

## Notes

### PLEISTOCENE ANIMAL BONES AND PALAEOLITHS FROM THE NENE GRAVELS AT GREAT BILLING AND ECTON

Work during the years 1967-8 on the bands of grey organic material containing plant and beetle remains stratified within the gravel then being extracted from the Great Billing pit showed that they contained plant and beetle remains indicative of a period of arctic climate. They yielded a C14 date of 28, 225±330 years B P (Morgan 1969). Subsequent geological work has gone on to suggest that the First and Floodplain gravels of the Nene were laid down in a late stadial of the Devensian glaciation during the period 28,000-9000 B P (Castleden 1976-8; 1980). The purpose of this note is to place on record the animal bones recovered from the Great Billing/Ecton pit (SP 820613) while the environmental work mentioned above was going on, as well as a small collection of palaeoliths picked up at the same time.

The animal bones are as follows: they were identified in the Department of Geological Sciences, University of Birmingham. All of them came from the heaps of sorted gravel layers in the pit and were not found *in situ*, but the grey sandy silt adhering to most of them would indicate that they came from the same kinds of organic layers as the environmental samples. Like these, they are indicative of cold conditions.

*Equus caballus* (horse). Tibia, metatarsal, metapodial bone, femur fragment, ?skull fragment.

*Elephas primigenius* (mammoth). Tusk fragments (5).

*Rangifer tarandus* (reindeer). Antler fragments (3).

*Coelodonta antiquitatis* (woolly rhinoceros). Lateral metapodial, radii (2), tarsals (4), tibia (2), pelvis fragments (3), thoracic vertebra (2), rib, scapula (2), humerus (2), skull fragment, upper molar, basiocciput.

*Bison priscus* (bison). Metacarpal

The flints (FIG 1) have been commented on by Mr D Roe of the University of Oxford as follows:—

1. *Probably a Levallois flake* of a simple kind, but not a very satisfactory or typical one. There is recent damage to almost the whole edge, so that only three major dorsal preparatory scars and a patch of cortex remain on the dorsal surface. Traces of others may have been lost, and we can say nothing of retouch or utilisation. There are certainly some primary facets on the striking platform, but there are also a few later scars. Two small plane areas remain, adjacent to the lower edge of the platform, either side of the point of impact. The thickness of the platform, and prominence of the bulb of percussion, and also the thickness of the whole flake, suggest that this is not a handaxe trimming flake; the prepared platform suggests that it is not a casual waste flake from a core.

2. *Waste flake, not clearly retouched.* Platform, bulbar swelling and portion of striking platform are all preserved. The scars along the edges are mostly ancient, but they have different patination and much less worn ridges, as opposed to the bulbar and dorsal surfaces of the flake. Also the scars do not look like regular and purposeful retouch, so much as random crushing and battering of the edges, probably during the formation of the gravel. From the battering on the dorsal surface, it looks as if the flint knapper may have had several shots at detaching this flake before he was finally successful.

3. Somewhat abraded *waste flake*. Plain platform. Edges have suffered recent damage: no obvious retouch. It could be from the manufacture of a handaxe, or a waste product in working almost any kind of core.

4 (unill). Flake, incomplete, with snap fracture and crushing at the edges. The curved profile and the thinness suggest that it is very *probably a trimming flake from a handaxe* at a fairly late stage of the implement's manufacture. The pattern of scars on the dorsal surface would agree with this, and so would the diffuse bulbar swelling ('soft hammer' or 'cylinder hammer' technique).

