

III: Hunting for the Gatherers and Early Farmers of Cheshire

An Investigation of Prehistoric Land Use in Chapel Field, Poulton

by **Kevin Cootes, Ron Cowell and Anne Teather**
with illustrations by Janet Axworthy*

This paper examines a residual assemblage of flint, chert and stone tools recovered during the excavation of a multi-period site located within Chapel Field, Poulton. Analysis has revealed early Mesolithic activity on the plateau overlooking the floodplain of the Pulford Brook and River Dee in the form of seasonal hunter-gatherer camps. The presence of possible late Mesolithic, early Neolithic and Bronze Age tools indicates reuse of the site. Further finds of a Neolithic polished stone axe and decorated stone plaque are notable for their rarity in this part of Cheshire. The level of interpretation that can be attained is limited by the absence of stratified material but is nevertheless important given that the nature of early prehistoric land use is still poorly understood in lowland Cheshire. The outstanding survival of later occupation suggests that better quality evidence of early prehistoric activity may be preserved elsewhere in the field, presenting the opportunity to increase our understanding of these elusive human groups.

Background Kevin Cootes

The Poulton project was initiated in 1995 as a community- and research-based excavation, with the primary aim of identifying the site of a lost medieval abbey attested in historical records. This twelfth-century Cistercian foundation was recorded as lasting for about sixty years, from 1153/1158 until 1214 (Emery *et al* 1996, 1–9) and therefore offered a unique opportunity to investigate an ecclesiastical complex in its initial form. The discovery in the late 1960s of a decorated medieval floor tile and human mandible by the farmer, Gerry Fair, on an area of agricultural land known as Chapel Field provided a probable location for the site.

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Excavation during the late 1990s failed to reveal the remains of the abbey but did uncover the foundations of a small medieval rural chapel with a secular graveyard (Emery 2000, 19–23). The accompanying material assemblage was unusual for a rural site and comprised a diverse array of not only medieval but also prehistoric (Mesolithic to Iron Age), Roman and Saxon finds. Subsequent excavation to the north revealed evidence of extensive occupation during the middle to late Iron Age, with the construction of a series of roundhouses within a larger enclosure. Resistivity survey has further identified multiple circular features across Chapel Field, consistent with late prehistoric structures outside the enclosure. The intensity of landscape use in later prehistory continued into the Roman period in both areas. Building material consistent with structures, field boundaries, enclosure ditches and industrial activity have so far been identified. Initial analysis of the material assemblage indicates occupation spanning the late first to late fourth centuries AD, with prehistoric finds occurring residually. Additionally, a significant collection of tenth-century Chester Ware pottery has demonstrated activity in the early medieval period. The combined evidence therefore identifies Chapel Field as an area of unusual preservation and long-term and intense activity, which is important in the study of ancient settlement and landscape use in rural Cheshire.

Location, topography and geology

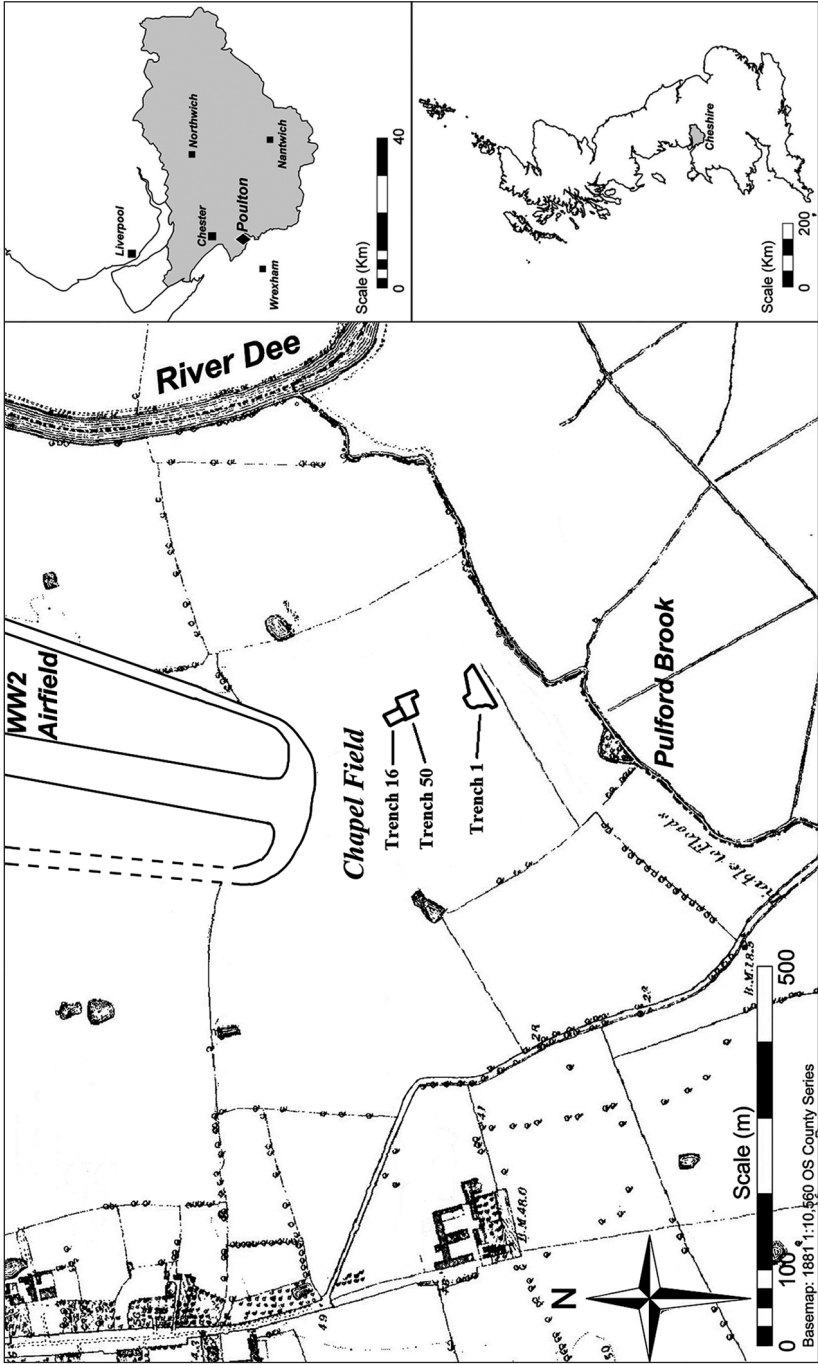
The farming settlement of Poulton is situated to the west of the River Dee, c 8km south of Chester, and is characteristic of the many rural communities that are found throughout the county (Emery *et al* 1996, 1). This small hamlet is surrounded by fields used for arable cultivation, which include the fifty-five acres of Chapel Field (SJ402584), situated to the east of the houses.

