

Bifaces of Lower Palaeolithic type from Scotland

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In a previous issue of *Lithics*, Mithen *et al.* (1992) gave the misleading impression that bifaces of ostensibly Lower Palaeolithic type are generally absent from Britain anywhere north of Pontnewydd Cave in North Wales, and that they are completely absent from Scotland, other than the example in the Islay Museum which formed the subject of their note. The present contribution seeks to correct this impression, with particular reference to Scotland.

On the first count, the existence of such finds, albeit sporadic and isolated, from the northern counties of England is a matter of long-established record. A biface from Huntow, near Bridlington (Roe 1968, 313), was already referred to by Evans (1897, 581) in his consideration of the problem of the general paucity of Palaeolithic implements in northern Britain. This problem has often been discussed since the 19th century; more recent instances include Posnansky (1963), Wymer and Straw (1977), and, probably most appositely, Wymer (1988), with a distribution map and gazetteer of the finds from northern England. Omitted even from Wymer's list is what may be the most northerly English example, the biface from Caldbeck Fells, Cumbria (Richardson 1980, plate I,C) in Tullie House Museum, Carlisle.

This is not to suggest that any of these northern English finds necessarily demonstrates Palaeolithic occupation of the region. The finds are typologically Lower Palaeolithic and in most cases are genuine antiquities, but their ambiguous or unrecorded contexts and other circumstantial considerations militate against their being accepted as local indicators of Palaeolithic presence.

As for Scotland, the discovery of apparently genuine Lower Palaeolithic-type bifaces also goes back to the end of the 19th century, when an example described as similar to one illustrated by Evans (1897, fig.449) was said to have been found in Bloody Moss, Sorbie, Wigtownshire (approx. NGR NX 420440). This large implement (L.7.25" x B.4" x Th.2" = 184 x 102 x 51 mm) of black flint was seen and authenticated by Evans himself, but the published account leaves the confused details of provenance unresolved (Anon. 1902, 632-3). The current whereabouts of this biface is unknown (note 1).

An early find which is in the National Museums of Scotland collections (cat.no. NMS: AA 133) is a biface from Upperbrough, Harray, mainland Orkney, presented in 1913 (Fig 1A). This implement, previously only briefly mentioned and illustrated photographically (Anon. 1914, fig.1; Callander

1931, figs.8-9), is of flint, with mottled dark ochreous grey staining (L.95 x B.54 x Th.24 mm; weight 111 g). It has peripheral flaking on the cortical dorsal surface and comprehensive retouch across the ventral face. A slight asymmetry is enhanced by the deep flake removal which creates the current tip, but this may be a manufacturing error or early damage.

The problem with assessing the Harray find is that the typological character is not sufficiently diagnostic to indicate that it is unequivocally of Lower Palaeolithic type. Large, bifacial, flint arrowhead, knife and other forms of later prehistoric type do occasionally occur in Orkney (e.g. Callander 1931, fig.10), and although the discolouration and precise form of this piece is unusual, a dogmatic statement of very early status would be difficult to sustain. The only information on the provenance of this biface is that it was "picked up ... on the surface of the ground, in gravel, on the Common to the W of the township of Upperbrough, Harray, at about half a mile distant from the Loch of Harray, and some 5 miles inland from the sea" (Anon. 1914; approx. NGR NY 310180).

Another intriguing biface (Fig 1B) is in the collection of Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery (cat.no. KIRMG: 1960:7). It is of grey flint, with chatter-marked and waterworn pebble cortex on the dorsal surface and indications on the ventral face that this was in origin a thermal flake. The dimensions are: L.86 x B.62 x Th.28 mm; weight 158 g. The condition is slightly rolled, with some more recent edge damage truncating the rolled areas. The tip has some damage and abrasion, but since it is partly formed by a hinge fracture, which appears original, it can never have been symmetrically sharp. There is an old break at the base, but this may have been part of the original tool design.

Typologically, the Kirkcaldy implement is difficult to categorize as anything other than a Lower Palaeolithic biface, although, like the Orkney piece, it is not a "classic" form and must remain somewhat ambiguous. It was donated to the Museum and Art Gallery in 1960 by Sir John Gilmour (ex Montraive Hall collection) and has the information that it was found at Lundin Links, near the standing stones (approximate NGR NO 404027). This provenance appears to have been written on the implement after it came to the museum, but there is no documentation to indicate the source of the information. The ventral face has the remains of a large paper label; it is possible this previously gave the provenance and was removed in 1960. Lundin Links are on the Fife coast, just W of Lower Largo, and the standing stones are about 500 metres inland.

Most recently, in 1991, the National Museums of Scotland acquired by donation a find from Newmore, near Muir of Ord, at the W end of the Black Isle, Ross and Cromarty (NGR NH 544523). This implement (Fig 2; cat.no. NMS: AB 3035) is the major part of a flint biface which has lost its tip in antiquity. The ventral face is stained a fairly uniform ochreous brown; the cortical dorsal face is less evenly stained with some surfaces darkish grey.

