

THE PORTABLE ANTIQUITIES SCHEME, MENTAL HEALTH AND LITHICS — A FIELDWALKER'S EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Rod Couper, a keen student of lithics and a social worker specialising in mental health, describes how, with the support of museum and heritage professionals, he introduced some of his clients to archaeology and fieldwalking in South East Wales as a form of therapy. Members of his fieldwalking team experienced an increased sense of personal empowerment and appreciation of the past, as well as helping to contribute to the understanding of past human activity in South Wales by discovering new lithic scatter sites.

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Whilst studying for the archaeology 'A' level at a college in South Wales I developed a particular interest in prehistoric lithic artefacts. On completion of the course I decided to start fieldwalking as a pastime, having located a promising looking area of cultivated land in the Vale of Glamorgan near Cardiff where, hardly expecting to find anything, I was surprised to collect a number of worked flints and some Roman pottery sherds. I took these to the National Museum Cardiff where Elizabeth Walker, a Curator there, confirmed that the flints were indeed prehistoric and the pottery Roman. In turn she put me in contact with Mark Lodwick, the Portable Antiquities Scheme Finds Co-ordinator for Wales who recorded all the finds.

I continued with the fieldwalking, reporting all my finds to the Portable Antiquities Scheme through the Museum until I decided to commence a more comprehensive survey of ploughed fields near Cowbridge, Vale of Glamorgan. As I planned to involve friends and relatives, Mark Lodwick suggested that all the finds discovered should be plotted with the Scheme's hand-held Global Positioning System. The finds discovered include several Neolithic scrapers, the tip of an Early Bronze Age burnt plano-convex knife, an awl, a fragment of a polished Neolithic flint axehead as well as flakes, blades and general knapping débitage.

In the Museum the find co-ordinates were plotted onto a digital map of the area which enabled us to scrutinize their distribution. This clearly showed two concentrations. The plano-convex knife can be confidently dated to the Early Bronze Age; such artefacts occur nearly exclusively in burial contexts. Furthermore, all the diagnostic pieces from this tight grouping were of Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date and may suggest the site of an Early Bronze Age burial mound now ploughed away and previously unknown to the archaeological record. As a result, and fired with enthusiasm by the results, the group have returned to the site several times since and have collected other artefacts from the surface of the field including a leaf-shaped arrowhead.

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The group have subsequently carried out a number of fieldwalking surveys across South Wales and are gradually building up knowledge of prehistoric lithic artefacts, not only through personal study, but also through training sessions in finds identification from the Museum's staff. The group have also participated on the Museum and Portable Antiquities Scheme's fieldwalking survey at Chepstow and the prehistoric excavations at Llanmaes, Vale of Glamorgan.



Figure 1: Rod Couper (centre) fieldwalking with friends at Chepstow, South Wales

When I am not fieldwalking I work within a small specialist mental health team as a Social Worker in the valleys of South East Wales. My job is to provide direct support to adults experiencing severe and persistent mental illness. These are some of society's most socially excluded people, partly as a consequence of their symptoms, but also due to a lack of appropriate services or through stigma and discrimination. As the onset of symptoms is common during school or college years, typically between the ages of 15 and 25, one consequence can be low, or even no, educational achievement. Others may experience the onset of mental illness later on in life and may have started careers and families. At whatever stage mental illness is diagnosed those experiencing it tend to become disempowered in some way. On receiving a referral for someone in need of a service I normally carry out an assessment of their individual needs which will focus on their strengths and interests to enable me to support them to pursue those activities. In some cases this may be access to education, community or leisure facilities and I attempt to increase their inclusion in society by reducing their isolation.

I discovered that several of my current clients have an interest in history and archaeology so I supported them in attending public lectures in archaeology and in visiting historic sites, monuments and local museums. Few had visited a museum since their school days and

several of them had never been to a museum. On showing some of my clients the finds from Cowbridge, they expressed an interest in fieldwalking and we began to plan a survey. My personal interest now became part of my professional life, to the amusement of some of my colleagues who considered this a great excuse for me to go fieldwalking during working hours.

Before commencing fieldwalking I contacted Mark Lodwick and informed him of my plans for another survey. This time he provided training on pottery and lithic identification for my clients. Having located land just outside Newport, myself and a small group set about fieldwalking. During the survey it quickly became apparent that we had stumbled across another lithic scatter. After several days spent surveying and recording findspots using the G.P.S., we returned to the Museum with over two hundred lithic artefacts many of which were identified as Later Mesolithic in age. These include narrow-blade microliths, cores, scrapers, flakes, blades and a considerable amount of general knapping débitage. Better still, Mesolithic activity had not previously been recorded in this area — so we have identified a new Later Mesolithic scatter site.

This fieldwork served several purposes. Apart from getting my clients out and about, it provided them with an opportunity for informal learning. Fieldwalking is also a relaxing activity, weather permitting, and lends itself naturally to conversation between participants. This is not only a distraction while discussing an individual's personal circumstances, but is also a medium for discussions around history and archaeology. Many people who experience severe mental health problems can often become quite introverted, limiting their perception to the here and now. Learning about prehistory and the lengthy timescales involved can, I hope, give some of our clients a broader perception of life. It may encourage participants to look beyond themselves and their problems, to show them new possibilities and to spark new interests. I also believe that fieldwalking in this context is an empowering activity. It allows my clients to engage in an aspect of practical archaeology for themselves and is no longer just something they see on T.V. They are in control of the activity, responsible for locating, collecting and recording any artefacts present, which were last handled by people thousands of years ago. Several of the participants have been taken with the thought that their ancestors once stood on the same spot handling the very same objects that they were. On recording the artefacts there is the acknowledgement that they have real archaeological value and that the finders now not only possess a physical part of their ancient past but have also made a small contribution to the understanding of past human activity in South East Wales.

I have now found many people from a wide variety of backgrounds who want to join me in fieldwalking. It is an accessible way into practical archaeology and one that can provide immediate results in terms of finds, which are often prehistoric flint and stone artefacts. However, this is only half the story as demonstrated above; liaising with, and receiving professional advice from, the Portable Antiquities Scheme and Museum staff has given us the opportunity to accurately record the location of finds and has initially resulted in the discovery of two new sites in South East Wales. It also provides opportunities for feedback and informal learning about prehistory, which for most of the participants in both my groups, is a totally new and fascinating subject.