

Palaeolithic and Mesolithic (c. 750,000-4,000 BC):

Summary of the Collections:

Palaeolithic

The Palaeolithic collections of the Wiltshire Museum are relatively limited, and 1,248 entries in the collections management database are attributed to this period; mostly records detailing individual Lower Palaeolithic handaxes. Whilst there have been some recent acquisitions, such as DZSWS:2019.10, a handaxe from Huish reported through the Portable Antiquities Scheme, the majority of objects attributed to this period derive from old collections or are chance finds, and thus many lack detailed contextual information.

Of these, 1,132 are attributed to the famous artefact-rich gravel pit at Knowle Farm, Little Bedwyn, and it is perhaps likely that two handaxes reportedly found in Savernake may have also originated from this deposit. Lower Palaeolithic artefacts were first recognised at Knowle Farm at the turn of the 20th century, and by 1903 over 2,000 flint 'implements' had been discovered (Cunnington and Cunnington 1903). This represents the most significant deposit of Lower Palaeolithic material in the region, and whilst the handaxes are now widely dispersed, the collection held in Wiltshire Museum remains the largest (Roe 1968; 1969). The collection has been recognised from early on as a mixture of multiple deposits, probably deposited by river action (Cunnington & Cunnington 1903; Roe 1968; 1969).

Several descriptions of the site appeared in WANHM in the early 20th century, however they contain insufficient detail to allow for in depth discussion of the geology or archaeology of the site (Cunnington & Cunnington 1903; Dixon 1903; Kendall 1906). A trial trench was opened in 1977, and although able to provide limited clarification of the stratigraphy of the site, the trench was excavated entirely mechanically so the stratigraphic relationships of the 70 Paleolithic flints recovered were not recorded, with the exception of a single handaxe (Froom 1983). It is also disappointing that none of the material recovered during this excavation appears to have entered the museum collections. Both Kendall (1906) and Froom (1983) note the presence of flakes and other evidence of knapping within the material recovered, although this is denied by the Cunningtons (1903). A sample of 461 of the less worn handaxes were examined in detail by Roe for their PhD, they note that the assemblage is dominated by ovate forms, but is notable for the crudeness and lack of refinement of many of the handaxes (1968; 1969). The Knowle Farm flints are also notable for a highly distinctive and poorly understood 'gloss', and which is the focus of many of the early discussions (Cunnington & Cunnington 1903; Dixon 1903).

The only other parish associated with significant numbers of Palaeolithic flints is Salisbury, to which 58 records are attributed. The majority of these flints are attributed to gravel pits on Millford Hill, with smaller numbers attributed to gravel digging at Bemerton, both sites published in 1884 by C.J. Read (who donated a number of the handaxes in question). Whilst detailed sketch plans allow the deposits to be placed on the map with relative accuracy, similar to early descriptions of Knowle Farm the potential for detailed discussion of the site is limited. Examination by Roe (1968; 1969) also suggests that the groups are unlikely to represent a closed group of implements, reducing their usefulness for statistical analysis.

Comparison of the distribution of Palaeolithic finds in the museum collections with those plotted by Roe (1969) reveals little change in the second half of the 20th century, with a continued concentration

around Marlborough and the Kennet Valley in North Wiltshire. A developing scatter of finds in the North West of the county is notable, however these represent chance finds and stray flints.

Mesolithic:

The Mesolithic collections of the museum are similarly limited, as is the case for the archaeological record for the period in the county as a whole (Hosfield et al. in Webster 2007), with the only significant excavation of an *in situ* Mesolithic site since Radley's (1969) review being at Blick's Mead, Amesbury, in the south of the county (Jacques and Phillips 2014). Searching the collections management database produces 1,908 records, however, this number is less informative than in the previous period; many record small groups or single flint flakes or tools, often as part of larger, mixed field walking assemblages. A review of the collections reveals just 13 groups of more than 50 flints identified as belonging to the Mesolithic, suggesting a wide, but thin, spread across the museum's collecting area. This is apparent when the distribution of diagnostic tranchet axeheads is plotted.

Twelve of these groups were collected through fieldwalking or survey, and there is a notable number of assemblages of 200-800 flints in the north west of the county, as well as a collection of 776 flints collected during a survey by Gingell in Teffont (Gingell and Harding 1983). A smaller assemblage of 282 Mesolithic flints is attributed to Golden Ball Hill, Alton, where a programme of geophysical survey and trial excavation by Cardiff University in 1997 identified *in situ* Mesolithic occupation levels (Dennis and Hamilton 1997). Similarly, a small field walked assemblage of Mesolithic flint is attributed to Hackpen Hill, also a known Mesolithic site (e.g. Whittle 1990: fig. 2).

The most significant assemblage derives from the excavations at Oliver's Hill Field, Cherhill, where excavations in advance of development in 1967 identified occupation spanning the Late Mesolithic to Early Bronze Age (Evans and Smith 1983). Although thin and patchy, and in places cut by later ditches, the site was well stratified with Mesolithic layers sealed by a deposit of tufa. The latter contained a lens of charcoal near its base radiocarbon dated to 5280 +/-140 BC, as well as smaller quantities of Mesolithic flint and bone. No precise count of the Mesolithic flint assemblage was published, however, it was estimated to comprise c. 10% of the 130kg of struck flint recovered from the site. It is dominated by bladelets and contains both scalene micro-triangles and obliquely blunted points, and was argued to represent a single broadly contemporary industry, with most flints described as being in fresh condition. In addition to the flint assemblage, a potentially important assemblage of 1,681 animal bone fragments were recovered from Mesolithic contexts. Of this group, only 125 fragments were positively identified due to the extent of fragmentation, and the assemblage was not quantified beyond NISP, it was however not deposited with the rest of the archive at the Wiltshire Museum, and the osseous material was deposited with the British Museum (Natural History) under the accession numbers ARC 1981.5163-5533 and ARC 1982.5003-5016. Overall, only a single Mesolithic feature was identified, a "working hollow" (although see Davis 2012, cited below), and the original excavators interpreted a general trend of gradual abandonment as the site became increasingly saturated with water.

