

## RECENT FINDS OF FLINTWORK, OLDBURY FLATS, SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE

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### INTRODUCTION

This note describes recent finds of worked flint from both stratified and unstratified contexts on the foreshore of the middle Severn Estuary at Oldbury Flats, South Gloucestershire. They supplement earlier collections, totalling *c* 2000 items, and further demonstrate the prehistoric importance of this site. The new stratified contexts date largely from the mid 6th to late 5th millennium BC, affording evidence for a previously not fully recognised phase of late Mesolithic activity.

There is a long record of prehistoric and later activity at Oldbury Flats and the neighbouring wetlands to the east and southeast. Coastal erosion has exposed primary contexts and released significant quantities of now unstratified worked flint and other lithologies of Neolithic and Bronze Age dates (Allen 1990, 1998a; Brown 2007). Animal bones and footprint-tracks preserved in the late Neolithic sediments suggests stock-grazing by pastoral communities on the wetland margins of the estuary. Excavations in advance of new silt-ponds at the Oldbury Power Station yielded a small assemblage of Bronze Age flintwork (Hume 1992), similar to intertidal finds (Allen 1998a), as well as structural evidence for a settlement of early-mid Bronze Age date. Iron Age finds are more limited, comprising a little pottery (Allen 1998b), a possible fishing hedge (Allen and Fulford 1992) and a previously unrecorded fishing basket, both preserved in a large palaeochannel. Later, a substantial but dispersed Romano-British settlement became established (Green and Solley 1980; Allen and Fulford 1987, 1992; Hume 1992; Allen and Rippon 1997), which was involved in iron-making and seems to have included at least one high-status building (Allen and Davidson, this volume).

Prehistoric activity is also apparent at Oldbury-on-Severn village nearby to the southeast of the Flats. Isolated struck flints of indeterminate age are known and there is a record of a formerly erect standing stone (SMR South Gloucestershire SG2335). Oldbury Camp, a possible Iron Age double-bank and ditch hillfort of *c* 4.5 ha (Sylvester 2004), has yielded pottery of this date, together with Romano-British pottery and coins and also medieval sherds (Iles 1980; SMR South Gloucestershire SG2334).

### CONTEXTS

Oldbury Flats lies on the eastern shore of the Severn Estuary about 1 km northwest of Oldbury-on-Severn village (Figure 1). It consists of an extensive, undulating bedrock platform of Triassic mudstones with thin sandstones (Welch and Trotter 1961), cut by sand-filled ice-wedge casts of probably Late Pleistocene (Allen 1984). Holocene sediments of the middle Wentlooge Formation are exposed as a series of geographically restricted outcrops of alternating estuarine silts and peats, ranging in date from 5530-2210 Cal BC (Druce 2005) and in elevation from -1.5 m to +4.4 m OD (Brown 2007). At these locations, the Holocene sequence typically includes a diachronous, grey, sandy-pebbly palaeosol, locally merging into peat, that grades up from the bedrock. Because of the unevenness of the bedrock surface, which dips especially deeply toward Oldbury Pill, as many as four individual peat beds are locally evident. Two peats of late Mesolithic date are exposed at the lowest elevations (-1.5 to +0.8 m OD) at Sites A, C and G. At Sites D, E and F, at a higher level (*c* +1.5-2.8 m OD), a further peat is exposed, and a still higher bed just *c* 0.01 m thick occurs at +4.4 m OD toward the base of the salt-marsh cliff. This cliff reveals exposures of the post-medieval

