

RAINBOW BAR: SOME OBSERVATIONS AND THOUGHTS

Brian Hack

INTRODUCTION

Rainbow Bar is the name given to a small gravel spit that occurs adjacent to the tiny harbour at Hill Head, Hampshire. The harbour is situated at the mouth of the River Meon, where tidal and river flow are controlled by sluice gates. On the landward side of these sluice gates there is a large area of wetland known as the Titchfield Haven Nature Reserve, an area popular with ornithologists. The name Rainbow Bar would appear to have derived from the distinctly curved contour of the gravel spit. This is best appreciated from aerial photographs of the feature taken during a low-water tidal state.

At low-water during Spring tidal conditions an area of some 0.8 hectare of gravel is exposed. This area of gravel stands slightly raised above the surrounding large areas of sand and silt. Access onto the Bar can be gained approximately four hours after high-water, and remains open for some four to five hours thereafter.

More than 50 years ago Chris Draper, while examining the Bar at low-water, made the chance discovery of large quantities of archaic looking flint tools scattered over its surface. Draper tried to gain a wider acceptance for the flint artefacts he recovered, which he believed were mostly Lower Palaeolithic. He published a short note on his discovery which he hoped would invoke a general interest in this interesting site (Draper 1951).

This short contribution describes the outcomes of recent monitoring work at Rainbow Bar (Hack 1999) and offers an extensive selection of illustrations by which the artefactual nature and affinities of the material from the site may be judged. In October 2000 a large part of this collection was donated to the Department of Archaeology at the University of Southampton. A small exhibit was previously presented at

the LSS meeting Palaeolithic Archaeology of the Ancient Solent River, at the University of Southampton, January 2000.

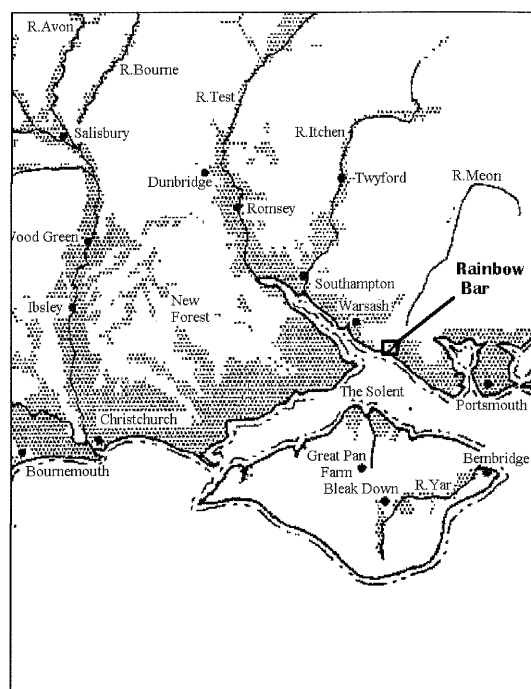


Figure 1: Map of Solent showing Location of Rainbow Bar

OBSERVATIONS ON RAINBOW BAR AND ADJACENT AREAS

Despite now being known for 50 years, the wider interest in the site that Draper wished for has not been forthcoming. There seem to be several key reasons why this is the case. First, access to the site is restricted; the Bar becomes completely submerged during high tide. The second is the fact that the flints have all been retrieved from a modern littoral situation and therefore lack detailed contextual informa-

tion. Finally, the collection from the site does not appear to form a single discrete assemblage, but contains finds from a wide range of archaeological periods and cultures, making comparison with other British assemblages difficult.

For many years handaxes have been found to occur in the tidal zone between Warsash and Brown-down. These handaxes are invariably made from good quality flint and are believed to have derived from either within the body of the low gravel cliffs that are exposed in this area or to have been carried by tidal or fluvial processes from elsewhere in what now remains of the ancient Solent River system. It is also not an infrequent occurrence for handaxes to be dredged up by the crews of small boats employed in the local Solent shellfish industry. These handaxes are different from the majority of the artefacts recovered at Rainbow Bar; although handaxes are present at the latter site.

