

New Lower Palaeolithic Finds in Norfolk

R J Macrae

Kirby cottage, Low Street, Hardingham, Norfolk, NR9 4EL

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the rescue of around 350 Lower Palaeolithic artefacts from two sand and gravel quarries in Norfolk while commercial extraction was taking place. At neither site was orthodox controlled archaeological excavation possible, neither labour nor finance being available. 'Rescue' meant recovery of as many handaxes and flakes as possible by raking over gigantic heaps of reject stones. This entailed 50 trips to and from my home, putting over 2,000 miles on the speedo clock, and enjoying every minute of it. This was between midsummer 1996 to the autumn of 1999.

The resultant finds were saved from oblivion at the two pits concerned, Feltwell and South Acre (Fig. 1) where the big reject heaps were diminished from time to time by the demands of the roadstone crusher; or by forty-ton trucks taking away load after load for farm roadways or to line reservoirs. However, the heaps built up again and at times held several thousand tons of reject stones, sometimes well-washed, sometimes not. Not for me to move mountains, but in 35 years of hand-axe hunting I have learned not to be intimidated!

THE VANISHING GRAVEL PITS

Leaving behind my beloved Thames Valley (my exploits there have been adequately published in *Lithics* and elsewhere) I found new challenges in East Anglia. The region was not entirely new to me as I sometimes stayed with John and Mollie Wymer and investigated various gravel pits all of which are now worked-out and restored to fields or lakes. Nearly all the valuable river-terrace deposits had gone altogether by the early nineties. The 30 or so remaining pits in Norfolk now extract glacial sand and gravel much too old to carry evidence of former human presence, and Devensian floodplains too are rapidly vanishing. South Acre closed at the end of 1997. The Feltwell pit complex is now largely an enormous (but well-managed) refuse dump, but adjacent areas will provide enough gravel for some years yet. New workings at Lynford by the river Wissey are due to start soon, and should be archaeologically valuable.

Recovering palaeoliths is far from being an end in itself. Always there is a chance of something new turning up – something to add to deposits in a given area. I have always been fortunate in having geologist friends to turn to for advice when anything unusual

comes my way, and occasionally some of these Quaternary experts were very welcome when they briefly joined me during dusty, muddy and quite strenuous activities at Feltwell and South Acre – when any normal octogenarian ought to be within easy reach of his armchair. Also it has been very heartening to see the Palaeolithic of East Anglia being kept very much alive principally by the British Museum excavations at Barnham and Elveden just over the Suffolk border, now completed after ten years. The skill and dedication put into these classic sites I have admiringly (and perhaps enviously) observed frequently as a privileged visitor. These digs have been fine examples of co-operation between archaeologists and Quaternary scientists. Multi-disciplinary teams are nowadays the norm, and geology and its allied sciences come together with prehistory. A primary catalyst in all this has been John Wymer, exemplified in the English Rivers Palaeolithic Survey.

