ART. IV. – *Some Recent Finds of Stone Axes in Furness.*

By H. ROBINSON, B.A.

A number of polished and roughout axes have recently come to light in the Furness area. These recent discoveries further indicate much activity by prehistoric people in South Cumbria and suggest the presence of a working or settlement unit in the locality which has yet to be discovered.

Coniston axe (Fig. 1)

This small polished axe was found by two boys, R. Telford and N. Radford in July 1983 while digging around bloomery hearths on the western shore of Coniston Water, just within the Civil Parish of Torver. (Grid ref.: SD 3038 9539). The axe remains at present in private ownership.

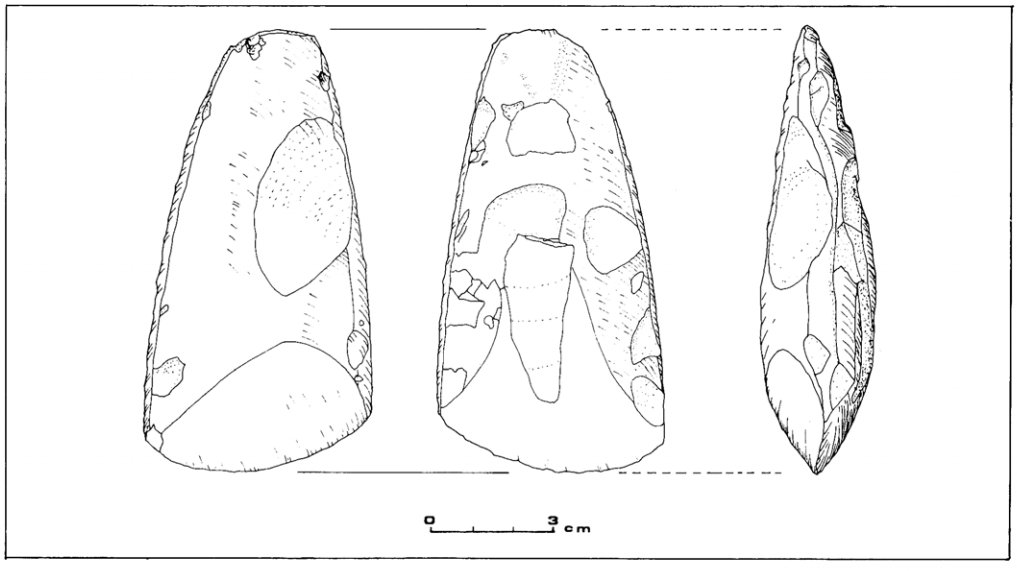

FIG. 1. – Polished stone axe: From west shore of Coniston. Found July, 1983
(Drawn by H. Robinson)

The measurements of the axe are:–

Length	110 mm
Breadth	55 mm (blade)
	27 mm (butt)
Thickness	25 mm
Weight	177 g.

The axe is heavily patinated, being nearly white. The outer crust is some 5 mm thick,

the inner sections are grey (visible from fresh flake scars). The sides are facetted. It is possibly of Group VI and of the later series.[1] The asymmetric blade and condition of the side facets are evidence of resharpening and there are several damage flake scars on the axe.

The site of the find lies below the 150′ contour. As with the Leece axe it is interesting to note that this axe type (Manby type 3C)[2] was found beside a waters edge. The Coniston find provides evidence of local use, rather than of intent for trading elsewhere. It therefore suggests the exploitation of the Lake District during the third or early second millenium B.C. The axe may have been used for tree felling and land clearance, home building and ancillary uses.

Leece Axe (Fig. 2)

A large roughout axe, typical of the Great Langdale axe series (Petrological Group VI) was found in June 1983 in Leece. (Owned by Mr Brian Read, 1984). The axe was found lying beside an uprooted gorse bush situated on the eastern side of Stank Moss. (Grid ref.: SD 2374 6875). One side of the axe surface is stained, which is probably due to it having been partly buried. The axe is large (350 mm long), oblong, symmetrical in shape and oval in section. A 'soft hammer' technique was applied to remove shallow flakes from both longitudinal sides. Final careful retouching of all the sides produced a fine edge, by which time the roughout had reached the stage ready for polishing. Manby[3] has distinguished several types of Cumbrian axe, the Leece axe falls in his Cumbrian type 10, Class A3 category.

