

A LEVALLOIS FLAKE FROM SOMERSHAM, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

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The large Levallois flake figured (Figure 1) was found during the course of the geological investigations and excavations in gravel quarries at Somersham, Cambridgeshire, by Professor R.G. West, conducted over a long period from 1979-1993 (West *et al.* 1999). The circumstances of its discovery are recorded below and preclude any definite attribution to the particular horizons exposed in the late Pleistocene channels of the Great River Ouse. However, this note is primarily concerned with the flake itself, as an artefact of exceptional craftsmanship on the part of some Palaeolithic knapper. It displays an impressive control over the material that would be appreciated by any present-day replicator of flint artefacts.

The raw material is, surprisingly, not apparently of the finest quality. Ochreous staining conceals the original colour of the flint, but some recent damage on the right edge nearer the proximal end of the ventral face (unshaded chips on the figure) show that is grey. It must have been a large piece that was selected for making the flake, but probably quite thin, if not tabular, for at the distal end of the dorsal face a thin band of cortex remains in the centre. Chert inclusions are also present. The dorsal face has been produced by seven major facets struck radially from the parent core as per good quality Levallois workmanship. The striking platform, however, is not faceted but thick and plain. Some elaborate trimming near the base of the ventral side, behind the platform, was presumably made to ensure that the final blow of

detachment from the core would be successful. It was!

The struck flake has considerable soft hammer retouch on the dorsal face at the distal end, enhancing its resemblance to a large ovate hand-axe. The implement is only very slightly rolled so cannot have travelled far in a fluvial deposit, but there are minor chips along its edges, apart from some obviously intentional retouch near the platform. These chips are more likely to be the result of heavy use rather than natural edge damage. They are more marked and partly bifacial at the distal end, which would have been the most likely area of its major use. In part, beneath the thin, ochreous staining, can be seen an incipient dentritic patina. Such has sometimes been attributed to surface exposure in very cold conditions, but this is doubtful, and it must remain unknown whether it was the product of someone along the river during the temperate or cold stages recognised at the site.

PROVENANCE

The Somersham site, at the southern margin of Fenland 6 km south of Chatteris (Grid Reference TL 375 800), was a large gravel quarry excavated in the river gravels of a major former course of the River Great Ouse in Middle/Late Pleistocene times. The site and its stratigraphy, palaeontology and environmental history are described in detail by West *et al.* (1999). Within the gravels occurred a sequence (Beds C,D,E) of freshwater and estuarine fossiliferous

sediments, largely organic, with evidence for temperate woodland conditions. Within the gravels, both those below (Bed A) and above (Bed F) the temperate beds, there were fossiliferous fine sediments with evidence for a 'full glacial' flora, together with periglacial structures. The pollen analytical evidence suggested an Ipswichian age for the temperate beds, with Devensian river gravels above them and pre-Ipswichian river gravels below.

The flake was found while levelling Section FF (West *et al.* 1999, Figure 11), where the temperate beds rise and thin to their western margin. The flake was within ill-sorted gravelly sand on the thin talus slope of the section, a contrast to the well-stratified sands and gravels of the section. The level was c. 15cm above the base of *in situ* organic sediments of the section at 240m. The flake was not *in situ*; it could have come from the gravels below or above the temperate beds during the excavation of the gravel. Generally the gravels in the area of the section were

free from large clasts of the size of the flake, except for a lag horizon at the base of the Devensian Bed F2 gravel in the nearby Section SAV (Figure 12, 68-100 m.), where large flint clasts were recorded above the fine sediments of the pre-Ipswichian Bed B. This lag appears to have been formed later than the temperate beds, and may have been the source of the flake. If so, further exposures of this horizon may in future yield firmer archaeological evidence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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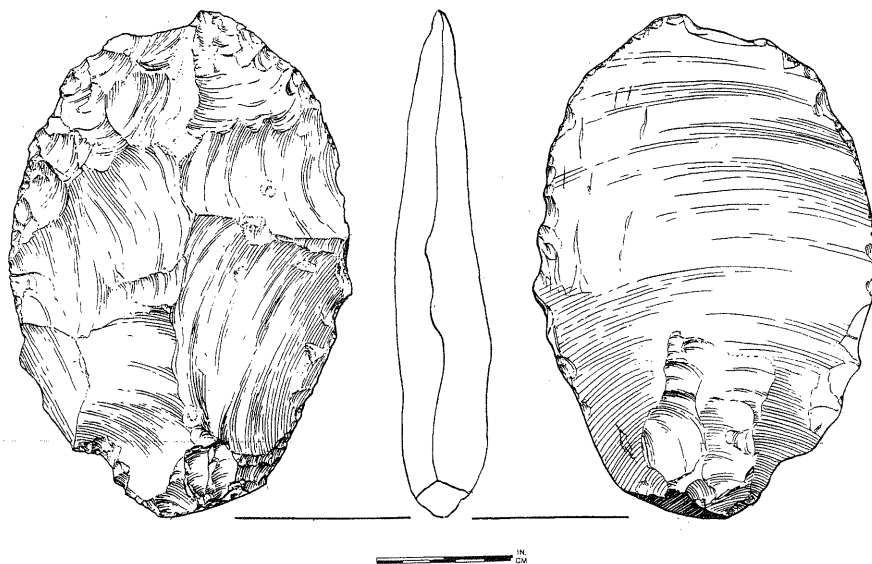


Figure 1: Levallois flake from Somersham, Cambridgeshire