PUTTING LITHICS TO WORK: FLINT SCATTERS AND THE SETTLEMENT PATTERN

by Frances Healy

The Prehistoric Society's meeting on 15 November 1986 brought together five speakers expounding the diverse potential of our most abundant archaeological resource together with even more diverse means of extracting it.

Mark Edmonds took as his starting point the indelible recognisability of successive stages of the reduction process, and went on to demonstrate its practical worth in the field. His first case study concerned what is usually a no-go area for field survey, the permanent pasture, in this case in the Peak District. Here the lithic material collected during a programme of shovel-testing reflected the practice of different stages of reduction in different topographical settings, during the implicit conduct of different activities. Turning to his current research in the Great Langdale quarries, he used a similar approach to sketch a preliminary picture of the techniques by which the quarries were worked and of the social and spatial organisation of their exploitation.

Frances Healy used the excavation of a multi-period site on Spong Hill, Norfolk, to demonstrate that the kinds of context from which concentrations of unstratified and residual lithic material were excavated varied with the cultural and chronological affinities of those concentrations. Predominantly Earlier Neolithic material came mainly from periglacial formations and later archaeological contexts; predominantly Later Neolithic/Early Bronze Age material mainly from the base of the modern ploughsoil. Having shown the dichotomy to be a frequent one, and suggested behavioural explanations for it, she spelt out its implications for the differential entry of lithics of the two phases into the ploughsoil and for the all-too-familiar dominance of Later Neolithic/Early Bronze Age material in surface collections.

Julie Gardiner described the largely untapped potential of lithic material amassed haphazardly in museum collections over the last hundred and fifty years, and summarised the methods which she has developed for studying it. These included the ordering of artefacts into groups of morphologically similar forms, which could be used to characterize collections and, with particular effect, to detect, define and describe artefacts, an essential preliminary to comparison between or synthesis of the collections of numerous individuals. She proceeded to present her main results, on the broad canvas of a block of three southern English counties, stripped to their geological bones. Impressive, if predictable, correlations between collection composition, raw material type, and topography interacted with inescapably cultural factors, unseen most clearly in the unexamined distribution of fine objects, linked far more with the presence of communal monuments than with detectable geographical or economic variations.

Julian Richards presented the fruits of the Stonehenge Environs Project, in the form of techniques developed for it and of experience acquired in the course of it. He underlined the
need for selectivity in the collection and analysis of lithic material in field survey, if only to avoid being crushed beneath an unmanageable mountain of aggregate. He advocated surface mapping by broad technological categories, without collection, as a first step in the examination of most scatters, and a straightforward count of broad categories as a first step in the analysis of collected material. A significant and enviable development was that the project had created its own comparative standard for detailed study of selected surface collections by identifying and excavating single-episode deposits of appropriate dates and subjecting them to consistent and far-reaching technological and typological analysis.

Richard Bradley wove these disparate threads into the conclusion that, in order to shape and justify its future, lithic analysis must think BIG: landscapes rather than individual living-places, societies rather than single knappers, subsistence-bases rather than sickle-manufacture; in short, the mainstream of prehistory rather than a bypassable backwater. The potential for scale and depth is there; it is for us to realize it and to communicate it.

A FIELDWALKER'S REPLY
by Bob Silvester

Somehow I doubt whether I am the only fieldwalker who, while traversing some muddy field on a murky winter's day, reflects on the deeper significance of collecting a mass of little fragments of flint and chert, fragments which must later be washed, marked and bagged ready (one hopes) for a lithic specialist to examine at some unspecified time in the future. A meeting such as that organized by the Prehistoric Society on 'Putting Lithics to Work' is thus welcome, not least to reassure the fieldwalker, whether amateur or professional, that those assiduously gathered fragments may be of some use over and above plotting the location of yet another prehistoric 'site' on the regional distribution map. The proceedings of the symposium are summarized above and need not be reiterated here. Instead I would like to consider two points which occurred to me as the afternoon progressed.

The first resulted from Julie Gardiner's paper on lithic collections in museums. Her analysis of the mass of material from three counties in southern England stumbled against two fundamental problems: some collections were poorly provenanced and many were biased in favour of the more recognizable artefacts. With today's more rigorous standards of recording the first of these should no longer be a handicap, but can we be entirely confident that fieldwalkers are now collecting a sufficiently full and representative selection of lithics from any given 'site' to satisfy the specialists who will study museum collections in the next century? I am not particularly optimistic about this. It seems to be a fact that the serious fieldwalker, if he or she professes any specialization at all, is likely to have a more detailed knowledge of pottery than of lithics and to be more interested in Iron Age and later than in earlier periods. The converse also appears true; few lithic specialists actually get out in the field and collect their own material. There is the great danger that the fieldwalker's ability to recognize and collect relevant material is not keeping pace with the improving techniques of collection and more sophisticated methods of analysis. Some lithic types must be obvious to all fieldwalkers - axes, arrowheads, blades, etc. - but can we be certain that those categories of tool with which the fieldwalker is less familiar will be recovered; and what of the waste material and less obvious cores? Equally problematic is the use of different kinds of flint and chert: familiarity with a particular variety of raw material may lead to oversight where tools and waste of unusual colour and texture are involved. Is, as I believe, these factors affect most of today's surface collections to some degree, are we justified in assuming our data are any more valuable than those of fifty years ago? And should we simply acknowledge that the problem is insuperable or perhaps aim for closer cooperation between collectors and lithic specialists?

My second concern should not be viewed as a criticism of the symposium which achieved, perhaps a little unevenly, what it set out to do, but rather the legitimate reaction of a fieldwalker to the emphasis of most of the papers: fieldwork complemented by selective excavation or, in the case of Spong Hill, Norfolk, extensive excavation accompanied by limited field collection. Such an integrated approach is, of course, something that should