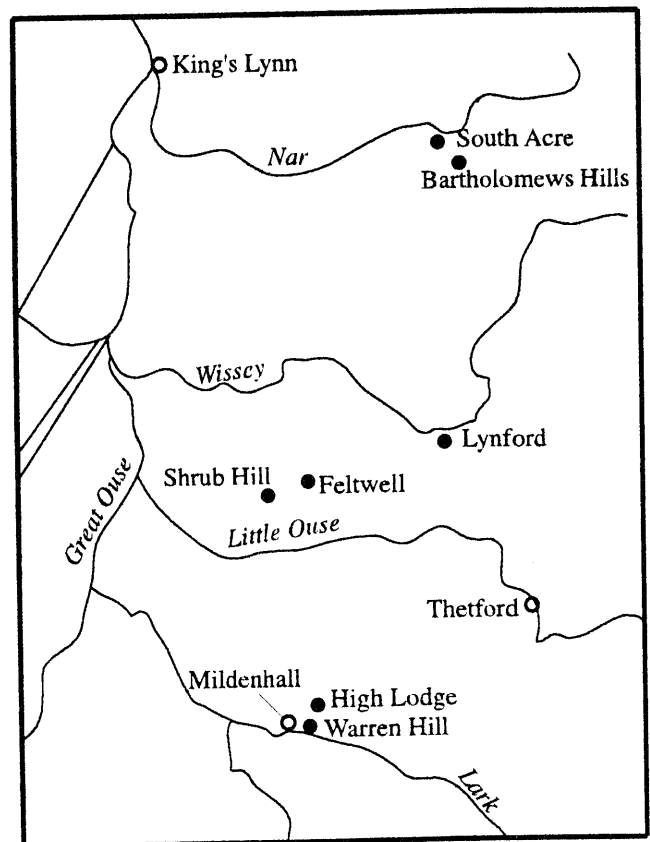


Fig. 1. Location of sites

THE FELTWELL FINDS

Frimstone's Pits at (TL739924A) although working for several decades, are not to be confused with the famous Shrub Hill site, also in the parish of Feltwell but nearly two kilometers away on the Fen edge. From the mid 19th century Shrub Hill yielded 239 handaxes, and its story is recorded in that invaluable handbook *Palaeolithic Sites of East Anglia* (Wymer 1985). The Shrub Hill pits have long been closed and waterfilled. I had been visiting the Frimstone reject heap for a year or more when I was told about the handaxes collected there over the past 12 years or so by Eric Secker and his sons Robbie and John, who live in Feltwell village. I went along to see them, and was astonished when they produced 45 handaxes! The Seckers welcomed me as a fellow enthusiast, showed me their finds and the careful records they keep, and they deserve special commendation because they report all their finds to the Norfolk County Museum and periodically send them to Peter Robins there to be recorded and each one drawn very competently. The majority are ovates of different sizes and are skillfully fashioned, and most of them are lightly or moderately rolled. Positively breathtaking, however, are seven pointed handaxes, the smallest in length being 100 mm and the longest 160 mm. They belong to a distinct group, all are sharp, and two of them are mint-fresh with superb edge retouch. Their form is plano-convex with the best of the Wolvercote Channel specimens, and, but for colour, be indistinguishable. The Seckers tell me they were found on the heap within a short period, and how they escaped damage ancient or modern seems miraculous. They are handaxes to become lyrical about!

THE QUARTZITE ELEMENT

When I migrated to Norfolk I was aware that only one quartzite handaxe had ever been found in that County. That was the one from Stibbard, thought to have originated in the Midlands, and identified by Wymer. I have a special love for non-flint palaeoliths (MacRae and Moloney 1988) and have been able to add nine quartzite artefacts to the total, all from Feltwell. They include one handaxe, and the rest are flakes, clearly defined, of sizes between 40 mm and 80 mm, and there is also a pebble-chopper. The gem of the little assemblage is a most unusual quartzite core, from which four deep removals have been made from a round Bunter cobble which must have been valued for some purpose, because flint is abundant over most of East Anglia. Just over the border into Suffolk, at Warren Hill where 2000 flint handaxes were once found, only five handaxes in material other

than flint, are recorded. Now at Feltwell where the lithological counts reveal more than 30% quartzite brought from the distant Midlands probably by way of the Bytham river (of which more later) it is not surprising that the occasional quartzite tool or flake should turn up. At the South Acre pit I could find no trace of quartzite, either pebbles or artefacts.