5. *Scraper on flake fragment, much abraded.* It is very much abraded, but the primary fracture surfaces seem mechanical, and there is fairly

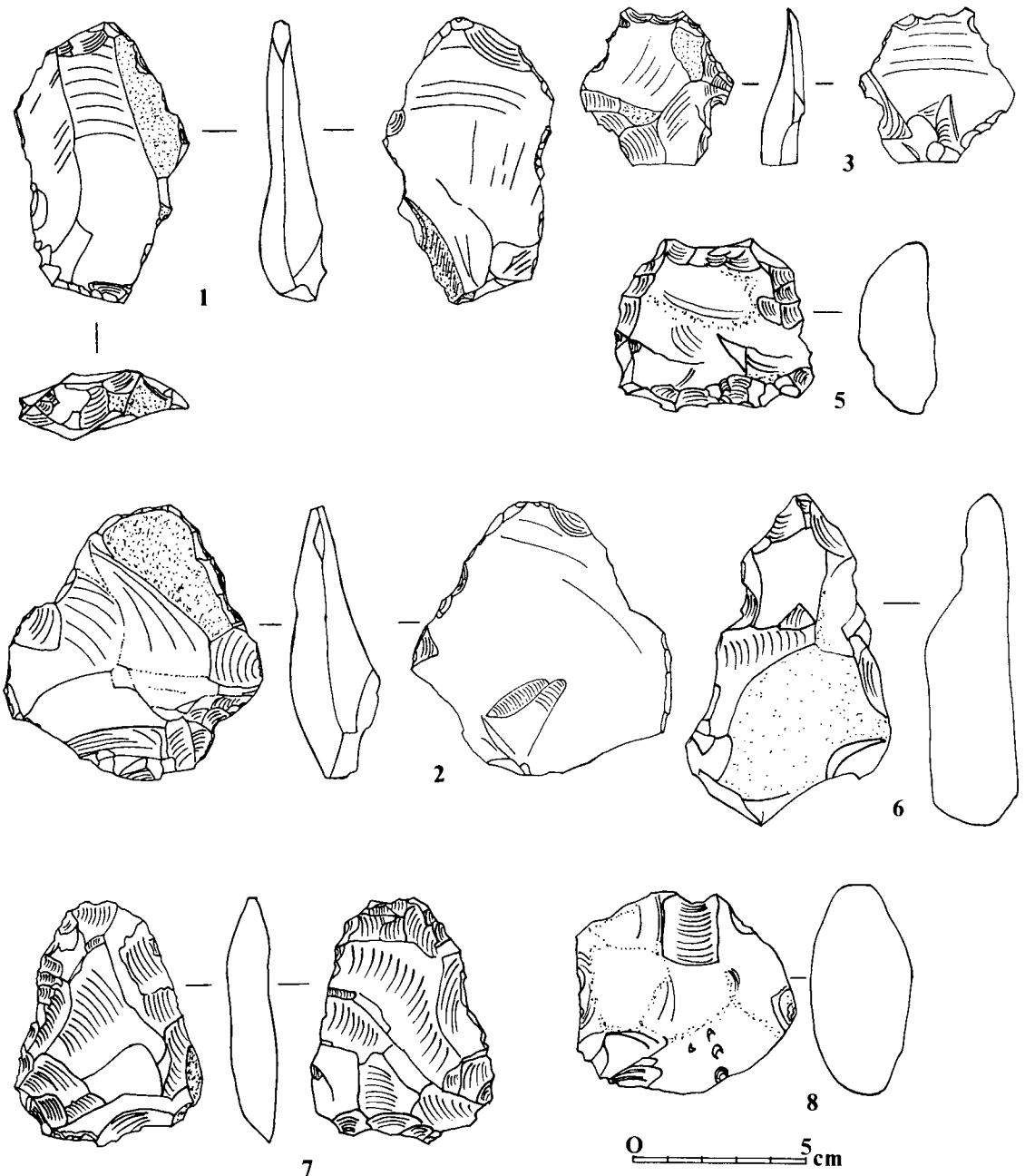


Fig 1 Palaeoliths from Great Billing/Ecton pit (1/2)

convincing retouch along one edge. Note that these retouch scars are also heavily abraded. But the remaining edges are not all convincingly 'retouched'. Many of the scars look much more like crushing and damage. A few of the scars are recent, and some of the ridges remain sharp.

6. *Rough point on flake fragment, much abraded.* There is recent damage, and not all of the scars along the edges may be retouch, as opposed to (ancient) damage. Also, several of the scars on the dorsal surface are primary, ie they were not all struck to shape the implement. A cortex patch remains on the dorsal surface. Nevertheless, the artifact gives the impression of probably being a shaped tool, though now worn and damaged.