The dimensions of the axe are:–

Length	350 mm
Breadth (butt)	60 mm
Breadth (middle)	95 mm
(cutting edge)	95 mm
Thickness	45 mm
Weight	2·2 kg.

Axes of similar size were found, for instance, at Ehenside Tarn (roughout, 14½ ins. long), Conishead Priory (partly polished, 14⅝ ins. long), Newton-le-Willows, Lancs. (polished, 17½ ins. long) and Scaleby Moss, (polished, 15 3/5 ins. long).[4]

Although roughout axes of Cumbrian type have been found outside the Lake District,[5] by far the greatest number are found within the region. The Furness Peninsula represents the furthest southerly distribution for roughout axes in Cumbria. It is also an area in which a quantity of Group VI axes have been found over the years.[6] A polished axe found at Leece is now lodged in the Ruskin Museum, Coniston.[7] There is also a roughout axe found in the garden of "Carrick", Leece Village, 1975 by Dr Forbes and owned by him and described below. A large sandstone polishing stone (presumed prehistoric) was found in Roose Moss buried 2-3 feet down in peat and bog oak (Barrow Museum records; *North West Evening Mail*, 3 May 1908; Barrow Museum 5027). These sites taken together suggest a possible polishing site near Stank and Roosecote Mosses.

The early farmers of the Neolithic period established marketing networks for the Great Langdale axes that exceeded in distance and quantity those for any other axe type.[8]

