

CONCERNING THE EARLIEST ACHEULEAN OCCUPATION OF BRITAIN: THE GEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF A HANDAXE ASSEMBLAGE FROM FOXHOLES, BOURNEMOUTH, SOUTHERN ENGLAND

R.J. Davis¹

ABSTRACT

In recent surveys of the Palaeolithic record of the River Solent, a small handaxe assemblage recorded from Foxholes in the Bournemouth area of southern England has been identified as a candidate for evidence of the earliest Acheulean occupation of the Solent region, and among the earliest handaxe assemblages in Britain. However, archival material and cartographic evidence has been identified that indicates the provenance of the Foxholes material has previously been misunderstood. The correct provenance suggests that these handaxes are considerably younger than previously thought, with implications for the timing of the first appearance of handaxes in the Solent region. This paper serves as a cautionary tale of a potential pitfall when studying old collections recovered from gravels of Pleistocene rivers, and highlights the importance of conducting a thorough search for all available contextual information.

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INTRODUCTION

A small handaxe assemblage recorded from Foxholes, Bournemouth, has been identified as one of the oldest to have been recovered from the fluvial deposits of the erstwhile River Solent and its tributaries, and potentially among the oldest in Britain (Ashton & Hosfield 2010; Hosfield 2011). This claim is based on the estimated provenance for the assemblage supplied by the Southern Rivers Palaeolithic Project database (SRPP; Wessex Archaeology 1993), which suggests the handaxes were recovered somewhere in the region of Foxholes, Poole (Fig. 1). No reasoning for this location is provided, and it contrasts Roe's (1968) earlier gazetteer in which the Foxholes assemblage is listed as being of unknown provenance. The SRPP suggests the assemblage originated in fluvial deposits associated with either Terrace 12 or Terrace 13 of the River Solent as mapped by Bristow *et al.* (1991). These are the oldest Solent terraces in the Bournemouth area and equivalent to Allen & Gibbard's (1993) Setley Plain Gravel, Tiptoe Gravel and Sway Gravel. Ashton & Hosfield (2010) proposed the older Sway Gravel as the likely source, since this is the only terrace as mapped by Allen & Gibbard to be found in the Foxholes area (Fig.

1). This claim is supported by the extensive historic gravel extraction of the Sway Gravels in the area (*ibid*: Supplementary Information Fig. 1), thereby providing a potential means of recovery for the assemblage.

The Sway Gravel is two terraces higher in the Solent sequence than the Setley Plain Gravel, from which the well-known Corfe Mullen assemblages were recovered (McNabb & Hosfield 2009; McNabb *et al.* 2012). While the Solent suffers from a great deal of uncertainty over the age of its terraces, Corfe Mullen has been widely cited as providing evidence for human occupation during MIS 13 (Wymer 1999; Roe 2001; Westaway *et al.* 2006; McNabb & Hosfield 2009; Ashton & Hosfield 2010; McNabb *et al.* 2012). This suggests that Foxholes may provide evidence for Acheulean occupation during the preceding MIS 15 interglacial or earlier (Hosfield 2011). If correct this would have important implications for our understanding of the timing of the first appearance of Acheulean technology, not just in Britain, but in northern Europe as a whole (e.g. Roebroeks 2006; Mosquera *et al.* 2012). However, a recent study of the provenance and context of the Solent Palaeolithic record has identified archival material and cartographic evidence that demonstrates the provenance of

¹ Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford, BD7 1DP; r.davis1@bradford.ac.uk

