

A Preliminary Note on the Palaeolithic Sites at Limpsfield, Surrey

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Briefly mentioned by the compilers of the Victoria County History (Surrey) in 1903 and by a number of geologists, the Palaeolithic sites situated around the headwaters of the river Darent at Limpsfield on the Surrey/Kent border are little known and do not appear to have received the attention that they deserve. During the latter part of the 19th century a considerable amount of flint material was recovered in the parish of Limpsfield, Surrey, by a local teacher, A. M. Bell. On Bell's death in 1920 the collection was acquired by the Pitt-Rivers museum in Oxford where it lay unnoticed until recently coming to light (Roe 1981). On inspection some of it appears to be of post-glacial character, but most, some 558 pieces, is Palaeolithic.

Bell collected flint implements from the fields of Limpsfield between the years 1883 and 1906, though dates written on some tools (nearly 400 are so dated) suggest that over half of the collection was amassed during the years 1885-1891. Whether he recovered all the finds personally or acquired some from local farmworkers is not clear, but the notes written on some tools suggest a first-hand knowledge of provenance. The artefacts were marked in pencil (subsequently overwritten in ink), some with more information than others, but usually with the site name and sometimes other descriptions of the locality, often the height OD, and the date found. Most of the Palaeolithic material, including nearly 450 complete and fragmentary bifaces, was recovered from fourteen separate sites located between the 150 and 180 m OD contours, to the east and south-east of the village, about the present headwaters of the river Darent.

Limpsfield lies south of the North Downs escarpment, close to the Surrey/Kent border. The local solid geology is well enough known (Dines *et al.* 1969), but the drift geology of the area is extraordinarily complex, and the relationship of this to the cultural evidence is of potential interest. Scattered across the solid are a number of patches of river gravel and solifluction deposits, the latter marked as 'Head' on geology maps. One deposit lying over the Gault Clay and Folkestone Beds, and composed of Tertiary material from the chalk downs, is located to the east of Limpsfield village, with a series of smaller patches beyond it. The nature of this gravel has caused controversy and is still not entirely understood, but Gosling (1940), who considered the matter in greatest detail, believed that at least two solifluction episodes and a river gravel deposit were present. The last of these can only represent an earlier phase of the Darent, a course that must have been disrupted by the

solifluction deposits.

An important group of fifty-five ochreous artefacts appears to have been stratified in these gravel deposits in a now overgrown pit, east of the golf course on Limpsfield Common. The notes on the flints suggests that they were found in at least two separate levels. The earlier horizon was at the base of the section at around 8 ft (approx. 2.5 m) deep just above a layer of loam. The greater number of artefacts were, however, found, often *in situ*, in a layer of presumably water-sorted shingle some 4-5 ft (1.20-1.50 m) deep.

To the south of the gravels and closer to the Lower Greensand escarpment is a further series of solifluction deposits that are scattered over the Hythe Beds. Prestwich described them as brickearth, noting them as being very stoney, consisting mostly of angular fragments of chert, ragstone and ironstone mixed with flints and Tertiary flint pebbles (Prestwich 1891, 146). They were later recorded as 'Head'. Since the deposit is cut by coombes, it was then considered to have been deposited quite early in the Pleistocene sequence (Dines *et al.* 1940, 220).

A number of sites occupy these 'Head' deposits, with a prominent cluster at Briars Cross (Lockhurst, Tenchleys, Paines Hill, Lombarden), a major site to the east of it at Ridlands, and sporadic finds at Chart closer to the Kent border. The finds from the deposit all bear a characteristic weathered blue-grey/creamy-white surface patina with occasional pink tinge and with frost cracks and pot-lidding. Amongst the bifaces ovate and cordate forms predominate, with some almost disc-shaped, but two possible examples of *bout coupé* form are now considered not to be so (Tyldesley 1987, 203). Twisted, in some cases extremely twisted, profiles, are common. Several flakes with prepared platforms are also present.