THE BURIED RIVER

The geology and geomorphology of Norfolk has been, and still is, intensively studied by Quaternary experts, including those attached to the British Geological Survey, and the resultant literature is quite considerable. Put very briefly, one of the most important features, an ancient and now completely buried river, has come to be called Bytham River. From its origin in the Midlands it ran eastwards flowing across Norfolk into the North Sea, parallel but probably apart from the pre-Anglian River Thames. The Anglian Ice of O.I Stage 12 wiped out the Bytham River – totally obliterated it – but its sands and gravels have been identified lithologically at places familiar to archaeologists in East Anglia as at Feltwell, Lakenheath, High Lodge and Warren Hill. While there is not complete agreement as to the river's history beginning more than half a million years ago, its course has been traced with fair accuracy from as far as Waverley Wood near Coventry to the East Anglian sites above. Its presumed course appears to have been mapped by the agency of 40 boreholes and exposures. The river deposits, below Anglian till, are therefore pre-Anglian, probably Cromerian. Lower Palaeolithic artefacts abound in many (not all) of the places where these gravels have been located, including Feltwell.

This does not mean that all the Feltwell artefacts are of one age or belong to one human or archaic group. Along the course of the river as Wymer has pointed out (in *English Rivers*) there might have been considerable activity, and palaeoliths produced during the interglacial periods could well have been washed off land surfaces or river banks and caught up in the gravels which accumulated during subsequent cold stages. That cannot be proved, and of course the Feltwell artefacts are derived, as are the handaxes from Warren Hill, the most prolific site associated with the Bytham River, but the extent of their travel can only be conjectured. However, on the weight of the evidence to date it does seem, to quote Wymer "... the sites with handaxes within gravels of the Bytham River are probably of the same age as those from the famous site at Boxgrove in Sussex". In brief, early Anglian or late Cromerian, around 480,000 bp – a good deal earlier than used to be thought.

Although the gravels at Feltwell contain a very

high proportion of quartzite pebbles and cobbles which can be traced back to the Midlands, it does not mean that all the contents of the reject heap are attributable to the Bytham River. Other, and later depositions are possible, and this may be clarified when the results of sampling from various parts of the pit itself are published, including a report on the very section cut in the summer of 1999 by Professor Jim Rose, David Bridgeland, Simon Lewis and John Wymer, when their very vigorous hand-digging revealed deposits a little above the basic chalk which unmistakably belonged to the long-lost river or one of its arms or tributaries.

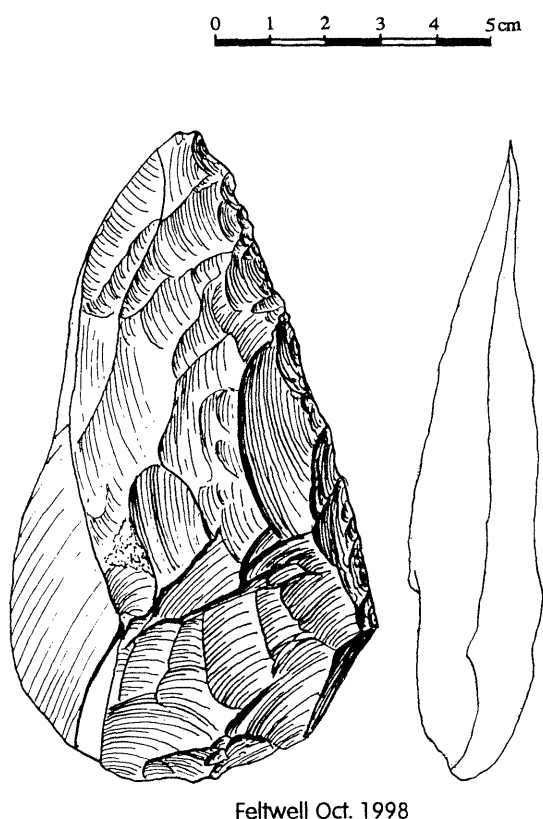


Fig. 2. Handaxe from Feltwell (drawn by Terry Hardacre)

