

MACRAE: AN APPRECIATION

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It is an honour and a pleasure to contribute a few words about 'Mac' to this volume in his honour. He would have been gruffly dismissive of any such idea - he could do a very good 'gruffly dismissive' when he wanted - but quietly very pleased and surreptitiously flattered that his efforts should be recognised by his friends and colleagues. He would also certainly expect to be referred to here simply as 'Mac,' and so he shall be. I never found out why he disliked his perfectly ordinary and straightforward given names (Robert John), but he claimed to do so, and it was pointless to refer to him in any other way than 'Mac', as he did himself, though he belonged to that rather special class of friends who, when they telephone, never give their name, but just start talking, and one knows instantly who it is. He might possibly add "Mac here," a sentence or two later, as an afterthought, if the recipient of the call had not yet managed to get a word in. So, Mac he was to us all, and Mac he will fondly remain in our memories.

There is an excellent brief account of Mac's life in the preceding number of *Lithics*, written by Terry Hardaker (2004), who knew him as well as anyone in his later years, and is his natural successor so far as Palaeolithic Archaeology and Pleistocene Geology in the Upper Thames Valley gravel pits are concerned. There you can read Mac's dates, 1915-2003, and the basic facts about his life and his several successive careers, which ranged from local newspaper reporter to expert renovator of wooden floors. If you never met him, you can glimpse in Terry's account Mac the husband and father, Mac the talented naturalist or knowledgeable lover of music and literature, and all these aspects of his life were indeed of the greatest importance to him, but what mainly concerns us here is the towering figure of Mac the unrivalled finder and ceaselessly driven student of the stone artefacts of the British Lower Palaeolithic. Terry has also listed Mac's publications, and they are a solid record of genuine and significant achievement, to set beside his remarkable collection of artefacts, which numbered several thousand pieces and will remain of permanent importance to all those who seek to understand the earlier Palaeolithic occupation of Britain.

Many amateurs have collected stone artefacts in Britain since the middle of the 19th century, sometimes in huge quantities, but not all of them greatly enriched our knowledge as a result. Mac certainly did, and his name is up there with the very best of them: he recorded his finds with care, and he shared his discoveries freely and made his collection available to anyone who could help in what he saw as the real task, the extracting of worthwhile new information from the finds made in the field. He was variously the originator, the catalyst or a willing participant in several substantial research efforts, notably in the Upper and Middle Thames Valley and East Anglia, and to some extent also the Solent area and the English Midlands. Never one for the more intricate paths of archaeological or anthropological theory, and an implacable foe of needlessly obscure terminology ('gobbledegook', as he called it), Mac soon learned to go straight to the point and ask the appropriate simple, penetrating, human questions. What were the people who made these artefacts doing here? Where had they come from? Where were they getting their raw material, and how did they actually transport large and heavy supplies of it? He was just as practical in considering the context of his finds, and

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was careful to glean every scrap of information he could, when it was a case of material gathered by the gravel-pit workers rather than by himself. He wanted the geologists to tell him not just the age of the gravels, but also why there were concentrations of artefacts in one part of a gravel pit when other parts were empty, and why it was that so many pieces seemed to occur at the base of the gravel rather than in the main body of it. Points of all these kinds, in whatever language one cares to express them, lie near to the heart of many current research interests in Palaeolithic archaeology. Read Mac's papers, and see for yourself what he himself made of them.

In several different ways, Mac in his collecting and research seemed to possess the priceless quality of being the right person in the right place at the right time. For example, one of the things for which he will be best remembered is his work on those British Lower Palaeolithic artefacts which are made of rocks other than flint. Early in his journalist career, based at Coventry, he was sent to interview Professor Fred Shotton, who gave him a Midlands quartzite handaxe to look at, and explained what it was, inspiring him to start collecting such things himself. He was thus aware of quartzite tools from the start, though much of his own early collecting was done in the flint-rich areas of East Anglia and the Test Valley. Later he moved to Cassington, just west of Oxford, and came face to face with the fascinating situation in the Upper Thames Valley where both flint and quartzite artefacts are to be found. The flint was brought in by humans from the Chilterns away to the south, because no usable flint is to be had locally in the Oxford area, while the quartzites, less easy to knap, were readily available in cobble form, along with a few other workable rocks from the Northern Drift (see Hardaker, this volume).