Research into the Collections since 2010:

Only two papers were identified as having accessed the pre-Neolithic collections of the Wiltshire Museum since 2010, with only one further example of a researcher accessing material from this period, but which led to no publication. Whilst material from these periods is among the least requested, this is proportional to the relative size of these collections. Both papers meaningfully engage with the museum

collections and make significant contributions to our understanding of the archaeological and/or taphonomic development of the sites which they discuss. Unfortunately, the results of neither paper has been published yet, meaning little publicity has been generated for the museum collections from this period.

Davis (2012), as part of their PhD thesis with the University of Worcester, re-examined 1,007 flints from Mesolithic levels at Oliver's Hill Field, Cherhill, including all of those from the "working hollow". Davis' detailed reanalysis supports the interpretations of Pitts (in Evans and Smith 1983), that the group as a whole is Late Mesolithic in date, and suggests that changes in the relative proportion of obliquely blunted points may imply a localised continuation of the form into the later Mesolithic period, which is gradually phased out. They also argue for a new interpretation of the "working hollow", drawing on the high proportion of burnt flint (not mentioned in the original report), the presence of other materials such as sarsen fragments and animal bone, and parallels to other sites to suggest that the hollow may have been deliberately dug for deposition. Their argument that the transformative properties of a tufa spring may also have had symbolic importance has interesting parallels with Jacques and Phillips's (2014) recent observation of the spring at Blicks Mead, Amesbury, where a rare alga would have caused submerged flint to permanently stain pink.

As part of a wider scheme of fieldwork Hosfield and Green (2015) have re-examined a sample of Lower Palaeolithic hand axes from Knowle Farm, focusing on morphological examination, but also examining a smaller sample with pXRF analysis and Scanning Electron Microscopy in an attempt to better understand the Knowle 'polish', which they suggest may be caused to the redeposition of silica at a microscopic level. A full publication of the study is hoped to be forthcoming. The only other piece of research undertaken on the Museum's collections was at the instigation of the former curator, Dr Paul Robinson, which led to the suggestion by the South West Implement Petrology Group that a chert handaxe attributed to Knowle Farm may in fact have originated in Broom, Dorset.

Priorities for future research:

Palaeolithic

The research potential of the collections as they currently stand is obviously limited, although there are clear opportunities to expand upon our knowledge of the collections. Whilst research into the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic has tended to focus on the region further south, around the Hampshire basin and the river valleys feeding into the extinct Solent river (e.g. Hosfield 1999, and the recent exceptional discovery of *in situ* Palaeolithic occupation at Harnham, Salisbury, Bates et al. 2014), Knowle Farm remains the largest deposit of Lower Paleolithic flint in the region, comparable in the South West only to Broom, Dorset. The main opportunity for research into this assemblage seems to be extending the preliminary research of Hosfield and Green (2015) to a larger sample¹. In particular, a better understanding of the technology and morphology of the group would allow for the assemblage to be compared to similar studies of other deposits (e.g. Hosfield and Chambers 2009). A smaller scale project could be built around attempting to provenance the chert handaxes attributed to Knowle Farm. Passing references to chert handaxes were made by both Cunnington and Cunnington (1903) and Kendall (1906), although no chert was included in Hosfield and Green's (2015) sample. The chert axes could be

¹ Hosfield (pers. comm.) would be happy to see this project taken up by students, and is not intending to expand the study themselves.

compared morphologically to the Broom and Knowle assemblages as a whole, and whilst the Knowle 'polish' is less likely to be visible on chert by eye, if the redeposited silica can be detected at a microscopic level this would seemingly confirm the attribution.

Mesolithic

As with the Palaeolithic, the opportunities for further research using the museum collections are limited. As the only assemblage of excavated material, the material from Oliver's Hill Field, Cherhill, is obviously the most significant group in the collections. The flint from the site is well stratified, and the potential exists to include it in a regional study of knapping technology incorporating assemblages from outside the museum collections (both Pitts in Evans and Smith 1983 and Davis 2012 suggest similarities between Cherhill and Wawcott III, Berkshire). Notably only 7% of the flints examined by Davis were encrusted with tufa, and patination similarly appears limited. The group may therefore be suitable for use-wear analysis, although the assemblage is dominated by knapping debris. Banfield (2018) has recently demonstrated the value of re-evaluating fragmentary animal bone assemblages, and with such limited original identifications and discussion, Oliver's Field seems like an excellent candidate. For this reason the museum will be negotiating for the assemblage's transfer from the Natural History Museum, as well as to bring the entire archive from the site together under one roof.

Although more suited to smaller scale research, such as an MA or even undergraduate dissertation, the reassessment and contextualisation of the numerous field-walked assemblages in the North and West of the county would also be valuable.

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