Rainbow Bar has been studied intensively over a continuous period amounting to some four and three-quarter years. Many thousands of artefacts have thus far been recovered. The flint tools are eroding from within the small body of gravel exposed here as a result of storm and tidal action. They seem mostly to have been manufactured on irregular flint cobbles and pebbles which make up the body of the bar. Handaxes, flakes, cores and Levallois products have all been recovered from the Bar but many other pieces defy standard typological classification.

The assemblage is dominated by large-sized, non-symmetrically designed items. In many cases, large irregular cobbles have been selected and subjected to a minimum of flaking that has provided a crude scraping or chopping edge. Invariably the edge so produced is not straight, but more often curved or wavy. Many of these artefacts have been formed on naturally broken or deliberately split cobbles. Limited flaking has then been carried out to produce the crude edge; this is generally unifacial working using the broken or split flat surface at a striking platform. Some may be geofacts resulting from modern storm battering, but most are undoubtedly genuine artefacts.

Indeed, artefacts are becoming difficult to find at Rainbow Bar, which would not be expected if they were repeatedly being formed under modern marine conditions. Moreover, it is relevant to record here

that Draper did not find further evidence of similar archaic flint tools anywhere else along this area of the Solent coastline. This observation has been endorsed by sustained searching by the present writer. It seems most likely that the Bar has been depleted of artefacts by the result of steady collection of ancient pieces eroded out of the body of the localised gravel deposit. In general the artefacts are considerably rolled and rounded; in many cases the ridges have become so degraded that they in areas take on a chalk like state, again testifying to considerable antiquity.

The nature of most of the artefacts from the Bar has lead to them being compared with the Clactonian industry from Clacton-on-Sea, many of which were also recovered from deposits exposed on the modern foreshore (Roe 1981). It is possible that we are dealing with a site whose past situation usually warranted only brief visits and the most basic of flint working to satisfy an immediate requirement. Alternatively, the artefacts may be testament to limited technical or mental abilities of the artisans. However, some handaxes are also present in the collection from the Bar: are these truly associated with the other material?

Also present in the Rainbow Bar collection are some artefacts that are recognisably fresher and belong typologically to later periods of the Stone Age. Why a mixture of what would appear to be artefacts from widely separate archaeological periods occurs here needs to be addressed from the point of view of site formation. One suggestion is that human utilisation of Rainbow Bar continued into later periods, albeit at times when material contemporary with and older than the original aggradation of the gravel were already being eroded out.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Whatever interpretation is eventually afforded to these intriguing artefacts will inevitably depend on geological research into the history of the deposit. Whether the Bar represents the remnant of a terrace or buried channel or the River Meon, or indeed a bank of terrace related to a more ancient course taken by the Solent River in response to then prevailing environmental conditions, is a formidable problem that will hopefully one day be resolved. Further multidisciplinary investigation at this potentially important site may shed some light on a 'perhaps too long ignored' enigma

