

A Mesolithic and later flint scatter at Little Gight, Grampian Region

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ABSTRACT

Describes fieldwork in 1990 at the Mesolithic and later flint scatter at Little Gight, Grampian, following the examination of a collection of artefacts. Little appears to survive of the site itself. The excavation was arranged and funded by Historic Scotland.

INTRODUCTION

The identification of a flint scatter at Little Gight Farm, near Methlick, Grampian (NGR 838 398; illus 1), 14 km west of the edge of the Buchan flint gravels, provided an opportunity to examine a possible flint-working site in the area. The farmer, Mr Buchan, who reported the site, had been collecting flints in the area for a number of years. The collection included material diagnostic of the Mesolithic to Early Bronze Age.

The following report comprises three parts: the analysis of Mr Buchan's flint collection by Bill Finlayson; the results of fieldwalking in Spring 1990 by Bill Finlayson and Stephen Carter; and the results of a small-scale excavation, funded by Historic Scotland, undertaken by Douglas Baird for HS/AOC in August 1990.

MR BUCHAN'S COLLECTION

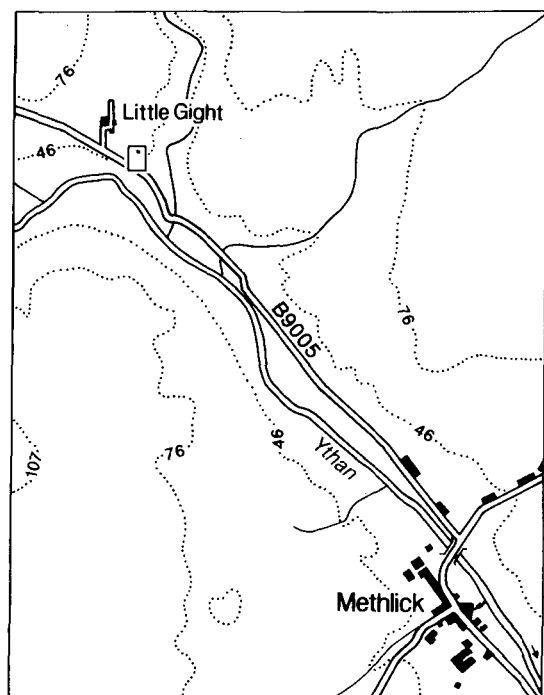
Mr Buchan's collection consists of 886 pieces of struck flint and five pieces of quartz, possibly knapped. The collection was built up over several years, following ploughing. Most of the material is understood to have come from one field (illus 1c), although one of the barbed and tanged arrowheads was collected near the Ythan, and one large retouched blade was collected from rough ground adjacent to the main concentration. Some of the pieces have rounded edges and ridges, signs of having been water-rolled. It is unlikely that these pieces derive from the same location as the unweathered bulk of the collection which was collected near the hilltop. The water-rolled material must derive from downhill near the Ythan. Given that the collection was of mixed origin a limited analysis was undertaken.

A full report on the collection is in the National Monuments Record of Scotland. Here the broad technological and chronological aspects of the assemblage are summarized.

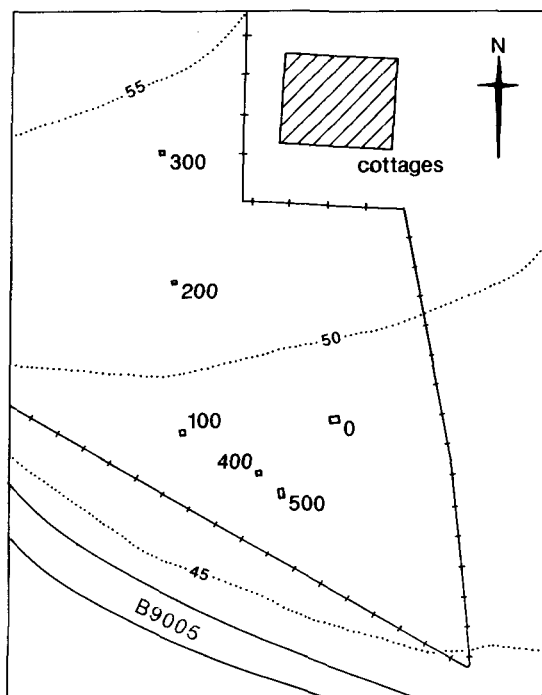
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LITTLE GIGHT BANFF AND BUCHAN GRAMPIAN



