Honey Hill, Elkington: a Northamptonshire Mesolithic site

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INTRODUCTION

This paper describes and discusses a collection of Mesolithic artefacts from Honey Hill, Elkington. The artefacts are surface finds recovered by Mr B Waite, during visits made over a period of 10 years up to 1979. This prolific findspot was discovered by Mr Waite in the course of fieldwork designed to investigate aspects of the early prehistory of the region centred on his home in Nuneaton, Warwickshire (Saville 1974).

Honey Hill is in Elkington parish in the W of the county, on the Northamptonshire uplands approximately 13 km E of Rugby and 19 km NW of Northampton. The site is at 213 m (700 feet) above OD, on Northampton Sand of the Inferior Oolite Series, commanding extensive views across the upper Avon valley towards the Birmingham plateau. The finds are concentrated on the W side of the arable field on the NW side of the hilltop (field centre: NGR SP 63707694), with a scatter across the rest of this field and into the adjacent arable field to the NE on the other side of the road. The maximum extent of the scatter covers an area some 400 m wide. Previous references to this site in the archaeological literature (Saville 1977; Wymer 1977, 316) relate to the same assemblage discussed here (see note 1).

Mr Waite's frequent visits to the site over many years, and his policy of retrieving all artefacts, irrespective of type or size, are thought to warrant the acceptance of the Honey Hill assemblage as a representative sample of the site product. All the artefacts described are of flint, though the site has produced 2 unretouched struck pieces of a black chert. The flint is pebble flint, presumably obtained locally from quaternary deposits such as the adjacent boulder clay or from river gravels. Although different types of flint are represented no attempt has been made to quantify these in view of the derived nature of their likely sources.

Honey Hill has produced some post-Mesolithic material, most notably a leaf-shaped arrowhead, but the vast majority of the finds can be regarded as typologically Mesolithic. In describing the assemblage the most diagnostic part, the microlith component, is analysed first in detail, followed by a description of the other main artefact categories.

MICROLITHS

The method of analysis of the microliths follows that used recently for Warwickshire Mesolithic assemblages (Saville forthcoming), employing descriptive typology based upon the work of Clark (1934; Clark and Rankine 1939). The Honey Hill assemblage contains 326 pieces identifiable as microliths, of which 154 (47.2%) are complete enough to allow classification. These 154 examples are all illustrated (FIGS 1-4), and can be subdivided typologically as in Table 1, which also shows the percentage representation of the major microlith type categories. (For the conventions used in illustrating and describing artefacts see note 2).

The microlith component is clearly dominated by obliquely blunted and edge blunted forms, including a significant group with inverse basal retouch. Of the blunted points with ancillary retouch, those with opposed retouch at the point, or at the base, are the most frequent. Geometric forms are rare, and are anyway, with the exception of no 139, not characteristic examples. There is only one instance of a narrow double edge blunted form (no 146).

From within the classified sample, those complete enough for metrical analysis are shown in Table 2.

Despite forming only 29% of the classified sample, Table 2 shows that the measured sub-sample is representative. The mean values for the length, breadth and thickness measurements taken are given in Table 3.

TABLE 1 MICROLITH CLASSIFICATION

Microlith type	*No*	*illus*	*No*	*%*
POINTS WITH INVERSE BASAL RETOUCH			27	17.5
—obliquely blunted, LHS	10	1-10		
—edge blunted, LHS	17	11-27		
OBLIQUELY BLUNTED POINTS, PLAIN			38	24.7
—LHS	38	28-65		
OBLIQUELY BLUNTED POINTS WITH ANCILLARY RETOUCH (AR)			37	24.0
—LHS, AR upper RHS, dorsal	14	66-79		
—LHS, AR upper RHS, inverse	2	80-81		
—LHS, AR lower LHS, dorsal	5	82-85;154		
—LHS, AR lower RHS, dorsal	9	86-94		
—LHS, AR medial and lower RHS, dorsal	1	95		
—LHS, AR lower LHS and lower RHS, dorsal	4	96-99		
—LHS, AR upper and lower RHS, dorsal	1	100		
—RHS, AR lower LHS, dorsal	1	101		
EDGE BLUNTED POINTS, PLAIN			14	9.1
—LHS	12	102-113		
—RHS	2	114-115		
EDGE BLUNTED POINTS WITH ANCILLARY RETOUCH (AR)			23	14.9
—LHS, AR upper RHS, dorsal	6	116-121		
—LHS, AR lower RHS, dorsal	10	122-131		
—LHS, AR upper and lower RHS, dorsal	2	132-133		
—LHS, AR medial RHS, dorsal	1	134		
—LHS, AR medial and lower RHS, inverse	1	135		
—LHS, AR lower RHS, dorsal and upper RHS, inverse		136		
—RHS, AR upper LHS, dorsal	2	137-138		
GEOMETRIC FORMS			7	4.6
—scalene triangles	3	139-141		
—sub-geometric	4	142-145		
IDIOSYNCRATIC FORMS	8	146-153	8	5.2
TOTAL	154		154	

TABLE 2
COMPARISON OF MEASURED AND CLASSIFIED SAMPLES

Major microlith category	*Measured*		*Classified*	
	No	*%*	*No*	*%*
Points with inverse basal retouch	8	17.8	27	17.5
Obliquely blunted points, plain	11	24.4	38	24.7
Obliquely blunted points, with ancillary retouch	13	28.9	37	24.0
Edge blunted points, plain	5	11.1	14	9.1
Edge blunted points, with ancillary retouch	7	15.6	23	14.9
Geometric forms	—	—	7	4.6
Idiosyncratic forms	1	2.2	8	5.2
Sample totals	45		154	

TABLE 3
MEAN SIZE VALUES IN MM FOR THE MAJOR MICROLITH CATEGORIES

	No	*L*	*B*	*Th*
Points with inverse basal retouch	8	26.4	8.1	2.8
Obliquely blunted points, plain	11	26.3	8.7	2.8
Obliquely blunted points, with ancillary retouch	13	28.1	7.5	2.6
Edge blunted points, plain	5	24.1	7.7	2.4
Edge blunted points, with ancillary retouch	7	25.4	6.6	2.3
Totals	44	26.5	7.8	2.6

These figures characterise the overall size of the Honey Hill microliths, and emphasise the metrical uniformity. It is of interest to note the tendency for the edge blunted forms to be slightly smaller in all dimensions than the obliquely blunted points.