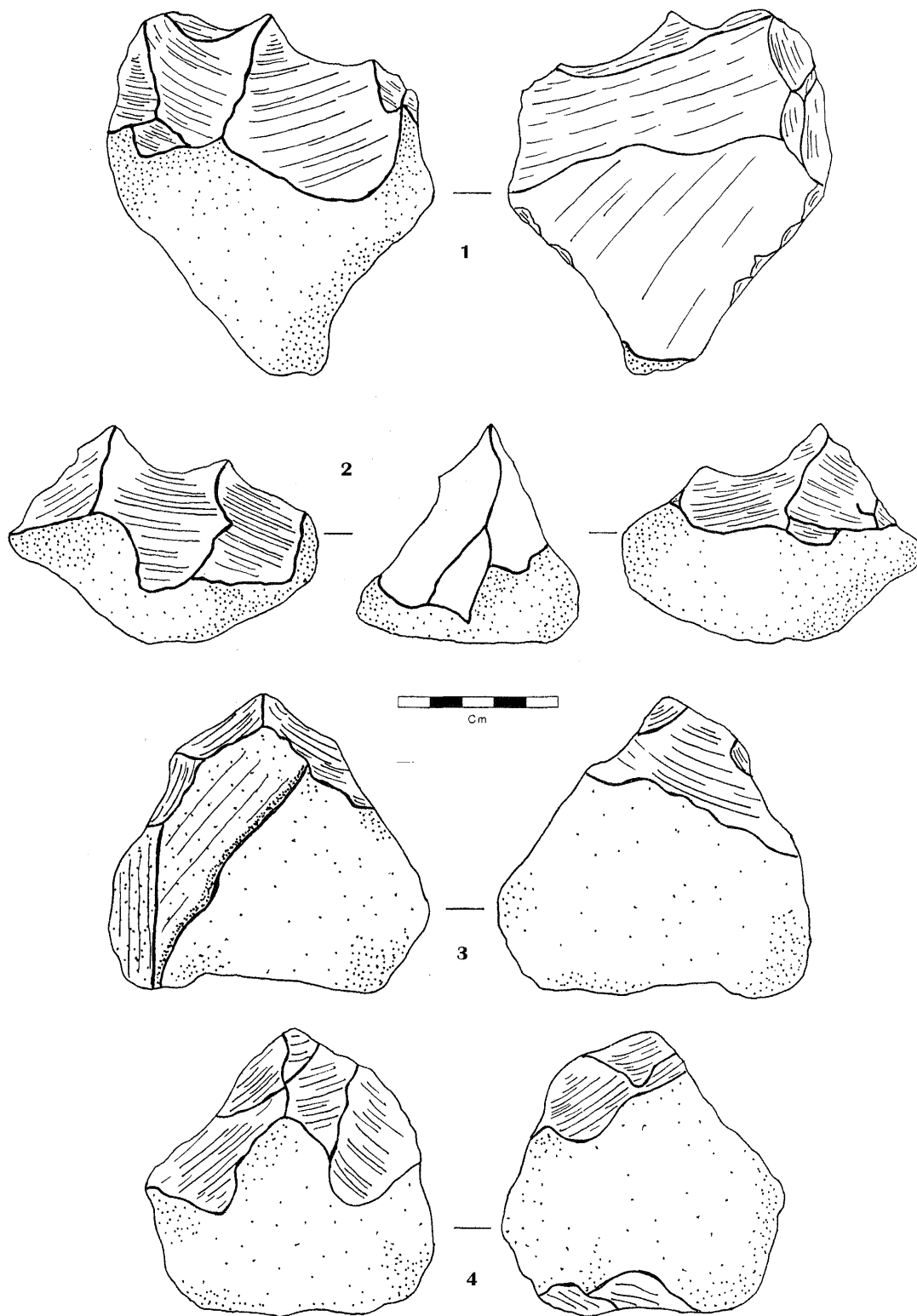


Figure 2: Choppers from Rainbow Bar

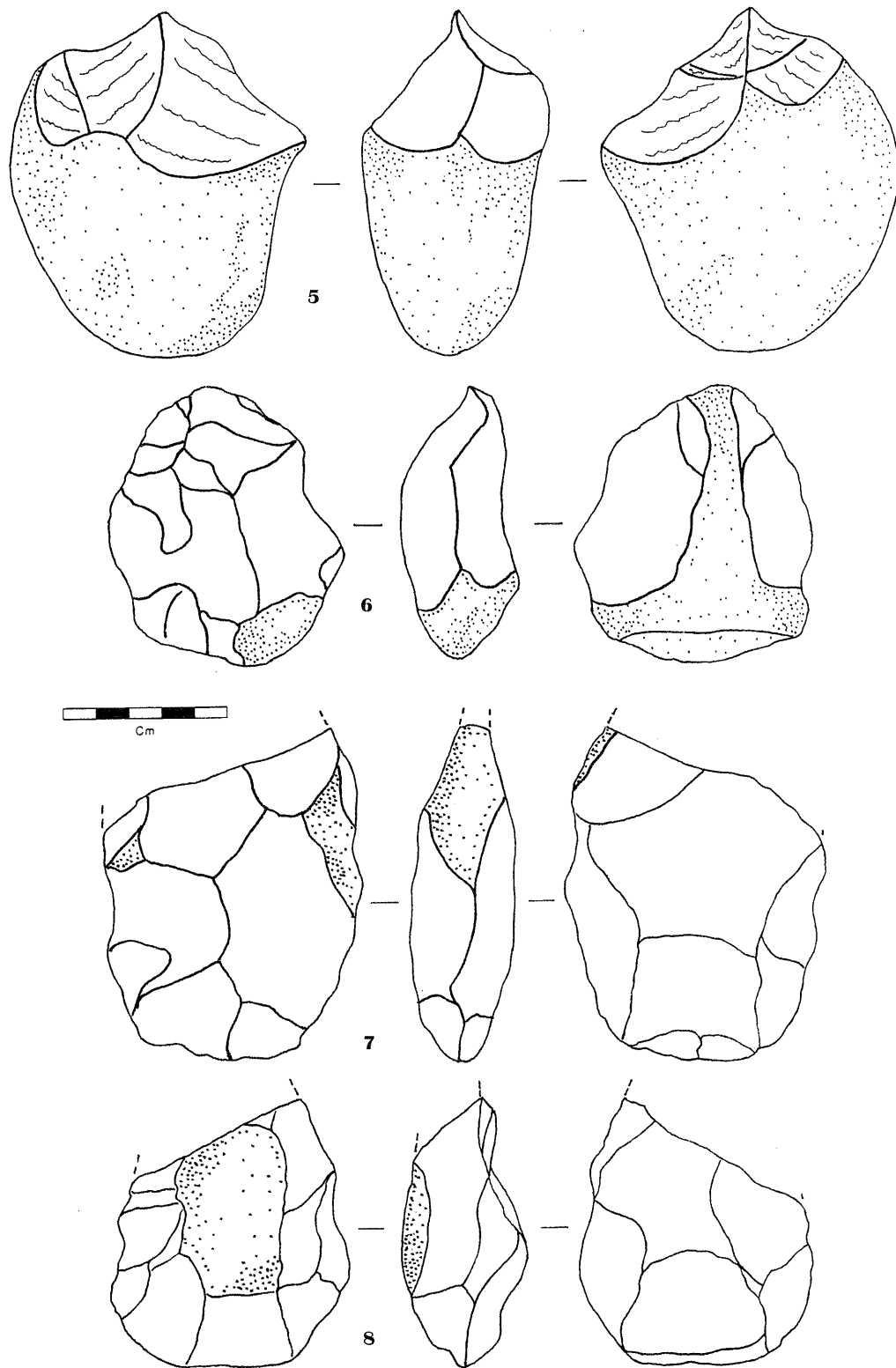


