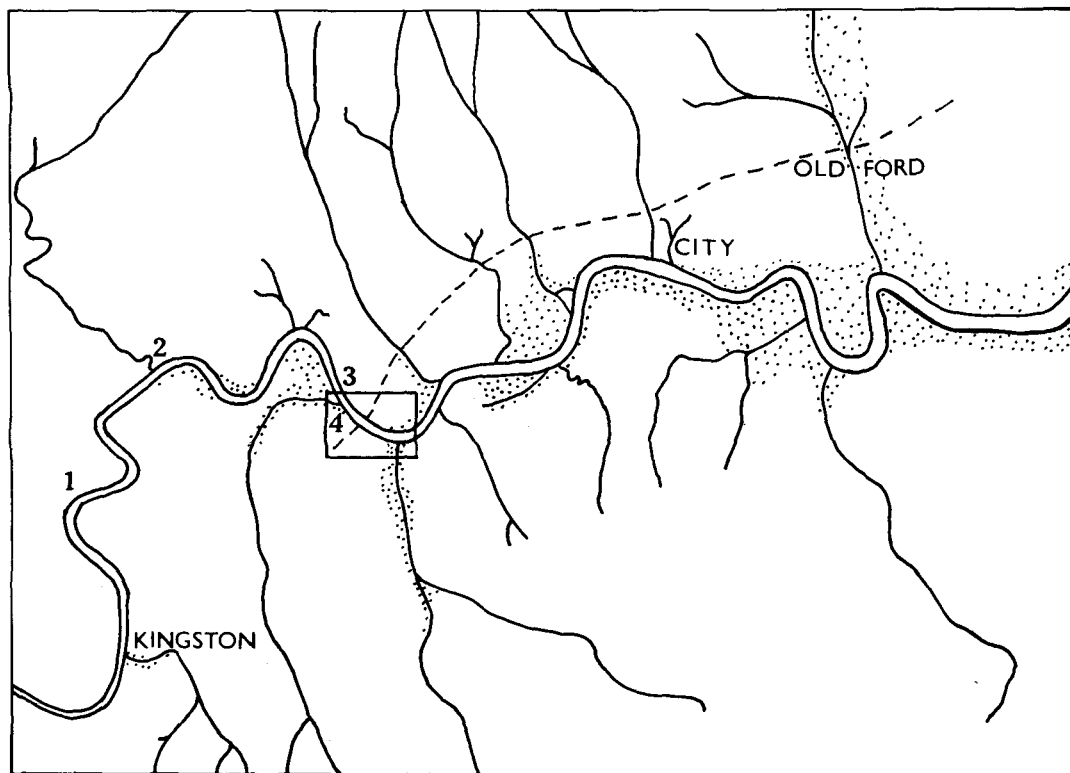


EXCAVATION OF A NEOLITHIC SITE AT SEFTON STREET, PUTNEY, LONDON

S. E. WARREN

An exploratory excavation in Putney (Fig. 1), at 38-46 Sefton Street (TQ232760), revealed below modern building rubble and earlier plough soil, an undisturbed Neolithic layer containing remains of occupation, and a channel of the same period. Many flint artifacts were found in association with shell, and grit tempered coarse potsherds. The ceramic material belongs to a period, from early to late Neolithic. There are examples of flint artifacts covering a period from Mesolithic to Late Neolithic. Two hearths and many "pot boilers" were found, but no floor plan of any structure could be identified, although postholes did exist.



1 TWICKENHAM 2 BRENTFORD 3 FULHAM 4 PUTNEY - - - TRACKWAY

Fig. 1 Sefton Street, Putney: Location map

1. INTRODUCTION

The site at Sefton Street (Fig. 2), is situated near the south bank of Beverley Brook, near to its confluence with the River Thames; Putney Common lies a little to the west of Sefton Street, and the southerly aspect rises up onto the Putney Heath — Wimbledon Common plateau, a mile away.

In 1969 the Wandsworth Borough Council invited the Wandsworth Historical Society to carry out an exploratory excavation on this site, which had been bombed during the Second World War. The aim of the excavation, was to try to define the extent of field scatter of the Romano-British settlement at Putney and, as many flint artifacts had been found in the past on Putney and Barnes Commons, to watch for signs of prehistoric settlement.