Chapel Field demonstrates little topographical variation, with the notable exception of the southern limit. Here the landscape is defined by a low but prominent shelf overlooking the floodplain of the Pulford Brook, which forms the boundary between England and Wales and flows into the River Dee approximately 450m to the east (Emery *et al* 1996, 1–3; Emery 2000, 7) (Ills III.1–2).

The area is covered by boulder clay resting directly upon Upper Mottled Sandstone (Earp & Taylor 1986, 69). Soils at Poulton are typical of this area of Cheshire, being dominated by argillic stagnogleys, in contrast to the Dee valley and Pulford Brook, which are characterised by alluvium. Although surface wetness is a major disadvantage to agricultural and pastoral activity, it is ideal for grassland (Furness 1978, 117).

The distribution of the lithic assemblage

Excavations over the past twenty years have focussed on the southern part of the field overlooking the Pulford Brook. Trench 1, covering approximately 20m by 40m, contained the remains of the medieval chapel, which proved to be underlain by Roman deposits and ditches. The investigation of the interments and other features within the secular graveyard produced residual finds of Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman and Saxon date. Approximately 80m north of the chapel, a series of middle- to late Iron Age roundhouses, Roman field boundaries and features related to industry were revealed in the L-shaped Trenches 16 and 50, measuring c 40m by 35m.



III.1.1 Location map showing trenches. (Scale 1/1000)



III Ill.2 Shelf overlooking the Pulford Brook, looking south-west

The majority of the chert and flint tools, and also a polished stone axe, came from the graveyard. Most of the remaining pieces were found residually in the Iron Age and Roman contexts in Trenches 16 and 50, while the stone plaque was recovered from the gully surrounding Roundhouse 1. A small but significant proportion of the assemblage was also recovered from a series of sondages between the two main trenches. The distance between excavated features therefore enables the material to be split into two broad groups based on the general area where they were recovered, representing separate areas of activity.

For the purposes of this article, the Mesolithic in Cheshire is taken to be the period from the end of the Devensian glaciation at *c* 9000 BC (Harrison 1994, 5) to the widespread adoption of Neolithic culture around 4000 BC. The division between the early and later Mesolithic occurs in the centuries around 6500 BC (Hodgson & Brennand 2006, 23). The beginning of the Bronze Age is taken to be *c* 2600 BC (Parker Pearson 1999, 77).

Lithics Ron Cowell

There are 305 pieces of flint and chert in the Poulton lithic assemblage, including the five worked fragments previously reported on by Shirley Ying Crompton (Crompton 1996). Twenty-nine of these are natural or have struck characteristics that cannot be confidently associated with human agency, and two are possibly post-medieval gunflints. There is an additional coarse-grained polished stone axe of Neolithic date (not included in the following figures, but *see below* for separate report). Of the 273 worked pieces of flint and chert, 229 are from Trench 1 and adjacent small trenches, associated with mainly medieval features. Forty-four pieces come from Trenches 50 and 16 and were associated with Iron Age and Roman contexts. The lithics were clearly residual in the contexts in which they were found, and there are therefore limitations on their usefulness in providing meaningful explanations about activity on the site other than where specific typological markers might suggest activity at a particular period. However, lithic assemblages in the lowlands of the North-West are relatively rare compared with areas richer in flint. Hence the documentation of the character of unstratified assemblages in the region is a useful first step in the search

for patterns that might lead to the discovery of assemblages with greater stratigraphic integrity. Even though post-depositional disturbance has taken place, many of the worked pieces are quite fresh and unweathered, suggesting minimal disturbance in some areas.

Raw materials

Table III.1 shows the make-up of the lithic assemblage at Poulton by raw material count. Flint accounts for 95.2% of the assemblage, chert 3.7% and indeterminate types 1.1%. In both Trenches 1 and 16/50 the main raw material comprises flint pebbles derived from the local glacial drift. These pebbles are generally small with rounded smoothed cortex surfaces that dictate the character of the knapping technology, which accordingly differs in a number of respects from chalk flint areas of the country.

Table III.1 Lithic assemblage quantified by type of raw material, trench and no of pieces

	<i>Trench 1</i>	<i>Trench 16/50</i>	<i>Total</i>
Flint	223	37	260
Chert	3	7	10
Indet	3		3
<i>Total</i>	229	44	273

Of the 260 assigned struck pieces of flint, 186 form the main type (71.5%) ranging from pale reddish yellow to yellowish red (Ying Crompton’s ‘honey or toffee’) through red to brown. They vary from a reasonably good quality fine lustrous flint, particularly the yellowish red and red material, to an opaque poorer quality flint. Grey types, from dark lustrous to pale opaque grey, account for 41 pieces (15.8%) of the assemblage. A very good quality lustrous rich brown flint forms the other main type, 12 (4.7%), while the rest, 21 (8%), fall into miscellaneous or indeterminate types.