MICROBURINS

To complement the microliths all the microburins are analysed (Table 4), and all the complete examples are illustrated (FIG 4).

TABLE 4
MICROBURIN TYPOLOGY

	No	*Illus*
Butt type, notched LHS, complete	27	155-181
Butt type, notched LHS, incomplete	3	—
Tip type, notched RHS, complete	1	182
Total	31	

As is usual, the butt type notched on the LHS is predominant amongst the microburins. The microburin presence, in a ratio of 1:5 to the classified microliths, and 1:10.5 to all the microlith pieces, implies a relatively common use of the microburin technique on the site.

The cortification discolouration (see note 3) of the microlith component varies from the completely undiscoloured medium grey flint, to a dense white and cream. The evidence from an examination of the cortication of the classified microliths and the complete microburins is summarised in Table 5.

TABLE 5
CORTICATION DISCOLOURATION

	Microliths	*Microburins*	*Totals*	*%*
heavy	70	10	80	43.9
light	56	8	64	35.2
absent	27	9	36	19.8
not recorded	1	1	2	1.1
	154	28	182	

Table 5 shows that although discolouration of the flint surface is the most common circumstance, a significant proportion has no discolouration whatever. Whether or not this phenomenon relates to chronological phasing within the Mesolithic assemblage (for which there is no obvious evidence), it is clear that the presence or absence of cortication cannot be used as a basis for distinguishing Mesolithic and post-Mesolithic artefacts within the surface collection. This must be remembered when considering the cultural affiliation of the other artefact and implement classes which are less inherently diagnostic than the microliths. If an individual piece is corticated, then there is a strong probability that it is Mesolithic, but if undiscoloured it could equally be Mesolithic or post-Mesolithic. For this reason no attempt is made to provide an overall quantification of the Honey Hill Mesolithic assemblage, instead the various artefact types present are briefly discussed in order to characterise the Mesolithic material. Two very significant components of the Honey Hill assemblage, the picks and the worn-edge implements, have already been published (Saville 1977) and are therefore not included in the following sections.

BASAL NOTCHED BLADES (FIG 4, 183-185)

The three blades illustrated are almost certainly unfinished or abandoned examples of microlith production by the microburin technique (*cf* Clark and Rankine 1939, 87-89), and are representative of the debris of microlith manufacture found in the assemblage.

EDGE BLUNTED BLADES (FIG 4, 186-188)

