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RON WAITE—A PERSONAL TRIBUTE

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I met Ron Waite only twice, but over a period of 25 years, through my friendship with the late R.J (Mac) MacRae, who knew him well, I was aware of his work, his letter-writing and his eccentricities.

Ron was one of a number of amateur archaeologists who pursue their hobby with a passion that few professionals can match. His interest in things from the past seemed to be almost genetically embedded, it was 'in his blood', and was manifest from an early age, starting with his childhood discovery of Roman material near his home in Nuneaton. His ability to find prehistoric artefacts in ploughed fields developed over a period of more than 40 years, and it became his main archaeological interest.

As a result he collected one of the largest, if not *the* largest, assemblage of surface artefacts of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic age in his travels in Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Staffordshire and Northamptonshire. I never asked Ron what his motivation was for such

compulsive activity, but it seems to have had something to do with the wonder of finding things very old, that had probably never been noticed since the day they were dropped by their makers. The potential monetary value of these finds did not enter his mind, despite a lifelong shortage of money (his letters were typically written on scraps of second-hand paper because proper stationery was unaffordable).

Working in the Midlands, his finds were most commonly made of quartzite, a material harder to work than flint that produces a different range of tools, so the authenticity of his finds often attracted heated discussion. Nevertheless he possessed an unshakeable certainty about the veracity of his discoveries, which would become even more entrenched when others expressed scepticism. I once pressed him on the specific human qualities of a particularly doubtful item. After a lot of close-focused debate, he came up with a telling phrase: “[y]ou are not seeing what I am seeing”, as if

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he possessed an inner eye on the subject. Only towards the end of his life did he begin to admit that, just perhaps, some of his finds might be natural, although most were sound enough. This self-assured confidence chimed with his interest in eastern mysticism, which gave him a deep spiritual appreciation of the meaning of life: despite the frugal lifestyle, he had managed to acquire a number of icons, prominent amongst which was a seated Buddha adorning the shelf in his modest home.

Ron had his ups and downs with the academic community in whose presence he sometimes felt uneasy. But once he had gained the trust of a curator, he was generous in handing over selected finds to museums. Problems only arose when the professionals begged to differ on some issue. Although he equipped himself with the basics of his subject, delving into the latest archaeological journals was not a priority. He felt his innate understanding of the nature of Palaeolithic man needed no statistics or lab tests to support it. This was at the root of most of the disagreements, and for Ron, acrimonious fallouts were very hard to repair.

So while others brought science to archaeology, Ron was away in the fields. That gave him one great advantage: he accumulated more experience of finding palaeoliths than probably any other archaeologist in Britain. We would have done well to pay more attention to his interpretations and even the rambling accounts in his letters, for therein lay a deep wisdom about the past culled from a lifetime's digestion of field data, a skill which most archaeologists have limited time to hone. Apart from the stone tools themselves, Ron's greatest legacy is perhaps that he showed us the value of human intuition, unshackled by proof, yet an essential part of any study.

After I heard of Ron's death I went to the MacRae archive, of which I am the custodian, to find the many letters Ron had written to Mac. There was a folder, but no letters remained. They had fallen victim to Mac's thinning-out of his paperwork which he had considered timely as he approached his late 80s. A pity, for we shall not see the likes of Ron again.