

NOTES

A MOUSTERIAN HANDAXE FROM WEST LONDON

by Jonathan Cotton

Since 1979, the Museum of London's Department of Greater London Archaeology has been monitoring the progress of a projected 45-acre gravel-extraction on the east side of the village of Sipson in the London Borough of Hillingdon. Centred at TQ 078783, the site lies on the third or 'Taplow' terrace of the river Thames a mile or so to the south of the famous west London gravel pits at West Drayton and Yiewsley, and is one of several currently being dealt with by the Museum.

The work, jointly funded by the Greater London Council, the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England (formerly the DOE), and the Museum of London, has revealed a series of later prehistoric, Romano-British, and Saxon features cutting into the surface of the natural subsoil, an undulating layer of loessic 'brickearth' varying between 3 and 10 ft. (c.1-3 m) in thickness, which mantles the terrace gravels in this area. The handaxe which forms the subject of this short note was not recovered from any of these post-glacial features, however, but from close to the base of the underlying brickearth deposit during its subsequent removal by towed box-scrapers. cursory inspection of the latter operation - both prior to and following the discovery - suggests that it must be considered as an isolated find.

The handaxe was initially revealed in the side of a furrow cut ('ripped') to counteract compaction of the basal brickearth by the heavy machinery at c.TQ 07757845. It lay in a horizontal position 5' 3" (1.60 m) below the modern ground surface, 3' 8" (1.10 m) into the brickearth, and some 4" (100 mm) above the surface of the terrace gravel, which is situated at 86' 3 1/2" (26.32 m) O.D. Following its discovery, the company kindly suspended work on the nearest complete brickearth face, 10 ft. (c.3 m) to the north, allowing a section of it to be cleaned down, drawn, and photographed (Fig. 1). The depth at which the handaxe was found in the adjacent out permitted its relative position to be projected onto this section with some degree of accuracy; this exercise confirmed its close relationship with a thin lens

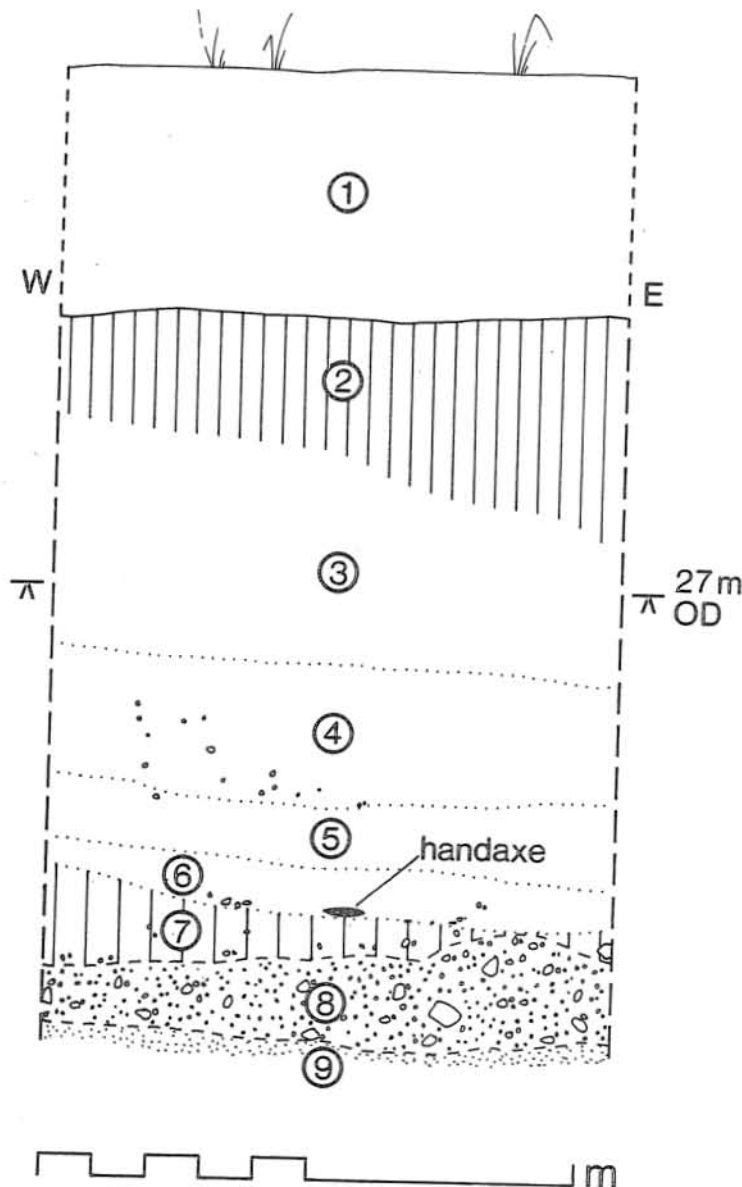
Fig.1 (on facing page).