Three examples are shown of the frequent non-

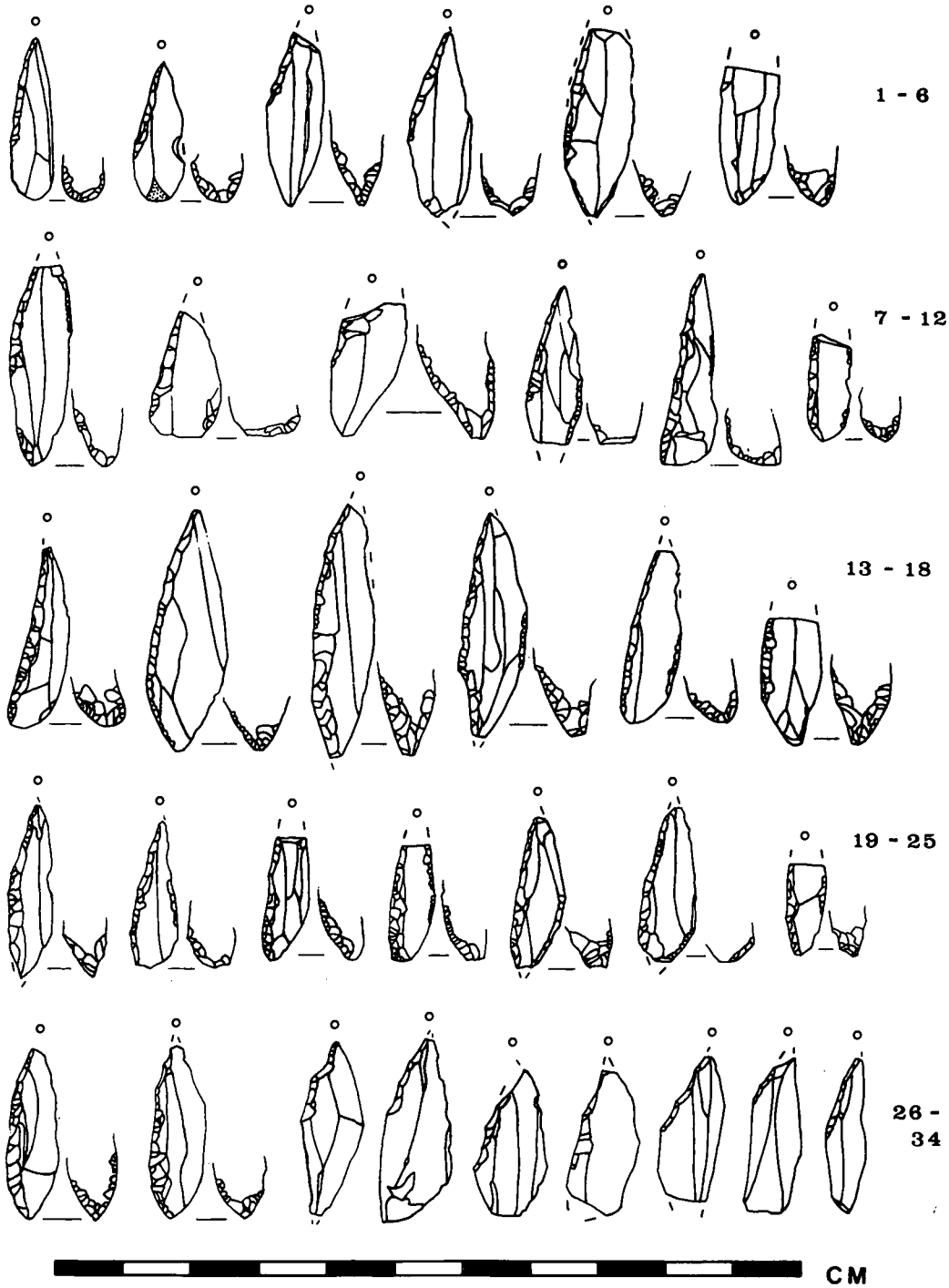

Fig 1 Honey Hill: 1-34 microliths (1/1).

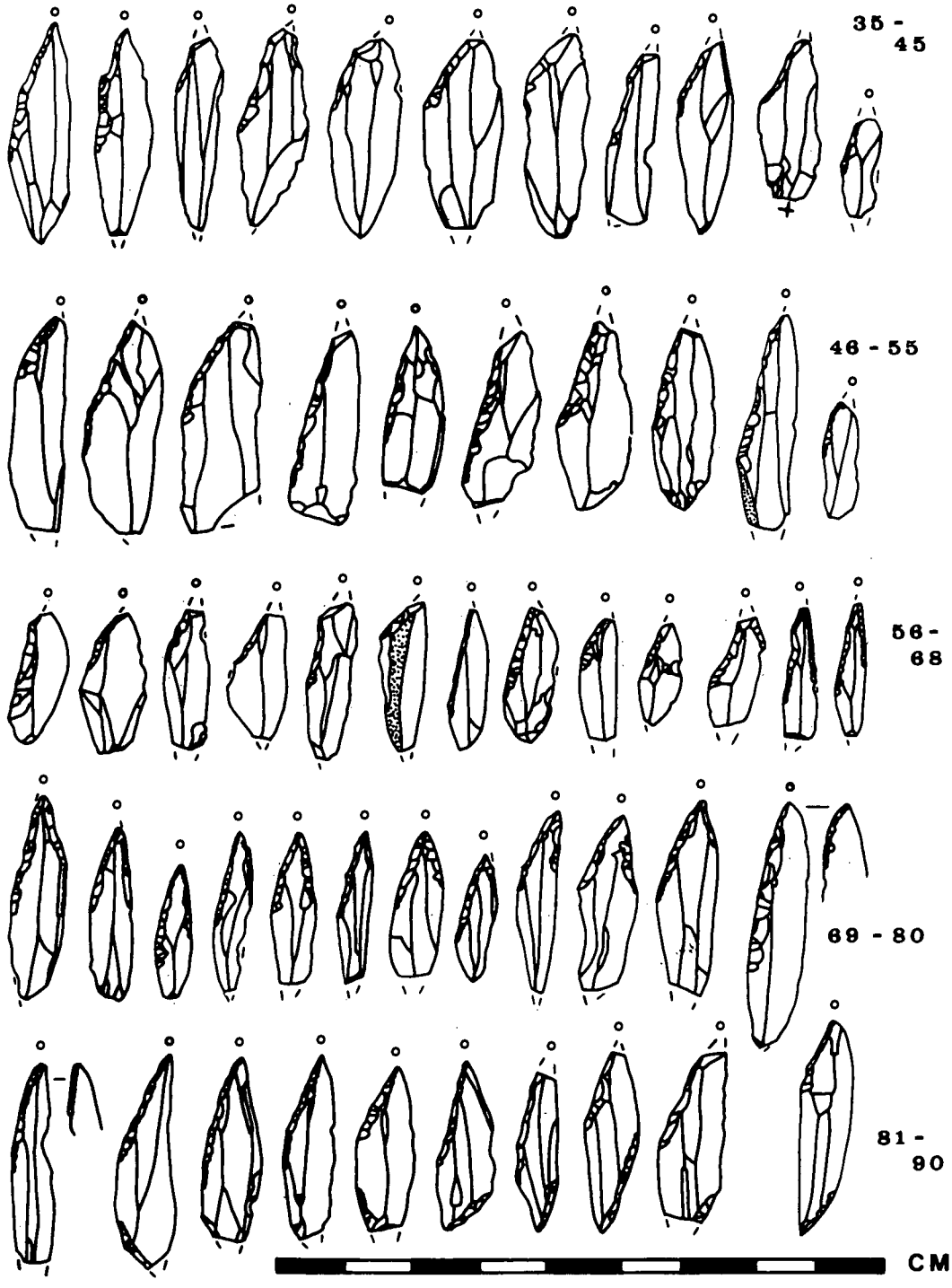

Fig 2 Honey Hill: 35-90 microliths (1/1).

