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

2.1 Summary of the collections

2.1.1 Palaeolithic

The Palaeolithic collections of the Wiltshire Museum are relatively limited. There are 1,248 entries attributed to this period in the collections management database, with the majority of these being records of individual Lower Palaeolithic handaxes. Whilst there have been some recent acquisitions of chance finds, such as a handaxe from Huish reported through the Portable Antiquities Scheme (DZSWS:2019.10), the majority derive from old collections. In both cases there is limited surviving contextual information.

By far the most significant assemblage of Palaeolithic objects derive from the artefact-rich gravel pit at Knowle Farm, Little Bedwyn. 1,132 of the records are attributed to this site, and it is likely that some of the handaxes attributed to neighbouring parishes, such as two from Savernake, may also have derived from the site or a related deposit. The Knowle Farm gravel pit is famous for the quantity of flint recovered, and by 1903 over 2,000 flint 'implements' had reportedly 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, unfortunately limiting their usefulness for statistical analysis (Cunnington and Cunnington 1903; Roe 1968; 1969).

Several descriptions of the site appeared in the Wiltshire Archaeology and Natural History Magazine (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 and Cunnington 1903; Dixon 1903; Kendall 1906). More recently, in 1977 a trial trench was opened by mechanical excavator (Froom 1983). This was able to provide limited clarification of the clarification of the site, but due to the method of excavation 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 (Cunnington and Cunnington 1903). A sample of 461 of the less worn handaxes were examined in detail by Roe for his PhD, who noted that the assemblage is dominated by ovate forms, and suggested that it was characterised by unusually crudely-made tools (1968; 1969). The Knowle Farm flints are also known for a highly distinctive and poorly understood 'gloss' (Cunnington & Cunnington 1903; Dixon 1903).

The only other sites associated with significant numbers of Palaeolithic objects are both in the Salisbury-area, with 58 handaxes attributed to the gravel extraction pits at Millford Hill and Bemerton. The handaxes were donated by C.J. Read, who also published the sites (Read 1884), and whilst detailed sketch

plans allow the deposits to be placed on the map with relative accuracy, stratigraphic detail is again 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 the findspots of Palaeolithic objects in the museum collections with those plotted by Roe (1969) reveals little change in the second half of the 20th century. The Kennet Valley and Marlborough-area in North Wiltshire continues to form the focus of the distributions, with a developing scatter of chance finds and stray flints in the North West of the county.

2.1.2 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). There has been only a single significant excavation of an *in situ* Mesolithic site since Radley's (1969) review of the period, at Blick's Mead, Amesbury, south of the Museum's collecting area (Jacques and Phillips 2014). Searching the collections management database produces 1,908 records, however, this number is not very informative. Most again 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 (Figure 2.1). 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 (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