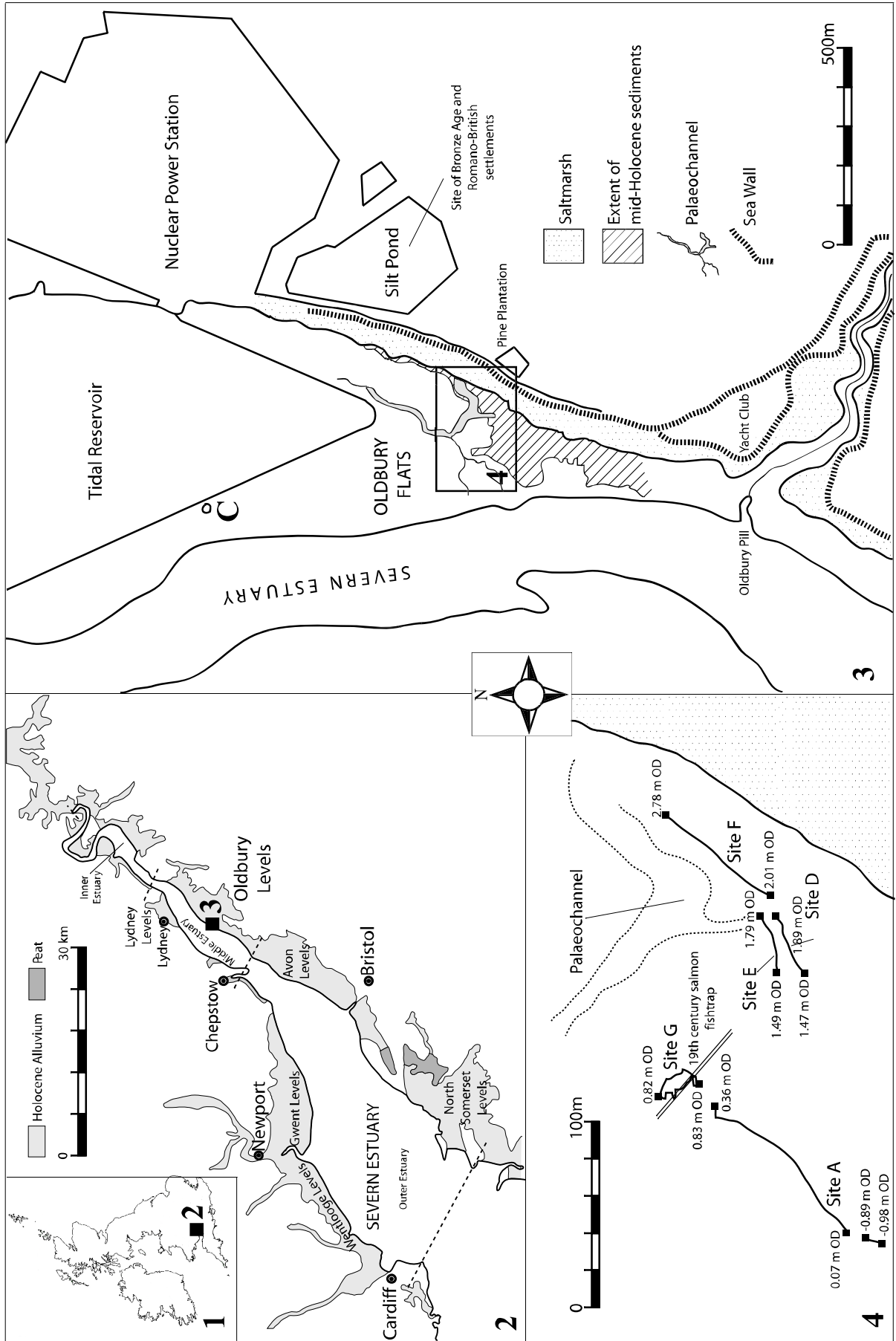


Figure 1. Location of Oldbury Flats. 1 after Allen (1998a), 4 after Riley (1998).

Rumney, Awre and Northwick Formations of salt-marsh origin (Allen and Rae 1987; Allen and Fulford 1992). Two primary, stratified contexts within the Holocene sequence have yielded flintwork.

Site F, centred on British National Grid Reference ST 6014 9368, is a shelf-like exposure of reed peat seen for a distance of *c* 60 m to the southeast of the large palaeochannel which crosses the bedrock surface before passing beneath the modern salt marsh (Figure 1). It lies close to Allen's (1998a) sondage. The upper surface of the peat and overlying estuarine silts are locally rich in animal footprint-tracks and trails and abundant flecks of charcoal and charred reeds. A thin 0.02 m layer of blue-grey, estuarine silt underlies the peat, in turn sealing an olive-grey sandy-pebbly palaeosol *c* 0.06 m thick. The peat is undated but is most probably contemporary with the bed at Site D, assigned broadly to the Neolithic.

Site G, the second stratified context, lies further out on the foreshore (Figure 1). Centred on ST 6000 9357, it is an isolated outcrop of Holocene sediments some 10 x 20 m in extent. The exposed reed peat is heavily eroded and grades up from an olive-grey sandy-pebbly palaeosol. The bed is undated but is most probably contemporary with the peat seen at Site A to the south and to the northwest at Site C, where the impounding wall of the tidal reservoir crosses a shallow bedrock valley. At both sites the peat is dated to the late Mesolithic.

The unstratified context lies in the upper part of the tidal frame and is a relatively narrow zone which ranges for a few hundred metres along the shore chiefly upstream of these primary contexts. Here flintwork is concentrated by wave-action in small patches of coarse, mainly Triassic debris at high-tide levels, and can be retrieved by repeated, systematic line-walking when the foreshore is clear of mud. The close similarity with stratified material from the wetland (Hume 1992; Allen 1998a) and from the foreshore leaves little doubt that it came from intertidal primary contexts, for some of which there may no longer be direct evidence.

## FLINTWORK

### *Stratified contexts*

Table 1 summarizes the finds of flintwork, which for continuity are classified as in Allen (1998a). The stratified contexts yielded a total of 15 flints, of which 12 are from Site F and three from Site G; a few fragments of other lithologies occur at Site F. Light grey as well as the better-quality dark grey flint are present at both sites but no chert was recorded

Site F is dominated by shatter and mainly small flakes, retrieved during limited excavations in the summers of 2001 and 2003. Most of the flakes came from the base of the peat exposed along the eroding edge of the shelf, whereas the shatter was largely retrieved from bulk samples sieved in the laboratory. The only retouched item is a thumb-nail scraper 24 mm across in light grey flint. The palaeosol yielded three fragments from two different cobbles of heat-fractured, off-white to light grey quartzite.

