CARRYING FLINT CORES TO MENDIP
by Leslie Grinsell

The 49th Annual Report of the Wells Natural History and Archaeological Society (1937), p.28, contains the following entry under Additions to the Wells Museum for that year: 'Prehistoric Antiquities: collection of Neolithic worked flints found near Slab House together with large core: the raw material of the flint workers: - Mr. R.F.Parry.' The specimen is Reg. no. 1893 in the Wells Museum catalogue, Mr. Parry, then Agent to the Marquis of Bath, is otherwise known for his excavations in Gough's Cave, Cheddar, 1927-8, and his reports thereon.

The emergence of the Lithic Studies Society provides an opportunity to publish this core in more detail than has yet been done. It was found near Slab House Inn (ST 502483), parish of St. Cuthbert Out, about 4.7 km north-east of Wells Cathedral. It is approx. 29 cm in length, 16 cm maximum width, and 12 cm thick: very much larger than that from Hazleton (Glos.) described by Alan Saville (1982). It has had numerous large and bold flakes struck from all directions except from one side which retains most of its cortex (the few close and parallel lines on the right edge of the drawing are of natural fissures and not blade scars). It is unpatinated, except for a slight gloss.

It has seldom been mentioned in the literature. Dr. E.K. Trotman (1956,153) referred to this and one from Nordrach on Mendip (ST 514559 area) as surface finds. The latter may or may not be the core shown to the present writer in a farmhouse in that area about 1970. An oblique reference to both occurred in Grinsell 1970,13. The Slab House specimen was described as 'Mesolithic' by Taylor and Smart 1983,10, but this is surely an error caused by their concentration on that period.

It remains to consider where the flint originated and when it was transported to Mendip. It is certainly from the Chalk. The nearest known sizeable flint sources worked from the Neolithic onwards are the Stanton Down flint mines north-east of Salisbury (SU 237358), and the open cast flint workings at Beer Head in south Devon (SY 215893). Of course there may be flint sources nearer to hand remaining to be discovered.

Radiocarbon dating suggests that flint was not being mined in England before the Neolithic period. Evidence of contact between Wessex and Mendip during this period comprises binding materials derived from the Bath-Frome area in about 30% of the Neolithic pottery from Windmill Hill (Avebury), and chambered long barrows of comparable types in both regions. Contact between Wessex and Mendip during the Early Bronze Age was, however, more intensive. There are numerous round barrows and grave groups of 'Wessex' type on and around Mendip, notably near Camerton, Cheddar, Cranmore, Chewton Mendip and Priddy (Grinsell 1972, 50-51). Of perhaps greater interest in the present context are bands of calcite, believed to be of stalactite from the Mendip caves, found in barrow TARRANT LAUNCESTON 9, Dorset, and in a barrow on Stockbridge Down in Hampshire, in both instances associated with an Early Bronze Age cremation; and it is likely that bands described in the barrow-diggings of Hoare and Cunnington and others as of 'yellow glass' were really of calcite from the same source (Stone 1944).

Fig.1. Flint core found near Slab House, St.Cuthbert Out, Wells, Somerset, 1937. Wells Museum.

The assemblage of worked flints found by Parry in the same field and probably at the same time as the core, also in Wells Museum, includes small cores, scrapers and borers; the only datable item is a barbed and tanged flint arrowhead. The balance of probability suggests that this massive core is likely to have been transported to Mendip around the period of transition from the Late Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age.

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This note summarizes the results of an examination of lithic material recovered more than forty years ago by the late C.K. Croft Andrew during the salvage excavation of barrows on Davidstow Moor (part of Bodmin Moor) in north-east Cornwall. A full report will accompany Patricia Christie's account of the excavation.

Neither flint nor chert occurs naturally on Bodmin Moor, so that the 370 artefacts in both materials must have been imported, whether as finished objects or as raw material. Predominantly later Neolithic collections from two adjacent barrows (sites 16/23 and 22) included battered and rounded pebble flint, most of it pale-coloured, and a small quantity of Greensand chert, both of which would have been available in local beach deposits, a few km away. They also, however, included non-beach flint, characterized by thin, brown, relatively unabraded cortex, sometimes retaining marked surface irregularities, and a few pieces of Portland chert. The nearest source of situ chalk flint is Beer Head, Devon, some 110 km to the east, which became a major quarry site in the earlier Neolithic (Care 1982, 277).

Secondary sources, like the Devon head and gravel deposits noted by Wainwright and Smith (1980,104,106) are closer. The island of Portland lies 150 km to the east, although Portland chert may have been obtained as beach pebbles from the south Cornish coast, 35 km away. Both materials must have been transported some distance even if obtained from secondary sources.

The two cherts together make up less than five per cent of the total; a few unretouched flakes and blades in addition to finished implements suggest that both may have been worked on the moor. Slightly more than half of the cortical flakes from the two sites are of non-beach flint. This figure understates the frequency of the material, since the relatively large size and dark colour of many non-cortical flakes make them unlikely to have been struck from small beach pebble cores. Both beach and non-beach flint were brought to the moor in an unworked or semi-worked state and knapped there, on the evidence of cores, irregular waste, and unretouched flakes. Unretouched flakes and finished implements are more frequent among non-beach than among beach flint, probably a reflection of larger core size and higher quality, perhaps also a reflection of the import of blanks and finished implements in addition to nodules and/or cores.

The acquisition of non-beach flint and Portland chert by occupants of Davidstow Moor at the turn of the third and second millennia BC reflects the persistence of networks established hundreds of years before. Whittle's map (1977, fig.9) of earlier Neolithic sites in the south-west of England on which 'Beer' flint has been found shows that by the early third millennium BC non-local flint was widely distributed in the peninsula. Green's distribution map (1980, fig. 25) of Portland chert arrowheads, including the leaf-shaped forms of the earlier Neolithic, presents a similar picture. This is seen most clearly at the Earlier Neolithic enclosure of Carn Brea, Illogan, where a few implements, especially arrowheads, of Portland chert were present, and where approximately sixty-two per cent by weight of cortical cores and core fragments were of non-beach flint.