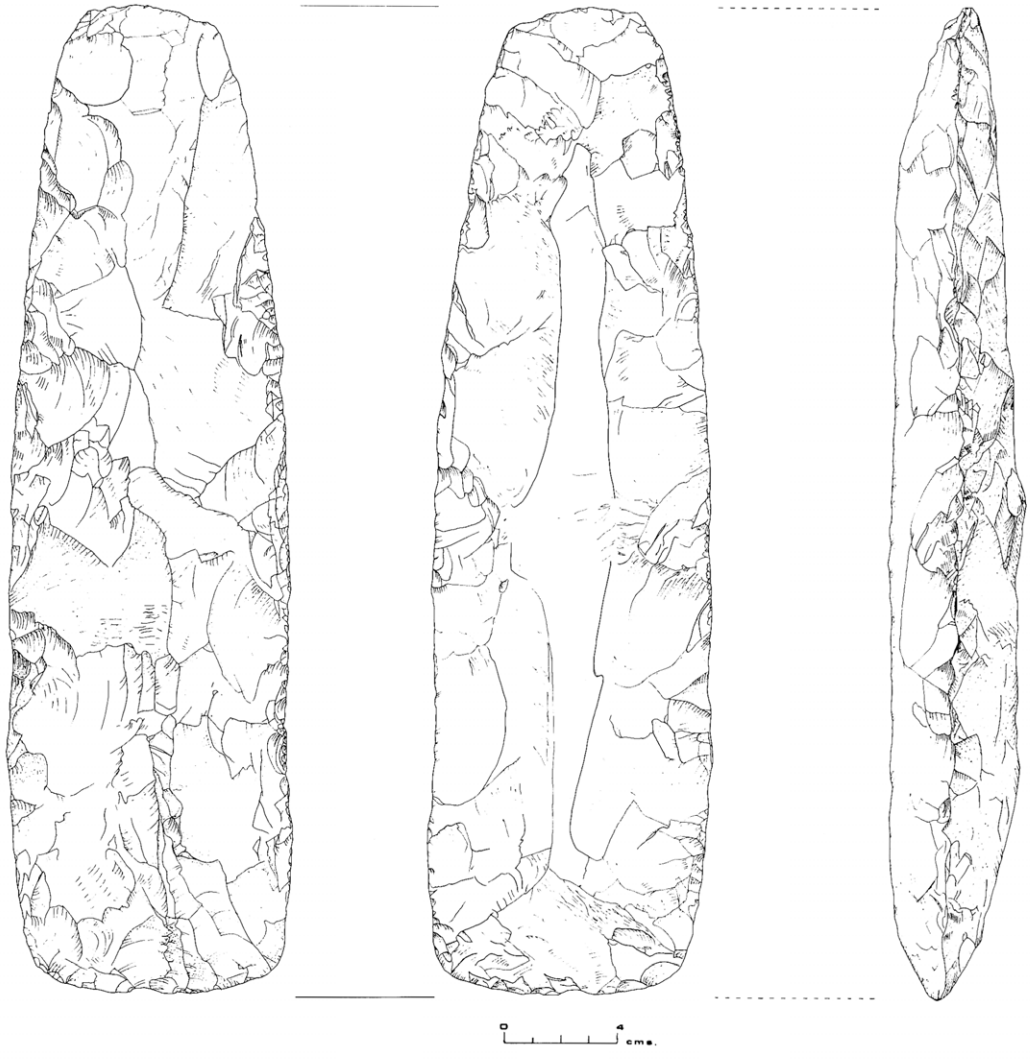

FIG. 2. – The Leece Axe.

(Drawn by H. Robinson)

Despite this knowledge, little is known of where the actual axe finishing sites occurred, apart from Ehenside Tarn.[9]

Sand (or sandstone) and water were the most likely abrasives used to reduce the rough surface of the axe to a polished form. The West Coast of Cumbria and from the Duddon Valley to Walney Island are areas which would have been suitable for polishing or finishing sites. Axe flakes were found on Walney Island, at the North End,[10] at Hillock Whins,[11] and at Sandy Gap.[12]

The Leece site occupies an area of glacial sand, overlooking Roosecote, Stank and Leece Mosses, which are made up of peat deposits. (Institute of Geological Services Map, Sheet 58). Boulder clay drumlins lie to the north-east (towards the village of

Leece). The peat is underlain by marine and estuarine alluvium, and to the south the coastal fringes are made up of older storm beach and storm beach matrix.

If, during the Neolithic period (c. 3500–2000 B.C.) the areas which now are mosses were open expanses of water, the Leece area would have been a suitable site for settlement and for finishing axes. Pollen or diatom analysis may show whether this was the case. The finished axes could then have been freely distributed throughout Cumbria and beyond.

