

The Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Periods

Article

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Palaeolithic and Mesolithic Wiltshire

Like Britain as a whole, the Palaeolithic (c. 950,000–11,600 BP¹) archaeology of Wiltshire is dominated by river valley finds, and by artefacts from the Lower Palaeolithic (c. 950,000–250,000 BP¹). While many of these finds were made during the 19th and early 20th century heyday of hand-dug gravel extraction and Victorian urban expansion (Wymer 1999), more recent discoveries have also been made. Of particular note is the late Lower Palaeolithic landscape exposed at Harnham through road construction (Bates *et al.* 2014). Excavations revealed *in situ* handaxe manufacture and associated palaeoenvironmental evidence in a riverbank setting, dating to c. 250,000 BP. The site is highly significant for (i) enhancing understanding of the transition between Lower Palaeolithic Acheulean (handaxe) industries and the Levallois technologies of the Middle Palaeolithic; (ii) demonstrating the ability of hominins, either *H. heidelbergensis* or perhaps early Neanderthals, to tolerate cool climates at high latitudes; and (iii) re-emphasising the key relationship between infrastructure projects and early prehistoric landscapes and the importance of thorough archaeological evaluations.

The majority of Wiltshire's Lower Palaeolithic artefacts have been recovered from river terrace deposits (the valley-side remnants of ex-floodplains abandoned over the course of the Pleistocene through river downcutting), particularly those associated with the Bourne, Avon, Nadder and Wylye confluences in and around Salisbury, and especially at Bemerton and Milford Hill. Wymer (1999) saw these concentrations as evidence for focused hominin activity, in contrast to the relative paucity of finds from the chalk-stream landscapes upstream of Salisbury, but there is also increasing concern at the partial view of Palaeolithic landscapes and hominin behaviour that such evidence provides (e.g. Pope *et al.* in press). Recent RAI-funded re-investigations of Knowle Farm, west of Froxfield, by Reading University (Rob Hosfield and Chris Green) were motivated by this bias, and are currently re-investigating the solifluction deposits and possible interfluvial origins of the site's rich handaxe assemblage (see also Froom 1983).

The last few decades have seen important developments in our understanding of changing Mesolithic landscapes and habitats in Wiltshire (c. 9,600–4,000 cal. BC¹). Pollen and molluscan data from tree-throw pits and other contexts have demonstrated the timing and character of vegetation development, commonly in the form of a shift from open, marshy conditions to full woodland. This occurred at around 7,500 cal. BC in the Upper Kennett, with evidence from a range of sites and settings across that landscape suggesting that such woodland was ubiquitous by the mid-Holocene (Evans *et al.* 1993). Further insights will also be forthcoming from Reading University's current research at and around Marden Henge (Jim Leary, Martin Bell and Amanda Clarke).

Wiltshire's widespread Mesolithic record, concentrated around Salisbury and in the north-west and north-east of the county, is dominated by sites with small numbers of artefacts, but there are also more significant assemblages and sites highlighting hunter-gatherer behaviour in this period. Of particular note are Cherhill (late Mesolithic artefacts, c. 4450–3750 cal. BC, in association with charcoal, animal bone, and closed woodland, and earmarked as a possible hunting camp: Evans & Smith 1983; Whittle 1990), Castle Meadow, Downton (tool manufacture, hearths, and stake-hole traces of possible lightweight, temporary structures; Higgs 1959) and most recently Blick Mead (see below). Early Mesolithic postholes have been documented at Stonehenge (see below) and other sub-soil features (e.g. ditches and pits) have been recorded elsewhere, such as at Strawberry Hill in

the north of the county (Allen & Gardiner 2002). Alongside excavated assemblages, understanding of the Wiltshire Mesolithic has also been greatly enhanced by surface collections arising from the sustained work of dedicated local archaeologists (e.g. around Knighton; Froom 1965). These collections have emphasised localised concentrations and a wider range of associations between artefacts, hunter-gatherer behaviours, and different landscape settings. While surface collections can sometimes raise interpretive problems, e.g. through selective sampling, they can also draw our attention to the potential of adjacent or adjoining depositional contexts which might otherwise receive little attention.

¹Based on dates from sites across Britain, rather than Wiltshire specifically.

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