GOOD DAYS AND BLANK DAYS

At Feltwell the results of search have on the whole been satisfying, though on most of the days spent there handaxes just didn't come my way. I recovered 14 handaxes, some only lightly-rolled, others more heavily abraded (Fig. 2). Six of these are small neat ovates uncannily similar to the Warren Hill ovates except for the colour staining. A heavy 14cm long pointed handaxe, cleverly flaked, stands notably among the rest of the everyday Acheulian toolkit. The

real gem of this assemblage was snapped up by John Lord (who lives not far away) when he joined me one morning. Exposed by amazing chance on top of the big heap his find was a white ovate 9cm x 8cm in perfect condition and as symmetrical as any I have seen. Sometimes visitors have all the luck! Terry Hardacre, who joins me from time to time from Oxfordshire (where he diligently and very successfully adds to the Lower Palaeolithic of the Upper Thames) has found two more pointed handaxes to swell the Feltwell total. Eventually I built up a most interesting collection of flint core tools, varying in size from 4cm to 11cm; there are 18 in all. In addition there are 94 flint flakes most of them stone-struck and unusually thick. Finishing flakes are very few. Chopper-cores of familiar Clactonian type are not present but there are half a dozen pieces with crude bifacial working as though scrapers or small handaxes were intended then abandoned. The cores and flakes are due for further study.

One core (Fig. 3) led me at first to become excited about the possibility of proto-Levallois appearing in these gravels. It is a struck core, 13cm across its near-circular face, with a plain platform and a whitish-blue patination that the old collectors used to call 'porcellaneous'. The missing flake must have been quite large. But on closer look it had to be decided that there is just not enough evidence of intentional core preparation of this kind which could firmly place it as Levallois technique, which in any case is held not to have appeared in Britain before Ol Stage 8. For the time being I have retained it as the Feltwell material.

SOUTH ACRE

South Acre lies in the valley of the River Nar, now a modest chalk stream widening only as it joins the Great Ouse below King's Lynn. Fluvial agencies since the advance of the Anglian ice-sheet have created a broad valley, the formation of which and the nature of the deposits therein having gained considerable attention from the geologists. Dating remains controversial, and the Lower Palaeolithic remains are in general moderately but not severely rolled. They may possibly belong to Ol Stage 8, but their relation to the Nar Valley Beds downstream has not yet been established, and the geologists must come to closer agreement before any attempt to give an age to the artefacts is made.

The pits at South Acre have been worked off and on for 70 years, and abandoned and waterfilled pits extend down the valley for a considerable distance down the valley. Final closure was at the end of the summer of 1997, but I had managed to put in, starting in the summer of 1996, a total of 26 visits. The reject

