

# Two Mesolithic Implement Types

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The purpose of this note is to comment on two implement types found in English Mesolithic industries, and to draw attention to their occurrence in Midland assemblages.

The first tool type (FIG. 1, 1-2, 4-5) can be described as a pick. Normally a core-tool, the pick is characteristically larger and heavier than other Mesolithic implements apart from the axe, and is defined by the presence of a pointed terminal formed by retouch which may be unifacial, bifacial, or multi-facial. As with the examples illustrated here, the pick can vary in the symmetry and 'neatness' of its form, and in the extent of its retouch, from the relatively regular (FIG. 1, 1 and 4), to the irregular (FIG. 1, 2 and 5). All four examples in FIG. 1 are manufactured on rough, thermally fractured lumps of flint, which have a naturally pointed shape emphasised by retouch. The 'crudity' of many pick forms has undoubtedly hampered their recognition, particularly if damaged, since they can easily be dismissed as flaked lumps or irregular cores. It is assumed that the pick is a hand-tool and not hafted, and this may be corroborated by the fact that some examples (e.g. FIG. 1, 5) are completely unworked at the butt end, which is often bulbous. Picks are presumably designed to serve a variety of functions in which a hefty, but directionally controllable, blow is required against relatively unresistant substances. They should best be regarded as an unspecialised form, though further research may suggest association with particular activities, such as the grubbing-up of roots.

The pick is a tool type frequently found on English Mesolithic sites and in surface assemblages, normally in small numbers at any one location, but despite its familiarity its definition has become confused in the literature. This is largely due to the use of the term pick for the so-called 'Thames Pick' which is not customarily a pointed form at all (Rankine, 1956, 17), but is usually an axe/adze woodworking tool, perhaps primarily associated with canoe-building to judge from its riverine distribution pattern. This confusion has led some archaeologists to prefer the less committal description of 'pointed core tool' for the pick (Bradley, 1972, 7), though as Palmer had emphasised (1970, 87), as long as the term pick is only applied to pointed tools the situation will be clarified.

The only excavated Mesolithic site in England to have produced picks in any quantity is the Culver Well midden-site on Portland (Palmer, 1968), in a micro-area where picks appear very common (Palmer, 1970). Apart from their tendency to have sharp points, the Culver Well picks are comparable in size and general morphology to the examples figured here, and the use of the term 'Portland pick' (Palmer, 1970, 87-88) should perhaps be avoided at present as this may lead to a similar confusion as with the 'Thames Pick', and certainly carries with it overtones of specialised function (i.e. in a coastal economy) and raw material (i.e. Portland chert), leading to unnecessary sub-division of the pick category.

The second tool type described here is less of a specific type, being defined not by its overall morphology, but by the distinctive characteristic of a worn or smoothed edge or edges, a wear form sometimes referred to as 'abrasion' (Odell, 1975, 229). These worn-edge implements as they will be called here, most commonly take the form of blades or blade segments, but can include large flakes (FIG. 2, 16), irregular thermal lumps (FIG. 2, 23), and even cores (FIG. 2, 14). The worn edge is sometimes retouched prior to becoming worn (e.g. FIG. 2, 10 and 21), but this is obviously not a prerequisite. In character the wear is macroscopically similar to that frequently found on Neolithic-Bronze Age scrapers, on the bulbar surface of the scraping edge (e.g. Saville, 1972-73, FIG. 2, 45), and could be produced in the same way during use, rather than prior to use as in the case of the polish on Neolithic axes. This may be confirmed by the fact that the worn edges are sometimes associated with macroscopically distinct striations (FIG. 2, 6-9, 12, 20), which are perhaps indicative of the heavy utilisation producing the edge wear, though one should be extremely cautious over the interpretation of such marked striations, especially on surface finds, since these can frequently be due to natural causes (L. H. Keeley, pers. comm.). When wear is present at both distal and proximal ends of the implement it would appear that this is due not to hafting at one end, but to equal utilisation of both ends of the tool, though in other cases use has clearly been restricted to the distal end (FIG. 2, 9), or the lateral edges (FIG. 2, 21). Broken bulbar segments with wear are common, and presumably derive from double-ended tools as no complete examples with exclusively bulbar wear have yet been identified.