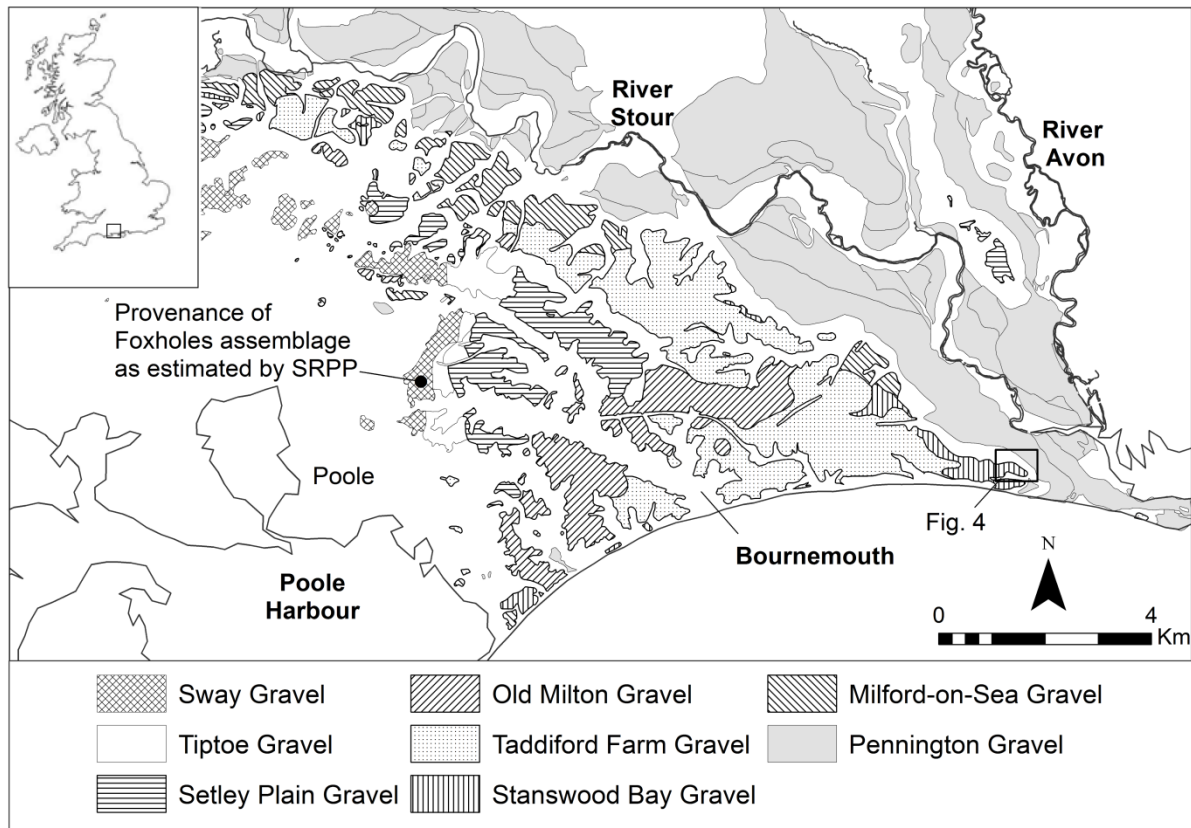


Figure 1. The terraces of the rivers Solent and Stour in the Bournemouth area of southern England and the estimated provenance of the Foxholes assemblage as listed in the SRPP database. Terrace mapping after Allen & Gibbard (1993) and adapted from BGS (2009)

the Foxholes assemblage supplied by the SRPP is incorrect, and that the Foxholes handaxes are likely to be considerably younger than previously thought (Davis 2013).

RELOCATING FOXHOLES

The Foxholes assemblage is formed of 12 handaxes and two roughouts that are made on flint and are dominated by pointed forms. All but one are moderately or heavily rolled and they are all stained, a general condition that is indicative of an origin within a fluvial gravel context (Fig. 2). They form part of the Old Red House Collection held by the Hampshire Cultural Trust, although three remain on display at the Red House Museum in Christchurch, Dorset. The Old Red House Collection is predominantly formed of the collections of Herbert Druitt, a Christchurch-based antiquarian who established the Red House Museum as a private museum to house his collections. During the early decades of the 20th century, Druitt amassed a vast Palaeolithic collection that included the Foxholes handaxes and accounts for more than

half of the known Bournemouth record (Davis 2013). For much of his collecting career, Druitt maintained a detailed catalogue of his acquisitions which, fortunately for us, was subsequently updated by John Bernard Calkin. Calkin was another local collector who, according to his own notes, took on the task of sorting and updating the catalogues of Druitt's archaeological collections after his death. The Druitt Catalogue, also held by the Hampshire Cultural Trust, is organised by site or area and lists each artefact by a unique identification number, along with details of the purchase, depth of recovery, and some basic typological and metric information. Druitt's code for Foxholes was 'BFH', indicating that the site was located in his Area B, defined by Christchurch Road and the River Stour to the north and east, the coast to the south and the River Bourne to the west (Fig. 3a). This detail alone immediately casts doubt on the SRPP Foxholes provenance, which is located in Druitt's Area E, approximately 6 km to the northwest of Area B.