Figure 3: Chopper (5) and handaxes (6-8) from Rainbow Bar

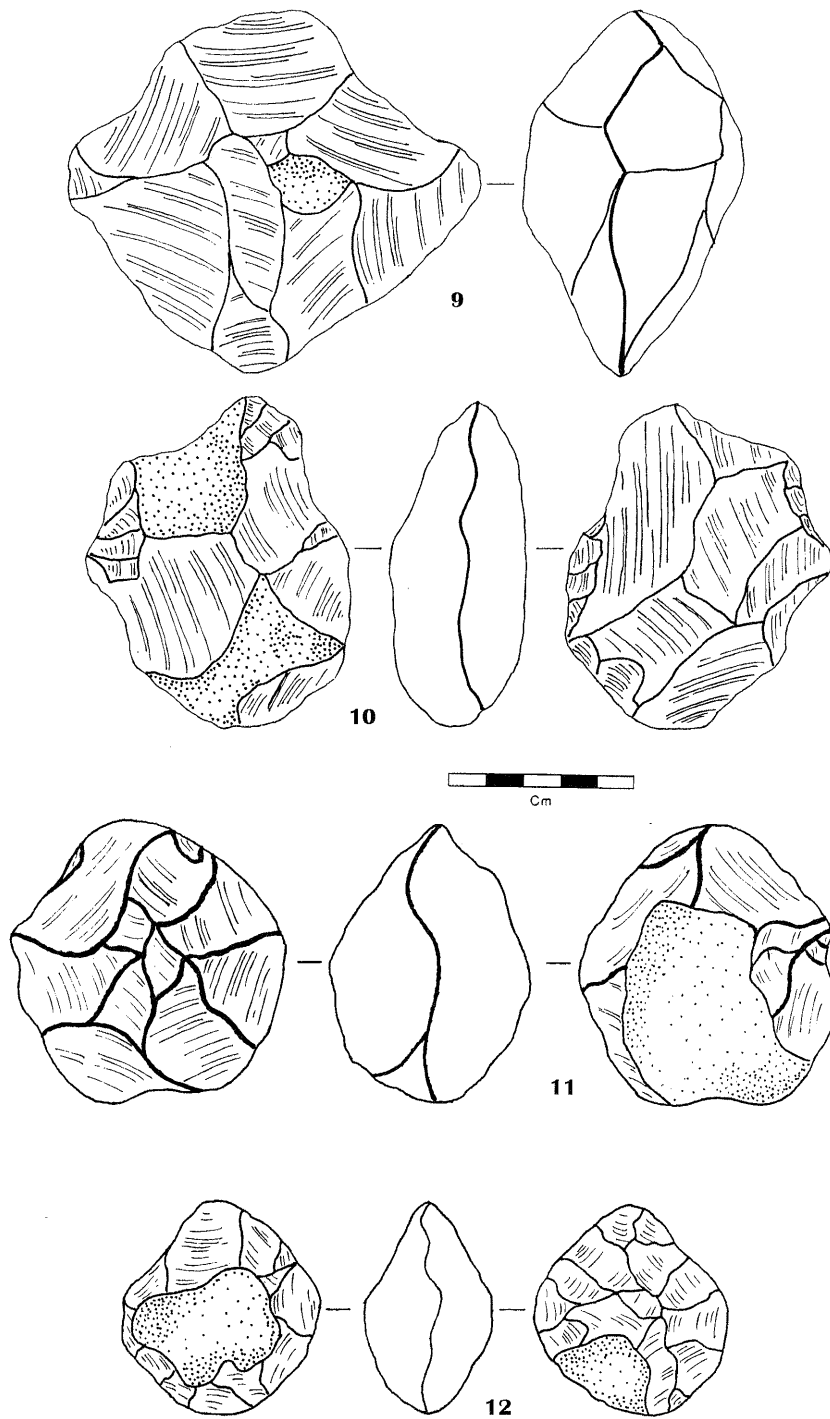


