

ARTICLES

TWO PALAEOLITHS FROM NORTH-EAST WARWICKSHIRE

by Alan Saville

This article records the discovery, in 1985, of two flint palaeoliths from separate, but nearby, locations to the north-east of Coventry in Warwickshire.

The first of the two palaeoliths (Fig. 1) is a small, ovate handaxe weighing 90 grams and with present maximum dimensions of 68mm (length); 55mm (width); 24mm (thickness). The surface of the piece is extremely worn and abraded by heavy natural weathering; the face not shown in the illustration has a markedly more 'rolled' aspect than the one depicted. The flint exterior is densely corticated and discoloured in a variegated fashion from pale brown through to a reddish brown. Ancient damage has occurred at the base, and the chip out of the distal tip is also probably ancient. Some of the edge chipping has penetrated the densest cortication, though it is lightly corticated itself, and must represent relatively more recent post-depositional damage. This small handaxe has some similarities with implements of *bout coupé* type, but is not typologically specific enough, nor refined enough, to be regarded as a potentially MAT (Mousterian of Acheulian tradition) artefact rather than a generalized Acheulian handaxe.

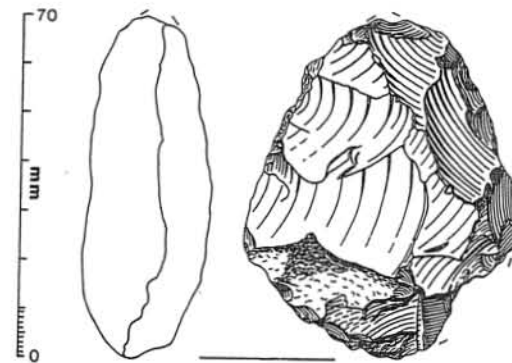


Fig.1. Handaxe from Wolvey Heath, Wolvey, Warwickshire. Scale 2:3.

The other palaeolith (Fig. 2) is the pointed distal tip of what must have been a very substantial Acheulian handaxe. The weight is 116 grams and the present maximum dimensions are: 74mm (length); 63mm (width); 25mm (thickness). Apart from the break at the base, there is minor damage at the tip, but both occurred in antiquity, since when the surface has become densely corticated and discoloured to a strong brown. The condition is slightly 'rolled', with some blurring of the negative flake scar ridges, especially on the flatter face. The method of manufacture is very distinctive, with all the flaking across the flat ventral surface preceding the bilateral retouch from the ventral face onto the

domed dorsal surface. This is a technique observable on a previous find of a fragmentary handaxe from Baginton, also in north-east Warwickshire (Shotton 1934, pl.IV:1).

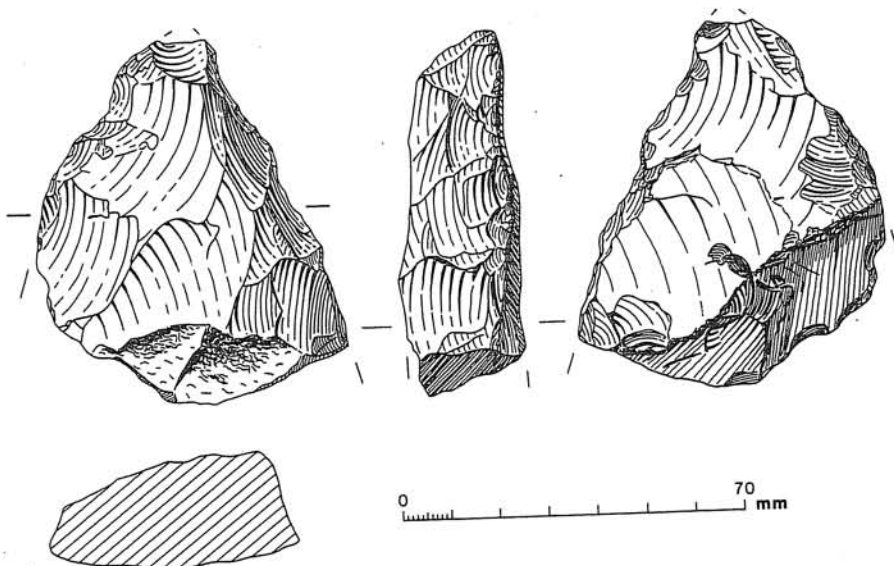


Fig. 2. Handaxe fragment from Leicester Grange, Wolvey, Warwickshire. Scale 2:3.