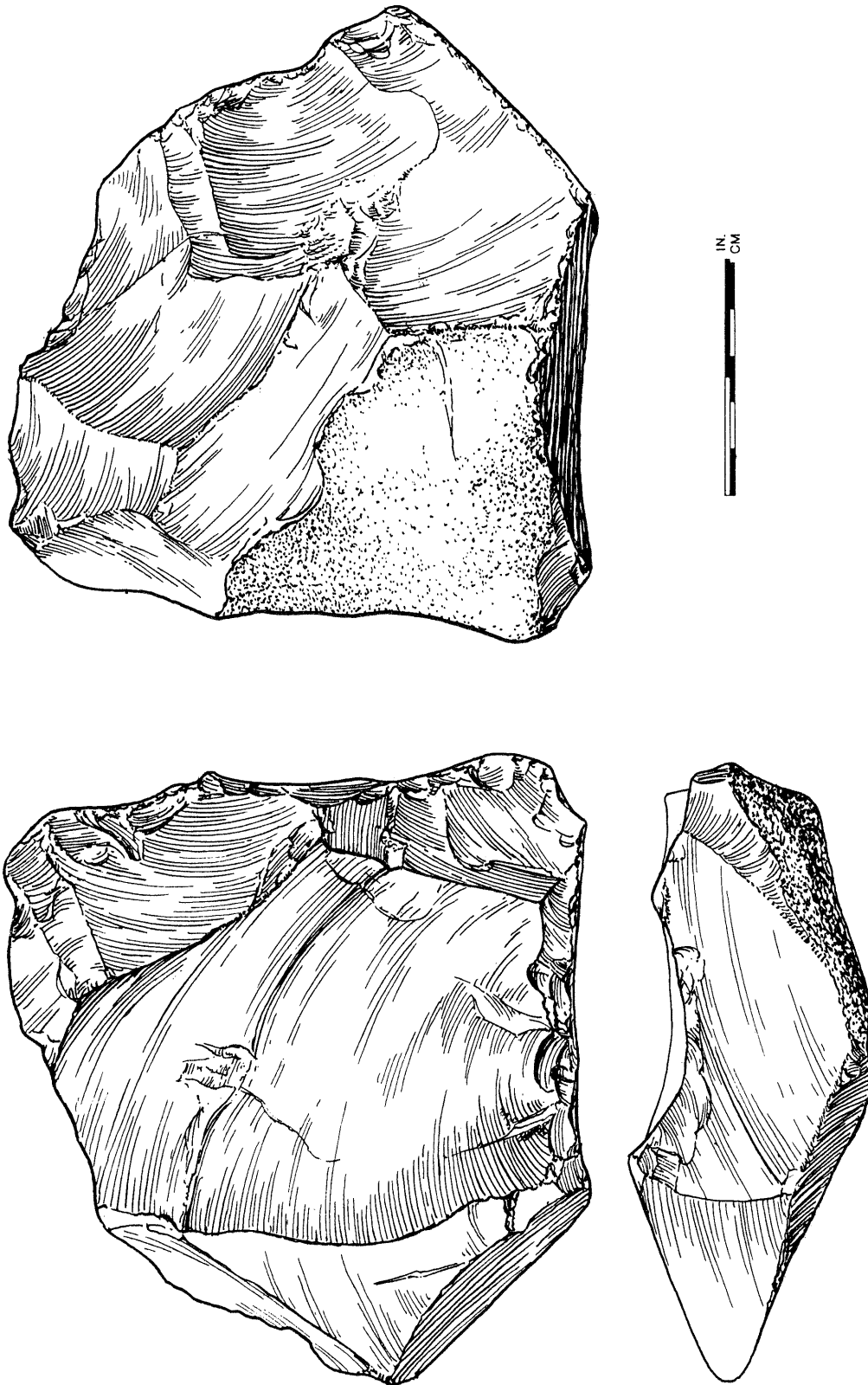


Fig. 3. Core from Feltwell (drawn by John Wymer)

heap was gigantic, and I had it all to myself, although friends were very welcome on their occasional visits. Managers and workmen of Middleton's Aggregates Ltd were interested and helpful, even to the extent sometimes of mechanically spreading out loads of rejects taken from the adjacent washing-plant outfall to make the search easier. At times I had to lament the removal of hundreds of tons of flints from the heap, taken away for farm roads and to line reservoirs; and on two occasions the roadstone crushing machinery came in, hideously noisy and dusty, and sadly reduced what had become a personal goldmine.

However, I rescued around 250 artefacts, listed below. The pits with which these notes are concerned were once known as Thorpe's Gravel Pits, and lay a kilometre away from a formerly famous pit called Bartholomew's Hills, close to the modern A1065 road from Swaffham to Fakenham. This pit was frequented in the 1930s by J.E.Sainty, whose finds included 31 handaxes, 3 Levallois cores, 9 Levallois flakes, and almost 200 other flakes, all white patinated. Wymer, in his *Palaeolithic Sites of East Anglia* describes these and illustrates some of these, and says 'this is the richest site of its nature in the whole of East Anglia'. It was the Levallois or proto-Levallois content that led him to say so. There has been confusion in the past between Thorpe's pit and the Bartholomew's pit, as all finds seem to be marked 'South Acre'. The matter is now resolved by the appropriate entries in the English Rivers survey. Bartholomew's Hills is now filled with mature trees, but it should stand high on the list for future controlled re-excavation. The map reference is given as TF816132.