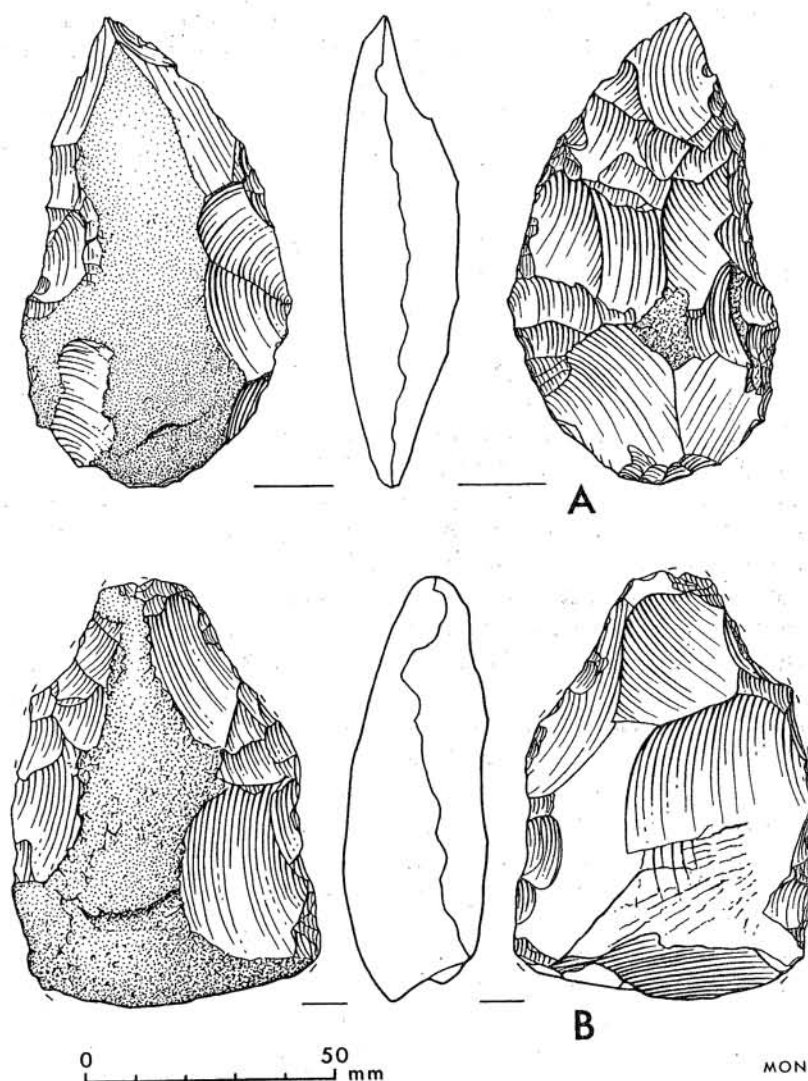


Figure 1: A: Flint biface from Upperbrough, Harray, Orkney (NMS: AA 133); B: Flint biface from Lundin Links, Fife (KIRMG: 1960:7).

Some more recent edge chips (left open in the drawing) reveal a medium grey-coloured interior. The present dimensions are: L. 110 x B. 79 x Th. 42 mm; weight 370 g. There is some rolling of the flake-scar ridges and everything about this implement recalls a conventional Lower Palaeolithic biface.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that the context of this Black Isle biface is so unsatisfactory. It was found in 1990 at the door of a derelict croft house, and although the finder was convinced it had been ploughed up by the late crofter, the association with the locality is hardly precise. Given the general character of this implement, a southern British or even northern French origin would seem more probable.

In sum, none of the Scottish finds listed here, and including the Islay Museum palaeolith (see Harding, this volume), can be accepted as *in situ* occurrences of Lower Palaeolithic bifaces. The implements are either of imprecise typology or they are apparently genuine Lower Palaeolithic artefacts, the current provenances of which can be more readily explained by confused records or as modern collectors' losses.

As many previous writers have maintained, there is no *prima facie* reason why all or part of Scotland should not have been inhabited during the various climatically favourable phases of the Pleistocene. There are equally many reasons why any archaeological evidence from such habitation might have been destroyed or be exceptionally hard to find, though the persistence with which such evidence has eluded archaeologists is surely significant.

For the moment, the position remains as stated by Roe (1981, 134-5); there are still no definite Lower Palaeolithic finds from Scotland. Unless and until there are, the conclusion can only be that there was no early human presence, or at best that any presence was so ephemeral that no trace remains, which effectively amounts to the same thing archaeologically. This conclusion was a commonplace already eloquently expressed some 80 years ago: "We cannot say that the Palaeolithic or early stone-age man was ever in existence in our country, as we find no remains to justify such an assertion" (Stout 1912, 97). It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that such a remarkable stasis in archaeological research does reflect the reality of Lower Palaeolithic absence.