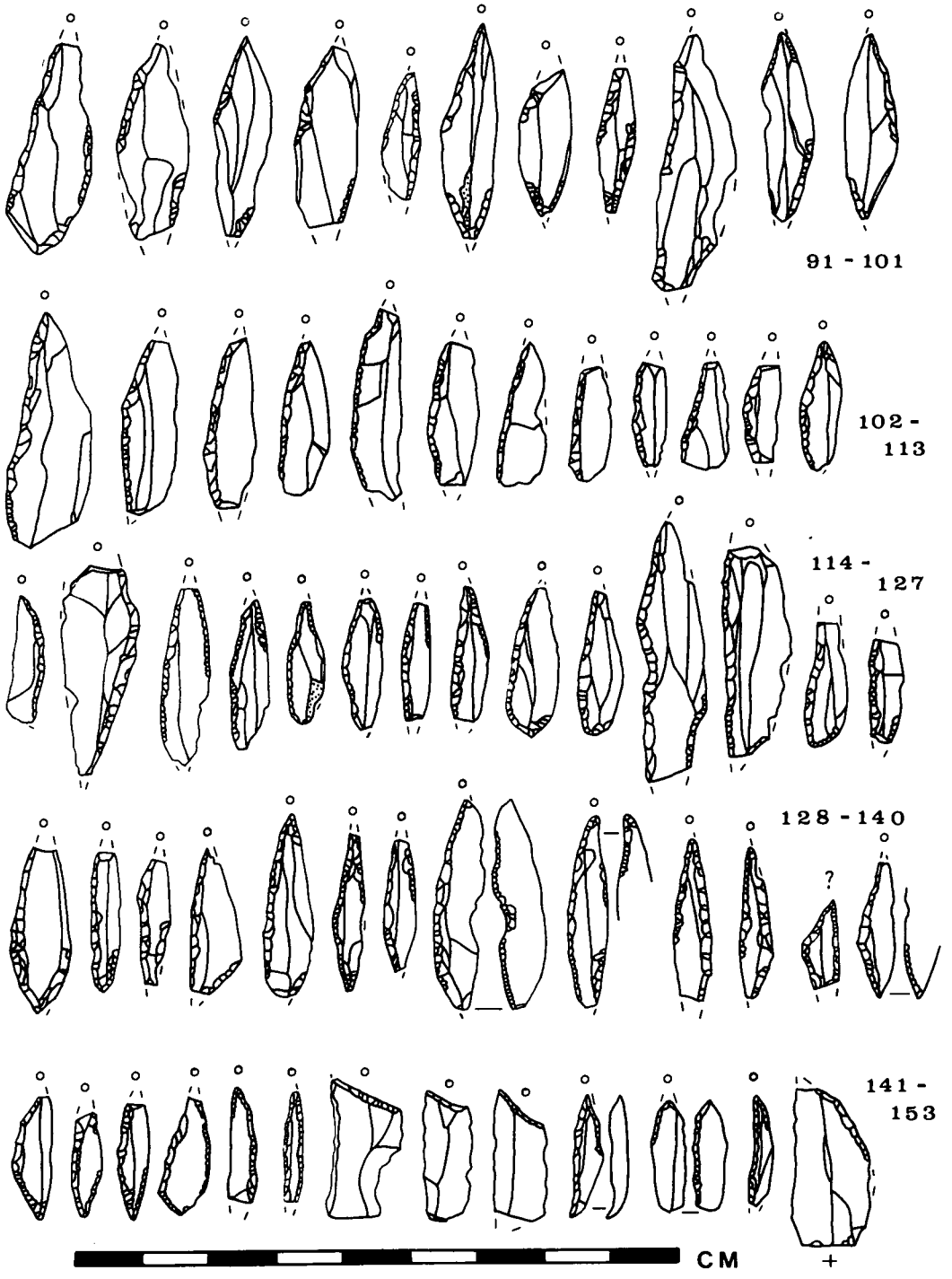

Fig 3 Honey Hill: 91-153 microliths (1/1).