7. A small biface, rather heavily abraded, and unfortunately damaged by several recent scars, no doubt caused by the machinery in the gravel pit. It appears to be a flat sub-triangular handaxe more similar to the general run of Mousterian handaxes than Acheulian ones, but it could belong to either period. Shiny, with white patination patchily occurring over much of both faces but little staining. No special technological features, and not particularly well made. Cortex occurs at one corner on one face only: though now fully bifacial, the handaxe was probably (but not certainly) made on a flake rather a flat pebble — possibly (from the slightly curved section) on a large trimming flake struck off during the manufacture of a larger biface.

8. This object is harder to interpret, mainly because of its heavily abraded and deeply stained condition, together with the presence of one large scar of recent damage. One scar may be an ancient break (either thermal or mechanical) but the condition makes it hard to say. Only partly bifacial, with a substantial patch of cortex surviving on one face. It could be an abandoned roughout for a small handaxe of some kind but gives rather the impression of being some sort of core, perhaps a Levalloisian core, unstruck or unsuccessfully struck, or perhaps a disc core. If this is right it could again as well be Mousterian as anything else; however, these are only possibilities.

Like the animal bones the flints come from the heaps of sorted material in the pit; none was recovered from any sort of stratigraphic context. Most were abraded and were clearly derived from

even earlier deposits; almost certainly they came from the gravels themselves and not from the intercalated organic layers. The Levallois items could possibly extend back in time to an interstadial of the Wolstonian glaciation (say 200000-125000 bc) from which time much of the flint and chalk in the Nene flood plain gravels could be derived (Castleden 1976-8), but the Mousterian items would be later. In general character the collection resembles the run of Levallois and Mousterian flints found in the Nene second terrace at Woodstone near Peterborough and thought to have been incorporated in it during the middle Devensian c 57000-45000 B P (Castleden 1980).

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#### SOUTH-WEST FEN-EDGE SURVEY, 1982/3: AN INTERIM REPORT

This very brief interim statement is written while survey work is still in progress and anticipates post-survey analysis of the data. It is therefore very provisional.

FIG 2 shows the approximate area of this, the initial pilot survey. It is hoped that later seasons will be able to operate on a regional scale, as that is the only way in which useful comparative studies may be drawn. The methods used in the survey are still in the process of development, so a detailed description would be premature, but considerable attention is paid to freshly machine-cleaned dykesides. Where appropriate, measures are taken to define the approximate area of sites revealed in section.

The first task was to ascertain from the local fen drainage authorities the number and length of dykes that were to be recut. These are shown on FIG 2. We soon learned, however, that this picture



was a gross under-estimate of actual dyke cleaning, as it ignored all maintenance work, whether by drainage authorities, water authorities or private individuals. It probably represents about 10% of total annual dyke cleaning. We will see that this system of ribbon sections represents a very major source of archaeological information that has been largely ignored hitherto (perhaps this may reflect the fact that all dyke works are carried out in wintertime, during the height of the academic year).

Our work has been concentrated in three main areas: north of Eye village; around Newborough and east of Fengate as far as the Nene at Northey. We will briefly consider each area in turn.

The Eye survey took place in dykes that cut into the Fen Clay tidal lagoon which laid down brackish water deposits around 2500bc. Local farmers informed us that the peats above the lagoonal deposits had 'shrunk' (in reality it had become humified and had been wind-eroded) at least 6 feet (2m) since the War, when government subsidies were given to plough the peat lands. Today the peat has become so thin that it is necessary to mix it with subsoil clay by deep ploughing. This process is beginning to seriously affect the underlying archaeology. We estimate that there is a readily accessible buried Mesolithic and early Neolithic landscape covering perhaps as many as ten square kilometres. This buried landscape offers extraordinary potential for the assessment of the impact of early Neolithic communities on pre-existing groups. All later settlement 'noise' is removed by the Fen Clay deposits. Our survey produced blade-based flints, together with a scatter of pits and postholes.