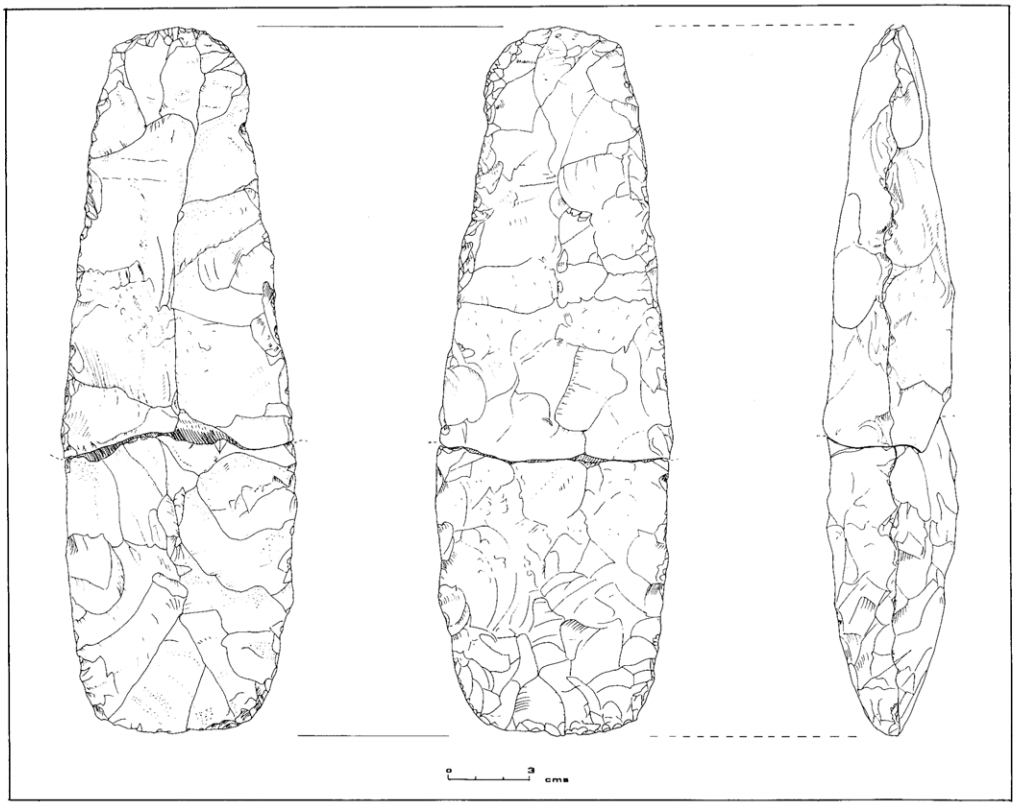

FIG. 3. – Carrick Axe.

(Drawn by H. Robinson)

"Carrick" Axe, Leece Village (Fig. 3)

Two portions of a roughout axe (which fit together to make one whole) were found in December 1975, by Dr J. R. Forbes, near soil which had been excavated from the garden of "Carrick" (Grid ref.: SD 2424 6942) in preparation for building an extension to the house. It remains in Dr Forbes' ownership. The axe was broken in the middle on a hinge fracture. The blunted edges around the break suggest this occurred in antiquity.

The axe measures:–

Length	330 mm
Breadth (butt end)	54 mm
(blade end)	81 mm
Thickness	46½ mm
Weight	1·15 kg.

There is no patination on the surface of the axe. This could be due to it being buried in an anaerobic environment. It is of a dark olive green colour and has been finely flaked across the surface. The rock is of a fine grained volcanic tuff, probably Group VI, and shows considerable banding. A fine sheen across the surface of the axe is probably due to handling.

The site is situated between the 30 m and 38 m contour line and overlooks Leece Tarn. Leece, Stank and Roosecote Mosses lie within ½ mile of this site and Peasholme Farm, where another small polished axe was found is just over a mile away.

Rampside Axe (Fig. 4)

This small polished axe was found in 1975 by Mr G. Kirkbride, of Barrow, when working in a potato field at Peasholme Farm (Grid ref.: c. SD 2465 6771). The axe was discovered as it passed along the rollers of a mechanical sorting machine, separating potatoes from stones.