RECORDED SECTION, SHOWING THE RELATIVE POSITION OF THE HANDAXE.

Key to layers

- 1 Topsoil (removed by machine).
- 2 Fill of late Iron Age/early Romano-British ditch (running E/W along the section).
- 3-6 Banded brickearth deposit.
- 7 Pale greenish-grey brickearth containing sparse pebbles and carbonate concretions ('loess dolls': Catt 1978, 13).
- 8 Fine-medium orange/yellow terrace gravel.
- 9 Lens of coarse, rust-coloured sand.

SIPSON LANE '84



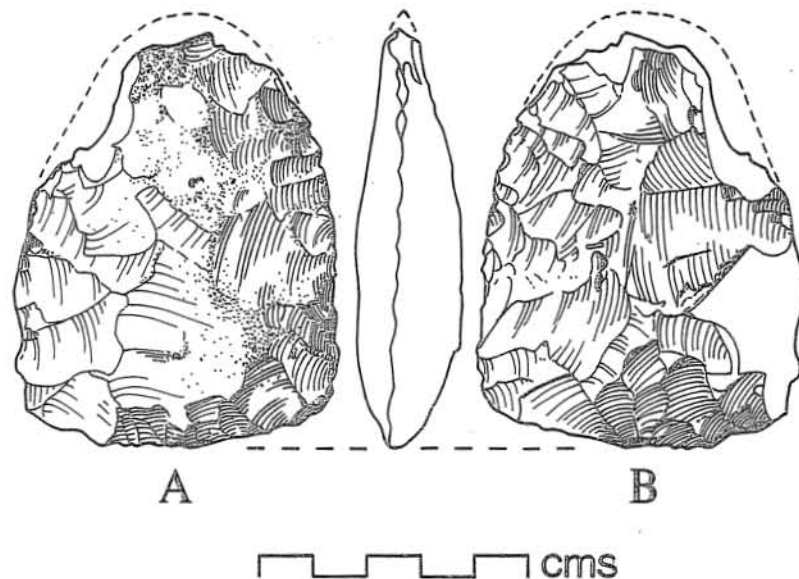


Fig.2. 'Bout coupé' handaxe from Sipson (modern flake-removals unshaded).

of pale greenish-grey, apparently calcareous, brickearth (Fig. 1, Layer 7), which directly overlay the gravel at this point. The section was subsequently sampled by Dr Richard Macphail of the Institute of Archaeology, University of London.

With surviving measurements of 3" x 2½" (78 x 61 mm), the handaxe itself is a fine example of a small, flat-butted cordate (Wymer's Type N: 1968, 59) or 'bout coupé', with neat bifacial flaking, even (if somewhat weathered) edges, and a slim, slightly-twisted profile. The face lying uppermost in the brickearth (Fig. 2A) has a lustrous snowy-white patina, and has been subjected to a fair amount of weathering, resulting in the 'pocking' of the higher points. The other face (Fig. 2B), protected from such post-depositional wear and tear, has a mottled bluey-white patina with no trace of pocking, and is altogether fresher in appearance. Several modern flake removals from the tip and along one edge of this face - perhaps due to the passage of heavy machinery or the ripping of the furrow - reveal the colour of the unpatinated flint to have been a mottled, smokey grey-brown.

The recovery of this apparently stratified handaxe carries with it a number of implications for the less well-recorded material from the brickearths further to the north, and also for the dating of the

deposition of the brickearth deposit itself (see Wymer 1968, 255-8 and Roe 1981, 215-6 for details and references). In particular, it may be possible to relate the new find to the 'bluish-white' series of artefacts recovered from the brickearth at Dawley and West Drayton by J. Allen Brown and others. These have been described as belonging to 'the start of the Mousterian of Acheulian Tradition (MAT) or Paxton stage' by Collins (1978, 45) and they include several 'bout coupé' handaxes and Levallois-type flakes.

Acknowledgements

All credit for the discovery of the handaxe belongs to the excavation co-director, John Mills; thanks are also due to Henry Streeter (Sand and Ballast) Co. Ltd., whose manager, Jack Halliday, has maintained a keen interest in the work throughout, to Dr Richard Macphail for taking the soil samples at very short notice, and to Frank Berry for helpful advice concerning the terrace sequences in the area. A fuller report, incorporating the results of further work, will appear in due course.

REFERENCES

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