2. GEOLOGY

The suggestion that the Thames river frontage between Beverley Brook and the River Wandle was habitable in prehistoric times, can be supported geologically by the identification of a deep layer of alluvial sand and gravel abutting the Thames between these two points. This alluvium has been observed to a depth of at least 8m in an excavation trench in the Lower Richmond Road (TQ237758). The steep slope up from the Thames, although embanked, is a natural one and would afford high, flood free land within 45m of the waters edge. The London Clay under the sand and gravel, is deep enough below ground level not to impede the natural drainage of the land, and it would therefore tend to be free of marsh (Fig. 2)

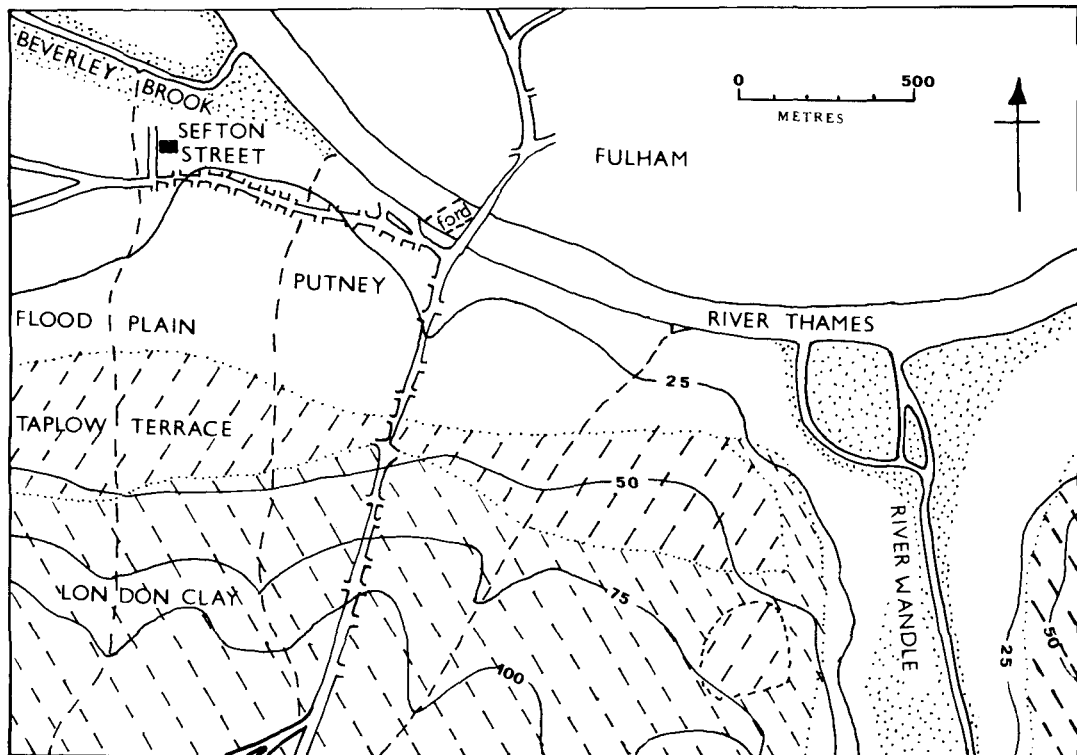


Fig. 2 Sefton Street, Putney: Location map for site (contours in feet)

3. THE EXCAVATION

(Figs. 3 and 4)

The overall area of the site was 544.50 square metres, of which 168.50 were excavated.

Phase 1 saw the opening of 5 trenches; the size of trenches A-D being each 3m x 3m, and trench E 3m x 2m. These were all excavated down to the natural sand. Bomb damage had obliterated most of the stratification in trenches A-C, whilst trench E had been disturbed by the introduction of a drain-pipe along its south side. The pottery scatter was mainly medieval to modern with 2 Roman potsherds, but the discovery of a rimsherd of Ebbsfleet pottery and a small wallsherd of Grooved Ware coupled with many flint artifacts prompted an investigation on a larger scale.

Phase 2, 1970/71, four trenches were opened, F and G both being 4.75m x 2.75m; H, initially 7.30m x 4.50m, was reduced to 4.50m x 2.40m, because of a bomb crater found at one end; and J 11.0m x 8.25m.

TRENCHES F & G. There were no features in either of these trenches, and the only point to note was that 27%(10) of all flint cores were found in trench G.

