FLINT ALTERNATIVES WORKSHOP: A REPORT ON THE SEMINAR HELD AT THE ARTIFACT RESEARCH UNIT, ROYAL SCOTTISH MUSEUM, 2 - 3 APRIL, 1987

by Sinead McCartan

Discussions of the flaked stone tools of prehistoric Britain concentrate upon the use of flint as a resource. In many areas, however, good quality flint is lacking, with the result that a wide variety of other materials had to be exploited. This presents certain problems for the archaeologist and these are only just beginning to be approached. Across northern Europe a number of lithic specialists are now involved in research related to the prehistoric exploitation of those raw materials used as alternatives to flint, and the workshop was organised to provide the opportunity for discussion of the problems encountered and suggested solutions. Participants from four European countries attended and there was also a contribution form the United States.

The proceedings got under way with an outline of the current issues facing lithics specialists in Scotland and Ireland (Wickham-Jones and Woodman). Four general questions emerged:

1. Are we aware of the range of potentially exploitably raw materials?
2. What understanding do we have of the physical properties and flaking characteristics of materials such as volcanic tuffs, slate and quartz?
3. Are we able to recognise worked alternative raw materials in the field?
4. How does the exploitation of a particular raw material affect the final tool morphology and lithic assemblage?

Subsequent lectures dealt with some of these points and papers examined the exploitation and analysis of a range of raw materials including quartz, rhyolite, sandstone and quartzite (Henson, Clark, Holm and Taffinder). The potential and use of replicative studies was discussed (Moloney), as was that of microwear (Finlayson). In addition, one paper examined the application of theoretical models (Barber).

On the second day, practical work allowed for participants to try their skills on a selection of raw materials including rhyolite, chert, Bunter pebbles, Rhum bloodstone, and quartz. Finally, a visit to the prehistoric gallery of the Royal Museum of Scotland provided the opportunity to view at first hand the range of materials used in prehistoric Scotland.

The workshop was intended primarily as a forum for discussion and plenty of time was left for debate. Discussion was lively and intense throughout the meeting. No specific publication is intended, but further meetings are planned. In future, each meeting will concentrate upon one area of this vast subject. It is clear that there is much to learn; related research is at different stages in different countries. By providing a setting for discussion, future workshops should assist in the development of a greater understanding of the 'alternative' lithic industries.
To conclude, thanks are owed to Caroline Wickham-Jones and Professor Peter Woodman for organising the workshop. Thanks are also due to the Royal Museum of Scotland for their hospitality in the facilities of the Artifact Research Unit.

Contributors to the workshop

C. Wickham-Jones, Edinburgh
The viewpoint from Scotland

Professor P. Woodman, Cork
The viewpoint from Ireland

Don Henson, Sheffield
Quartz and rhyolite in County Waterford, Ireland

Russel Barber, San Bernadino, U.S.A.
Models of lithic trade in prehistoric southern New England

Ann Clark, Edinburgh
Sandstone tools from the north of Scotland

Nora Moloney, London
Experimental production of bifaces

Lena Holm, Umea, Sweden
Quartzite working in northern Sweden

Jackie Taffinder, Uppsala, Sweden
Lithic raw materials in southern Sweden

Bill Finlayson, Edinburgh
Microwear on chert tools from southern Scotland

Those interested in future workshops should contact:

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THE GREAT GIANT HANDAXE STAKES

by R. J. MacRae

With some trepidation I offered to this journal an account of a macrolithic phenomenon found lately in the gravels of the upper Thames. I was hesitant to intrude into the polysemic solemnity of the world of lithic studies - the fascinatingly subtle analyses of technological variability in multi-period cultural/behavioural patterns in little bits of flint. I suffered resource stress until the Editor kindly assured me that Lithics was quite human, and indeed intended for light bedside reading. Nothing like a little gamble, as will be related.

The Guinness Book of Records, in its obsession with the trivia of athletics, motor-racing, and walking sideways across Britain turned up in 1919 at Purse Platt, Maidenhead. This pushed into second place the jumbo-sized specimen from Shrub Hill in Norfolk, which had held the record since the mid-nineteenth century and relegated to third an elegant fiorcon from Sonning Town, Berkshire, found in 1911.

Only a whisker separated Sonning Town from Warren Hill, where a big ovate took up the running in 1932. Excitement ran high among Sainty, Reid-Moir, Haz Warren, Burchell and other prominent racegoers of the time when monster bifaces from Wolvercote in Oxfordshire and Keswick in Norfolk made their challenge. The stewards upheld a protest against the Keswick runner, scornfully rejecting a plea that, although it was only the butt of a handaxe, if projected it would be a world-beater. At the same time, they refused to permit the addition of a plasticine tip to Sonning Town to replace the missing end which, had it been there, would have moved it up to second place.

The shades of Evans, Flower, and Worthington Smith looked on from the grandstand in their hunter-gather Ellysium, which they shared with some notable Acheulean craftsmen. With them was Prigg, who had changed his name to Trigg in order to invent trigonometrical computerisation as applied to handaxe statistics. In 1968 Mackae, not yet in Limbo, entered the stakes with a prize colt from Romsey, but the bookies only offered 100 to 1. Eighteen years later the Form Book read as follows (measurements from nose to tip of tail only, in millimetres):

1. Purse Platt, pointed, 1919, British Museum
233mm
2. Shrub Hill, Pointed, 1869, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
285mm
3. Sonning Town, fiorcon, 1913, Reading Museum
266mm
260mm
5. Wolvercote, plano-convex, c. 1904, Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford
244mm
6. Romsey, pointed, Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford
235mm

A lot of research has gone into that race-card. I would be glad to hear of dark horses I may have missed, but I feel I've