Figure 2. From left to right, Foxholes handaxes BFH12, BFH10 and BFH8. Note the abraded scar ridges and damaged edges, a condition indicative of an origin within fluvial gravels. Reproduced courtesy of Hampshire Cultural Trust

The Druitt Catalogue indicates that the Foxholes handaxes were recovered between 1906 and 1914. Most are simply recorded as coming from Foxholes; however, three have more specific entries (Fig. 3b). Handaxe BFH10 was found in “Foxholes on the Guildhill Road side of tram route”, handaxe BFH11 was found “on the corner site at Guildhill Road, Foxholes”, while handaxe BFH 15 was recovered from “Foxholes Road between Guildhill Road and Lion Way”. These details combine to point to an area of Southbourne as the provenance for the Foxholes assemblage, not Poole as suggested by the SRPP. While there are two Foxhole Roads in the Bournemouth area, only one of them shares a junction with Guildhill Road and was part of an early 20th century tram route, and that is the Foxholes Road located in Southbourne and within Druitt’s Area B. Contemporary Ordnance Survey mapping of Southbourne adds further support (Fig. 4). Not only does it confirm the existence of Foxholes Road, Guildhill Road and the tramway in this area at the time of artefact recovery, it also shows an active gravel pit and on-going urban development in the area at this time, thereby providing a potential means of artefact recovery (a detail that is not recorded in the catalogue). The clincher is the fact that the area of Southbourne in question is identified as Foxholes on the historic mapping.

It is clear that Druitt recorded this assemblage as coming from Foxholes in Southbourne and not from Foxholes in Poole. For any of the handaxes to have originated at the latter would require Druitt to have made a mistake or to have been misled, which, considering his diligent and detailed recording of his collections, seems unlikely. The only terrace present in the Foxholes area of Southbourne is the Stanswood Bay Gravel of the River Stour, a north bank tributary of the River Solent, although as can be seen from Figure 4, Guildhill Road and the northern part of Foxholes Road are outside the mapped terrace area. This raises the possibility that some or all of the handaxes may have originated within a bluff gravel and not from *in situ* terrace deposits. It is necessary to be cautious when dealing with bluff gravels, since there is the potential for younger artefacts to become incorporated in older terrace gravels during the formation of a terrace bluff (McNabb & Hosfield 2009). However, the rolled character of the Foxholes assemblage suggests that the majority are likely to be contemporary with the Stanswood Bay Gravel deposits; if they were recovered from the bluff then they had simply been part of the terrace gravels from which the bluff had formed.

The Stanswood Bay Gravel is five terraces lower than the Sway Gravel in the Solent