Of the total assemblage, ten pieces are struck chert. In the trenches to the north of Trench 1, six of seven pieces of chert are dark grey banded and slightly lustrous. Chert occurs in pebble form in the drift geology in Cheshire, with rounded very smooth exterior surfaces, and also in bedded form in limestone outcrops in north Wales and north Derbyshire. However, there is no indication that the material from Poulton is from drift pebbles as the exterior surfaces through which this origin might have been identified have been removed. The nature of the material does though have some textural and colour parallels to struck material found on some Wirral sites (*see* discussion below), most notably at Greasby (Cowell 1992, 2012), which uses bedded chert, some of which appears to have come from north Welsh sources (Longworth 2000). Two of the three pieces of chert from Trench 1 are different, being of a distinctive jet black homogeneous texture; the remaining two pieces are miscellaneous types.

The assemblage

Table III.2 shows the make-up of the flint assemblage based on the main stages of the knapping process represented on the site, which can allow some insight into the range of activities being carried out. The small numbers for the northern trenches 16 and 50 make conclusions based on them of limited value.

Table III.2 Knapping stages quantified by trench and no of pieces

<i>Knapping stage byproducts</i>	<i>Trench 1</i>	<i>Trench 16/50</i>	<i>Total</i>
Small waste debitage	79	9	88
Un-retouched blade and flake debitage	86	17	103
Cores	12	1	13
Core rejuvenation flakes	4	0	4
Retouched implements	48	17	65
<i>Total</i>	229	44	273

Debitage

On the site as a whole, eighty-five pieces of flint and three of chert are classed as general small pieces of waste debitage such as chips and chunks arising from the knapping process. These are undiagnostic of period, although ten fall into the blade debris category. The latter can be classed as being related to the same technology that produced the larger, more controlled blade debitage removals, which tend to occur more numerous in earlier prehistoric assemblages (Mesolithic/Neolithic; *see below* for discussion).

In Table III.3, of the thirty-five un-retouched blades, only ten are complete. Eight of the latter are between 15 and 34mm long and 8 and 11mm wide. The other two are 41mm and 49mm long. Of the twenty-five incomplete blades with missing ends, sixteen are less than 13mm wide, making about two-thirds of the blade sample of relatively narrow proportions.

Forty-nine of the sixty-eight more irregularly shaped flakes and blade-like flakes are complete, all but five of which come from Trench 1. All but one of the latter group range in length between 21mm and 39mm and all but one are between 9mm and 35mm in width. Twenty-one of this category show traces of a bipolar technology with crushed and damaged points of percussion and damage on the opposite end resulting from impact fractures on a stone anvil surface (*see* discussion below). These are concentrated in Trench 1, with only one such piece coming from the northern trenches.

Table III.3 Larger flake and blade debitage quantified by trench and no of pieces

	<i>Trench 1</i>	<i>Trench 16/50</i>	<i>Total</i>
Blade debitage	27	8	35
Blade-like flake debitage	18	2	20
Flake debitage	41	7	48
<i>Total</i>	86	17	103

Of the fifty-nine flakes and blade-like flakes made of flint from Trench 1, seventeen retain greater than 80% cortex on the dorsal side, and of these six have 100% cortex. This suggests that just short of one-third of the flakes recovered in this area are associated with the primary stage of the working down of natural pebbles on site. A further twenty-one with some cortex

represent subsequent shaping of the pebbles, once much of the outer cortex has been removed, while twenty-one pieces have no cortex and represent the final stages of shaping and the production of blanks for retouch into tools. Nineteen of the blades from this trench have no cortex, with five of the other six having less than 15% (there are two further pieces of chert/indeterminate type).

Only one of the fifteen flint pieces from the northern trenches retain 100% cortex (the other two are chert). Twelve pieces have no cortex, including five of the six flint blades, mirroring the situation with the larger number of blades from Trench 1.

The nature of six of the seven chert pieces from Trenches 16 and 50, albeit only a very small sample, suggests that a different phase of activity may be represented in the north from that associated with the flint material in the southern trenches. The banded chert raw material has already been mentioned as suggesting a connection with north Wales, mirroring potential early Mesolithic activity at Greasby on the Wirral. The blade characteristics of this material at Poulton, including an obliquely retouched blade, also offers a little support for a Mesolithic date for this material. Four of the six pieces are slightly larger than the average flint blades from Trench 1, being between 30mm and 39mm long. A possible alternative explanation might be that rather than a chronological distinction this represents the use of a better source of raw material than is associated with the flint pebbles, thus producing slightly larger waste material. On balance though a chronological distinction is a realistic conclusion.

Cores

There are thirteen cores in the assemblage, representing the remnants of the worked-down original pebbles that were discarded (Table III.2). Five are little more than tested pebbles with one or two small blade-like scars removed, generally of poorer quality material. Of the other eight, there are five single platform cores that have been used to produce blades (eg III III.3.1, 1–3), three of which have had the final removals taken off in a bipolar fashion on a stone anvil, probably because they were becoming too small to work easily. One of these comes from the northern trench area.