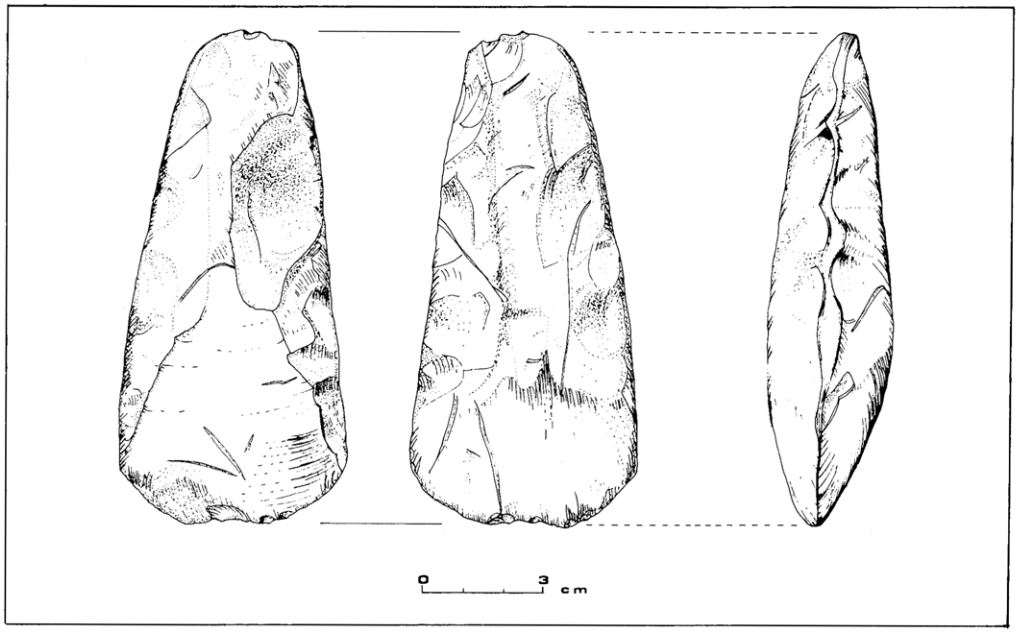

FIG. 4. – Rampside Axe.

(Drawn by H. Robinson)

The measurements of the axe:–

Length	122 mm
Breadth (blade end)	57 mm
(butt end)	38 mm
Thickness	32 mm
Weight	230 g.

The surface of the axe is patinated light-grey in colour and much scored, where ploughshares in the past have scraped across it. The deeper scars (some 0·5 mm deep) show a light blue-grey colour. There are a number of damage flake scars along the sides of the axe and smaller chips missing from the cutting edge. The flake scar edges are worn and abraded, probably as a result of being churned about in plough soil for a long time.

The axe was made from a volcanic tuff and is probably of the Langdale series (Petrological Group VI). It is similar in shape and design to the Coniston axe described above, being only marginally longer and more tapered towards the butt. Both axes have a large deep flake scar missing from the side of the butt. This is in an area where the axes will have been hafted and possibly resulted from pressure and friction transmitted by blows at the cutting edge when in use.

The Rampside axe has not been resharpened, whereas the Coniston axe has. It is difficult to determine whether the Rampside axe had facetted sides or not, due to the abrasion received subsequent to deposition.

This axe was found in an area of low undulating hill land (c. 18 m OD) overlooking a glacial valley (Sarah Beck) draining naturally into Morecambe Bay. The soil is of a brown-red sandy type and well drained. It supports at present pasture land. The nearby valley area of Sarah Beck is now mostly drained. Roosecote, Stank and Leece Mosses lie to the north and upper section of this valley and Morecambe Bay is to the south-east.

Ormsgill Axe (Fig. 5)

The butt end of a roughout axe was found in 1981 by Mr C. Leversley of Ulverston (Barrow Museum Acq. No. 812600). Mr Leversley was working for the North West Electricity Board "digging out a hole for a service cable at Low White Close, Ormsgill." The axe was buried in clay about 2 foot down in amongst a "lot of water" (Grid ref.: c. SD 1953 7170).

The axe measurements:–

Length	190 mm
Breadth (butt)	54 mm
(break)	85 mm
Thickness	47 mm
Weight	735 g.

One surface of the axe is heavily patinated off-white, the reverse side bears grey-blue stains. This outer crust is some 5 mm to 10 mm thick in places. The greatest amount of

