

An Archaeological Resource Assessment of the Palaeolithic in Northamptonshire

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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.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The evidence for the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic in Northamptonshire has recently been summarised and briefly reviewed as part of the English Heritage sponsored English Rivers Palaeolithic Project (ERPP) (Wessex Archaeology, 1996). This paper has been prepared as part of the East Midlands Regional Research Frameworks Project to provide a brief statement of the current state of knowledge for the Palaeolithic period in Northamptonshire as well as a preliminary statement of issues for a research agenda and strategy. It draws on the data collected by the ERPP (with some minor additions and amendments) and considers this within the context of the local Pleistocene geological sequence.
- 1.2 The earliest evidence for human occupation in Britain is currently dated to c 500,000 BP and attributed to the warm period known as the "Cromerian complex" which predates the Anglian glaciation (Roebroeks and Kolfshoten, 1994). From c 500,000 BP until c 13000 BP Britain lay at, and sometimes beyond, the northern limit of human occupation.
- 1.3 The latter part of the Quaternary is characterised by successive warm and cold phases recorded most completely within deep sea marine sediments, although the correlation with terrestrial geological strata remains tentative. Unfortunately, despite some useful studies, the Quaternary geological record of Northamptonshire is far from being completely understood. Appendix 1 provides a simplified summary of the Nene valley's Pleistocene geological sequence.
- 1.4 Northamptonshire lies beyond the southern and eastern core of counties which are rich in Lower and Middle Palaeolithic finds (Roe, 1968, vii; Roe, 1981, 132-133). There has been no history of systematic Palaeolithic research in the county. Nevertheless, some 70 Lower and Middle Palaeolithic stone artefacts, mostly Acheulian hand-axes, have been recorded from a total of 31 locations. These finds comprise less than 0.5% of the "complex" level records on the Northamptonshire SMR.
- 1.5 Only one Upper Palaeolithic artefact, a reindeer antler "Lyngby" axe (Cook and Jacobi, 1994), has so far been recognised in the county.

2. THE NATURE OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

- 2.1 In discussing the nature of the evidence for this period the English Rivers Palaeolithic Project has drawn a distinction between *primary context sites* and sites where artefacts are found in *secondary contexts*, which have been disturbed and redeposited by natural agencies. Northamptonshire has no known examples of primary context sites, although the potential for such sites is considered in this paper. The only significant concentration of Palaeolithic findspots in Northamptonshire lies in a 15km stretch of Nene valley at Northampton (Wessex Archaeology, 1996, Map NEN-1). The poor quality of the existing database is most clearly illustrated by analysis of the data collected by the English River Palaeolithic

Project which shows that only 38% of the recorded findspots can be attributed a reliable 6-figure national grid reference and that the provenance of many of the older finds is simply unrecorded (appendix 2).

- 2.2 There are a few “surface” findspots, from fields or superficial construction works, which consist of one or two artefacts in “fresh” condition. The extreme rarity of Palaeolithic finds from fieldwalking surveys, for example none were found during the Raunds Area Project, suggests that these surface sites are very rare and perhaps comprise few diagnostic artefacts. Indeed some of these finds could be more recent introductions, as has been suggested for a hand-axe from Borough Hill which was found in association with apparently deliberately deposited late Bronze Age metalwork (Jackson, 1996-97). In 1997 trial trenching was carried out in advance of development on a site 50m from the findspot of a fresh Acheulian hand-axe at Great Billing. No further artefacts were found but examination of the geological deposits in the trenches led Dr Martin Bates to suggest that the hand-axe had most likely been deposited on a post-Anglian land surface (Parkinson, 1997).
- 2.3 The majority of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic finds have been made during gravel quarrying in the Nene valley where individual pits have produced small assemblages of up to 10 artefacts. Most of these quarry finds are in a “rolled” condition but a few appear “fresh”.