Mac, already familiar with both flint and quartzite tools and flakes, was the ideal person to collect locally and his arrival coincided with a resurgence in gravel extraction in the area. In due course, pits were to open almost on his doorstep at Cassington and Yarnton, and meanwhile others were active in the Stanton Harcourt and Hardwick area, and for a while at Berinsfield and further south at Highlands Farm, near Henley. The classic Middle Thames area around Burnham and Maidenhead, with several working pits, was also within easy reach. In particular, as time passed, collecting the local quartzite implements led Mac to a deepening interest in their significance, not only in West Oxfordshire but in Britain generally and he gradually became an authority on them. In that connection, he continued to keep an eye on the Midlands, and it was predictable that he would in due course make contact there with another extraordinary and prolific collector, Ron Waite (see Graf, this volume). Indeed, to jump some way ahead, when Mac finally left Cassington and moved to Norfolk, he did so at a time when the significance of the Bytham River was becoming understood, along with the geological processes which had brought Midlands quartzite cobbles to East Anglia. In his later years he was to find yet more Lower Palaeolithic artefacts of both flint and quartzite in his new home territory.

Meanwhile, however, Mac's arrival in Oxfordshire in 1969 brought him not only abundant collecting opportunities, but also a whole new range of contacts of exactly the kind he needed, starting with Donald Baden-Powell and Kenneth Sandford, and indeed myself as Baden-Powell's successor, teaching Palaeolithic Archaeology at Oxford University, though we first met two or three years earlier. Not long after, Ray Inskeep came to join the Pitt Rivers Museum staff, and Kenneth Oakley had moved in retirement to Oxford. While diffident about his lack of formal archaeological training, Mac was never shy in introducing himself, and many were willing to encourage him, answer his questions, suggest sources of information or introduce him to others he wished to meet.

It was after Baden-Powell's death, and the opening in 1975 of the Centre that bore his name at 60 Banbury Road, however, that Mac really came into his own as an unofficial but very real component of the small group of Palaeolithic researchers based at Oxford University, and this he remained for the next twenty years or so. He has given his own reminiscences of that period of his life (in Milliken & Cook 2001: ix-xi), and has told the story of how 'Mac's Room' at 60 Banbury Road came into existence, and how he simply imported into it his own collection, and a substantial quantity of the Pitt Rivers Museum's British palaeoliths, using footwork that was altogether too fast for the ancient University. If you present Oxford academics with a *fait accompli*, nine times out of ten you will get away with it; offer them a brilliant and worthwhile plan, and they will spend years devising and debating alternative strategies, usually until the time for action has passed.

During that period, Mac was once again in the right place at the right time. Though I am not really able to take a detached view, I think it is fair to say that for the last quarter of the 20th century, the Donald Baden-Powell Quaternary Research Centre at 60 Banbury Road contrived to become and remain a rather special, very friendly and even pleasingly productive place. Curiously, one reason for the 'nice atmosphere,' on which so many visitors commented, was probably the fact that the University never gave the Centre any money of its own, and staff and students shared with genuine equality the tasks and the pleasures of keeping everything going. The triumphs or disasters of any one member of the small community were the triumphs or disasters of us all. Visitors from many parts of the world the world would look in, and we set ourselves to welcome them and to help them, as best we could, with whatever it was that had brought them to Oxford — not the sort of attitude that would endear an institution to any hard-headed, cost-conscious University in the competitive world of today. Through it all, the University authorities seemed almost unaware of our existence, perhaps because we were not a named cost-centre. But at least they let us get on with it, for more than two decades, and many people benefited from that, as a succession of talented graduate students came and went, and we enjoyed the visits of distinguished scholars, who would share their knowledge and experience, as much informally as by the giving of seminars.

Mac, who today would have to be categorised, accounted for, appraised, made to write annual reports, and probably even charged a fee, was simply part of it all, whenever he had the time to be there, and I believe he gave just as much as he received, in such things as the practical help and advice he offered to students working on artefacts, and in his reordering of the Museum's collections. He attended the lectures of visiting scholars whenever he could, and would delightedly take any of them who had the time and inclination on a personally conducted tour of the Middle and Upper Thames Valley gravel pits. All the while, he was bringing in new finds and effectively monitoring all the local pits; it is a simple matter of fact that in the course of his personal fieldwork he changed the whole scale of our knowledge and understanding of Lower Palaeolithic settlement in the Upper Thames Valley. It is very pleasing that during his closing years Mac saw the successful completion of a full-scale doctoral thesis, based on a study of his collection, by a Korean graduate student (H.W. Lee) working at 60 Banbury Road, and the work was subsequently published as a monograph (Lee 2001), which he also saw. Indeed, most of Lee's research and writing was done actually in 'Mac's Room' at No 60, and Mac himself gave invaluable advice and assistance. Lee's study made particular use of some of Mac's most important sites: Highlands Farm, Berinsfield and Gravelly Guy at Stanton Harcourt.