0 1 kilometre



10 0 50 metres

- excavation trench
- +—+—+— field boundary

ILLUS 1 Location of Little Gight Farm and of test pits. Based upon the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright

TABLE I
A summary of the cores and retouched pieces found

Type	Mr Buchan's collection	Fieldwork 1990
Cores		
Platform	31	–
Scalar	8	–
Amorphous	14	–
Fragments	2	–
Rejuvenation flakes	9	–
Retouched pieces		
Scrapers	36	3
Microliths	1	2
Oblique truncations	5	1
Notched & snapped	1	–
Notches	6	1
Barbed & tanged	3	–
Leaf shaped	1	–
Edge retouched flakes	16	–
Bifacially retouched pieces	3	–
Other retouched pieces	51	–
Gun flint	1	–

TECHNOLOGY

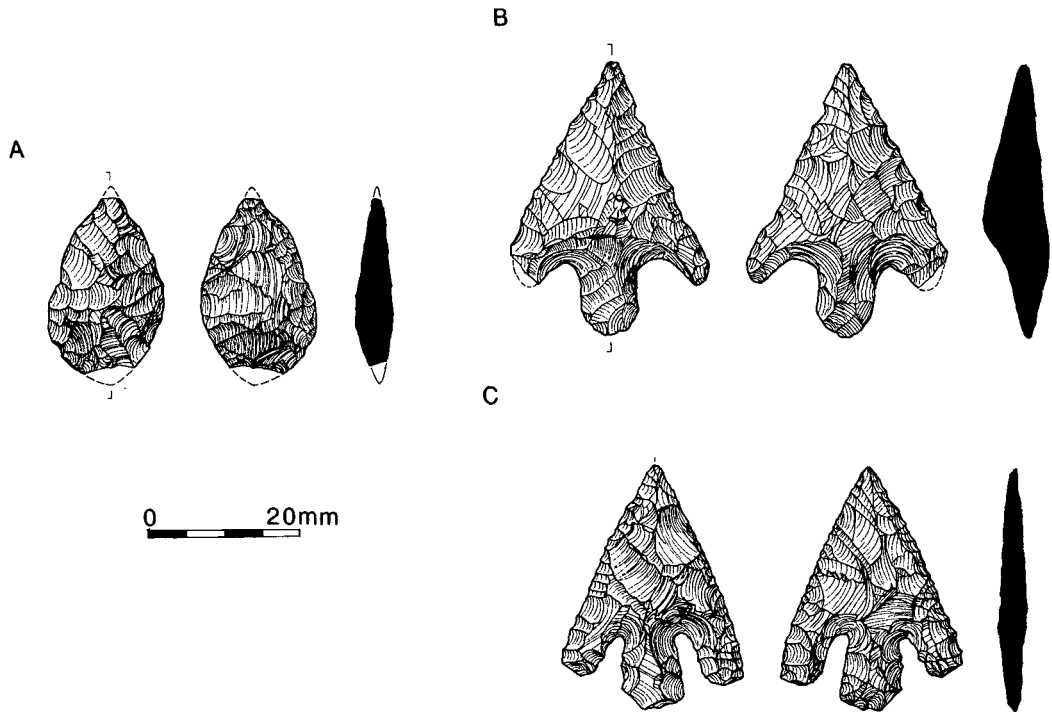
The assemblage had a total of 65 cores and core rejuvenation pieces including 14 amorphous flake cores, 31 varying platform cores and eight scalar or bipolar cores (Table 1). The amorphous cores are generally undiagnostic, and while the scalar cores may have a Neolithic affinity, they are not uncommon in Mesolithic assemblages. The platform cores include small conical narrow blade cores, typical of the Mesolithic, and platform flake cores, possibly of post-Mesolithic date. The most common method of production was to work on a split pebble, using the split surface as the initial striking platform. The cores have been worked to varying degrees, some cores being completely exhausted while other nodule fragments have had only a few removals made. The core rejuvenation products, all related to platform reduction, are typically Mesolithic, and imply a greater conservation of material than the poorly executed scalar cores and amorphous cores in the collection.