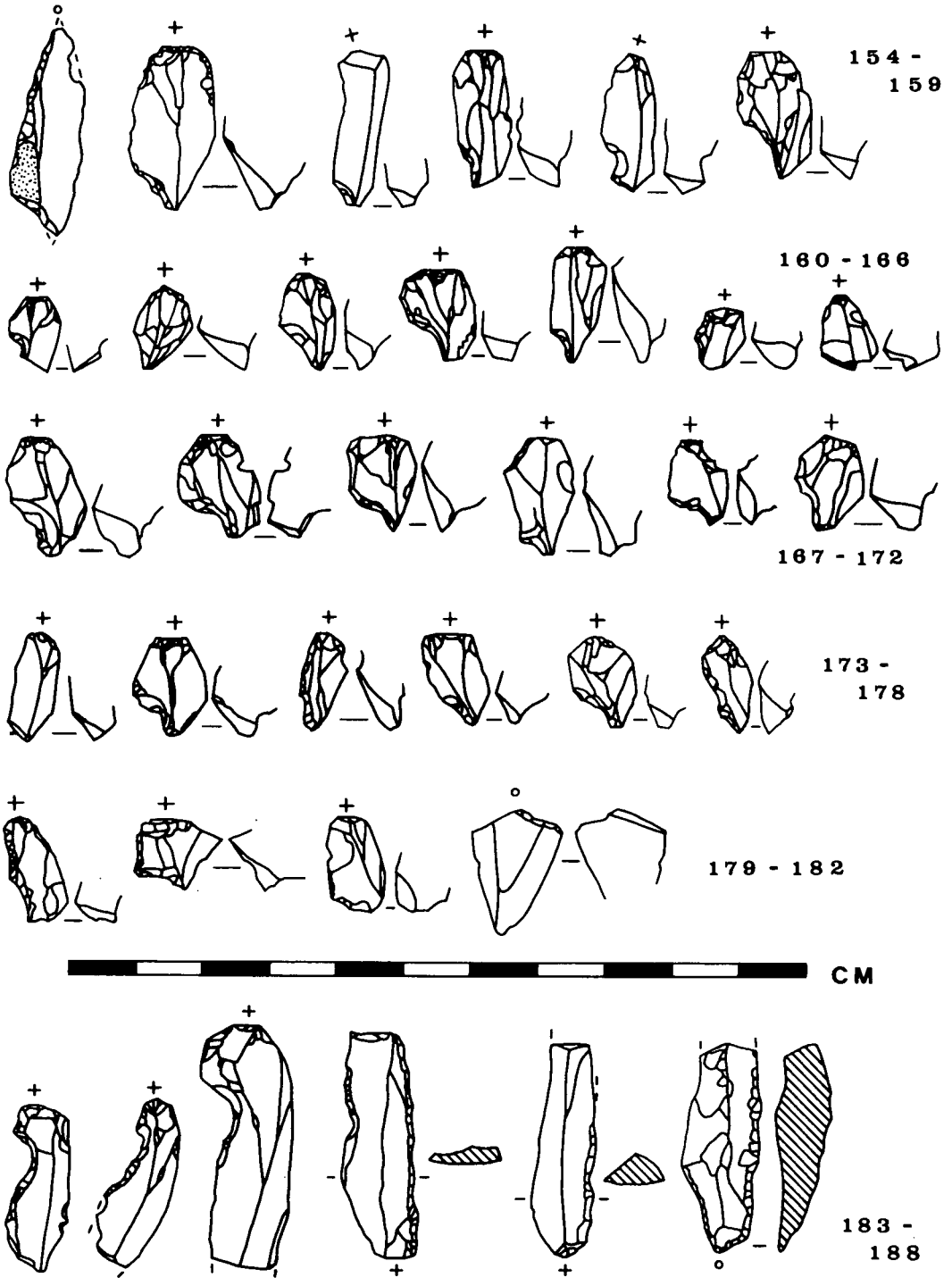

Fig 4 Honey Hill: 154 microlith; 155-182 microburins; 183-185 basal notched blades; 186-188 edge-blunted blades (1/1).

microlithic blades, flakes and segments which have blunting retouch. There is wide typological variation amongst these pieces and their purpose(s) remain obscure.

BURINS (FIG 5, 189-192)

At least 4 burin-like implements are present in the assemblage. No 192 is formed on a piece detached on a thermal fault from the exterior of a core, and together with the piercer no 196 must suffice to illustrate the frequent use of thermal pieces in the Honey Hill assemblage, a natural concomitant of the raw material exploited. The problems of identifying burins are well-known (Froom 1976, 143; Saville 1972-3, 14), but even if the examples here are accepted, it is clear that burins are not common at Honey Hill. Each of the illustrated examples is lightly corticated except no 190 which is undiscoloured.

AXE? (FIG 5, 193)

This axe-like implement presents problems of interpretation. It is complete, but very small, measuring 68 mm in length, 37 mm in maximum breadth, and 15.5 mm in thickness. The weight is 39 grams. The complete bifacial flaking, and the absence of cortex, have obscured the nature of the original blank from which the piece is manufactured. The broad end is not finished as a sharp cutting edge, but has been retouched unifacially with the edge shown on the LHS illustration as a platform. The pointed end does, however, show probable signs of utilisation and could have been used as a pick. Otherwise this bifacial implement is perhaps best seen as an unfinished axe. It is made of undiscoloured grey flint, and this fact, together with the shape and the extent of the retouch, might be thought most appropriate in a post-Mesolithic context. On the other hand the small size would appear unusual for a post-Mesolithic axehead, and the style of retouch is not un-Mesolithic. Without known dated parallels from Central England or elsewhere it is impossible to be more specific about this implement, but the possibility of a Mesolithic context should not be completely discounted.

'FABRICATORS' (FIG 5, 194-195)

One implement of this class from Honey Hill has already been published and discussed (Saville 1977, 4: FIG 1, 3). The two further examples shown here are both regular forms with extensive flaking, no 194 abraded and smoothed at the distal terminal only, no 195 at both terminals. Both implements are corticated.

PIERCERS (FIG 5, 196-198)

Over 20 piercing tools are present in the assemblage. The illustrated examples comprise one on a thermal flake, and two distal points on blades, one of which (no 197) has extensive lateral blunting. No 196 is uncorticated, the other two have slight discolouration.

SCRAPERS (FIG 6, 199-205)

A large series of over 150 scrapers are present in the assemblage, though these may include some post-Mesolithic examples, which seems particularly likely for a group of 10 scrapers which have their scraping edges formed by subsequent undiscoloured retouch on corticated flakes. The illustrated examples, however, are all corticated and are almost certainly Mesolithic. Nos 199-202, and 204-205 are end scraper variants, no 199 with the retouch extending to the proximal end on the LHS, and no 205 with its scraping edge worked through the bulb at the proximal end of the flake. No 203 is an irregular type with complete peripheral retouch, a type of micro-scraper not uncommon in Midland Mesolithic assemblages.

A sample of 44 complete, bulbar scrapers, all corticated and of Mesolithic type, was isolated for further analysis. They could be subdivided by type as in Table 6.

TABLE 6
SCRAPER TYPOLOGY

	No
end scrapers	24
extended end scrapers (eg no 199)	10
side scrapers	5
end-and-side scrapers	4
atypical	1
	44

These scrapers are also analysed metrically to produce the data shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7
SCRAPER SIZE AND SHAPE

Length range in mm	*No*	*Breadth: length ratio*	*No*
10 - 19.9	4	2 : 5 - 3 : 5	6
20 - 29.9	22	3 : 5 - 4 : 5	10
30 - 39.9	16	4 : 5 - 5 : 5	11
40 - 49.9	2	5 : 5 - 6 : 5	14
		6 : 5 -	3
	44		44

