

# **An Archaeological Resource Assessment of Palaeolithic Leicestershire and Rutland**

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Note: For copyright reasons the figures are currently omitted from the web version of this paper. It is hoped to include them in future versions.

## **Introduction**

Very little is known about the Palaeolithic period in Leicestershire. What knowledge we do have is based upon a very biased distribution of artefacts, virtually all of which are surface finds and out of context. Only one, very recent, excavation has produced Upper Palaeolithic artefacts in context.

## **The Lower and Middle Palaeolithic**

With the exception of one area (Hinckley, in the South West of the County), the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic artefacts we do have are in the form of single finds and are predominantly handaxes. Since 1976 Leicestershire has had a tradition of amateur archaeology on an organised and widespread basis. These local groups have undertaken fieldwalking surveys in several different areas of the county. Despite this still only a tiny percentage (a maximum of about 5%) of the fields of Leicestershire and Rutland has been investigated. Of the 110 Lower and Middle Palaeolithic artefacts recovered from the county 32% were casual finds, 8% were found during systematic fieldwork and 60% were found by one man in a semi-systematic way in the Hinckley area (fig 1).

As Leicestershire was covered by ice sheets until the beginning of the Ipswichian interglacial (c.130,000 BP) and we have no highlands or caves, what finds we have from the Lower and early Middle Palaeolithic are found in the drift geology and therefore disturbed. The material collected so far (again with the exception of the Hinckley area) is predominantly flint - presumably because this is more easily recognisable by non-specialists than, for example Andesite or Quartzite.

There are obviously large gaps in our knowledge of Palaeolithic Leicestershire and Rutland. As Leicestershire and Rutland are on the edge of the undisturbed Devensian landscape our future findings on the Middle and early Upper Palaeolithic could, in some cases, be projected into lowland areas of our northern neighbours as a model from which to work. It is tempting to suggest further, more systematic and detailed investigation of the areas producing good evidence to date - such as Hinckley, Eastwell and Launde but we do need to spend equal time on areas of potential but which have no archaeological history. Leicestershire's plentiful river terraces, Palaeochannels and wetlands are an obvious place to start. We also need to encourage our amateurs to look more carefully for early lithic material perhaps showing Ron Waite's material as reference.

The Hinckley material, found almost exclusively by Mr Ron Waite, comprises a mixture of flint, quartzite and some tuffs, which has been recovered from varying drift geologies. The largest group is from The Thrussington and Oadby Tills (laid down in the Anglian Glaciation). Other groups are from Wolston Lake clay and Wolston glacial sand and gravel. The scatter of material found by Mr Waite continues well

into Warwickshire. There is a total of 29 verified implements (fig.2) including handaxes, scrapers (including transverse examples in Andesitic tuff) and choppers (only one other chopper is known from Insert Fig.1 Distribution of Palaeolithic Sites and Finds in Leicestershire and Rutland (North to right).

the rest of the county) and over 10 flakes. One of the handaxes is of particular note in that not only is it unusual in form but also it is from a Leicestershire source, Charnian Tuff. The remaining objects, which are mostly quartzite with one or two removals, have been kept but as they were not found in context and flint and quartzite pebbles abound in the area, we do not feel happy to state whether they really are “cultural” or not.

Amongst the handaxes from the rest of the county there are, in my opinion, two notable examples worthy of further mention. In 1993 a large Andesite ovate handaxe was found somewhere near Rearsby in the Wreake Valley (OHP). Unfortunately we don't have an exact provenance. This axe can be closely paralleled to those excavated at Waverley Woods in Warwickshire, which have been most recently dated to circa 500,000 BP. Rearsby and Waverley Woods and indeed Hinckley, are all on the approximate course of the “Bytham River”. It would be nice to think that the finding of this Leicestershire material could give further weight to the theory of early humans travelling inland along the Bytham.

The second axe is an unusually fresh and sharp black flint axe of Middle Palaeolithic (Mousterian) form, found on a ploughed surface on Cliffe Hill in Stanton under Bardon, in the northwest of the county. All other Palaeolithic material from Leicestershire (including other Mousterian objects) is recorticated, and often iron stained, at least to some extent. The condition of this axe confirms that the findspot, only 185m OD, was clear of ice by this period.

### **The Upper Palaeolithic**

Perhaps surprisingly, the fieldwalking projects around the county do not seem to have increased the number of known Upper Palaeolithic sites very dramatically. One exception is the work of an amateur archaeologist at Eastwell in North - East Leicestershire where several Upper Palaeolithic objects have been identified amongst large quantities of later flint.

An important find of probable late Upper Palaeolithic date was made recently at Launde on the Leicestershire/Rutland border. Here a dense scatter of around 3000 blades, blade cores, possible hammerstones - but very few finished tools, has been recovered during a rescue excavation on a pipeline course. 57% of the flints were recorded sealed in a thin silty clay layer thought to be a weathered surface horizon of the boulder clay. The site is on a commanding hilltop 190 OD with views to the north, south and east.

The recent excavation mentioned above was at Glaston, in Rutland, where a scatter of semi-fossilised animal bones, including woolly rhinoceros, wolverine and early horse (*Equus Ferox*) was recovered

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beneath medieval layers on part of a development site. Within this scatter - both in plan and in section - an early Upper Palaeolithic flint point, a core of the same period and a small number of micro-debitage fragments were found showing human activity within the site. The bones, however, showed no signs of crushing for marrow or human butchery. The deposits were sealed within a sandy layer in (or derived from) the Grantham deposits at the base of the Lower Lincolnshire Limestone, which lay as large slabs across the site. Either side of the site had been eroded by tributaries of the River Welland. One of these slabs appears to have formed the roof of a shallow cave, inhabited by hyena. Some of the bones show clear signs of gnawing, and hyena coprolites containing ingested bone have also been found. The wealth of environmental deposits will greatly enhance our understanding of that particular landscape in the Upper Palaeolithic. The potential for other Palaeolithic sites existing in similar areas of geology and interfluves should be investigated further.

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