

OBITUARY

R.J. MacRae (1915–2003)

R.J. MacRae (“Mac” to all who knew him) was a well-known and much-loved character in archaeological circles. Born in 1915, son of a Scottish engineer, he was brought up near Coventry. Economic conditions following the 1929 crash prevented his completion of a public school education and almost certainly a university place afterwards. Instead, Mac joined the local newspaper, the Coventry Standard, as a 17-year-old junior reporter. Here he learned the rights and wrongs of quality writing at a time when it was still to be found in provincial newspapers. His lifelong love of good literature, and the ability to use words concisely and correctly, were born from this experience. One day in 1935 he was despatched to report on a gravel pit being investigated at Baginton near Coventry by a group of amateurs under a certain Mr. Fred Shotton of Birmingham University (later to become the distinguished Professor of Geology at that University). He explained to MacRae that the brown quartzite pebble he had found was a ‘handaxe’ of the ‘Chellean’ period of early Man, probably 200,000 years old. A seed was sown, which after some twenty years of incubation would flourish to become the dominant passion in a man of many interests and talents. His vast knowledge of archaeology was entirely self taught, inspired, as he would often recount, by the thrill of finding a handaxe which had last been handled by the maker or user so many thousands of years ago.

For a number of years Mac ran a market garden at Shipston on Stour. He thus gained an early respect for, and interest in, farming and the countryside, as well as learning the benefits of hard manual labour. His description of sprout picking before dawn in the frost remained vivid and his love of nature grew rather than diminished over the years. After the War, Mac was appointed regional sales representative for Newton Chambers, a leading industrial sanitation company. This allowed him the opportunity to pop in to local gravel pits while on his travels, armed with nothing more than a 1903 edition of the British Museum Guide to the Old Stone Age. He was soon gaining a wealth of experience in the Hampshire area, where at that time many small pits were being worked. Mac discovered that Lower Palaeolithic implements could be picked up at many of these sites, and he began to accumulate a collection which would eventually rank amongst the most important of the 20th century. From his home in Shipston on Stour, Mac was also able to investigate pits around the South Midlands and Upper Thames areas, and he somehow also got himself to East Anglia, thus widening his experience into both flint and non-flint-bearing regions. From the enigmatic site at Highlands Farm near Henley, he retrieved over 3,000 artefacts, mainly flakes, many of them apparently representing a ‘Clactonian’ industry devoid of handaxes.

In 1969 the family moved to Cassington nearer to Oxford, where it is said whatever your subject there is an expert who knows more about it than you do. Mac became acquainted with some of the leading Palaeolithic archaeologists and Pleistocene geologists of the time. His association with John Wymer went back to 1958, and in Oxford he soon came to know Bernard Fagg at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Kenneth Sandford, who had first written on the Upper Thames terraces in the 1920s, Donald Baden-Powell, and Derek Roe.

There was hardly a person worth knowing in these circles that Mac did not either meet or correspond with. At the invitation of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Mac transferred his by now large collection of artefacts to a specially equipped room in north Oxford loaned by Linacre College, which he shared with Donald Baden-Powell. In the company of Donald and Derek,

Mac began asking more serious questions about the material he was finding, but at about the same time, at the age of 54, he decided to start a completely new career, this time as a self-employed flooring contractor. Though often working six days a week and late into the evening, Mac did not lose touch with the gravel pits and his friends the digger drivers. He would painstakingly nurture any gravel worker who showed interest and get them to spot and keep the handaxes until he was able to visit them again.

After the death of Donald Baden-Powell in 1973, Mac initiated a re-organisation of the Pitt Rivers Museum collection of Palaeolithic artefacts, which were gathered together from dusty storerooms and eventually placed, along with his own (still-growing) collection, in a room in the newly-formed Donald Baden-Powell Centre for Quaternary Studies at No. 60 Banbury Road in Oxford. It became known as “Mac’s Room”, and later in his life he was officially given the title of Honorary Curator of the collection. Many generations of graduate students, as well as anyone else who registered promise, would eventually be invited to “No. 60”, where in the convivial company of Mac and Derek, many a Palaeolithic tale was told.

Mac was intrigued by his frequent discovery of implements made of quartzite, which had barely been recognised until then, flint being the norm. Many of these artefacts were not of classic handaxe shape and Mac developed an advanced skill in recognising human agency in some very unpromising lumps of quartzite. Finding that almost nothing had been written on this subject, Mac set about organising a series of papers which were published in 1988 as BAR British Series volume 189 under the joint editorship of himself and Norah Moloney: ‘Non-flint Stone Tools and the Lower Palaeolithic Occupation of Britain’. This landmark work opened up the subject of Palaeolithic occupation in areas where flint was not endemic, showing that man employed whatever materials were to hand, with findspots extending into the Midlands and beyond.