Apart from his single-handed efforts, Mac also joined in, one way or another, with pretty well all the more formal research projects concerning the Palaeolithic and Pleistocene successions in the Oxford region, undertaken from time to time by scholars based there or elsewhere. The long-term excavation of the highly important Stanton Harcourt Interglacial Channel, directed by Katharine Scott and Christine Buckingham, is a particularly important example. It was during this period too that he met Norah Moloney, who was a regular visitor to 60 Banbury Road, and had her own involvement with Lower Palaeolithic quartzite artefacts through her doctoral research in Spain. The volume on non-flint stone tools in the British Palaeolithic, which they edited together (MacRae & Moloney 1988), and Mac's own papers in it, are an important landmark on the road he had been following from collecting to research. His horizons had already widened greatly by 1988, and no doubt the contacts at 60 Banbury Road had helped in that. We tried never to take ourselves too seriously, but it was fascinating how widely conversation at coffee or tea breaks might range, on an ordinary day, depending on who happened to be there, what current work was going on in the laboratory, or what someone had just read. A particular advantage we enjoyed was that at the Centre itself we had a superb accumulation of books, reprints and even some archival material, plus outstanding stone tool teaching collections, loaned to us from the Pitt Rivers collection. Few questions arose without my being able to go and fetch, there and then, a copy of a relevant publication, or an actual example of an artefact type that someone wanted to see. These were casual, day-to-day, essentially social occasions, but to me they were a key part of the graduate teaching that went on at the Centre. The nature of the Oxford taught courses, let alone the choices of doctoral research topics that might be made, ensured that, so far as we could, we taught all aspects of Palaeolithic archaeology on a world-wide basis, and the conversations ranged accordingly.

In the absence of recurrent funding, we could not often ourselves host substantial conferences, but many groups came to the Centre for day meetings, including the QRA and the Lithics Studies Society, more than once. Sometimes the topic was the Palaeolithic of the Upper Thames Valley, and if so we would try to fit in a trip to nearby sites, which Mac would lead. There were a few other public occasions too, and I cannot resist including here a couple of pictures taken by Katharine Scott during a visit to the Centre by Queen Margrethe of Denmark, when she was in Oxford to receive an Honorary Degree in June 1992. Her Majesty, as Princess Margrethe, had spent a year at Cambridge studying Palaeolithic Archaeology with considerable distinction, which had happened to coincide with my own final undergraduate year there. She came to see the Centre and the Pitt Rivers Museum's Hunter-Gatherer Gallery, at her own special request, and we organised a tea-party and an exhibition of things Palaeolithic for her. Mac was of course an eager participant, and Plate 1 shows him ensuring that the Queen got to know everything worth knowing about West Oxfordshire handaxes in the short time available.

Plate 2 is something of an indulgence, but it is there for Mac's sake, because he has recorded his enjoyment of our local 60 Banbury Road custom of producing a home-made cake for special occasions, decorated with appropriate prehistoric artefact types made of icing sugar. Usually the occasion was a party after one of our number had received his or her doctorate, but we made a couple of cakes for the Queen of Denmark, taking care to include some polished stone axes of specifically Danish type and some good honest English handaxes: here they are. It should be added that, a few years later, there was a handaxe-decorated cake at a party given by Katharine Scott for Mac's 80th birthday, at his particular request.



Figure 1. R.J. MacRae (left), with Queen Margrethe of Denmark and Derek Roe at 60 Banbury Road, 23 June 1992. Mac was a remarkably youthful 77 when this picture was taken. [Photograph by Katharine Scott]



Figure 2. Cakes decorated with icing sugar artefacts, June 1992 (see text). [Photograph by Katharine Scott]

As for Mac's knack of being in the right place at the right time, that of course extended to his extraordinary talent as a finder of artefacts. In a few people, of whom Mac was one, the ability to find handaxes in gravel pits seems almost like a physical quality. Rarely do such people return home completely empty-handed. Here are just two examples: I was present on the second occasion, and Mac himself told me about this first one. In the days when he was a travelling sales representative for a sanitation company, he used whenever possible to stop for his lunch of sandwiches at any gravel pit he could find. On one occasion he happened to be in the Ouse Valley near Blunham, upstream of Bedford, where a pit was open which he knew had never yet yielded any artefacts. Undeterred, Mac walked across to it, choosing his path quite at random, and at precisely the point where he reached the edge of the pit, there was a handaxe, lying on the sloping surface of gravel below the cut section. As he scrambled down to collect it, his foot slipped and he thrust out an arm to the gravel face to steady himself. His hand disturbed the gravel, and another handaxe fell out. He showed me the two implements, which remained in his collection, and assured me that the pit never produced any further artefacts, except a couple of flakes which he himself found on a later visit. I duly recorded the four items in the *CBA Gazetteer of British Lower and Middle Palaeolithic Sites*, on which I was working at the time (Roe 1968: 2).