TRENCH H. In this trench were found 20%(8) of all cores; 62%(20) of all Neolithic potsherds; 48%(4.763Kgs) of all fire crazed flints, and 33% more flint artifacts per square metre than any other trench. In the floor level of layer 4, a channel ran SE-NW across the trench (Fig. 2), and contained some organic fill; it had been recut twice and from the grey silt found at the bottom, it would appear to be a drainage channel. There was a hearth within 0.65m of the west side of the channel.

TRENCH J. The channel found in trench H continued across this trench in the same SE-NW direction. There were remains of a hearth near to the west edge of the channel. A thin spread of postholes mostly from 50 and 90mm in diameter were found in this trench, contemporary with the layer 4 floor level. They were situated mainly to the east of the channel.

STRATIFICATION. Approximately 1 metre below the present surface lay a ground level of Neolithic date. Only 0.15m of Neolithic material above this level remained undisturbed, as farming activity from medieval times onward had ploughed up and dug over the upper 0.85m. Although much disturbed the upper section can be roughly divided into layers according to the age of the pottery waste introduced into different levels.

Layer 1.(100mm). Building rubble from bombed houses.

2.(250mm). Dark soil, containing 16-19th century artifacts. Flint 34%

3.(500mm). Orange sand, containing 14-16th century artifacts. Flint 38%

4.(150mm). Yellow sand, containing Neolithic flint artifacts and potsherds only. Flint 28%

HEARTHES. There were 2 hearths; one in trench H and one in trench J. Trench H hearth consisted of burnt gravel and sand 50mm thick, and was surrounded by many fire crazed flints. Close to the south side of this were found 5 cores. Trench J hearth was made of gravel and 6 pieces of sarsen stone.

FIRE CRAZED FLINTS. Many fire crazed pebbles were found scattered over the site; nearly 98% being bleached 'pot boilers', while the other 2% were less crazed and red in colour. The total weight from trenches F, G, H & J, was 9.81 kgms; of this total 4.74 kgms was found in trench H, of which 1.02 kgms had been dumped into the channel in the trench.

The weight varied considerably from trench to trench: — (F) 33.91 grms per sqr metre; (G) 126.59 grms per sqr metre; (H) 424.72 grms per sqr metre; (J) 33.91 grms per sqr metre. It will be noted that trench H contains 55% of all fire crazed flints.

4. FLINT INDUSTRY

As to be expected, the majority of the flint used was of river pebble origin, accounting for 70% of the whole, and the remainder were from nodular flints. There was little discrimination in use between the two sources of flint material. The colour of the flint can be divided into four categories:-

Dark grey to light grey	80%
Orange	16%
Opaque brown	3%
Honey	1%

The honey coloured flint appears to have been used for the more delicately made implements, but of the other colours there was no discrimination.

Flint assemblage. The total number of worked flint pieces was 2486, of which 8% were finished tools. The assemblage can be broken down as follows:-

Primary flakes without retouch	1748
Snapped blade ends	325
Cores	38
Utilized blades	175
Tools	200