As a regular contributor to *Lithics*, Mac diligently recorded his finds in his own entertaining style. Although he studied and wrote about his subject, Mac was foremost a field archaeologist with a highly developed eye for the Lower Palaeolithic. Almost single-handedly he continued the work of the great collectors of the 19th century, but reinforced with the increasingly technical knowledge of the 20th. Those who were lucky enough to be on a field trip when Mac was on board will recall the pub-lunches where his skill as a raconteur would be embellished with handaxes conjured from his pocket, while puffing furiously on his pipe.

In the late 1990s Mac’s collection was the subject of a dissertation by a young Korean archaeologist, Hyeong Woo Lee, whose detailed study was published in 2001 as the BAR British Series volume 319: ‘A Study of the Lower Palaeolithic Artefacts from Selected Sites in the Upper and Middle Thames Valley, with Particular Reference to the R.J. MacRae Collection’. This 223-page book is a fitting tribute to Mac’s 40 years of tireless fieldwork. Although tall and of robust build, Mac was seldom aggressive, but when moved by a righteous cause he could be formidable. The sight of him, in his early 80s, ready to come to blows with a man in a field using a metal detector, was enough to frighten the boldest treasure hunter. Archaeology was his main passion, but as time went on his appreciation of the Classics, especially Jane Austen, together with a profound love of classical music and old films, gave him many happy hours.

Mac’s wife Joan died in 1991 and their elder daughter, Susan, had died in 1988. In 1996 he moved to Hardingham in Norfolk where he was lucky to purchase a beautiful cottage next door to his daughter Janet. Here he was able to enjoy close family life, taking special interest

in his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, as well an indulging in his love of the countryside. At the age of 81 he took once again to visiting the East Anglian gravel pits, many of which he had known years before. There grew up yet another collection, this time mainly of flint, but Mac was delighted to find increasing numbers of quartzite artefacts in the path of the pre-Anglian 'Bytham River' at Feltwell. His last article, written jointly with Terry Hardaker in 2000, described these finds. Mac's intellectual powers remained intact right to the end, but increasing physical frailty restricted his trips into the country. He often joked that he would die in a gravel pit, but home near his family and treasured artefacts was probably a better place. Here he died, in his 89th year, on 19 July 2003.

Terry Hardaker

R.J. MacRae: Bibliography

1982. Palaeolithic Artefacts from Berinsfield, Oxfordshire. *Oxoniensia* 47: 1–11.
1985. Palaeolithic Archaeology of the Upper Thames basin. In D.J. Briggs, G.R. Coope & D.D. Gilbertson (eds.) *The Chronology and Environmental Framework of Early man in the Upper Thames Valley*: 8–25. British Archaeological Reports British Series 137. Oxford: BAR.
1986. Tool Manufacture in Quartzitic and Similar Rocks in the British Palaeolithic. *Lithics* 7: 7–12.
1987. The Great Handaxe Stakes. *Lithics* 8: 15–17.
1988. & Moloney, N. (eds.) *Non-flint Stone Tools and the Palaeolithic Occupation of Britain*. British Archaeological Reports British Series 189. Oxford: BAR.
1988. Palaeolithic Artefacts from Stanton Harcourt. *Oxoniensia* 52: 179–80.
1988. The Palaeolithic of the Upper Thames and its Quartzite Implements. In R.J. MacRae & N. Moloney (eds.) *None-flint Stone Tools and the Palaeolithic Occupation of Britain*: 123–154. British Archaeological Reports British Series 189. Oxford: BAR.
1988. The Palaeolithic Artefacts of Warwickshire. In R.J. MacRae & N. Moloney (eds.) *None-flint Stone Tools and the Palaeolithic Occupation of Britain*: 95–102. British Archaeological Reports British Series 189. Oxford: BAR.
1988. Belt, Shoulder Bag or Basket: an Enquiry into Hand-axe Transport and Flint Sources. *Lithics* 9: 2–7.
1990. New Finds and Old Problems in the Lower Palaeolithic of the Upper Thames valley. *Lithics* 11: 3–15.
- 1991 New Lower Palaeolithic Finds from Gravel Pits in Central Southern England. *Lithics* 12: 8–20.
1994. The Case of the Migrating Cleaver. *Lithics* 15: 21–23.
1998. J.J.W. A Tribute from the Upper Thames. In N. Ashton, F. Healy & P. Pettitt (eds.) *Stone Age Archaeology: Essays in Honour of John Wymer*: 11–14. Oxbow Monograph 102 & Lithic Studies Society Occasional Paper No. 6. London: Oxbow Books.
1999. New Lower Palaeolithic Finds in Norfolk. *Lithics* 20: 3–10.
2000. & Hardaker, T.R. A Lost River and some Palaeolithic Surprises: New Quartzite Finds from Norfolk and Oxfordshire. *Lithics* 21: 52–59.