This type of edge wear is presumably caused by contact with a resilient yet malleable material such as wood, leather, or bone, and similar, though less marked, wear patterns can frequently be attributed to the scraping of hides (L. H. Keeley, pers. comm.), though the degree of wear on some of the present examples, and their variable morphology, would make such an interpretation problematic. The morphology would in some cases be consistent with the enlarging and smoothing of perforations (R. Jacobi, pers. comm.). However, since the survival of worked remains of these raw materials on Mesolithic sites is rare, it is both difficult and dangerous to speculate further on function without experimental replication and microwear analysis (Keeley, 1974).

The relationship of these worn-edge implements to so-called 'fabricators' is of interest. Mesolithic 'fabricators' (of which two examples are illustrated here for the sake of comparison: FIG. 1, 3 and FIG. 2, 15) are, as with their Neolithic and Bronze Age counterparts, normally of prismatic form, though there has undoubtedly been a tendency to over-rigorously define the 'fabricator' according to this morphological trait. 'Fabricators' exhibit wear smoothing due to use, which is rarely restricted to the edges of the tool, but spreads out across the tool surface, which itself is often elaborately retouched. These tools are clearly not flint punches as has sometimes been assumed, and cannot be used for any activity involving blows or striking, or they would have the sort of surface crushing found on flint hammerstones. There is, in fact, little objective difference between 'fabricators' and edge-worn implements in many respects, and though the 'fabricator', by virtue of its form, may be designed for a more specialised function, the two implement types are certainly generically similar.