The final average length of these cores is between 22mm and 24mm, except for one that is 29mm long. The proportions of the blade removal scars on the cores compare reasonably closely with the dominant size of the blade debitage on the site, but perhaps tending to be slightly shorter. Removals from the cores tend to be of bladelet width, between 6mm and 8mm, which is generally narrower than most of the recovered blades. By this stage the reason for core discard would have been the difficulty of working them further. There are four core rejuvenation flakes, all from Trench 1, implying that the raw material was carefully curated to ensure control of the blade production process. Three of these remove the flat striking platform edge down through the face of the core and one has removed the striking platform transversely.

Implements

There are sixty-five pieces in the assemblage that can be classified as retouched implements (Table III.4). Many of these are relatively informally shaped, often resulting from limited knapping retouch of a blank, or as a result of use-wear (utilisation), which makes

them difficult to date with confidence as they are not chronologically well defined as distinctive types with good dating associations.

Four pieces, however, might be associated with a more specific phase of occupation on the basis of their blade form and the nature of the retouch along their edges. These comprise a double backed blade, a bi-truncated blade, a blade with a single truncation, and an obliquely retouched blade-like flake (Ill III.3.2, 12–14, 16). These could be Mesolithic types on form (although *see* the discussion below). An invasively scale-flaked point (Ill III.3.2, 10), possibly an awl, on a long blade also stands out as distinctive within the implement category, the form of retouch suggesting a Neolithic date.

The scrapers are perhaps a class of implement with more specific chronological associations, although even here without being associated with dated contexts typological attribution of date can still be uncertain as scrapers are found throughout prehistory. There are thirteen scrapers, including two small, well made round types (eg Ill III.3.1, 4–5) that often have Bronze Age associations, and an uncertain form with a surface patina much altered by chemical action that makes interpretation difficult. Three less regularly retouched types are made on flakes, one of which is a bi-polar blank, with hollow concave scraping edges (eg Ill III.3.1, 9). The latter type is also common in assemblages of Bronze Age date. The other seven are small end scrapers (eg Ill III.3.1, 7–8), four made on blades or blade-like flakes and three on flakes, which can be ubiquitous on sites of a range of differing periods.

Table III.4 Retouched implements quantified by form, trench and no of pieces

<i>Form</i>	<i>Trench 1</i>	<i>Trench 16/50</i>	<i>Total</i>
Obliquely retouched pieces	1	1	2
Backed blades	1		1
Truncated blades	2		2
Informal utilised points	12	7	19
Retouched blades	2		2
Retouched flakes	4		4
Serrated pieces	13	4	17
Scrapers			
Thumb	3		3
End	5	2	7
Hollow	3		3
Composite	2		2
Abraded edge pieces	2	1	3
<i>Total</i>	50	15	65

Additionally, six flake and blade blanks with retouched edges can be included; seventeen pieces are utilised along an edge or part of an edge producing mostly quite fine serrations (eg Ill III.3.1, 6); nineteen are lightly utilised tips of blades or flakes whose association

with edge wear through human use, rather than post-depositional damage, can range from convincing to slightly ambiguous interpretations. These include four with spurred points along one side. Two composite implements combine end scrapers with other forms of retouch, while three pieces have continuous heavy abrasion along one edge or more. This could be from prehistoric activity, but the disturbed contexts in which they were found should be borne in mind as also being a potential cause of the abrasion. These examples are all difficult to date and could belong to any period, but the sixty-five pieces account for almost a quarter of all struck flint and chert from the site and point to a range of activities being carried out beyond the working of flint over a long period of time.

List of illustrated flints

III III.3.1

- 1 Blade core with bipolar platform
- 2 Blade core
- 3 Blade core with bipolar platform
- 4 Small scraper
- 5 Thumb scraper
- 6 Serrated flake
- 7 End scraper
- 8 End scraper