EVIDENCE OF LEVALLOIS TECHNIQUE

Middleton's (or Thorpe's) pits are, or were located at TF790150 to 806150. In the past, 12 handaxes are reported to have come from there, plus 12 flakes. As long ago as 1968 during my first visit to East Anglia I looked at this pit and was rewarded with a pointed handaxe 18cm x 9cm, of thin section, quite sharp, flaked by a master craftsman. I still treasure this as one of the finest handaxes I have ever handled.

Artefacts I recently recovered from South Acre amount to:

- 15 handaxes, various types and sizes
- 2 heavy handaxes butts
- 2 handaxe roughouts
- 4 struck Levallois cores
- 1 unstruck Levallois core
- 1 Levallois flake
- 3 Acheulian cores
- 230 Acheulian flakes

No artefacts of quartzite or other non-flint material were found, nor were any faunal remains. Fluvial and soliflucted forces have left their mark upon the artefacts, but they show no sign of thermal damage – which is surprising, as many of the large flint clasts in the heap are frost-cracked – incidentally much to the disappointment of John Lord who forever hunts for big unfrosted chunks 'with a lovely ringing sound to them' from which he makes his wonderful replicas.

A notable feature of these South Acre flakes is their unusual size. Many are massive, stone-struck with prominent bulbs, and they measure up to 15cm in length. Few of the others are less than 6cm long. The impression is left that the handaxe-makers selected the largest and soundest nodules they could find and were quite prepared to strike off nine-tenths of the core before even trimming the tool they had in mind. A prodigal use of resources, but in the apparent absence of quartzite cobbles or any other hard-rock erratics, what did they use for hammerstones? Flint against flint causes a lot of problems, as modern experimenters know. At South Acre it seems probable that some of the flakes were themselves used as tools, though this is difficult to confirm, as all show some damage to the edges by periglacial or fluvial movement. That makes it difficult to identify any possible trimming to produce choppers or scrapers. Moreover, most flakes have been damaged in their passage through the washing and grading plant. Despite vigilance during search, small finishing flakes were rarely found among the innumerable chips and spalls broken off by the mechanised processes between the pit and the reject heap. Looking at the complete assemblage of flakes, it is seen that there is no Clactonian stamp to them; there are no chopper-cores at all, and it would be safe to assume transient occupation of the valley by one or more Acheulian groups.

The handaxes from South Acre are very much a mixed bag, perhaps best described as one of each style from the orthodox Acheulian catalogue. Pointed sorts dominate, but there are a couple of thick and rather crude ovates. Sizes vary between 11cm and 16cm, and all but one suggests utility rather than elegance. They are stained in various shades of brown or yellow with occasional greyish blue, as indeed are all the flakes.

As with so many sites in East Anglia, South Acre has now gone, without ever having attracted the kind of thorough archaeological assessment and excavation that it deserved but for which time and funding were necessary. It is no use lamenting this, so we must be content with 250 pieces of flint, won with a good deal of hard but enjoyable labour, but lacking exact provenance and perhaps only providing food for