CHRONOLOGY

The collection includes a number of chronologically diagnostic pieces (Table 1). Certain aspects of the technology of the assemblage are indicative of a Mesolithic date for part of the collection: small conical narrow blade cores, narrow blades and one notched and snapped bladelet, possibly a stage in microlith manufacture. One definite microlith fragment was included in the assemblage.

Two barbed and tanged arrowheads and a leaf-shaped arrowhead (illus 2) were recovered. The leaf-shaped arrowhead is damaged but probably dates to the Neolithic, while barbed and tanged arrowheads are more typically associated with Beaker contexts. Both types, however, have a long period of use (Green 1980) and many examples have been found in Scotland (Hamilton 1983).

A spindle whorl, a musket ball and a gun flint were also included in the collections. The gun flint is well made and is of a fine black flint not found within the prehistoric assemblage. It is similar to English chalk flint and may be an import from the Brandon flint works.



ILLUS 2 Arrowheads from Mr Buchan's collection: A leaf-shaped arrowhead; B & C barbed and tanged arrowheads

TYPOLOGY: RETOUCHE PIECES

As with the technology, the retouched pieces indicate a mixed assemblage. There is a total of 130 retouched pieces and the collection is dominated by a variety of miscellaneous retouched pieces and simple edge-retouched flakes (Table 1). A diverse array of scraper types is also included. None of this material is chronologically significant, although the large number of irregularly made retouched pieces suggests that the bulk of the material is post-Mesolithic. Apart from the diagnostic pieces discussed above, the only pieces with possible chronological affinities are a number of obliquely truncated blades which may be Mesolithic (Wickham-Jones 1990).

FIELDWALKING

The area of the field indicated by Mr Buchan to be the centre of the flint concentration was divided into a grid and the 18 squares (10 m by 10 m) were walked by Stephen Carter and Bill Finlayson. The field had been ploughed earlier in the year and had a growing crop. All flint and quartz observed was collected. The quartz was collected partly to assess whether any had been struck deliberately, and partly as a control over surface visibility which varied due to uneven plant growth. Forty-one pieces of flint were recovered from a defined scatter within the fieldwalking area; 337 pieces of quartz (none worked deliberately) were recovered from across the entire area, suggesting that the limits of the flint scatter were not caused by variation in the plant growth.

The most obvious reason for the low count is Mr Buchan's thorough collecting – his collection includes pieces less than 10 mm in maximum dimension. The fieldwalking sample contained no chronologically diagnostic pieces. One multiple platform core, an inversely truncated flake and a fragment of a possible 'bec' all suggest a Mesolithic date. Such a small surface collection was of little value apart from confirming the existence of a small concentration in one corner of the field.

THE 1990 EXCAVATIONS

Prior to excavation, a geophysical survey was carried out by Geophysical Surveys of Bradford (1990). A number of anomalies thought to be associated with bedrock outcrops, but possibly with occupation deposits, showed up on the survey. The aims of the 1990 excavations were to test the nature of the areas highlighted by the geophysical survey; to investigate the extent and degree of concentration of the scatter; and to gauge the possibility of the survival of features (most probably negative) at the site.

Four test pits of 0.5 m by 0.5 m and two trenches of 2 m by 1 m were excavated. The larger trenches were placed to examine the most extensive geophysical anomaly and the densest concentration of surface-collected material. All excavated material was sieved through a 6 mm mesh.

All trenches revealed between 0.2 m and 0.3 m of ploughsoil immediately overlying the archaeologically sterile natural subsoil. The trench placed to examine the geophysical anomaly revealed that it coincided with bedrock outcrops, and it is probable that this is the case with the other anomalies. No features or surfaces were uncovered. The densest concentration of flint occurred on the southern edge of the site. The general diffuseness of the scatter and the small size of the sample from the test pits, indicate that the scatter became exiguous about 70 m north and west of the main concentration in the south-east corner of the site.