Briars Cross itself is sited at NGR TQ 41705210 on later OS maps. The name presumably refers to the junction of Chapel Road/Ridlands Lane with Kent Hatch Road. Immediately to the south-east is a house named Briars Cross. The site, not far from the Greensand escarpment, sits on one of the patches of 'Head'. Forty-two implements were found here, twenty-five of them *in situ* in the 'Brickearth'. Four of these are noted as being found 2 ft (0.60 m) deep, two from 2.5 ft (0.75 m), two from 3 ft (0.90 m), and one from 5 ft (1.50 m) deep, while a further example is noted as 'probably from floor'. Close by is Lombarden. Thirty-four bifaces come from this area. A house bearing this name is situated a little south-west of Briars Cross at NGR TQ 42135182 on the junction of Hythe Beds and 'Head'. Most pieces are labelled simply 'Lombarden' and all appear to have come from the surface.

A little further to the south is Tenchleys, where 18 bifaces were recovered. This site probably lies within the grounds of Tenchleys Park, a large house situated on the Greensand escarpment at NGR TQ 41905165. The underlying geology here is Hythe Beds, though the northernmost tip of Tenchleys Park

clips the 'Head' deposit occupied by Briers Cross and Lombarden.

By far the greatest quantity of material appears to have come from the fields of Ridlands Farm, where 234 artefacts are recorded, including 193 bifaces. Ridlands Farm buildings, now a private house, are at NGR TQ 42255225, just off Ridlands Lane. The former fields of Ridlands Farm extended as far north as the A25 but are now part of Broomlands Farm, which lies to the north of the A25. The former farmhouse and buildings were on Hythe Beds though patches of 'Head' intrude on the high ground to the south-west, south-east and east. To the north there is a band of Sandgate Beds with thin patches of gravel marking terraces of the Darent, and further north a large expanse of Folkestone Beds to the south of the A25, broken by two patches of 'Head'. On one of these, straddling the Westerham Road, thin patches of gravel can be seen. All finds come from the former lands of Ridlands Farm but, though the area is large, the notes on some of the implements provide help in allocating a closer provenance.

The annotations of height OD on implements from the Ridlands Farm site provide a small clue to their original provenance and two possible localities seemed worthy of investigation:

1. the area either side of the A25 at NGR TQ 41655315 which rises to 161 m OD. Here large, rounded flint nodules from two levels north of the A25, strongly suggested remnants of former river terraces, and
2. the area immediately around the former Ridlands farmhouse at NGR TQ 42255225. These areas are now part of Broomlands Farm and as a result of the kind co-operation of the farmer the fields were searched for artefacts in the autumn and winter of 1987-8 and in 1988-9. It seemed possible that at least the non-biface element of the assemblage might be present. In the event little material was recovered and most of it exhibited Mesolithic traits. One complete biface was found lying on the surface, near the summit, and the tip of another further west, close to the overgrown gravel quarry.

In 1988 and 1989 the fields to the north, west and south-east of the former Ridlands farm house were walked. Again no Palaeolithic material was recovered. The apparently ubiquitous material collected by Bell seems to have been recovered after a period of deep ploughing. If this is the case it appears that the fields were picked clean around the turn of the century and that little ploughing has reached that depth since, but it does make it likely that further cultural layers remain in situ awaiting discovery.

The age of the Limpsfield artefacts is unknown, and of course they need not all be contemporary. The bifaces from the Limpsfield Common Gravel Pit clearly originate from two horizons that were separated by a considerable

deposit of material. The tools from the Brickearth, however, bear such a remarkable similarity to each other in terms of technique, style, and general condition that it is tempting to suggest that at the very least they are near-contemporary. If not indicative of actual occupation, they could at least represent successive visits by the same group of hunters. The spatial distribution of sites around the springs and headwaters of the proto-Darent is potentially of great interest, and provides a valuable opportunity of studying the relationship of Palaeolithic sites within a landscape.

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