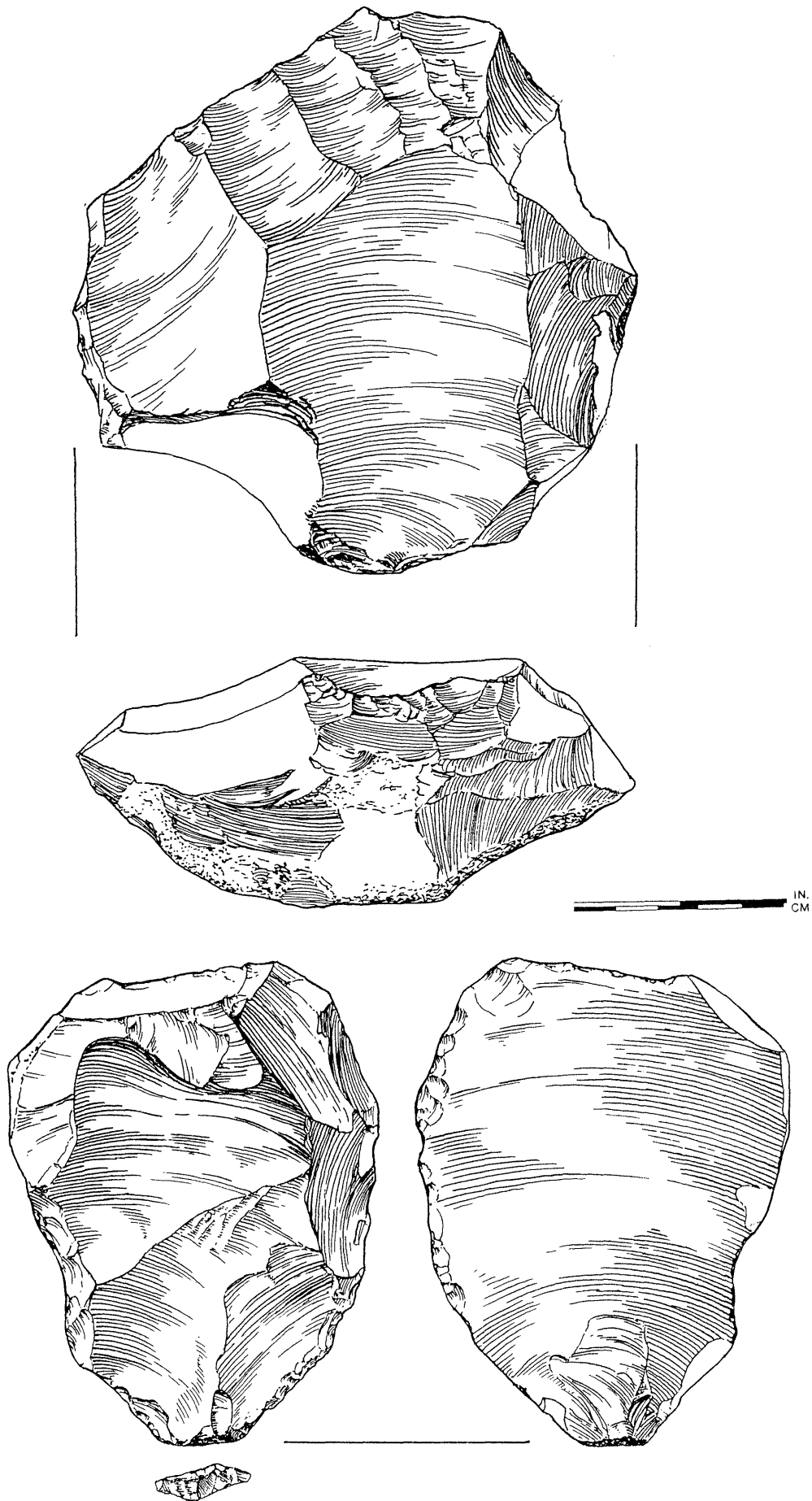


Fig. 4. Levallois core and flake from South Acre

speculation. What was exciting, and a valuable contribution, I am told, to the prehistory of the Nar valley, were the Levallois cores. Apart from the one illustrated (Fig. 4) two of the cores were interesting because the flakes struck from them must have been disappointingly small, judging by the flake scars. The cores themselves fail to show advanced preparatory skill, and it may be that the Levallois technique was in its infancy in East Anglia.

I have deposited seven handaxes and 200 flakes from South Acre in the Norfolk County Museum (the Castle Museum in Norwich) in the care of Peter Robins. The rest are retained, with the Levallois pieces, for further study.

Acknowledgements

Although opinions and speculations are my own, I am very indebted to John Wymer for having perused this paper, and for his wise suggestions and emendations, as well as for his splendid drawings of the best Levallois core and flake from South Acre, and the unusual core from Feltwell. Terry Hardacre found, and has drawn, the pointed handaxe from Feltwell and he also made the simplified map of the region.

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