The dykes in the Newborough area are only just being cleaned (February 1983), but we were able to investigate two known sites. The first was a round barrow (BoF 10) of David Hall's Borough Fen field. This monument was cut by a dyke and we were able to demonstrate that it was indeed a substantial barrow, with buried old land surface and a ring ditch largely filled with peaty alluvium. It stood about two metres high. The second site (Hall's BoF 7; TF 190072) is a ring-work comprising a circular bank and external ditch (approximate external diameter 300m; total area c 10ha.). There is also evidence for a second, slighter, external bank and ditch. In form it resembles Irish ring-forts, or the circular 'mini-

hillforts' of the Thames estuary and hinterland (sites such as Mucking and Springfield, Essex). The monument is scheduled as Medieval or Roman, but we were able to demonstrate its Early or Middle Iron Age date, on the basis of many sherds revealed in a dyke which bisected the monument. These sherds derived from a thick (c 300mm) occupation deposit containing animal bone, pottery, charcoal, burnt stone etc which seems to have covered much (if not all) of the interior. Conventional subsoil features could be clearly seen below the occupation horizon. At least half the monument is under grass, and here the bank survived almost intact, perhaps to an original height of 2-3 metres, but estimation is difficult owing to the thick clay alluvium which covered all features with the exception of the upper bank. This blanket of clay was at least 500mm thick and protects the ploughed half of the monument from any damage due to agricultural activity. The ditch depth was probably slightly more than 3m, but our auger was not able to penetrate much below c 2m, owing to the stiffness of the clay infilling. The ditch is almost totally waterlogged and the presence of the clay will mean that the preservation of organic material will be particularly good. There can be little doubt that this is one of the best preserved Iron Age sites in the country. Its archaeological potential is enormous and it is essential that it is not allowed to be de-watered.

Our survey east of Fengate was confined to two areas, the land on the fringes of the gravel 'island' of Northey, and the open Fen between it and Fengate. The Northey survey produced numerous features which broadly-speaking confirmed the picture of second millennium landscape development sketched by David Gurney (1980). The buried fringes of the 'island' were, however, wetter than we had expected and organic material survived on at least two of the four pre-Iron Age buried sites we discovered. One such site, of undoubted Bronze Age date was located at the extreme edge of the island between c 2m and 500mm above OD. Beyond it lay about 100m of open fen. At this point the land was traversed by a Roman road (the Fen Causeway, Margary route M25), which at this point was taking the easiest route across the Fen between Fengate and Whittlesey, via Northey 'island'. The Roman engineers also made use of a local 'hillock' in the peat. This



*PL 1* Flag Fen wooden platform. A view of the central timbers exposed in the dykeside. The view is from above, the pale area is ice; scales in half metres. Photo by FP

hillock was in fact the remains of an artificial crannog-like island which sat in the open fen, just off the Northey shore, near to the low settlement just discussed.

The base of the road lay about 500mm, or slightly more, above the timbers of this artificial island — the space between being composed of peat, peaty alluvium and a thin layer of clay alluvium. This deposit had accumulated over some 800 and more years (assuming that the road was built in the late first century AD, see Pryor 1980 FIG 86 and discussion). A radiocarbon date was obtained from sapwood of a piece of roundwood used in the construction of the monument (BM, lab no not yet available, 660 + 60bc). This date falls well within Burgess' Ewart Park phase of the Late Bronze Age.

The site is still very poorly understood, as it could only be seen in dyke section, but it must measure at least 80m in length or diameter, and as such is far larger than most crannogs. It was built up on a lattice-work of timbers, many of which we believe were re-used, probably from buildings. Numerous (40+) vertical piles were encountered in a narrow (10m) band, facing the island shore. They do not appear to serve an obvious practical function and their use as a defensive screen might be suggested. Although only a small section was excavated, domestic debris was absent, and it is possible that the site was only occupied for a short period or intermittently. The reader is referred to *Current Archaeology* (1983, no 87) for additional photographs and for a more full description of this very remarkable monument.

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