In themselves these two palaeoliths are in no way remarkable - they would certainly be regarded as poor 'museum pieces'. Their interest lies in the manner of their discovery and in their provenance. Both finds were made by Mr. R. Waite, an amateur archaeologist from Nuneaton, who has for many years been collecting flint artefacts of all periods from sites he has himself located in the course of fieldwork in the north-east Warwickshire area (see, for example, Saville 1981). Mr. Waite has a particular interest in palaeoliths, so is actively seeking to find examples during his fieldwork. Nevertheless, despite his educated eye for recognising even the crudest of examples, his success rate in discovering palaeoliths simply as surface finds on farmland in an ostensibly unpromising area is remarkable. Some of his previous handaxe finds have been published (Saville and Shotton 1973 and 1974); many more have been, or are now in the process of being recorded by Professor F.W. Shotton and by the staff of Warwick Museum.

The detailed provenance of the present finds can be stated briefly. That shown in Fig. 1 is from farmland adjacent to the B4455 road just east of Wolvey Heath, in Wolvey parish (NGR SP B4455 road just east of Wolvey Heath, in Wolvey parish (NGR SP 4427 8842). The other handaxe, Fig. 2, is from farmland at Leicester Grange (SP 4370 9050), immediately south of the A5 road (Watling Street), which is the county boundary at that point, and in the same parish of Wolvey. Of the two previously published examples referred to above, one came from Wolvey parish (SP 4331 8988), the other from the adjacent parish of Burton Hastings to the north-west (SP 4215 8840). Most of the other palaeoliths

found by Mr. Waite come from the same area, including several from near Bramcote (SP 406 890), also in the parish of Wolvey.

This small area of north-east Warwickshire from which these finds are emerging correlates exactly with an expanse of glacial sands and gravels running north from Wolvey into Leicestershire (Geological Survey Drift Sheet 169: Coventry). This is precisely the same area identified many years ago as an important dry-soil belt producing concentrations of later prehistoric artefacts (Shotton 1938, 186 and fig. 41). The area is within the postulated extent of the proglacial Lake Harrison, where late Devensian solifluxion intermittently overlies various deposits of Wolstonian age. (It is necessary to note that, for the purposes of this article, an orthodox view is taken of the existence of a Wolstonian glaciation between the Anglian and the Devensian: Shotton 1985, 31).

All the palaeoliths found so far in the Wolvey area have been surface finds from disturbed ground, so they cannot be stratigraphically assigned to any particular deposit or deposits. The assumption has previously been made that palaeoliths from the area are likely to be of Ipswichian or even early Devensian age, having been incorporated as residual items in late Devensian solifluxion deposits and subsequently become exposed as surface finds (Saville and Shotton 1974, 244). In fact, the artefacts themselves could equally, and perhaps in some cases more happily, be of Hoxnian or Wolstonian age on typological grounds, although it must be admitted that, as with most English surface finds of handaxes, the chronology necessarily remains guesswork.

These findspots in north-east Warwickshire fall within the zone of central England where the distribution of handaxes 'simply peters out' (Roe 1981, 135 and fig. 5, 1-4). It is a matter of some debate as to whether this marginal distribution zone relates to any real limit of human exploitation during the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic (Roe 1981, 135), or whether it is a product of the limit of glacial destruction, since, as Wymer and Straw have reasonably maintained, 'it seems inconceivable that northern Britain was not inhabited during the Hoxnian and Ipswichian interglacials' (1977, 358).