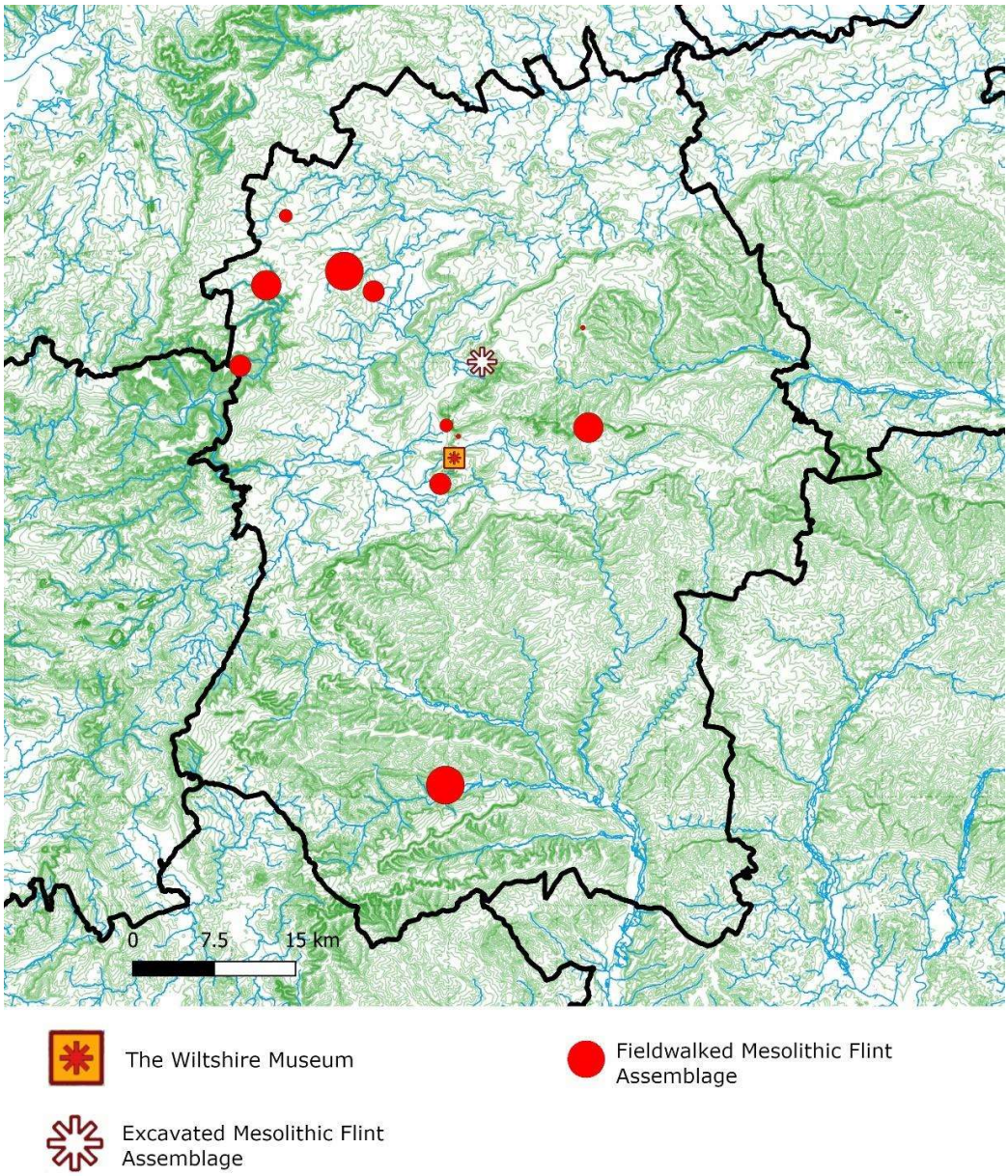

Figure 2.1: Distribution map illustrating the distribution of flint assemblages of more than 50 flakes dating to the Mesolithic period. Image contains Ordnance Survey data, crown copyright 2022.

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.

2.2 Research summary

2.2.1 Summary

Only three papers were identified as having accessed the pre-Neolithic collections of the Wiltshire Museum since 2010, with one further piece of research undertaken by an independent researcher, but which did not lead to a thesis or

written report (although the results were fed back to the museum). Whilst material from these periods is among the least requested, this is proportional to the relative size of these collections. The papers meaningfully engage with the museum collections and make significant contributions to our understanding of the archaeological and taphonomic development of the sites which they discuss. Unfortunately, the none of the results have received wider publication.

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. 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 Blick's 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. Egberts (2017) has then also accessed the Palaeolithic handaxes from Bemerton and Milford Hill, Salisbury, as part of her study of hominin colonization of the Avon valley. 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.

2.2.2 Research projects and publications

Egberts, E. (2017) *The Palaeolithic of the Avon valley: a geoarchaeological approach to the hominin colonization of Britain.* Unpublished PhD thesis: University of Bournemouth.

Davis, R. (2012) *The Nature of Mesolithic Activity at Selected Spring Sites in South West England.* Unpublished PhD thesis: University of Worcester.

Hosfield, R. and Green, C. (2016) *Project Report: Lower Palaeolithic archaeology at Knowle Farm* Unpublished report: University of Reading.

2.3 Research priorities

2.3.1 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 sample[1]. 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 (2016) sample. The chert axes could be 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.

2.3.2 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 of central importance. 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 seven percent 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. The limited discussion of the animal bone assemblage from Cherhill, as well as the small proportion of the assemblage identified to species level, both imply that the animal remains could be usefully re-examined (see Banfield 2018, discussed below, **3.2.1**). The Museum has approached the Natural History Museum to attempt to arrange for the animal bone assemblage's transfer.

[1] Hosfield (pers. comm.) has no intention to expand the study themselves.