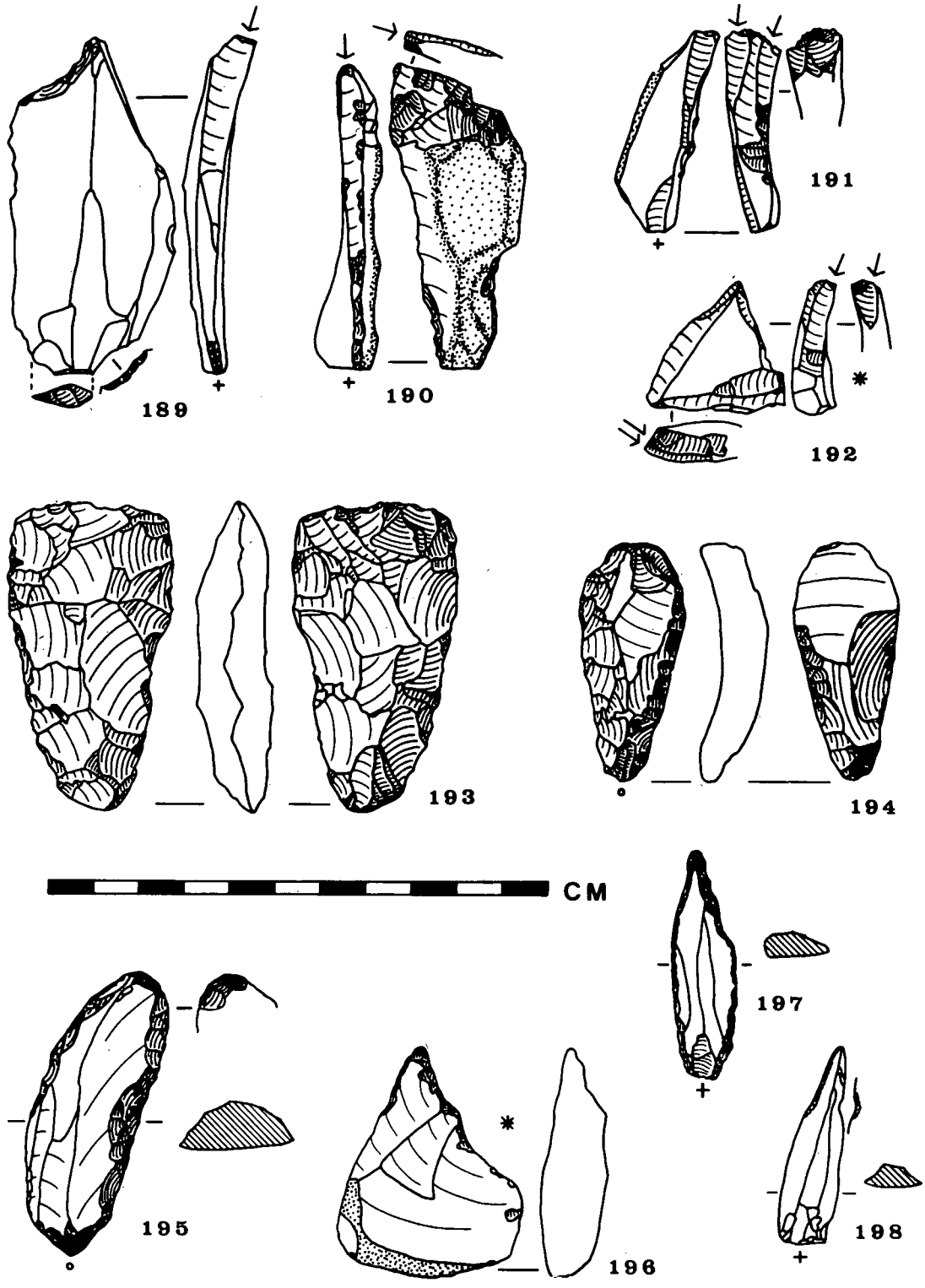

Fig 5 Honey Hill: 189-192 burins; 193 ?axe, 194-195 'fabricators'; 196-198 piercers (⅔).