MESOLITHIC IMPLEMENT TYPES

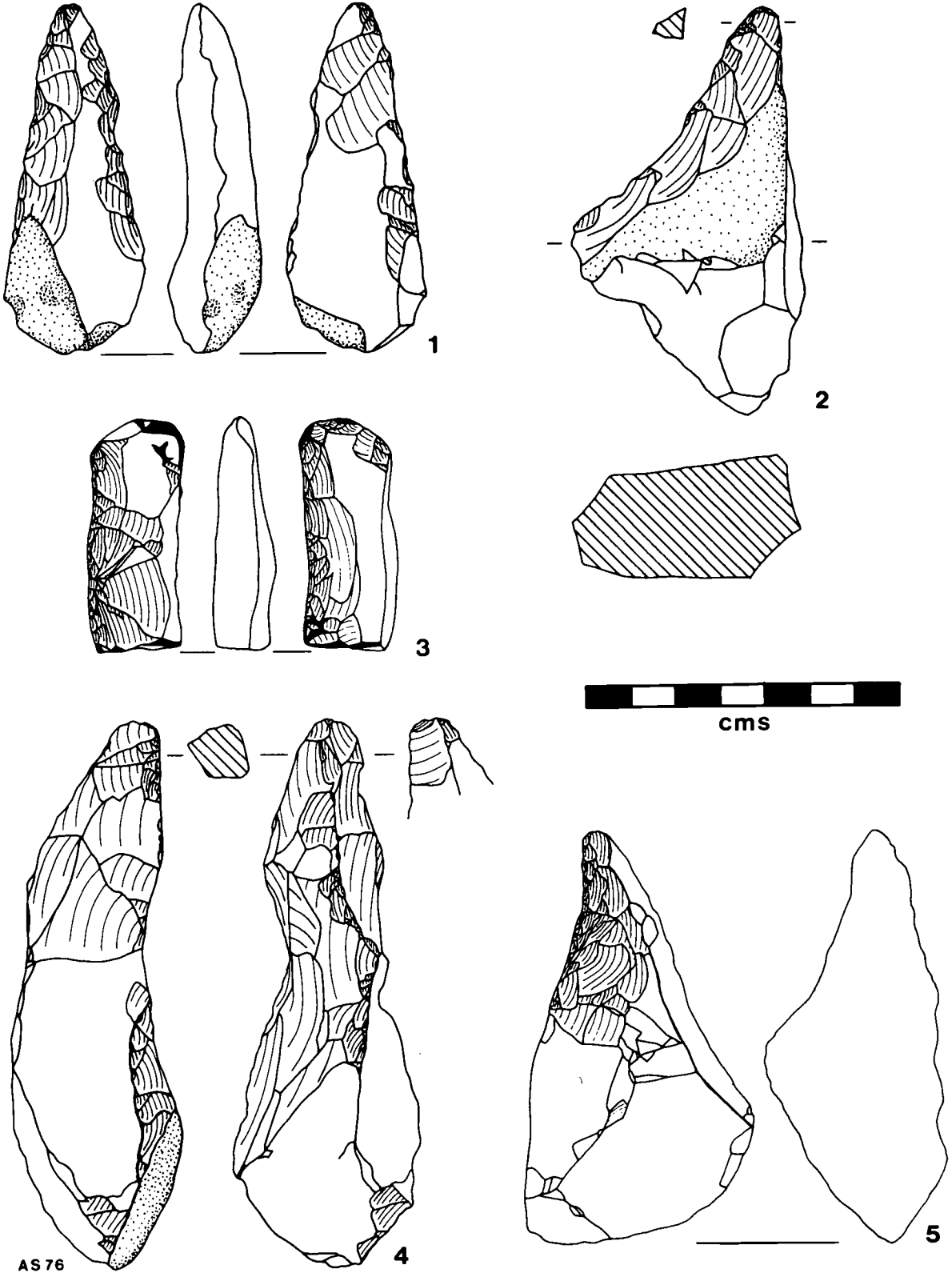


Fig. 1 1-2, 4-5 picks; 3 'fabricator'.

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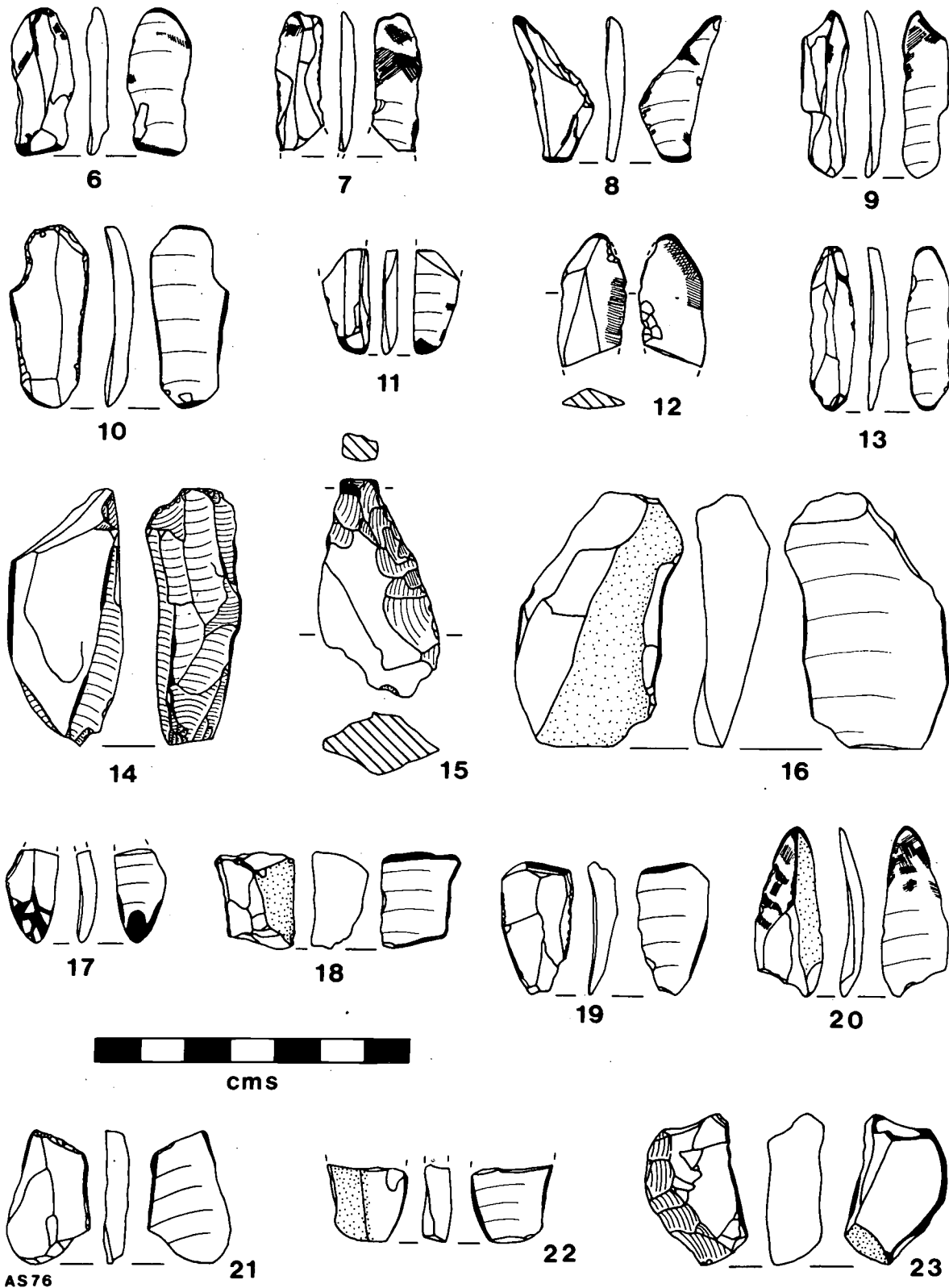