In principle Palaeolithic artefacts might be found in any geological deposits of Cromerian or later date. However, in practice most such deposits formed in glacial or peri-glacial conditions and comprise materials which have been reworked or redeposited by glacial and/or fluvio-glacial action. Primary context archaeological sites are unlikely to survive in such circumstances and the most that can be expected is to recover artefacts from secondary contexts, such as the rolled implements from the Nene river gravels.

Primary context sites are most likely to survive in fine-grained sediments deposited during warmer climatic stages and in relatively low energy environments, especially in locations closely associated with watercourses. The potential survival of such locations within the Nene valley has been demonstrated by the discovery of a pre-Ipswichian waterhole and animal pathway with associated mammal fossils beneath the river gravels in a quarry at Little Houghton, Northampton (Smith, 1995). Similarly well preserved sites may well survive on the margins of the glacial lake deposits which underlie the Nene valley at Northampton.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND PRIORITIES

- 3.1 It must be admitted that Northamptonshire has yet to make a significant contribution to Palaeolithic research and that the numbers of artefacts so far recorded in the county are tiny in comparison to the enormous timespan covered by this period. It therefore only seems realistic to consider whether there are locations within the county where further study might be of value.
- 3.2 For the Upper Palaeolithic the lack of any recognised stone tools is somewhat surprising - perhaps some isolated finds lie unrecognised in archive collections. There is also the possibility of “unexpected discoveries”, as in the recent case of an in situ flint knapping site found to the northwest of Corby in Leicestershire.
- 3.3 The few accurately located Lower Palaeolithic surface findspots would warrant further investigation to establish whether they represent isolated finds or larger activity areas, as has been demonstrated for some surface sites in Southern England.
- 3.4 Lower Palaeolithic finds from secondary contexts should continue to be recorded to contribute towards the broad picture of artefact deposition across Britain. Finds from pre-Devensian deposits, especially the

3rd terrace gravels of the Middle Nene and the pre/early Anglian Milton Sands, would be of particular interest.

- 3.5 The potential for primary context palaeo-environmental and archaeological sites should be considered in relation to gravel quarrying in the Nene valley around Northampton. Such sites would be of national importance.
- 3.6 Where Palaeolithic archaeology is concerned there is a need to work closely with other scientists involved in Quaternary research and to ensure that significant data on Quaternary sites is held on the SMR.
- 3.7 It would be useful if Palaeolithic archaeologists could give specific consideration to research questions focused on the contrasts between apparently marginal areas of early hominid activity such as Northamptonshire and the more intensively occupied areas to the south and east.

Appendix 1: A simplified summary of the Pleistocene geological sequence in the middle and upper Nene valley¹

Devensian	First Terrace deposits (Nene and Welland)
Ipswichian	Second Terrace deposits (Nene and Welland)
Wolstonian?	Glacial Lake deposits at Northampton
Hoxnian (+ later)	Third Terrace deposits (Nene) ²
Anglian	Boulder Clay
Anglian or earlier	Milton Sands

The River Nene did not exist until after the Anglian glaciation. Prior to this the Anglian glaciation the drainage pattern was defined by the catchments of the proto-Thames and Bytham Rivers (Rose, 1994).

¹ Sources: Horton, 1970 and 1989

² The 3rd terrace deposits are correlated with the Woodston Beds which may have been the source of Wyman Abbots finds in the 1920s (Wessex Archaeology, 1996, 72).

Appendix 2: Summary of Palaeolithic findspots in Northamptonshire

PROVENANCE	TOTAL ACC. LOCATED	MULTIPLE (c 6 FIG NGR)	CONDITION ARTEFACTS FRESH/ROLLED	

QUARRY	12	5	10	3/5
SURFACE	7	3	2	7/0
EXCAVATION	1	1	0	-
UNRECORDED	9	2	2	2/0

TOTAL	29	11	14	12/5

Source: English Rivers Palaeolithic Project (Wessex Archaeology, 1996)

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