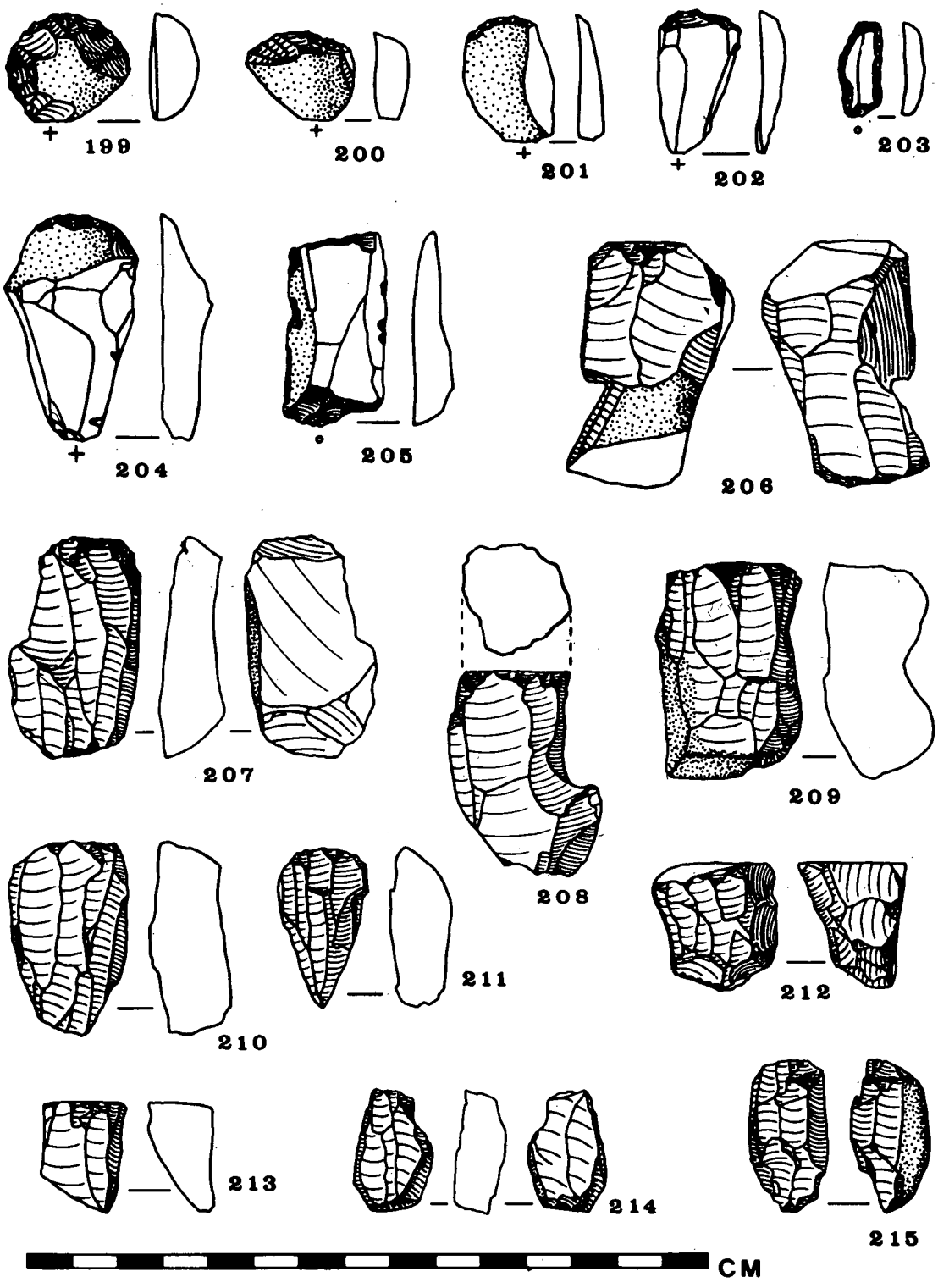

Fig 6 Honey Hill: 199-205 scrapers; 206-215 cores (⅓).

These tables show that the scrapers are predominantly of the end scraper type, and are characteristically small and squat. 26 of the 44 are made on cortical flakes from pebble exteriors.

CORES (FIG 6, 206-15)

The assemblage contains at least 231 complete cores. Of these the majority (195, ie 84%) have surface discolouration, and the small number of uncorticated examples are typologically indistinguishable from the rest. For the following analyses, therefore, all the cores are taken together. The cores can be subdivided into core classes on the basis of their surviving platforms as in Table 8.

TABLE 8
CORE TYPOLOGY

Core class	*No*	*%*	*Illustration No*
A1	9	3.9	208
A2	71	30.7	209; 213
B2	128	55.4	206-207; 210-212; 214-215
B3	5	2.2	
C (3 platforms)	16	6.9	
E	2	0.9	
	231		

55 (24%) of the cores show remaining signs of previous flaking prior to the classified platforms. 163 (70%) retained some cortex, and 13 (5.6%) had thermal facets, indicating the use of thermally fractured pebbles. At least 121 (52%) could be said to have a bipolar element to the flaking method.

The total weight of the cores is 7.319 kg, giving an average core weight of 31.68 grams. Further definition is given to this aspect by the calculation of the size and weight ranges of the cores (Table 9).

TABLE 9
CORE SIZE AND WEIGHT

Max Dimension in mm	*No*	*%*	*Wt in grams*	*No*	*%*
20 - 29.9	11	4.8	0 - 9.9	10	4.3
30 - 39.9	76	32.9	10 - 19.9	64	27.7
40 - 49.9	84	36.4	20 - 29.9	64	27.7
50 - 59.9	44	19.0	30 - 39.9	36	15.6
60 - 69.9	12	5.2	40 - 49.9	21	9.2
70 - 79.9	4	1.7	50 - 59.9	14	6.1
	231		60 - 69.9	10	4.3
			70 - 79.9	3	1.3
			80 - 89.9	3	1.3
			90 - 99.9	1	0.4
			100 - 109.9	1	0.4
			110 - 119.9	3	1.3
			120 - 129.9	1	0.4
				231	

The cores are of particular interest in providing a sample to set against those analysed by the author from another surface site at Bourne Pool, Aldridge, Staffs, some 61 km to the NW of Honey Hill (Saville 1972-73, 8-11). The Honey Hill cores are clearly much larger and heavier: 62.3% are over 40 mm in maximum dimension, and 24.7% are over 40 grams in weight, as opposed to the corresponding figures from Bourne Pool of only 12.9% and 2.1%. Multi-platform flaking is far less common at Honey Hill, whereas a bipolar element is more marked. If the constraints provided by the raw material available at the two sites can be considered equal, then there ought to be a functional/cultural reason for the divergence. The Bourne Pool assemblage is unfortunately less homogeneous than that at Honey Hill, but the microlith component, with its geometric forms, appears to reflect a different Mesolithic industry to Honey Hill. The implication may be that larger and less extensively worked cores are more appropriate to the products of the Mesolithic phase represented at Honey Hill.

DISCUSSION

The Honey Hill finds constitute the first substantial Mesolithic assemblage to be published from Northamptonshire, and the findspot appears to be the most prolific yet recognised in the county, with the possible exception of Duston (Wymer 1977, 217). Smaller published groups of Mesolithic finds, like those from the very mixed assemblages at Aldwincle (Healey 1976) and Ecton (Moore 1975) provide little basis for comparison, so little can be said at this stage about the Mesolithic in Northamptonshire. Since they lack stratification, associated features, or absolute dating, the Honey Hill finds can simply be said to represent the surviving remains of the production (and use) of tools of Mesolithic facies during an occupation of the hilltop of unknown duration. Their immediate significance lies in the demonstration of typologically distinctive Mesolithic activity within the county, and in providing a base for future studies.

Further perspective can, however, be given to the Honey Hill assemblage by a consideration of external typological comparisons. In so doing attention must inevitably focus upon the microliths as the most common, and most readily comparable, implement type. It should be stressed that the comparative typology of microliths is a technique limited by current inability to fully understand the parameters of

their manufacture and function (Clarke 1976), so that it is not always possible to know if like is being compared with like, or if the presence or absence of a particular type does have cultural relevance. However, these provisos apart, and given the existence of sufficiently large assemblages as at Honey Hill, it does seem archaeologically acceptable to use comparative typology to provide hypotheses which it will be possible to test as and when stratified and dated assemblages become available.