On the basis of Mr. Waite's finds, this marginal zone of the handaxe distribution certainly appears as a very biased one, capable of fairly dramatic local alteration by the discoveries of an individual fieldworker. That said, it must also be the case that the geological preconditions for such discoveries are favourable in the Wolvey area of Warwickshire. Could the Wolvey finds be an example of the prediction made by Wymer and Straw (1977, 358) to the effect that the chances of Palaeolithic artefacts surviving from glaciated regions would be greater near the fringes of the ice sheet? Is the context of origin of these palaeoliths in fact the glacial outwash (Wolston Sand/Wigston Gravel and Sand) in front of the second Wolstonian ice advance (Shotton 1977, 7), and are these finds therefore of Hoxnian or early Wolstonian age? It is to be hoped that continued observation in the Wolvey area - which is of obvious archaeological and geological importance - will eventually provide the opportunity to resolve the questions of the context and chronology of these intriguing palaeolithic finds.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Ron Waite for bringing these finds to my attention and for permitting me to record and publish them. The handaxes remain in Mr. Waite's private collection.

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TOOL MANUFACTURE IN QUARTZITIC AND SIMILAR ROCKS IN THE BRITISH PALAEO-LITHIC

by R.J. MacRae

This outline of some aspects of implement manufacture in the British Palaeolithic using quartzite and similar hard rocks is designed to arouse interest in a strangely neglected area of lithic studies. Non-flint artefacts in the earlier Palaeolithic are usually given little more than passing mention in the vast sea of literature concerning flint. Upper Palaeolithic reports necessarily deal in detail with the hard rock tools sometimes found in caves; but apart from occasional short papers in county journals and the like very few thorough examinations of the non-flint content of early assemblages seem to have been published. Professor Shotton and his colleagues have done justice to the finds in the Midlands so far; Posnansky (1963) dealt adequately with some quartzite tools in pits on the Nottinghamshire-Derbyshire borders. But as yet no comprehensive study has been made for Britain. Now that the immensely important Lower Palaeolithic hominid site of Pontnewydd cave has been published by Stephen Green and his fellow-workers, it seems time for a wide-ranging examination of the role of hard rock implements to be made.

A multi-author publication is planned, and half a dozen contributions have been firmly promised. As instigator and co-editor with Norah Moloney, I would welcome information, especially about relevant literature and also isolated finds in any part of Britain. That would help with a proposed catalogue or gazetteer. The general study will involve reports of experimental tool manufacture and functional efficiency; will contain accounts of known assemblages and their geological contexts; and will include the Upper Palaeolithic, but no later periods. The whole will be confined to Britain except for extracts from literature concerning hard rock tools in other countries which are directly relevant to the interpretation of British finds. The chert from which the Broom/Axminster handaxes were made will not be included. It is too close a relative to flint.

I have for a quarter of a century muddled my gumboots on the floors of gravel pits over much of Britain below the Bristol/Wash line, and had added several thousand palaeolithic artefacts to the Pitt Rivers Museum collections in Oxford when the significance of the quartzite fraction became evident. 'I often wonder', wrote F.W. Shotton to me back in 1971, 'whether the scarcity of quartzite implements is a question of lack of recognition . . . but I think one is only likely to find quartzite tools on and beyond the fringes of the flint country. We have about eleven from the West Midlands.' After that hint, although other commitments meant only sporadic visits to likely gravel pits, I began consciously to look for implements other than the more easily-spotted flint. This alteration in focus, so to speak, brought pleasing results. It also brought the depressing realisation that I must have missed seeing quite a lot of these stone artefacts, as did most workmen in the past when they failed to notice, or ignored, non-flint tools when the collectors told them they wanted nice flint handaxes. Modern mechanical gravel-digging must mean that nine out of ten artefacts are sped into the sorter or crusher to be lost for