

Mesolithic and Neolithic Activity on the South Downs at Pyecombe, West Sussex

Chris Butler

Introduction

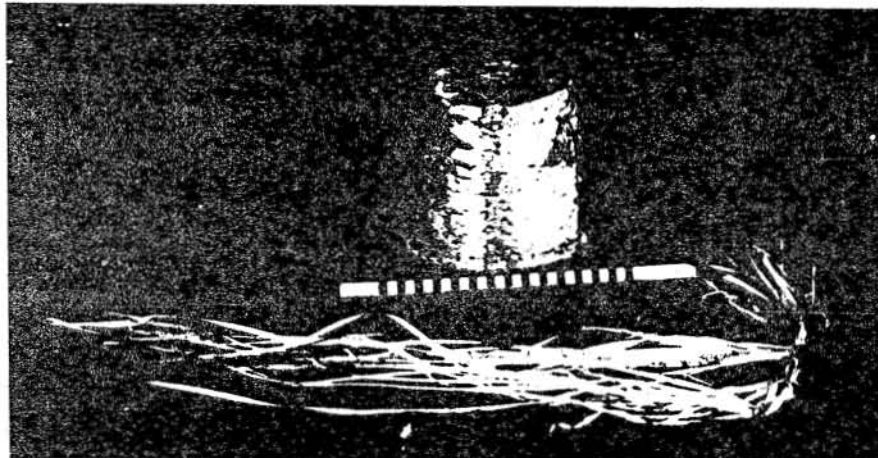
As part of a landscape project, a section of the South Downs was fieldwalked at Pyecombe, West Sussex, just to the north of Brighton (Butler 1988). This area was selected due to the large quantities of flintwork recovered here by flint collectors during the earlier part of this century. Most of the large number of pieces retrieved by these collectors consist of finely-retouched implements, such as arrowheads, scrapers and knives. These implements, dating to the Neolithic and early Bronze Age, suggest that activity of some description took place here in these periods, although the lack of any debitage gives a rather biased picture of its character.

The Survey

In total an area of approximately 1 km² was fieldwalked between 1985 and 1987, using 20 m transects, with material bagged in 20 m collection units. There was a general scatter of worked flint across the upper slopes of the Downs, together with discrete areas where higher densities of material were found. A number of concentrations of fire-fractured flint were also located. The largest concentration of flintwork occurred on the Clay-with-Flints capping on top of the Downs where, together with Neolithic and early Bronze Age pieces, a small concentration of Mesolithic flintwork, including blades, bladelets, blade cores, tranche axe sharpening flakes and scrapers was also found.

A total collection of some twenty-five 20 m squares was then carried out over this concentration, with material collected from the whole surface area of each square. In total some 9,300 pieces of flintwork were collected, of which 1,200 were Mesolithic in date.

The Mesolithic material included geometric and rod microliths, a tranche axe and a Hassocks adze, together with end scrapers, blades, bladelets and cores. A small quantity of the remaining material may date to the early Neolithic, but the majority dates to the later Neolithic and early Bronze Age, with large numbers of hard hammer-struck flakes, flake cores, scrapers, knives, notched pieces and piercers. Later Neolithic arrowheads include transverse, oblique and chisel varieties, with barbed and tanged arrowheads also present, showing that activity continued into the early Bronze Age.



a



b

Plate: The equipment used in replicating the Iceman's dagger (a); and lime bast and a replica birch bark container (b).

In 1990 a series of 1 m square test trenches was excavated across the site to see if *in situ* flintwork and knapping floors could be found. Unfortunately, ploughing since World War II has completely destroyed the site, with all the flintwork coming from the ploughsoil; only a few Mesolithic blades in one of the trenches were possibly *in situ*. However, two trenches excavated just off the Clay-with-Flints outcrop revealed possible evidence for flint quarrying. In these trenches we found that small pits had been dug into the Upper Chalk, and in one of these vertical grooves in the side of the pit showed that an implement had been inserted, presumably to prise out blocks of flint. Unfortunately no dating evidence was found in the pits, but it is hoped that further work may throw some additional light on these features.

During the total collection a small number of axe roughouts had been found. In the course of further survey work on the site, however, flint axe roughouts and preforms were found on the surface in such numbers as to indicate that this was a major Neolithic axe production site. The small number of broken polished axe fragments found may also be the result of this production, but they are more likely to have been broken in use.

Discussion

It is clear that this is a major flintworking site, with activity dating from the later Mesolithic through to at least the early Bronze Age. It is becoming clear that this is just one of a number of similar sites occupying Clay-with-Flints outcrops in this area. One such site at Red Hill, some 3 km to the south, has recently been investigated as part of the Brighton Bypass project (Butler and Holgate in prep.). At Red Hill it was possible to construct an hypothesis of this long period activity, based on the material found, and a similar sequence is likely for Pyecombe.

Mesolithic activity on the South Downs was concentrated on the outcrops of Clay-with-Flints (Jacobi 1978, 15). One of the attractions of the Clay-with-Flints was the availability of good quality flint, which was being extracted during the later Mesolithic and manufactured into a variety of implements, including microliths and tranchet axes. Activity continued through the earlier Neolithic, consistent with a seasonal exploitation of the Clay-with-Flints, as in the preceding period. During the later Neolithic there was a change from seasonal to more permanent occupation. There is a vast increase in the amount of debitage, together with an increase in the variety and number of implements, such as scrapers, piercers and notched pieces. These suggest a variety of domestic or manufacturing activities. In addition to the Clay-with-Flints, the chalk was now also being exploited for flint to manufacture axes, which may have been a major activity on the site during the later Neolithic. Quarrying and possibly even mining may have been taking

place at Pyecombe in order to obtain suitable flint for axe production. It has been suggested that seams of high quality flint exist in this area (Holgate 1991, 9), although until now there has been no evidence that they were being exploited in the Neolithic. Activity continued into the early Bronze Age, as evidenced by both the flintwork and the Beaker bowl barrow excavated in 1988 (Butler 1991). It is also likely that some of the hard hammer-struck debitage and cruder implements may date from the later Bronze Age.

The landscape project at Pyecombe is now in its final stages, and a full report will be published in due course.

Acknowledgements

The farmer, Mr Ian Currie, and the present landowners, the National Trust, must be thanked for allowing access to the site. Robin Holgate provided much advice and support throughout the project, and members of the Mid Sussex Field Archaeological Team, especially Laurie Gaston and John Funnell, helped with the fieldwalking and excavation.

References

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