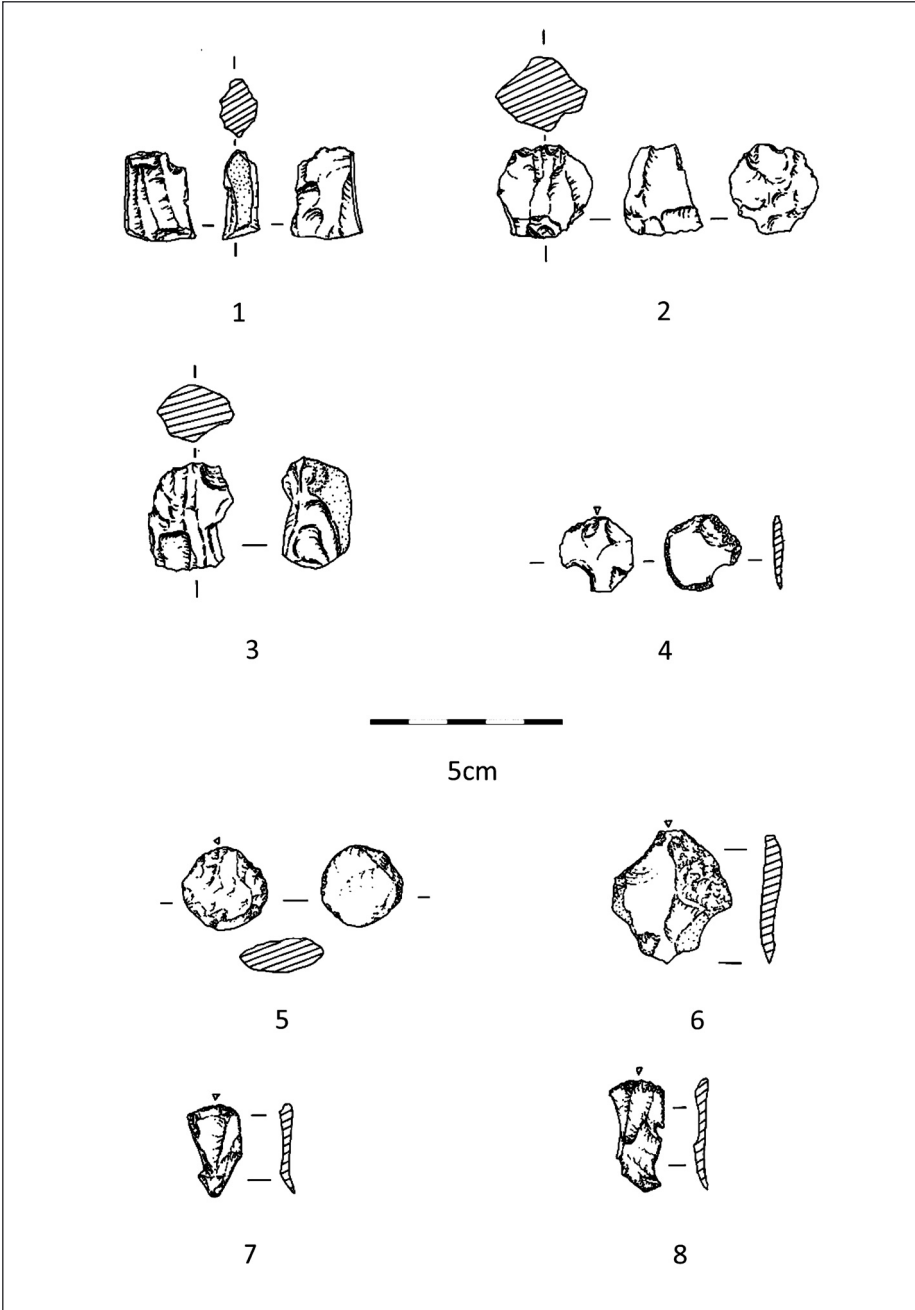
III III.3.2

- 9 Hollow scraper
- 10 Possible awl
- 11 Blade
- 12 Backed blade
- 13 Truncated blade
- 14 Truncated blade
- 15 Blade
- 16 Obliquely retouched blade
- 17 Blade-like flake
- 18 Retouched scraper

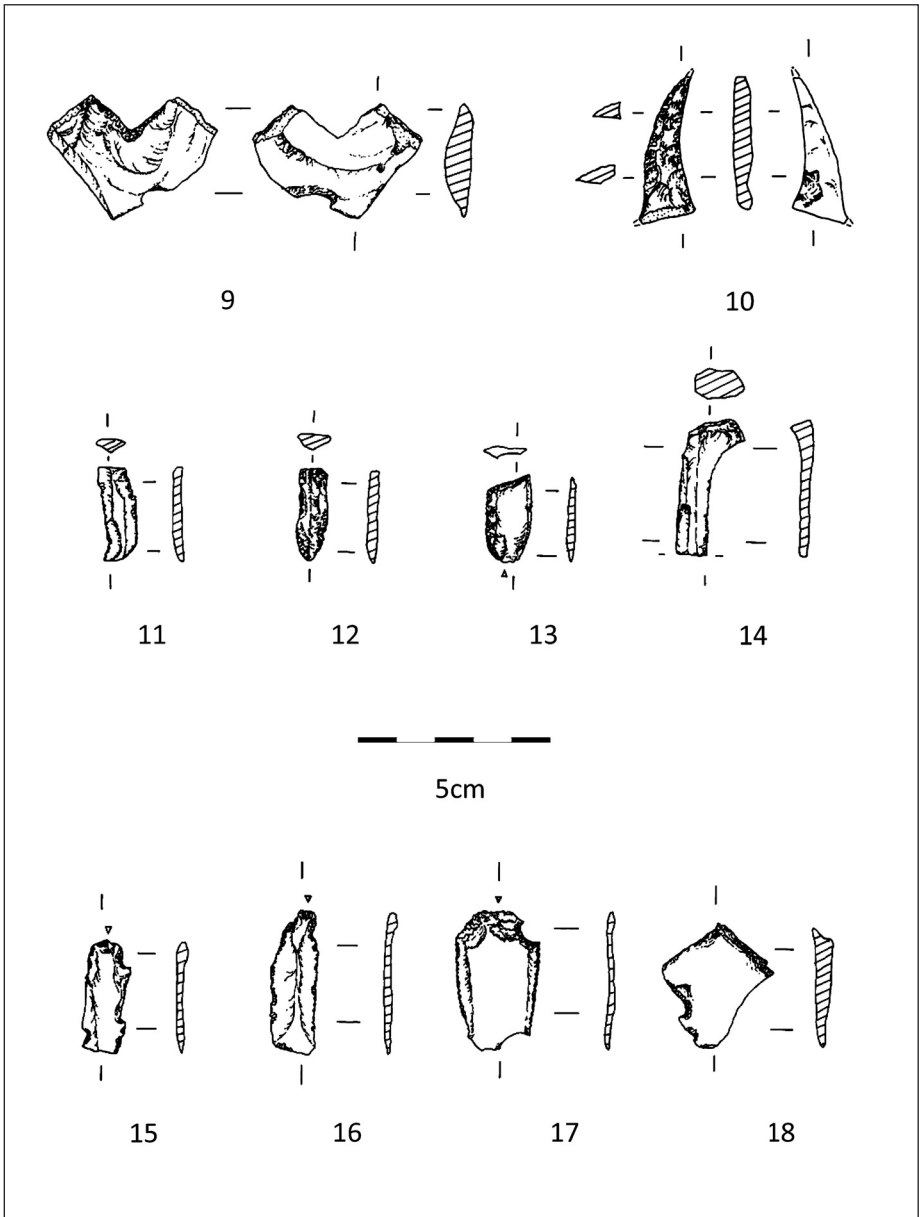
Discussion

The six pieces of banded chert from Trenches 16 and 50 are similar to the raw material used at Greasby on the Wirral for the production of obliquely blunted microliths and long blades, whose form, in the current absence of radiocarbon dates from the site, provide some expectation of early Mesolithic associations for this material (R Jacobi *pers comm*). There is also a total lack at Greasby of the micro-triangle form microliths that characterise the later Mesolithic period in the region. Most of the chert pieces from the northern part of the Poulton site would not look out of place in the Greasby assemblage. It appears therefore as if this material may mark the earliest phase of activity, potentially at some time around the eighth millennium cal BC.