Figure 4: Disc-oids/cores from Rainbow Bar

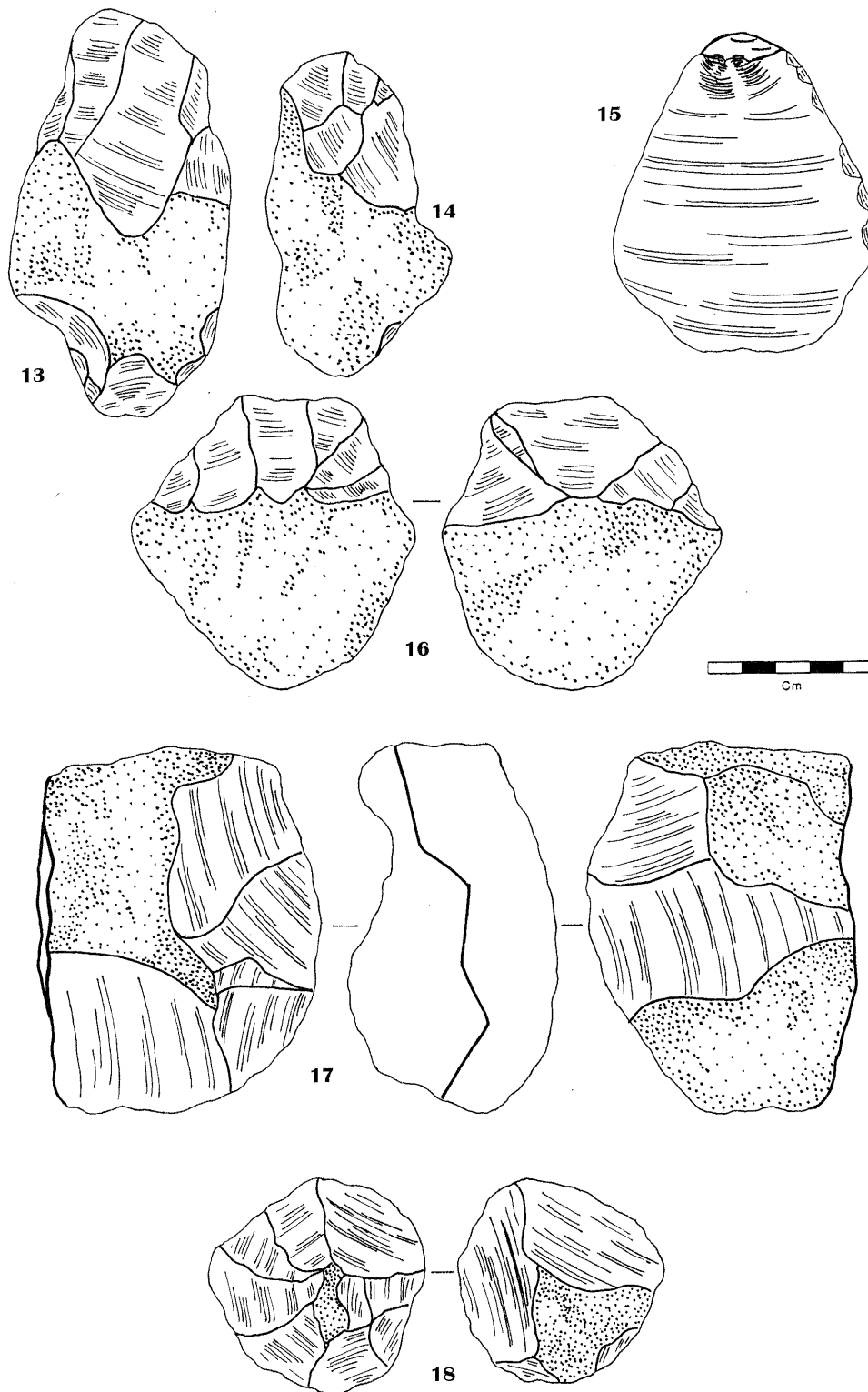


Figure 5: Artefacts from Rainbow Bar. Chopper (16 & 17), cortical flakes (15), discoid (18) and retouched split-cobbles (13 & 14)