The current model for the Mesolithic involves the now well-known bipartite subdivision into early and later phases (Mellars 1974, 81-90). In terms of microlith typology, this means a predominance of large, broad and plain obliquely blunted points and isosceles trianges in the early Mesolithic industries, with small and narrow scalene triangles and other narrow edge blunted forms becoming increasingly common in the later Mesolithic, from the 7th millennium bc onwards. At first sight the composition of the Honey Hill microlith component does not correspond with the major traits in either of the early or later Mesolithic phases, but a clue is provided by its most distinctive microlith type. The point with inverse basal retouch can be seen as a facet of the later Mesolithic industries, on the basis of its presence within the former 'British Sauveterrian' group (as exemplified at Shippea Hill, Cambs; Clark 1955), and its presence within the Horsham industries of the Weald (for example Beeding Wood; Clark 1934, FIG 10), irrespective of its undoubted typological relationship to the Horsham point itself (Saville forthcoming). In these contexts the point with inverse basal retouch is invariably associated with smaller geometric microliths, but the relevant published assemblages are almost all from surface collection, or can on other grounds be regarded as potentially chronologically mixed. Thus although in general terms the Honey Hill microlith component can be related to the later Mesolithic, it is at present unusual in its combination of microlith types without any significant presence of geometric forms.

An explanation may be provided by Jacobi's (1978, 21-22) recent reassessment of the Horsham material, and in particular his identification of a possible third association of microlith shapes to be inserted chronologically between the early and later Mesolithic.

This group is defined by the presence of obliquely blunted points and Horsham points (or other points with inverse basal retouch), with some isosceles triangles and bitruncated rhombic points (the typological equivalent of Honey Hill FIG 2, no 88), and by the absence of scalene microtriangles and other small geometric forms. The possible occurrence of this separate tradition within the Wealden Mesolithic offers a milieu in which to locate the Honey Hill assemblage. Rather than pursue detailed analogies between geographically disparate regions, however, a sounder basis for comparison is available in the Mesolithic assemblages of an adjacent Midland county. Three large assemblages from the east Warwickshire plateau have recently been studied by the author (Saville forthcoming). The composition of the microlith components from these assemblages are contrasted with Honey Hill in Table 10.

The closest comparison is with Corley Rock, 35 km WNW of Honey Hill, which has a similarly high presence of points with inverse basal retouch, though there is a contrast in other elements of the spectra. Corley Rock, unlike Honey Hill, has a significant geometric presence, and a much lower proportion of obliquely blunted points.

TABLE 10
MICROLITH SPECTRA FROM HONEY HILL AND THREE WARWICKSHIRE SITES

Major microlith category	*Honey Hill*	*Corley Rock*	*Over Whitacre Site 4*	*Over Whitacre Spring*
	Microlith presence expressed in percentages			
Points with inverse basal retouch	17.5	19.6	11.1	7.4
Obliquely blunted points, plain	24.7	16.7	20.9	12.4
Obliquely blunted points with ancilliary retouch	24.0	10.9	11.6	11.2
Edge blunted points, plain	9.1	8.3	6.4	10.6
Edge blunted points, with ancilliary retouch	14.9	19.2	12.8	12.4
Geometric scalene triangles	2.0	17.0	24.4	28.0
Other geometric forms	2.6	4.8	8.7	9.9
Idiosyncratic forms	5.2	3.5	4.1	8.1
Sample size	154	312	172	161

It has previously been possible, on the basis of the Warwickshire industries shown in Table 10, to establish the point with inverse basal retouch as a definitive trait of the Mesolithic in Central England (Saville forthcoming). Honey Hill now provides an assemblage in which this trait is associated with obliquely and edge blunted points

to the exclusion of geometric forms. This divergence of microlith repertoire could result from a variety of potential causative factors, but the interpretation suggested here as a hypothesis, is that Honey Hill represents a virtually pure example of an industry which has been diluted at the Warwickshire sites by later admixture. The Honey Hill assemblage is thus proposed as a model for the earliest type of Mesolithic industry yet identified in Central England, chronologically precedent to the use of small geometric forms, in particular scalene micro-triangles.

NOTES

1. The content of the assemblage as listed in Wymer (1977, 216) relates to an early stage of Mr Waites' fieldwork at Honey Hill. The exaggerated totals of 500 microliths and 400 scrapers previously mentioned by the present author (Saville 1977, 7) result from a misunderstanding during correspondence with Mr Waite, prior to the examination of the assemblage on which the present report is based. This assemblage comprises microlith finds up to 1979, and all other categories of finds up to 1976. It has not been possible in include any analysis of the unretouched flakes from Honey Hill.
2. The conventions used in the illustrations are as follows:-
   + = the presence and position of a bulb of percussion/ striking platform on a struck flake.
   O = the proximal end of a struck flake on which the bulbar end is absent or has had the striking platform obscured by retouch. In the case of non-bulbar microliths the symbol indicates the distal end of the implement, which is positioned at the proximal end of the bladelet from which it is made.
   ? = uncertainty over which is the proximal end of a struck flake, the bulb being absent and directional indicators being lacking or obscure.
   * = a thermal piece or flake as opposed to a struck flake.
   Break lines are indicated. Cortex is represented by stippling. True cross-sections are cross-hatched, while side profiles are indicated in outline only. The arrows on burins represent the position and direction of removal of burin spalls deemed to form the burin facet.
   When the terms LHS (left-hand side) and RHS (right-hand side) are used these refer to the appropriate sides of the dorsal surface of struck pieces, viewed as they are oriented in the illustrations. The dimensions of a microlith are length: maximum dimension along the long axis: breadth: maximum dimension at right angles to the length; thickness as the greatest distance between the dorsal and ventral surfaces. The length of a struck, bulbar scraper is the maximum dimension along the bulbar axis, at right angles to the striking platform. The length of a core is the maximum dimension in any plane.
3. The term cortication is here used to describe the process normally referred to, incorrectly, as patination (see Shepherd 1972, 112-124).

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