It is worth noting as a qualification, however, that a sealed, stratified settlement at Lunt Meadows in Sefton, north of Liverpool, contains a large proportion of chert, some of quite similar appearance to the Poulton pieces, associated with late Mesolithic form microliths and a radiocarbon date of around 5800 cal BC (Cowell 2014). North Welsh chert also continued to be used in the late Mesolithic period on sites such as Rhuddlan (Healey 1987).



III III.3.1 Illustrated flints 1-8. (Scale 1/2)



III III.3.2 Illustrated flints 9–18. (Scale ½)

The main stratified lithic assemblage from Cheshire comes from excavations at Oversley Farm, Styal, in advance of construction of the second runway at Manchester Airport (Wenban-Smith 2007). This was a site with radiocarbon dates and pottery associations for Neolithic and Bronze Age phases of occupation, which included an assemblage of over 600 struck lithics. Some of this material is dark pebble chert from the gravels in the valley of the River Bollin, where the site lay. Banded chert, as found at Poulton, is not mentioned in the Oversley Farm report, which thus may hint at a western rather than an eastern origin for it. The two small pieces of chert with a matt black colour and homogeneous texture from Trench 1 are less distinctive than the raw material from the northern assemblage and could be from a different source.

Later Mesolithic assemblages can be associated with the production of blades, as is moderately evident at Poulton, and the incidence of small blade platform cores and end scrapers on blades here also might be thought to signify a late Mesolithic phase. The small group of four truncated and backed blades could also perhaps be used as further evidence for this period. However, the lack of more typologically secure Mesolithic implements such as microliths and the resulting micro-burin waste from their production leads to some caution in identifying this material as necessarily being late Mesolithic.

Several other excavated sites in the region have also produced similar assemblages to Poulton. These all, however, suffer from the same restriction in not being stratified and often have typological indicators of other periods. The nearest is a series of sites at Ditton Brook, near Widnes (Cowell 2000a and b). There, three separate sites lay in a very similar topographical location to Poulton, spread over a distance of *c* 100m on the slopes overlooking the flood plain of the brook at a point about 4km from its confluence with the Mersey. These were small sites with assemblages of between 50 and 250 pieces characterised by blades and mostly using reddish drift flint as raw material. However, two of them did produce a few microliths or micro-burins, although without associated radiocarbon dates as ploughing had disturbed many contexts. The only unequivocal features encountered were tree hollows on two of the sites around which the scatters were dispersed.

The radiocarbon-dated Neolithic phase at Oversley Farm also included blades, blade and bladelet cores and superficially microlithic forms including retouched bladelets as well as serrated blades and opportunistic exploitation of scraps of flint for irregular scrapers (Wenban-Smith 2007, 23). There, mainly translucent grey local flint from the gravels that lay close to the site was used in contrast to the dominant reddish and brown drift varieties at Poulton.

Thus, although a late Mesolithic element within the assemblage at Poulton is possible based on the evidence of the types outlined above which use a predominantly local raw material, these categories may just as easily be of Neolithic date. There is a small typological Neolithic presence in the form of the polished stone axe and the scale-flaked awl piece (III III.3.2, 10) at Poulton to further suggest the possibility that some or all of the blade associated material may fit into this later context.

Oversley Farm also produced a stratified assemblage of Bronze Age flint and chert that forms the main regional typological control for unstratified assemblages. The cores tend

towards bipolar or globular multiplatform types for the production of short squat blades, which contrasts with most of the core material from Poulton. The Oversley Farm assemblage also includes blades and implements based on blades during this later period, although a trend towards the production of flakes was noted through the period (Wenban-Smith 2007, 87–91). However, tools are dominated by scrapers with short curved, straight or slightly concave edges on scraps of flint and serrated edge blades and flakes, which also have parallels at Poulton. The serrations on the flakes and blades from Poulton tend to be finer than the Oversley Farm Bronze Age examples, although that may as easily be a functional difference as a chronological one. There are several small rounded scrapers from Poulton that could be of this Bronze Age date, and the more informal concave hollow retouched pieces would also fit into this period.

The larger numbers of miscellaneous retouched and utilised pieces from Poulton are harder to place within a specific date range and could fit any of the aforementioned periods. Seven of the sixty-five (11%) retouched or utilised pieces at Poulton occur on bipolar flakes, which contrasts with the finer blade technology of the potentially earlier Neolithic or late Mesolithic material here, which may suggest that the former could belong in the later period along with some of the scrapers.

The continuation of lithic technology into the Iron Age has been proposed in the past as being a real possibility (Young & Humphrey 1999). The northern trenches 50 and 16 contain a number of inter-cutting roundhouses. Apart from the small group of dark banded chert pieces from the northern trenches, however, the general profile of the proportions of flint debitage and tools in the assemblage here generally mirrors that of the larger assemblage in Trench 1 to the south. This implies that the lithics from contexts associated with the roundhouses in the north are likely to be residual rather than contemporary with the Iron Age features.