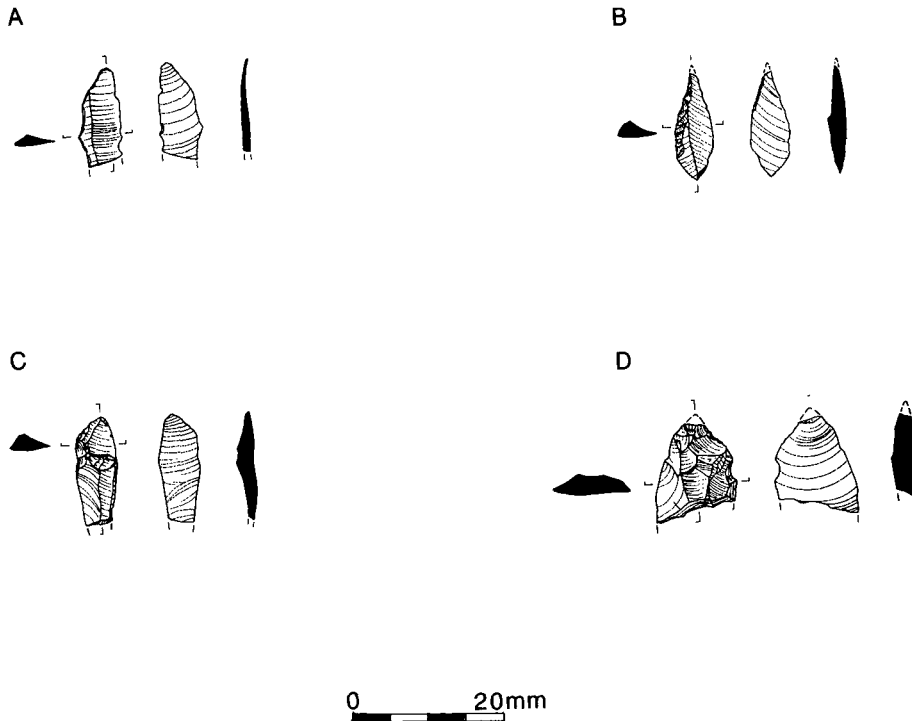
REPORT ON THE CHIPPED STONE FROM THE 1990 EXCAVATIONS

From the excavations were recovered 102 pieces of chipped stone: 73 pieces of flint and 29 pieces of quartz. The quartz consists of small pieces, apparently struck. Identification of the deliberate knapping of quartz, particularly with such a small sample, is problematic and it is possible that the assemblage includes flakes chipped during ploughing.

The flint is all of reasonable quality and is generally similar to the collection held by Mr Buchan. The pieces, however, are generally smaller than those from the surface collections, indicating that the excavated assemblage is the residue from years of collecting the larger items. This is reinforced by the relatively low number of pieces recovered. Despite the controlled excavation, there is little debris less than 10 mm in maximum diameter, which may indicate that the site was never used extensively for knapping.

The assemblage from the excavation reinforces the impression from the surface collections that the site is largely Mesolithic. Two further microliths were recovered, identifiable as narrow blade microliths. An oblique truncation, made on a proximal blade segment, is indicative of a Late Mesolithic date (illus 3). Five other retouched pieces – an end scraper, a thick discoidal scraper, two unclassified retouched pieces and a piece with a double notch forming a crude 'bec' – are chronologically undiagnostic. Four additional pieces had edge damage which may have been associated with use.

No cores were recovered. Of the 103 pieces, 82 are flakes, 13 blades and eight chunks (the



ILLUS 3 A microlith from Mr Buchan's collections; B & C microliths from the excavations; D truncated proximal blade segment from the excavations

last being mostly quartz). Ten of the flakes were identified as possible blade segments which, considering the predominance of platform (blade) cores in the surface collection, is not surprising. When the bladelet segments are included in the blade count, the proportion of bladelets rises to over 20%; this is often seen as indicating an industry in which blade manufacture was the primary objective of knapping strategy, and again indicating that the assemblage is principally Mesolithic.

CONCLUSIONS

Apart from modern pottery and nails, the only finds recovered from the plough zone were chipped stone, mostly flint. The bulk of the assemblage, small blade and bladelet fragments and the diagnostic pieces – a microlith, a possible microburin and a truncated blade/bladelet – would fit best in a Mesolithic assemblage. This supports the interpretation of the material recovered during Carter and Finlayson's fieldwalking but contrasts with Mr Buchan's collection which contains both Mesolithic and post-Mesolithic material. It is possible to suggest on this basis that post-Mesolithic material might be thinly scattered over a wider area but that a high proportion of the chipped stone from the flint scatter investigated relates to Mesolithic activity in this particular location. The low density of the scatter, even if Mr Buchan's collection is included, precludes any specific assumptions about the original character of the site.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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