The second occasion must have been sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s, and involved one of several Indian Palaeolithic archaeologists who visited the Centre around that time, M.L.K. Murty, who was interested in Soan and Acheulian in India, and as a result in Acheulian and Clactonian in Britain. He came in the depths of winter, mainly to visit Museum collections, but that did not deter Mac from offering him a quick field trip to Thames Valley gravel pits during the short daylight hours. I remember Murty telling me that he had been warned by colleagues in India how cold the British winter was and, since he did not own an overcoat, he had actually borrowed one that had belonged to his grandfather, which had been given to a local museum. It was as well that he did, because the day of Mac's trip, which I had agreed to join, dawned as bleak as they come. We agreed to try our luck, in spite of a dismal weather forecast, as it was the only day Murty had free, and duly climbed into Mac's car, bound for the Maidenhead area gravel pits of the Middle Thames. For once, under the grey skies, even Mac could not charm so much as a flake from the exposed gravel at any of the pits we visited, and Murty, overcoat and all, was clearly finding the cold intense. In the darkening mid afternoon, Mac, in the interests of international goodwill, reluctantly suggested that we call it a day. Through the horizontal sleet that had perhaps prompted his decision, we could just see his car in the distance, and — thank goodness — there was a direct route to it across a new field that was being made where old gravel workings had been filled in with disturbed material. We made straight for it, heads down because of the sleet. About half way across, Mac suddenly stopped. "Well," he said. "We might as well pick that one up." A perfectly genuine handaxe was lying on the surface, a few inches from his foot, amongst the scatter of stones, soil and rubbish that formed the surface of the pit filling. As I said, such people rarely go home completely empty-handed.

Many more stories could be told, but it is time to bring these reminiscences to a close. Mac continued to add to his collection, and to our knowledge, right to the end, moving in 1996 from West Oxfordshire to Hardingham in Norfolk. He left the Upper Thames Valley Palaeolithic in the care of Terry Hardaker, who had worked with him for many years and been inspired by him. Truly, the mantle of Elijah is fallen upon Elisha, and the Upper Thames is in good hands: Terry's eye for an artefact in gravel is as sharp as Mac's was. Meanwhile, how should one end this piece? It is hard to comprehend that Mac has found his last handaxe, and indeed, one might think that he himself would regard the accident of death as no more than a

temporary hindrance to his work. I also have in mind that he chose carefully the place where his ashes would rest in Cassington churchyard, next to those of his beloved wife Joan, who pre-deceased him by 12 years: he delighted in pointing out to friends that the spot was actually on the Summertown-Radley terrace gravel, which is a key feature of the Upper Thames Pleistocene succession.

Mac always liked a good story, fact or fiction, and at 60 Banbury Road we were not averse to the occasional foray into the realms of fantasy, perhaps for example at tea after one of the more trying Faculty Board Meetings, if one or other of our sister institutions, or perhaps some high-up committee of the University itself, had been behaving in what we considered a more than ordinarily piratical or obtuse manner. So here is a short epilogue, which I think Mac himself would have enjoyed, but what *you* think of it is up to you.

I see Mac, having completed the business of dying, ascending the great staircase to the legendary Pearly Gates. Perhaps he puffs a little at first, but as the cares of the world fall away, he moves ever more lightly, and by the top he is his old self again. And there sits the Saint with the big key, just like they used to say. It is bound to be a nervous moment, but Mac is relieved and delighted to see that the Saint has a back-number of *Lithics* open on his knee, and he looks up with a beaming smile.

"Mac! Hullo, *bonjour*, welcome! No problem about letting *you* in. I like very much this article of yours about the belt and the shoulder bag. You ask the good questions in it. We are very glad to see you, and you have many old friends waiting. Come in, *entrez!* We need you very much, and indeed this is why we send for you. You like, I am sure, our fine celestial highway, and I read your mind: you are thinking, where does the gravel come from, for that big road surface? Well, you are in luck. The evolution, it worked almost too well, you know: there is now the big pressure on numbers, and we must extend our beautiful road. A new pit, of the most magnificent, is opening today, and you shall watch it for us. And up here, the contexts for the handaxes are never doubtful, you understand. Come in! I have already a trowel for you. But, my friend, you look a little, how you say, puzzled, is it not? Is there something you would ask me?"

Mac is indeed a little overwhelmed by his welcome, not surprisingly, but as ever he is not shy to ask his question.

"Well, excuse me, St Peter, and that's all wonderful news, but — forgive my curiosity — I would have expected you to speak with a Galilean accent. I even thought you might ask me difficult questions about sites like Gesher Benot Ya'aqov, which I never had a chance to visit, and that might have been embarrassing. But you seem almost to be talking with a... well, with a *French* accent. I like France very much, of course," he adds hastily.

The Saint's smile broadens so far that his halo starts to flicker. "Mac! Forgive me! The fault is mine, *tout à fait*. I forget to introduce myself, so pleased I am to meet you. I am not Saint Peter! Even a saint must eat, and Pierre, he is at lunch. He particularly asked me to come and welcome you. I am Saint Acheul! Now, come in: we have much to do, you and I".

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