THE DALLOW FARM HAND-AXE: WORTHINGTON GEORGE SMITH’S ASSOCIATION WITH A VERY EARLY ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIND

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ABSTRACT

Worthington George Smith’s (1835–1917) highly significant contributions over many years to the development of Palaeolithic archaeology include a single event that has received very little notice. It concerns his recording and preservation of a flint hand-axe that was discovered well before the birth of the subject as an academic discipline. The implement was found by a farsighted Luton (Bedfordshire) farmer in 1830. It reached Smith in 1890 when a third party attempted to sell it to him; Smith in his turn, ensured that it found its way to the British Museum. As we approach the centenary of Smith’s death, it is an appropriate time to draw attention to this landmark episode.

INTRODUCTION

The pioneering Victorian archaeologist Worthington George Smith died on 27 October 1917 at the age of 82. In anticipation of more expansive commemorations of this anniversary, we report here on the part he played in recording the very early discovery of a flint tool and in ensuring that it reached safe custody.

Smith (n.d.) maintained a ‘List of Palaeolithic implements’ (hereafter LPI) that were in his possession. He noted whether he had found the artefacts or had received them from others; he also identified those he passed to friends and colleagues. The following information is provided for each of the nearly two thousand entries: date; find-spot; length, width and weight. The depth of a discovery within an exposure and/or a brief description of the enclosing sediment is recorded where appropriate. When artefacts were found in deposits that had been dug elsewhere, Smith attempted to identify the ultimate source of the material. He also noted when he had drawn an implement. Many of his illustrations (with their LPI number) are preserved in his ‘folios’ (held by Luton Culture) and are reproduced in his books and numerous papers. The British Museum (BM) holds Smith’s LPI.

One hundred and fifty-eight artefacts recorded in the LPI are annotated ‘TF’ (= trimmed flake) but, otherwise, the form and (possible) function are seldom given. Exceptions include occasional references to a throw-stone, scraper class, (hand-) chopper and piercer.

The first entry in the LPI, dated 1877, refers to an implement from St Acheul, near Amiens, Somme département, France. It was a gift from Dr Maxwell Tylden Masters, FRS (1833–1907), a botanist and editor of The Gardeners’ Chronicle, who purchased it at the St Acheul gravel pit located in a terrace of the River Somme. The final entry was written on 21 December 1906 and is for an artefact from Gaddesden Row, Hertfordshire, which Smith found and gave to Sir John Evans.

‘A DISCOVERY LONG PRIOR TO MINE’ (SMITH 1894, 176)

The LPI contains a brief description of a flint implement (number 1391) whose discovery pre-dates the pioneering phase of modern Palaeolithic archaeology in Britain:

Dallow Farm, Luton. This had the original label, dated 1830. Found between Dallow Farm & Caddington & kept by the finder, Mr William Gutteridge, farmer of Dallow Farm as a curiosity. Given to British Museum, Bloomsbury. [BM registration number 1896,0124.52]

Smith had been approached by a Mr John Waller of Luton who had with him ‘… a few fossils and stones, for sale’. They had been collected long ago and preserved by William Gutteridge. The would-be seller knew nothing of geological specimens and all ‘… were quite
worthless except one …’, a Palaeolithic implement ‘… sub-triangular in shape, bevelled all over and rather rude …’, found by Gutteridge ‘… on the surface of the ground …’ near his farm (Figure 1). The finder was ‘… astute enough to decide that it was not an ordinary natural stone’ and, with considerable forethought, had ‘… affixed a small label to the implement, with locality and date [1830]’. The artefact is in the collections of the BM, its label has survived and is, with the aid of ultraviolet light, still legible.

Smith’s LPI entry is dated 13 August 1890, the ink inscription on the artefact 13 September 1890; he also reported that the encounter with Waller had taken place ‘[l]ate in the autumn …’ (Smith 1894, 176; 1904, 25–26). He does not reveal the sum he paid (if any) to Waller.

In Smith’s (1904, 185) history of Dunstable, his adopted home, he summarises the find-spot of the Dallow Farm implement as ‘… near Caddington …’ and appears to give the date as 1814. But he also describes the event as taking place ‘… 17 years before the first European discoveries are published in France’, revealing a typographical error (see below). This mistake is repeated in the online Dunstable timeline (dunstablehistory.co.uk, accessed 21 November 2016).

The BM’s Register provides the following information on the artefact: ‘[f]lint implement brownish with spots of iron’. Smith (1894, 176) described it as a ‘… good whitish-grey, flat … sharp-edged Palaeolithic implement …’.