It is hoped that this note will bring to light other instances of Lower Palaeolithic-type implements in Scottish museum collections, with or without Scottish provenances. The detailed recording of these may allow some of the objects to be reunited with relevant documentation and will certainly help prevent further confusion in the future (note 2).

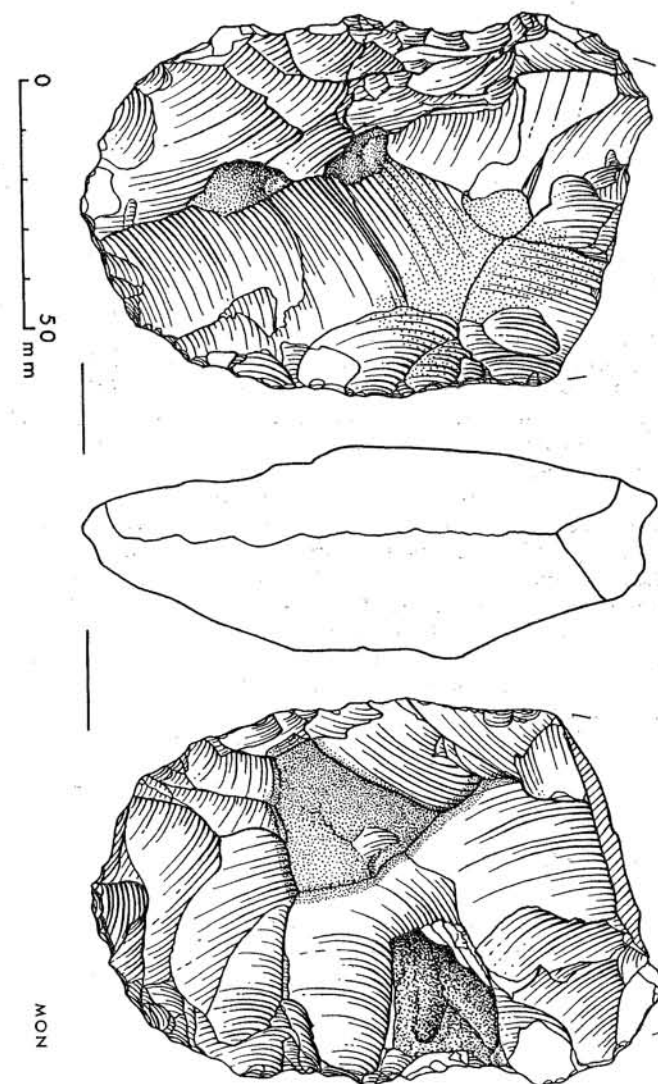


Figure 2: Biface from Newmore, Ross and Cromarty (NMS AB 3035).

Notes:

1. The publication of the Bloody Moss biface implies that it was purchased for the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, and it was indeed listed in the contemporary register as purchased in 1902. Exceptionally, however, and perhaps because of doubts about its status, it was never given a registration number, and its fate since 1902 cannot be ascertained.

2. As an instance of confused provenance, the case of the biface published by Wickham-Jones (1994, 42) as probably from Hillhead in Glasgow is salutary. This biface, now in Inverness Museum & Art Gallery (cat.no. INVMG: 00/67), is the major part of a typical Lower Palaeolithic flint biface with mottled ochreous grey-brown staining and is in a rolled condition. The distal tip of the biface is broken off. (N.b. the illustration in Wickham-Jones 1994, fig.32:2 (not 32:1 - the caption is transposed) shows the biface upside down and with the distal break incorrectly appearing to be retouched.)

There are no records of how or when this implement came into the Inverness collection, but it is marked in black ink with the label: "HILL HEAD, GLASGOW, 1885". There are the traces of a former paper label, so perhaps all or part of this information was transcribed at some stage. Apart from the inherent unlikelihood of such a find from this date in Glasgow not having been recorded at the time, there would have been many opportunities for the location to become associated with Scotland's best-known "Hillhead", the one in Glasgow, if no other locational information was available.

Hillhead is of course a very common placename at local farm or hamlet level, and there are numerous occurrences in many parts of Scotland. However, it is noteworthy that the writing on the object actually has HILL HEAD as two words, and this brings to mind the fact that there is a Hill Head in Hampshire (SU 540023), well-known as the findspot of hundreds of Lower Palaeolithic bifaces, now widely dispersed in museum collections (Roe 1968, 99). The Hill Head finds were already recognized by 1885 (see the discussion in Evans 1897, 625) and many entered the Sturge Collection, including examples in a rolled condition with deeply ochreous colouration like the Inverness specimen (Smith 1931, 75-78).

It is hard to escape the conclusion that this is a biface from Hill Head, Hampshire, which at some stage has acquired the association with Glasgow by default of any associated documentation other than the incorrectly read placename.

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