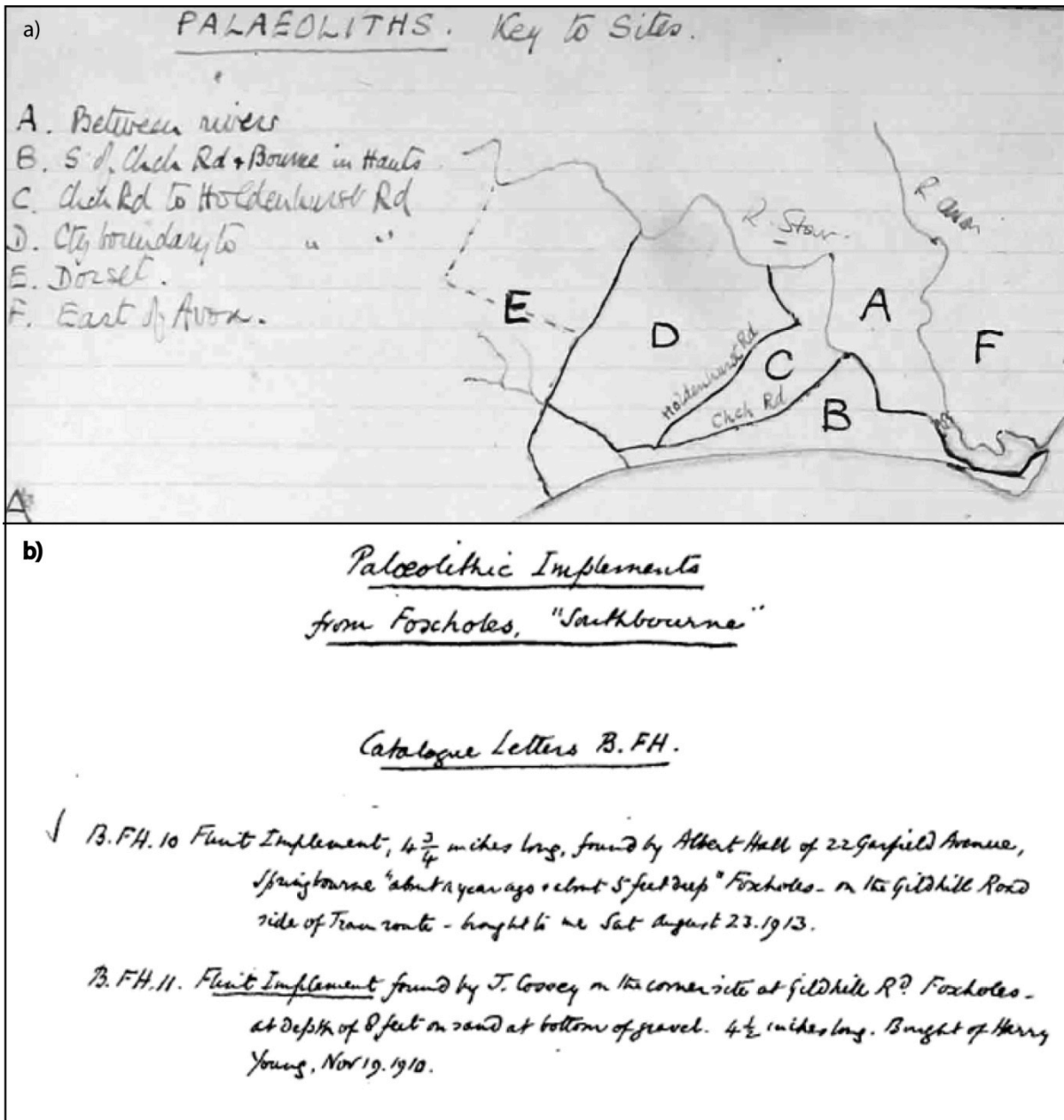


Figure 3. a) a reproduction of Druitt's plan of his collecting areas by Calkin. Note the position of Area B; b) extract from the Druitt catalogue showing two of the Foxholes entries that supply important information relating to the provenance of the assemblage. Reproduced courtesy of Hampshire Cultural Trust

sequence. Its age is far from clear, with recent estimates varying between MIS 6 (Hatch 2014) and MIS 8 (Briant *et al.* 2006; Westaway *et al.* 2006), perhaps suggesting the handaxes relate to occupation during either the MIS 7 or MIS 9 interglacials. Given the rolled character of the assemblage, it is of course possible that some or all of the handaxes are of greater antiquity and have been reworked into the Stanswood Bay Gravel from a higher terrace, so a precise age for the assemblage is presently unobtainable (even at the coarse scale of

marine isotope stages). However, what is clear is that a case for the Foxholes handaxes being among the oldest handaxes in the Solent region cannot be upheld.