Dallow Farm (TL 0781 2145) was located in the valley of the River Lea, 1.2 km west of Luton, at ca 125–130 m OD (Figures 2 and 3); the Gutteridges had held the property since ca 1680. The exact position of the find-spot is not known. The immediate area is underlain by Chalk bedrock. Smith (1894, 177) had never found a Palaeolithic implement in Luton, and he speculated that the find ‘… probably came originally from the Palaeolithic floor at Caddington’ (p. 176). Roe (1968, 6) listed a hand-axe from Dallow Farm and provided a grid reference but offered no other details. The farm buildings and some of the land were swallowed up by suburban development during the early part of the twentieth century.
Although the descriptions of colour are at a slight variance, there is no doubt that we are dealing with the same hand-axe. It is made from a lightly mottled brown-grey flint with hints of ‘toad-belly’ patination. The ‘rude’ description provided by Smith probably refers to the marked damage around the edges. Dallow Farm is situated at the foot of the Chalk escarpment; the damage might therefore have been caused either by movement within slope deposits or from ploughing of flatter ground close to the farm. The piece also has

Figure 2. The location of Dallow Farm, 1.2 km west of Luton (Source: ‘Archaeological map of the Caddington and Dunstable District’, Smith’s folio 8, page 1). (Luton Culture Accession Number BL 157/34).

Figure 3. Dallow Farm c. 1889, oil. E.K. and A.C. Higgins (floreat 1888–1899). Image Courtesy of Luton Culture.
slight abrasion to the *arêtes* on each face and a little iron-staining.

From the flatness of most of the flake scars, the hand-axe appears to have been finished with a soft hammer. The flint is not of the finest quality as the knapper encountered problems with small internal flaws that created several step fractures. Due to edge damage, some caution must be exercised in assessing the original shape of the implement. It is more triangular than ‘sub-triangular’ in form. The distinctly flat base places it in Wymer’s Type N or ‘flat-butted cordate’, although the tip is slightly more pointed than most hand-axes attributed to this type (Wymer 1968). Flat-butted cordates have frequently been equated with *bout coupés*, but the Dallow Farm artefact does not have the elegance of form or the rounded tip that are features of classic examples (Tyldesley 1987; White & Jacobi 2002).

Categorisation as a flat-butted cordate might suggest attribution to the Late Middle Palaeolithic, between *ca* 65 and 40 ka (White & Jacobi 2002; Ashton & Scott 2016). It is worth noting that 18 of the 180 flat-butted cordates listed by White & Jacobi were also found as surface finds, which is a high proportion compared to Lower Palaeolithic hand-axes. The high ratio might reflect wider landscape use, beyond the river valleys and onto the interfluves, by late Neanderthals. In this respect the location of Dallow Farm on Chalk bedrock close to the Downs is consistent with a Late Middle Palaeolithic age. It is thought unlikely that the hand-axe came originally from Caddington.

Smith (1904, 25) was well aware that when the true character of stone implements was first appreciated, ‘… it was remembered that a few similar stones were already in public museums and had remained unidentified and misunderstood for years’. The Dallow Farm artefact is perhaps unique for such an early find in that its label provides information on both the find-spot and the date, a striking contrast with Frere’s unlabelled finds (Evans 1868 cited in Gamble & Kruszynski 2009, 470–471) (see below). Smith (1894, 177) regarded it as the third oldest archaeological discovery in Britain. The earliest find, a ‘… British weapon made of flint dextrously shaped …’, was made by John Conyers, an apothecary of Fleet Street and London’s first archaeologist, in London on 11 December 1673 (Burnby 1984). This so-called Gray’s Inn Lane hand-axe is misnamed as the find-spot was near Black Mary’s Hole, one of a series of wells on the eastern bank of the River Fleet, some 300 m from Gray’s Inn Lane (or Road). The hand-axe was found in association with elephant bones and, since Conyers connected elephants with Roman invaders, a link with Claudius was inevitable.

The second oldest find was made at Hoxne, Suffolk, in 1797 by Frere (1800) who discovered hand-axes that had been used by brickearth diggers to fill ruts in the road. Frere, too, thought that they were ‘… evident weapons of war …’ but, with remarkable insight, observed that they had been employed by ‘… a people who had not the use of metal’ and that the overlying ‘… strata were formed by inundations happening at distant periods …’.

By comparison, the earliest discoveries in mainland Europe are attributed to Boucher de Perthes who began collecting hand-axes from the gravels of the River Somme at Abbeville, France, in 1836 (Boucher de Perthes 1847, 1857). The Dallow Farm hand-axe therefore deserves better recognition in the history of Palaeolithic archaeology as does Worthington George Smith in his role as the recorder of the discovery and in donating it to the BM. His unpublished ‘List of Palaeolithic implements’ and numerous drawings provide exceedingly valuable records of his collecting activities during the formative period of British Palaeolithic archaeology. As we approach the centenary of Smith’s death it is an appropriate time to celebrate his landmark contributions.

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**ENDNOTES**

[1] There is a wealth of information from other sources to show that he also purchased implements, many at considerable cost.
In many cases this is likely to be the date on which the item was found (or is close to it); on other occasions, artefacts from quite distant find-spots are recorded on the same day, suggesting that Smith was catching up with record-keeping.

mapapps.bgs.ac.uk, accessed 22 November 2016.

REFERENCES