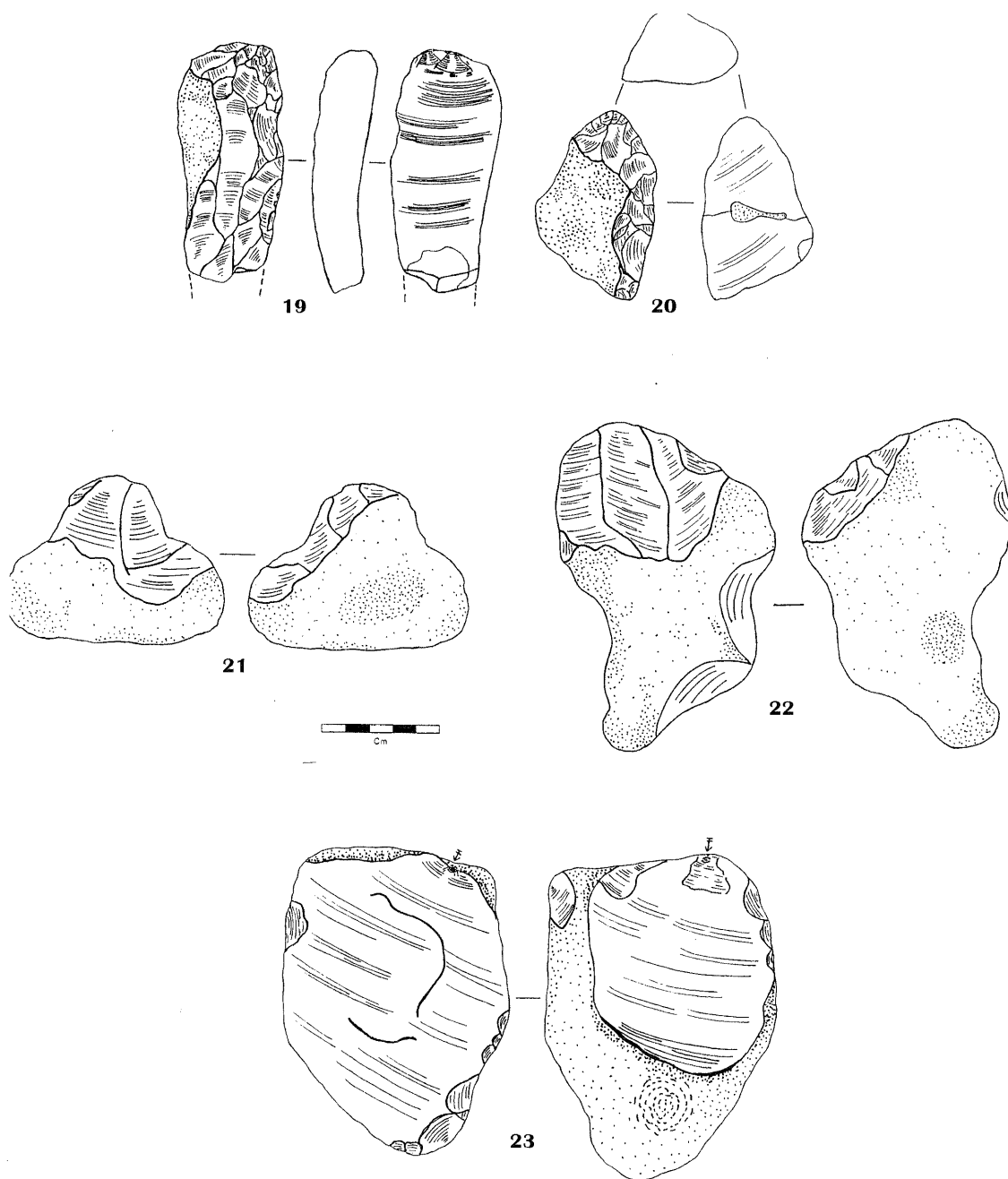


Figure 6: Choppers (21 & 22), flakes and flake tools (19,20, 23) from Rainbow Bar