DISCUSSION

The reassignment of the Foxholes assemblage from the Sway Gravel to the Stanswood Bay Gravel has implications for the timing of the first appearance of Acheulean technology in the Solent region. Based on their reading of the SRPP database, Ashton & Hosfield (2010)

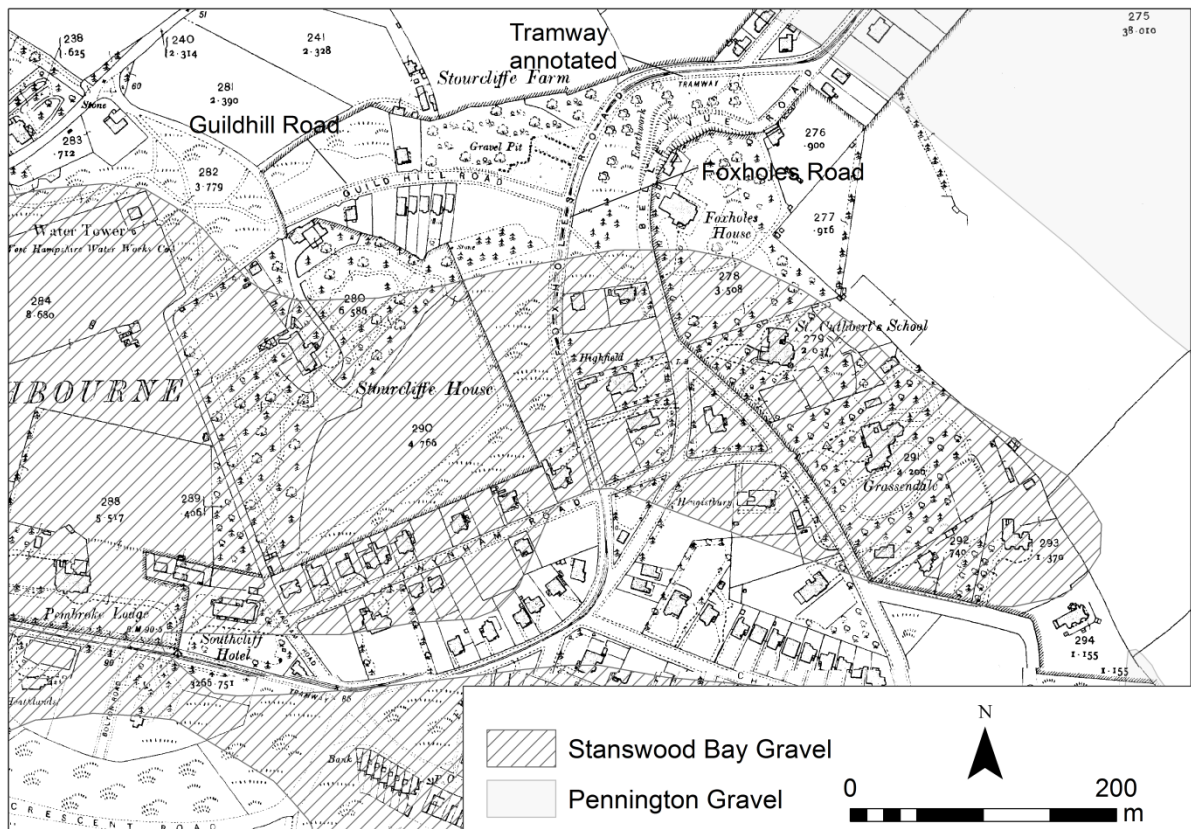


Figure 4. The Foxholes area of Southbourne at the time the Foxholes artefacts were recovered. Note the intersection of Foxholes Road and Guildhill Road, and the tramway that ran along Foxholes Road. It is from this area that the Foxholes handaxes were recovered, most likely from deposits associated with the Stanswood Bay Gravel. See Figure 1 for location. Created using 2nd Rev. (1909) 1:2500 County Series (Hampshire Sheet), © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2014). All rights reserved. (1909)

presented the distribution of handaxes across the five main terrace sequences of the Solent River system which, from west to east, are associated with the River Frome, the rivers Solent and Stour in the Bournemouth area, the Hampshire and Wiltshire Avon, the River Solent in the New Forest area and the River Test. They highlighted a pattern that is common across the region, whereby the highest terraces are characterised by small numbers of poorly contextualised handaxes and contrast the large handaxe assemblages of known provenance associated with the middle and lower terraces. Now that the true provenance of the Foxholes handaxes has been established, the higher terrace record is even more impoverished.