Fig. 2 6-14, 16-23 worn-edge implements; 15 'fabricator'.

A further note of caution which should perhaps be sounded in relation to the worn-edge implements is that they should not be confused with those artifacts in a 'rolled' condition which sometimes occur on Mesolithic sites, usually as a result of water action. This is not a problem when dealing with whole assemblages, as artifacts of all types will be randomly affected by rolling, but can arise when dealing with isolated finds.

Worn-edge implements are not common in the literature, though the infrequency of published examples probably bears no relationship to their actual occurrence, which is likely to be widespread, and it is hoped that this note will lead to their increased recognition. However, they have sometimes been noted as forming an extremely small element in an assemblage (e.g. a single example at the Wawcott III site: Froom, 1976, 154 and FIG. 83, 10), and the largest published group known to the writer is the nine examples from the early Mesolithic site at Thatcham (Wymer, 1962, 348-350 and FIG. 12, 162). Wymer refers to these tools as 'ground edge blades', and considers the grinding as deliberate and not the result of some activity, and he suggests that they may have been used for the scraping or burnishing of bone. This interpretation differs somewhat from that given above, and does not seem consistent with the prior retouch which sometimes occurs, but even if Wymer's theory is correct, most of the wear visible on the implement must result from its actual use.

Finally the context of the implements discussed here must be considered. All of the illustrated examples derive from Midland Mesolithic surface assemblages currently being studied by the writer, which on the basis of their general content and particularly their microlithic component can all be related to the Later Mesolithic facies (Mellars, 1974), and would formerly have been classed as 'British Sauveterrian' (Clark, 1955). In the case of the picks from Honey Hill in Northamptonshire, although the site has yielded a few post-Mesolithic flints, there is no doubt that these implements are Mesolithic since they are fabricated on a coarse raw material only exploited for the Mesolithic industry. The Honey Hill site has so far produced five picks from an assemblage which includes over 500 microliths and over 400 scrapers. None of the other Midland assemblages studied to date has included picks, but only two have produced an axe each, and it would be wrong to assign any special status to the Honey Hill industry when core-tools are so infrequent, as in terms of its more common tool components it adheres to the general pattern.

The worn-edge implements are more widespread, and examples from four different sites are included here, though they are most common at Honey Hill (26 examples) and Over Whitacre, Warwickshire (12 examples). As these implements are all from surface scatters which also contain some post-Mesolithic material there must occasionally be uncertainty over their Mesolithic date, particularly if their patination is slight, and while the Mesolithic status of the illustrated examples seems in little doubt, the possibility of this being a tool form which also occurs in local Neolithic and Bronze Age contexts should be borne in mind (cf. the utilized flakes and knives with edges worn smooth at Windmill Hill, Wilts.: Smith, 1965, 93 and 99).

CATALOGUE

- FIG. 1 1-5. Honey Hill, Northants (SP636769)  
 1. Pick, weight 35 grams.  
 2. Pick, weight 96 grams.  
 3. 'Fabricator'.  
 4. Pick, weight 150 grams.  
 5. Pick, weight 120 grams.
- FIG. 2 6-14. Honey Hill, Northants.  
 6-13. Worn-edge flakes.  
 14. Bipolar core with worn edges and flake ridges.  
 15-20. Over Whitacre, Warwickshire (SP262903)  
 15. 'Fabricator'.  
 16-20. Worn-edge flakes.  
 21-22. Corley Rocks, Warwickshire (SP304851).  
 21-22. Worn-edge flakes.  
 23. Maxstoke Springs, Warwickshire (SP249876)  
 23. Worn-edge flake.

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