The stone plaque Anne M Teather

Summary

The plaque is a fragment and likely to have formed part of a larger piece. The shape of the fragment suggests that it may have originated from a rectangular rather than square plaque. The material is likely to be limestone. Overall it appears polished and abraded, possibly a result of pre- or post-depositional action. It has similarities with a rare form of late Neolithic plaque in terms of decoration and size. The fragment came from a residual context in an Iron Age roundhouse ditch and therefore could be Iron Age or earlier.

Description

The triangular stone plaque is 43.8mm long, 26.7mm at its widest point and 5.3mm at its narrowest, and has a variable depth of between 13mm and 17mm due to an unfinished base. The surface appears to have been smoothed and exhibits a number of incised lines *c* 1mm in width that extend into two of the three sides, and in one direction also onto the base.

Two linear lines follow the triangular shape of the face being 3.6mm apart at the narrow end and 9.8mm at the wider end. One of these lines is 26.5mm long and extends over approximately two-thirds of the face. At a length of 24mm, a separate line 1.8mm to one

side commences and continues for 13.9mm to the edge of the face, 12.7mm down the side and a further 16mm along the base. The other incised line continues for 34.8mm to the edge of the face, and halfway down the side for 6.5mm. Another incised line parallels this line of the face for 12.1mm, 2mm to the outer side of the design and also extends over the side the whole length of approximately 12mm and then 17mm along the base.

Crossing the two lines at an angle across the face are three further incised lines approximately 8mm apart from each other, creating lozenge or triangular shapes. From the narrow end of the face, the first line commences 8mm on one side and exits the other side of the face at 18mm from the end. The middle line commences 16.2mm on one side, exiting at 27.9mm and the third line commences 26mm on one side and exits on the base of the piece, 4.5mm from the corner.



III III.4 Stone plaque (not to scale)

Comparanda

Decorated small plaques in any material, such as stone, within Neolithic contexts are rare, although other types of chalk artefacts (such as cups and balls) are common in southern and eastern Britain (Teather 2016). While most chalk plaques can be described as having a single flat and decorated face, this fragment is similar to the polyhedral Tarrant Monkton, Dorset, chalk plaque (Teather *in press a*) as the decoration follows from the face onto an adjacent pre-smoothed surface. A similarly polyhedral chalk plaque was excavated from the midden at Durrington Walls village (Teather *in press b*), although on this piece the surface is raised and decorated. In terms of chronology, the Durrington Walls village dates to the late Neolithic (*c* 2450 cal BC: Parker Pearson *et al* 2007) and the Tarrant Monkton henge is thought to be of a similar date. Varndell (1999) noted similarities in decoration between the probable Iron Age Killam plaque with Neolithic decorations on chalk and pottery, and so the possibility of a longevity in chalk designs is paralleled. This plaque

could therefore be seen as late Neolithic, although more evidence of activity of this date within the excavation would be welcome.

The polished stone axe Kevin Cootes

A single example of a bifacial polished stone axe was recovered during the excavation of Roman-period ditches surrounding a structure predating the medieval chapel. This is a relatively small example with two principal and two narrow sides, 89mm long, 35mm wide, and 23mm thick.



III III.5 Polished stone axe. (Scale 1/1)

The axe is made from a fine grained light grey-green micaceous stone, with a broad blade in comparison to its length. It has suffered damage across the entire body and also the blade, where the striking edge has been removed. It is not possible to identify when the damage occurred, although post-depositional staining indicates that the majority is ancient rather than modern. Later reuse as a whetstone is evident from striations on the narrow sides, and also as a possible hammer stone from chips on the rounded distal end.

The residual context of the axe prevents discussion regarding the nature of deposition, with the added restriction that only a general Neolithic date can be assigned. Identification to source is also difficult. The light grey-green colour may be indicative of an imported piece, although the small size of the item may also be consistent with the utilisation of glacial till material, which is common in the locality (Mullin 2004, 15–18). This is, however,

a significant find for rural Cheshire. As of 2004 a total of eighty-one axeheads had been recovered from excavation and surface collection in the county, whilst demonstrating a general paucity in number in the areas surrounding Poulton (Mullin 2004, 18). Further stylistic and petrographic research may enable a more refined date and source for the axe to be obtained.

Summary and discussion Kevin Cootes

The lithic assemblage from Chapel House Field occurred residually in Iron Age, Roman and medieval contexts and is mixed, containing Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze Age material. Traditionally, such residual material comprises the most abundant category of prehistoric evidence available to archaeologists working in the region, but often forms little more than a footnote in many reports and publications. This approach is understandable given limited post-excavation funding and the resulting concentration on the analysis of well stratified material. However, it is worth exploring what a more focussed investigation can reveal about early prehistoric land use without the benefit of contemporary contexts.

At the most basic level, the presence of these finds attests activity on the site over a minimum of six millennia, with the earliest material dated stylistically to the eighth millennium BC. At the very minimum, the number of known early Mesolithic sites within the region has been expanded. Cowell's analysis further indicates that the flint and chert tools may represent separate periods of activity within the early Mesolithic period, based on the use of different material, for instance banded chert. The distance between Trenches 1 and 16/50 also supports the hypothesis of multiple episodes of activity during this period.

To expand our understanding of early prehistoric Poulton beyond that of simple chronology, an appreciation of the topography of the site is vital. The low plateau that defines this part of the landscape overlooks the floodplain of the Pulford Brook and River Dee. Extensive views and a varied complement of natural resources would have been available. In addition to a steady supply of water, plants and vegetation could have been utilised for food, medicinal properties, basketry and construction. Fresh fish and the small animals which live in such environs would have been readily available as a source of sustenance, in addition to byproducts such as bone for tools and pelts for clothing. Larger animals such as deer would also have been attracted to the area to water and could have been viewed and hunted by transient groups on the higher ground. The potential attractiveness of this area as a focus of activities was initially postulated by Emery (2000, 7), and the current evidence supports his interpretation.

