence and adopting the Availability Model developed by Zvelebil and Rowley-Conwy, he considers the various alternative suggestions as to what they represent. This is a point put in context in Healy's summary and is one of the major themes to emerge from this volume.

In conclusion, the contents appear to contradict the validity of the title, as the 'Stony Silence' was apparently no longer there to be broken. The main attraction of the volume was that it provided an insight into some exciting new research, much of it apparently within the Sheffield Department. However, I was left in some doubt as to whether a BAR was the most appropriate stage for the contributions it contained as most of the papers were interim, at least two (Henson and Young) were supplemented or preceded by contributions on a similar theme in Lithics, while Myers' work has been well-covered elsewhere. My own view (from a safe distance) is that Lithics does not cover enough interim statements and that at least seven of the contributions in this volume are just the kinds of article authors could
submit for consideration by a specialist audience prior to full publication.

References


Editors Note I agree fully with Dr Schofield’s comments about the function of Lithics. The deadline for contributions to issue 12 is 31st May 1992.


A. Roberts

The Mesolithic site at West Heath in North London was discovered by members of the Hendon and District Archaeological Society (HADAS) in the mid-1970’s as a scatter of flint artefacts eroding out of a sandy bluff near Leg of Mutton Pond on Hampstead Heath. The members of the society recognised that the site was one of importance and because of continuing visitor erosion it was decided to record it before it was destroyed. The ensuing excavations were a model of the type of work that can be achieved by an archaeological society. This report which details the findings of the first phase of excavation at the site from 1976-1981, is of very good value for the concise detail with which the results are presented.

Judging by the publication, the Society was not daunted by the size of the project, nor did it overstate the case. The report is well-balanced and sensible and is obviously the result of collaborative teamwork. While the recognition of the work of so many people in the report is commendable, I have to admit that I found the lack of continuity in quality and style of contributions disconcerting at times - especially in the sections relating to the artefact assemblage. I was also disappointed that several interesting points were lost in the shorter sections: for example, Margaret Maher’s comments on ‘strike-a-lights’ the enigmatic tool type which turns up on Mesolithic sites throughout southern Britain under a variety of names deserved greater attention. I would like to have have seen more detailed discussion about these tools and their interpretation. This illustrates some of the wider issues affecting the publication of volumes of this kind. On the one hand, I do understand the pressure of time and money in getting excavation projects published, and the editors of this volume have done a good job in keeping the manuscript short and relevant. However, it is a shame that some of the more detailed work could not be published in full. There were several examples of tantalizing notes saying that more detailed analyses were available in the site archive.

I was also concerned that major topics such as the refitting project were allocated so little space in the report. Two pages was not sufficient for Laurie Gevell to discuss the findings and implications of this work. West Heath is one of the largest and best recorded Mesolithic assemblages in the country, and the technological and spatial information possible from the analysis of conjoining artefacts would be of considerable importance.

One minor criticism would be the occasional use of non-standard terminology in describing artefacts (e.g. ‘dorsal points’ instead of ‘straight backed’ or ‘B-type’ microliths). However, given the quality of most of the contributions this seems pedantic - and perhaps when the Lithic Studies Society finally publishes its long-promised Glossary, the comment will probably be unnecessary.

The Hendon Society must also be congratulated for the range and variety of post-excavation work. It seems as though no stone was left unturned (no pun intended) in getting the maximum information out of the site: from the analysis of possible traces of resin on a flint artefact by M. Hughes, to the detailed palaeoenvironmental work by Maureen Girling, James Greg and others. The environmental work is especially relevant not just for West Heath, but for understanding the palaeoenvironment of the London area as a whole.

The volume is packed full of interesting and useful information about this large Early Mesolithic site in North London (although I was curious why some reports were included in appendices rather than in the main text). However, my major criticism about the volume is that there was very little discussion or interpretation of the wealth of information presented. My appetite has been whetted and I look forward to hearing more about this site - and especially to the report of the more recent phase of excavations directed by Margaret Maher.