Westaway *et al.* (2006) excluded all of the higher terrace handaxes from their analysis of the Solent Palaeolithic record due to the lack of contextual information. In most cases they argued that the height at which they were found, and consequently the relative age of the associated terraces, suggested that these were

surface finds and therefore younger than the associated terrace. Another possibility is that the recorded provenance, usually based on the testimony of workmen, may simply be false; Worthington Smith (1894) provides a first-hand account of the unscrupulous behaviour of some workmen as they attempted to extract more money from the collectors. However, a recent search of museum archives has discovered some contextual information pertinent to the provenance of three assemblages associated with these higher terraces (Davis 2013). This suggests that a small number of handaxes may be attributable to the Sway Gravel of the River Solent and Terrace 8 of the River Test (Davis in prep.). Of course the actual age of these terraces and the associated archaeology remains unclear. It is tempting to view the first appearance of large handaxe assemblages in the Setley Plain Gravel of the Solent and Terrace 6 of the Test as corresponding with the broader proliferation of handaxes across Britain and northwest Europe during MIS 13 (Roebroeks 2006). If true, then handaxes from the higher terraces

are likely to have been discarded during at least the preceding MIS 15 interglacial. However, there remains no direct dating evidence to support this, so at best the Solent region remains a candidate for early Acheulean occupation of Britain that requires further investigation.

The case of Foxholes also serves as a cautionary tale for the potential pitfalls of using the SRPP database and its partner *The English Rivers Palaeolithic Survey* (TERPS, Wessex Archaeology 1996), and highlights the potential for important contextual information to exist undiscovered in museum archives. The Druitt Catalogue was one of a number of documents discovered by the author in museum archives that did not come to light through a standard museum enquiry or catalogue search (Davis 2013). The information garnered from these helped to establish accurate provenances for a substantial portion of the Solent Palaeolithic record, providing a more accurate view of the region's archaeology than has previously been possible (Davis in prep.). It is clear that several of these documents, including the Druitt Catalogue, had not been utilised in previous studies/surveys of the Solent's archaeology (Roe 1968; Wessex Archaeology 1993; Westaway *et al.* 2006; Ashton & Hosfield 2010), presumably because their existence was simply unknown. Given the amount of contextual information found for the Solent (Davis 2013), a record that has previously been characterised by its general lack of contextual information (Ashton *et al.* 2011), it seems likely that there is a greater quantity of information available for other British fluvial archives than is often assumed.

It is also likely that the errors identified in the Solent section of the SRPP such as at Foxholes mirrors similar inaccuracies for the other river valleys covered by the SRPP and TERPS databases. This is not meant as a criticism, since the sheer size and scope of these projects meant that they could not be expected to conduct the same level of detailed study that is possible for a three-year doctoral study of a single river system. It is meant as a cautionary note for future studies of the fluvial archive. The SRPP and TERPS databases provide an essential foundation on which studies of the British fluvial archive can be built (Hosfield 1999). However, as has been demonstrated for Foxholes, they do contain inaccuracies,

generalisations and errors that can have a significant affect on our reading of the archaeological record. It is therefore essential that the use of the SRPP and TERPS databases is accompanied by a thorough search for and study of all available contextual information wherever possible.

CONCLUSION

It is now clear that the small Foxholes handaxe assemblage was recovered from an area of Southbourne in eastern Bournemouth and not from the Foxholes area of Poole as has previously been assumed (Wessex Archaeology 1993; Ashton & Hosfield 2010; Hosfield 2011). Its association with deposits of the Stanswood Bay Gravel of the River Stour suggests that the handaxes are younger than much of the Palaeolithic material associated with the Stour and Solent terraces in the Bournemouth area. Although the poor chronological control in the Solent region and the potential for the handaxes to have been reworked from higher terraces prevents a confident age estimation, it is clear that they can no longer be decisively considered as candidates for early Acheulean technology in southern Britain. Foxholes serves as a cautionary tale of the potential pitfalls of using the SRPP and TERPS databases without conducting a thorough study of all available contextual information to verify site/assemblage provenance.

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