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An Upper Palaeolithic Flint Tool from the Tyne Valley, Northumberland

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THE tool described below was found during routine fieldwalking by one of the authors (SC) as part of postgraduate research and the Tyne-Solway Ancient and Historic Landscapes Research programme and generously donated to the Museum by the landowner. Its accession number is 1994.1. The flint was found in a field on the south side of the Tyne Valley at Eltringham, Prudhoe, at a height of about 55 m OD. The findspot is on boulder clay, which covers the valley sides at this point. Below, and near by, are glacial melt-water deposits probably dating from after the Late Devensian Dimlington Stadal, c.16,000 RCY BP.

The implement is a secondary flake measuring 77 mm long and 30 mm across its short axis. It has a maximum thickness of 12 mm. The length to width ratio, in excess of 2:1, enables it to be classified as a blade. This is an unusually large find for the Northeast, an area where workable flint is a rarity, and indicates a non-local source for the raw material. The core from which the blade was struck was of a pale grey-brown colour, with some black inclusions and a whitish cortex. However, except where there are areas of modern plough damage, the flint is covered in a white patina with some rusty spots and an area of purplish staining. The core appears to have been tabular in form and the scars of several blade removals are exhibited on the dorsal surface. The butt is faceted and the ventral surface displays a prominent bulb of percussion, implying the use of a hard hammer. At the distal end the dorsal surface shows traces of cresting and an area of abrupt retouch extends about half the way down the right lateral margin. In morpho-

logical terms it may be described as a backed blade.

The size and character of the piece, the extent of patination, the knapping technique and the style of retouch, are all unusual features on a find from the Northeast. They are, however, characteristic of finds of Late Upper Palaeolithic type from further south, and backed blades are considered diagnostic implements of that period.

Prior to the discovery of this Eltringham finds, human presence in the Tyne Valley was only attested from the Late Mesolithic, and evidence for Late Upper Palaeolithic activity has not hitherto been recognised in Northumberland. Coggins *et al.* (1989) have reported the recovery of putatively Late Upper Palaeolithic artefacts from the Tees Valley, and the findspot at Eltringham significantly extends the range of Late Upper Palaeolithic finds in northern England, although the question of the extent of Late Upper Palaeolithic settlement in northern Britain as a whole is not without controversy.

The Late Upper Palaeolithic period is conventionally regarded as having come to an end at c.10,000 RCY BP, which is also the terminal date for the Lateglacial and the Pleistocene Period. A number of isolated finds, claimed to be putatively Late Upper Palaeolithic type, are known from widely scattered locations in Scotland which have been taken to suggest a human presence throughout northern Britain before the end of the Pleistocene (Lawson and Bonsall 1986; Morrison and Bonsall 1989; CBA 1994; Wickham-Jones 1994). However, none of these finds are from dated contexts and one of

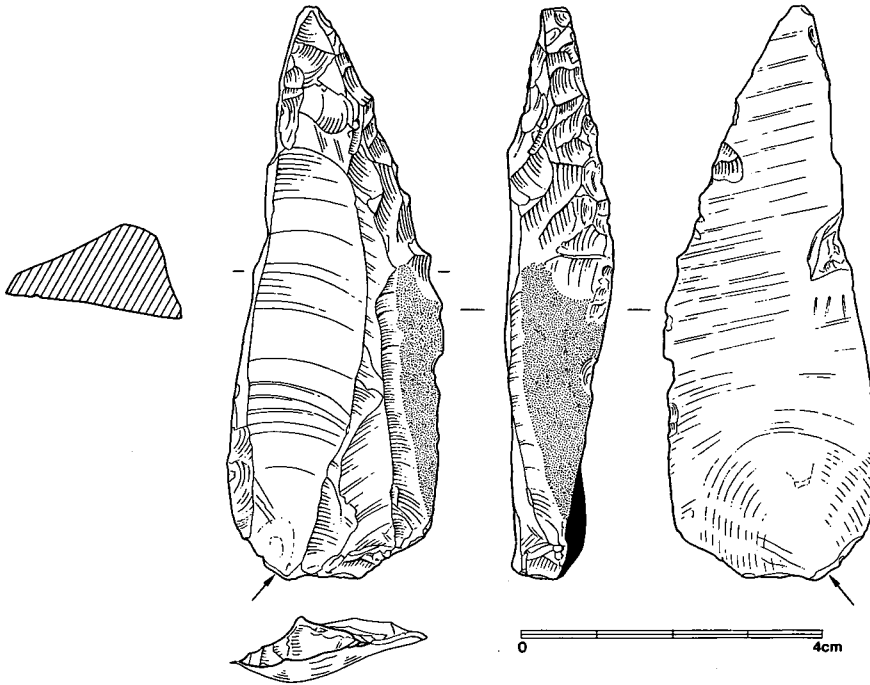


Fig. 1 Flint blade from Eltringham, Prudhoe. Drawn by S. Robinson. 1:1.

the present authors (CT-S) has suggested that the established radiocarbon chronology offers a more objective assessment of the extent of human settlement in the British Isles at the end of the 11th millenium RCY BP (Smith 1992, 159–80). The implication of the available dates is that human settlement at the end of the Pleistocene had not extended north of a line stretching from Morecambe Bay to Scarborough (Latitude 54 15' N).

Before 10,000 RCY BP the most northerly records of a radiocarbon dated human presence are at Kirkhead Cave (Lat. 45 12' N) at the north end of Morecambe Bay and Victoria Cave (Lat. 54 05' N) in westernmost North Yorkshire. Human activity at these two sites has been dated to c.10,700 RCY BP and 10,800 RCY BP (Smith 1992, 188; Hedges et al. 1992; Bonsall and Smith 1992) respectively. These sites appear to document the frontier of human settlement in mainland Britain during the first half of the 11th millennium RCY BP.

The Eltringham findspot lies about 100 km to the north and implies either that human settlement in the 11th millenium was more widespread than indicated by radiocarbon dated sites, or that implements of Late Upper Palaeolithic type remained in use in northern Britain after c.10,000 RCY BP. In either case it seems likely that human settlement had extended as far as the Tyne–Solway corridor several millenia earlier than has hitherto been supposed.

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