Cowell's analysis of the flint and chert assemblage adds an extra dimension to our knowledge of the activities on the site. Although the eighty-eight fragments of debitage are undiagnostic as to period, they demonstrate that tools were being prepared on site, at least ten being blades. The identification of thirteen cores supports this conclusion. Admittedly, the residual and therefore chronologically mixed nature of the assemblage prevents firm conclusions on the nature of these activities, but the presence of scrapers and different forms of tool such as blades and awls indicates that multiple tasks were being conducted. Such a signature is tentatively consistent with multiple visits as a seasonal camp during the early Mesolithic period.

The dominance of locally sourced and therefore readily available materials may be the product of populations who were tied to the general area of Cheshire for at least part of the year, but there are also tentative indications of seasonal movements in the assemblage. The presence of banded chert in the early Mesolithic component is consistent with groups whose movements or contacts lay to the west of Cheshire, indicating connections to North Wales.

When the Poulton assemblage is considered within a Cheshire context, the local topography and mixed, residual nature of the material is seen to be consistent with the known distribution pattern of lithic scatter sites. Although Mesolithic activity has been identified across a wide variety of topographical zones (Hodgson & Brennand 2007, 36), there was a distinct preference for areas with high visibility, fresh water and diversity in plants and animals. Examples occur across the county, with a distinct cluster around the mid-Cheshire ridge and east of the Dee valley (Emery *et al* 1996, 51), for instance Ashton, Harrol Edge, and Alderley Edge (Higham & Cane 1999, 28). At Frodsham, a number of locations on the ridge have produced Mesolithic and later material as surface finds (Longley 1987, 37), whilst activity in the later part of the period has been confirmed at Farndon, Carden, Harrol Edge, Bickerton, Tarvin, and Kelsall (Crompton 1996; Higham & Cane 1999, 30). A further example, at Bache Pool near Chester, comprised a small collection of microliths and a single core (Carrington *ed* 1994, 19). The closest comparison to Poulton, however, occurs at the neighbouring settlement of Aldford. The topography is very similar to the southern portion of Chapel Field, being situated on high ground overlooking the floodplain of the River Dee. Twenty-five Mesolithic flint and chert items were recovered from the ploughsoil (Penney 1993).

Neighbouring counties demonstrate a similar pattern to the Cheshire sites, for instance at Hilbre Point, Thurstaston, and Red Noses in New Brighton (Longley 1987, 39), all of which are located on the Wirral peninsula. Proximity to water and commanding views are the obvious factors in these examples. Sites in North Wales are similarly concentrated along coastal and river areas, as at Tandderwen near Denbigh, Brenig and Llyn Aled Isaf on Mynydd Hiraethog (Brassil 1991, 49).

There are only a handful of stratified sites with which to compare the Poulton assemblage, the closest being at Tatton Park, Knutsford. Investigation of a hunter-gatherer camp revealed a series of pits, stakeholes, and 8187 pieces of flint/worked stone recovered from the edge of the mere. Similarities in topography are consistent with extensive views of areas frequented by prey animals, whilst the assemblages can also be paralleled with Poulton in the small size of discarded cores, the variety and general poor quality of raw materials and evidence of tool manufacture (Higham & Cane 1999, 1–29).

In comparison to the Mesolithic presence in Chapel Field, the Neolithic and Bronze Age material is limited but again provides insights into the nature of the activities that were taking place. Any such information is highly important in a regional context, as very few settlement sites have been identified for these periods. In this respect the Poulton material is consistent with the vast majority of assemblages, comprising flint scatters and random finds of distinctive artefacts such as polished stone axes (Hodgson & Brennand 2007,

39–48). A comparable site in the general area is Legh Oaks Farm, High Legh, where twenty late prehistoric flints recovered from ploughsoil were dominated by scrapers and cores (Nevell 2003, 122–4). Similarly, at Beeston Castle, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age flints were recovered from residual contexts in the area of the outer ward (Ellis ed 1993, 19; Smart 1993).

As well as the flint/chert assemblage, the polished stone axe and stone plaque indicate a diversity of activity in later prehistory. Although the former can only be given a general Neolithic date, the presence of such a tool is indicative of activity in the vicinity of Chapel Field. The discovery of a fragment from a decorated stone plaque is a first for Cheshire. The nearest sources of limestone are found between eight and 13.5 miles to the west in North Wales, whilst deposits to the east occur at a much greater distance of *c* 29 miles on the Carboniferous limestone of the Peak District (Pugh 1957). The similarity of the Poulton plaque with examples from Tarrant Monkton, Dorest and Durrington Walls village, Wiltshire, presents the additional possibility that this was a traded item from southern Britain.

In conclusion, analysis of the stone material from Chapel Field reinforces the potential of this site to contribute to our current poor understanding of early prehistoric economy and land use in Cheshire. Such an assertion is especially important as economy and land use for this region are still poorly understood (Hodgson & Brennand 2007, 33). When the extensive nature and outstanding preservation of Iron Age and Roman settlement in Chapel Field are taken account, there is a distinct possibility that truncated features directly relating to Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age activity are preserved within this field. Additional remains may await discovery in waterlogged deposits on the floodplain. The residual assemblage from Chapel Field therefore offers a tantalising insight into what may be preserved, with the potential to increase our understanding of early prehistoric land use in the region.

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