Site G yielded little: a piece of shatter, a small flake, and a small, roughly formed scraper in dark grey flint.

### *Unstratified context*

Collecting over a period of a decade has yielded much more from the unstratified context (Table 1). A wider range of flint is represented and there is some chert. Heat-fractured cobbles of light grey quartzite are also recorded, but no representatives of the other worked lithologies earlier reported (Allen, 1998a).

Shatter and flakes predominate and unutilized blades are few. Cores are common. They are chiefly on the small side, averaging 12.2 g in weight (range 2.7-41.3 g), and are seldom well-formed. The smallest has a parabolic profile and another somewhat larger is also roughly parabolic but narrow. A third of middling weight has a shallow parabolic profile. The remainder are best described as irregular, with removals coming from a number of directions. As found, these various cores could have yielded only very small to small flakes and blades. Dark grey flint affords most of the retouched items: blades up to 52 mm long and a well-formed, thumb-nail

Table 1. Composition of the stratified and unstratified struck flint assemblages.

Category	Shatter	Flakes	Blades	Cores	Tools	Heat fractured quartzite	Heat fractured flint	Total
<b>Site F stratified assemblage</b> (*base of the peat sealing old land surface **old land surface +surface of peat)								
Light grey flint	3 (1*/2**)	1*	-	-	1*	-	-	5
Dark grey flint	2 (1*/1**)	5 (2*/1**/2+)	-	-	1+	-	-	7
Other lithologies	-	-	-	-	-	3**	-	3
<b>Site G stratified assemblage</b> (base of peat sealing old land surface)								
Light grey flint	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Dark grey flint	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	2
<b>Unstratified assemblage</b>								
Chert	1	2	2	-	1	-	-	6
Light grey flint	6	2	1	2	1	-	-	11
Dark grey flint	18	10	4	11	5	-	-	48
Brown flint	1	4	-	-	-	-	-	5
Flint u undiff.	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Other lithologies	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	4
Total	32	25	7	13	10	7	1	95

scraper measuring 22 x 30 mm. The retouched items in the other lithologies are all blades.

Taking all the context together (Table 1), shatter contributes *c* 36%, flakes *c* 28%, cores *c* 15% and retouched items *c* 11%.

## DISCUSSION

While uneven in detail, revealing depressions and shallow valleys (eg Jordan 2007), the bedrock surface in broad terms gradually descends westward toward the estuary from the long, low ridge of Triassic mudstones that ranges north-eastward beneath the village of Oldbury on Severn. The surface immediately to the west of the ridge is concealed today by the surviving Holocene outcrop, but further out appears

intertidally as the rock platform of Oldbury Flats. This large, triangular area, which as sea-level rose eventually came to support salt marshes, would have offered ready access to the estuary along its north-westward and south-westward sides, as well as serving as a natural trap for game. It is on the inner edge of this platform, and in the lowermost encroaching Holocene deposits, that the evidence for Mesolithic-Neolithic activity lies. That evidence and our supplement above (Allen 1990, 1998a; Brown 2007) comprises the artefacts in grey flint and chert, the footprint-tracks, and significant quantities of charcoal, including charred reed stems. Further eastward, and at a slightly higher level on the bedrock surface, excavation has afforded evidence for Bronze age settlement and activity, chiefly in the form of wooden structures and brown as opposed to grey

flint dispersed over at least an area measuring c 400 x 100 m (Hume 1992; Allen 1998a).

Although the amounts of stratified and unstratified material described above are small, their character reinforces previous general conclusions from larger collections, with the important addition that the proof of Mesolithic activity comes together with environmental evidence from dated stratified contexts and is now firm. Mesolithic hunter-gather communities would appear to have been burning reed beds that fringed the encroaching salt marshes, as seen on the Welsh coast of the Severn Estuary (Bell 2007). Their visits at Oldbury were probably small in scale and, in the absence of known structures, this could also have been true of their Neolithic successors, although the footprint-tracks in the peats and silts might suggest more permanent activity. Whatever the scale, however, there was time and need to produce flintwork. As before (Allen 1998a), cores in high-quality flint treated parsimoniously, along with retouched items, comprise a significant proportion of the new material, and there is also much shatter (Table 1). Oldbury Flats is so far the only known Mesolithic site on the Severn Estuary Levels to the east of the estuary. What that might mean is not yet clear, but further and more extensive excavations on the stratified contexts exposed to erosion at Oldbury Flats are clearly justified. Other exposures of the bedrock surface in the estuary should be searched for evidence of prehistoric activity.

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