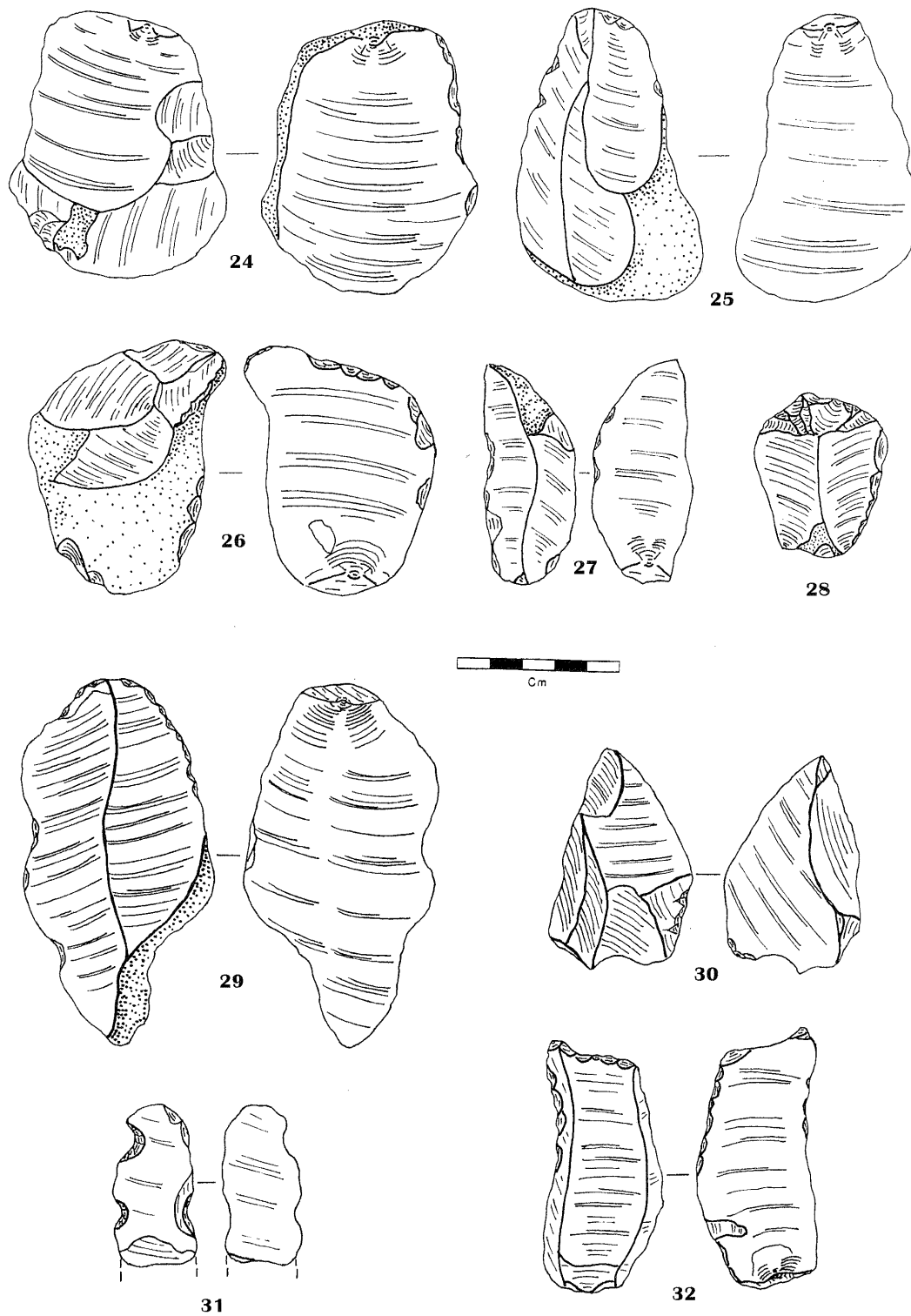


Figure 7: Flakes and Flake tools from Rainbow Bar

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Arthur ApSimon for informing me of the threat to Rainbow Bar that was posed by the proposed removal of the gravel deposit by the County Council in 1984. He is owed a debt of gratitude for his energetic response to this threat, which has so far ensured its safety. Derek Roe has, as ever, shown me much encouragement and kindness.

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94 Stubbington Lane
Fareham
Hampshire
PO14 2PE

brhack94stub@lineone.net