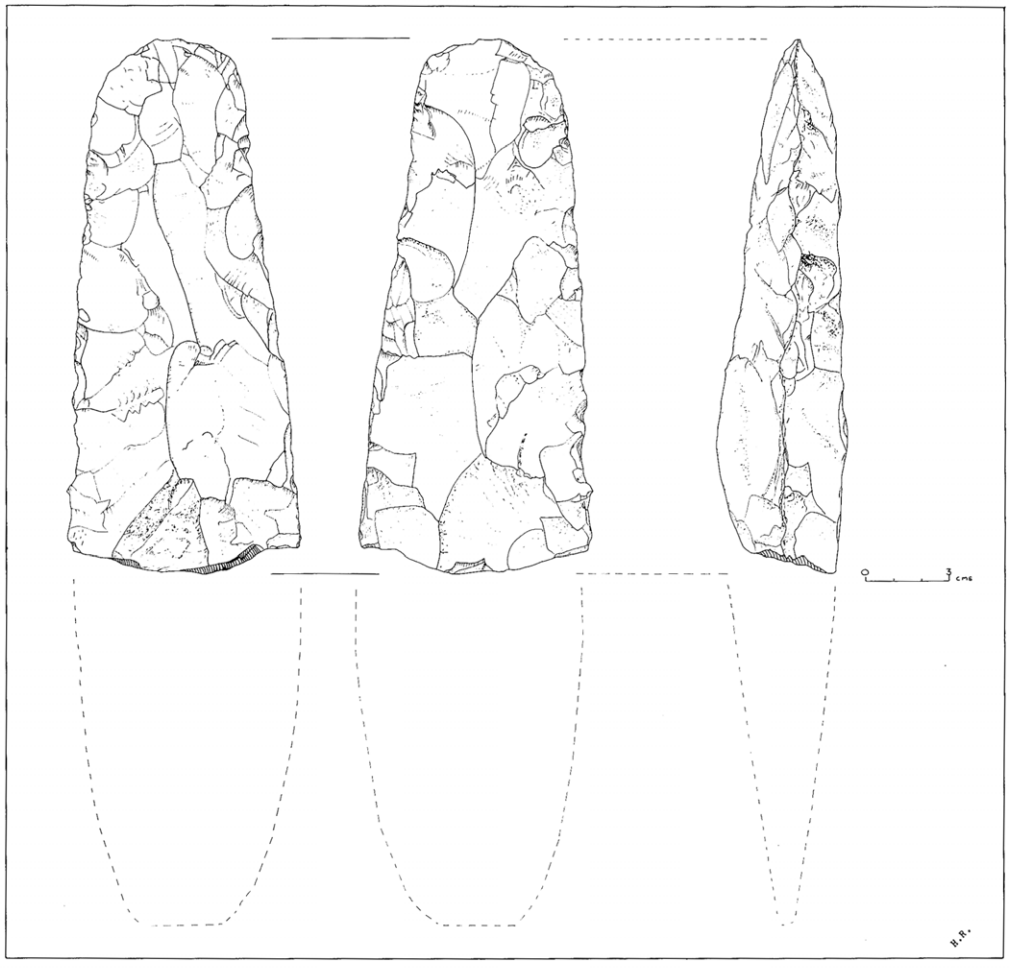

FIG. 5. – Ormsgill Axe.

(Drawn by H. Robinson)

oxidation occurs where the break is situated. Modern chips to the axe reveal the inside core to be a grey-blue volcanic tuff, typical of the Langdale series.

Interestingly, the break to the axe was approximately in the middle and as such virtually identical to the break that the "Carrick" Leece axe received. This may characterize or denote a weakness in the roughout axe shape or a fault in the tuff.

The axe find spot lies between the 15 m and 23 m contour overlooking Walney Channel. The sand-dune sites of Roanhead and Sandscale are situated some 3 km (1¾ miles) to the north. Walney North End lies approximately 1½ km to the north-west across the Walney Channel. It is possible to postulate that much of the above named area would have been wooded in Neolithic times (3500–3000 B.C.), that Walney was much larger than it is today and most likely not an island at all, but joined to the mainland. Evidence for this comes from peat and macro-fossil finds of vegetation within the peat dredged from Walney Channel[13] and from recent pollen studies undertaken by

Prof. F. Oldfield[14] off the west shore of Walney. The prehistoric site (L.N.E.B.A.) on North End Haws, Walney Island, is well known. Axe flakes and polished axes have been found there in the past and the site has been recognized as one of the local sites that may have been used for 'finishing' axes.[15] It may have been intended, therefore, that the Ormsgill axe be ground and polished nearby; the finished product being for use locally, or for possible distribution elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

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[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*
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[5] *Ibid.*
[6] For Roosecote Red sandstone polishing stone see F. Barnes, CW2, lxiii, 27-30; T. G. Manby (1979), *op. cit.*; B. Bunch and C. I. Fell, 'A stone axe factory at Pike of Stickle, Great Langdale', *Proceedings of the Prehistory Society*, xv (1949), 1-21.
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