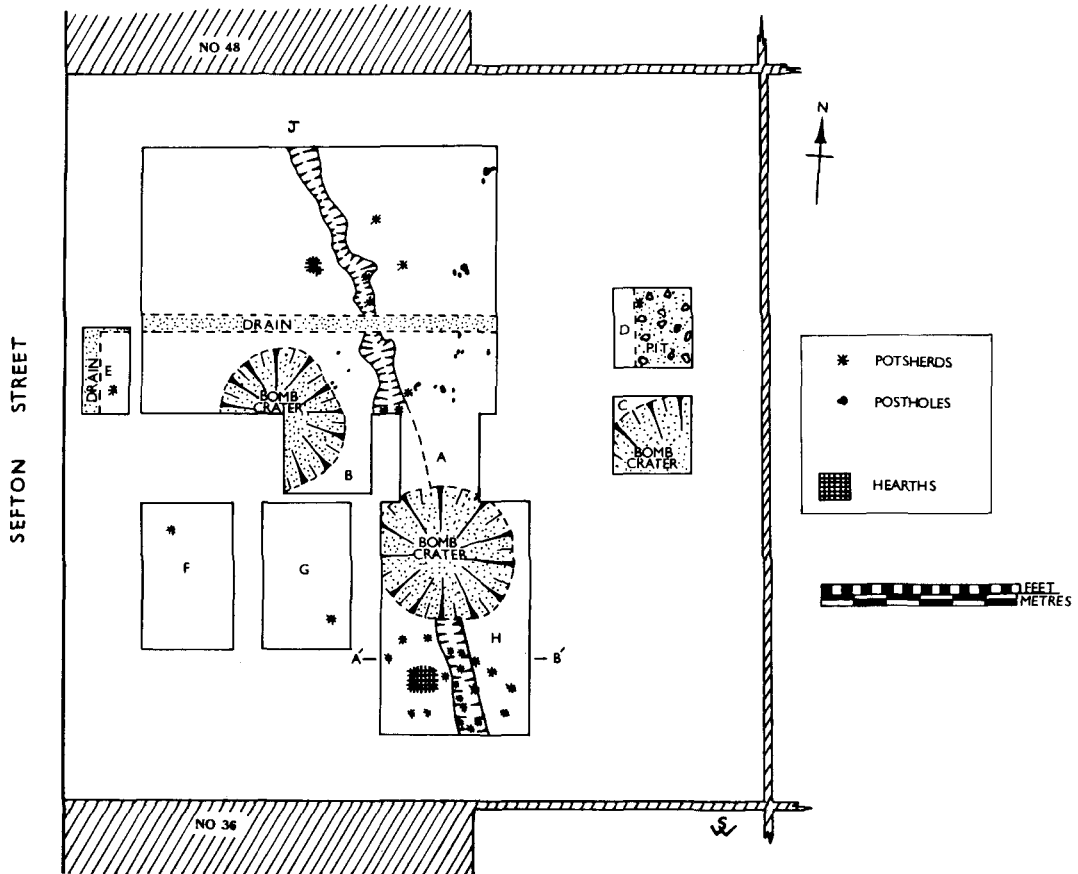


Fig. 3 Sefton Street, Putney: Site plan

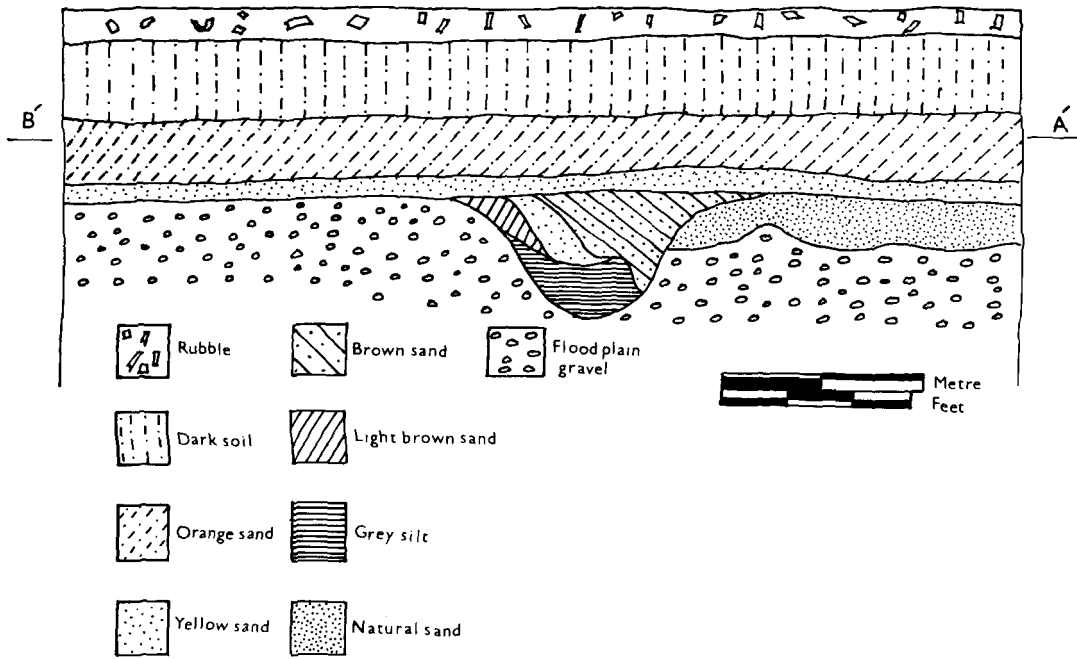


Fig. 4 Sefton Street, Putney: Section A-B

The flint tools can be subdivided as follows:-

Scrapers	68
Blades	42
Knives	6
Axes	4
Saws	22
Arrowheads	58

(Fig. 5 Nos. 1-23; Fig. 6 Nos. 24-54; Fig. 7 Nos. 55-72; Fig. 8 Nos. 73-93; Fig. 9 Nos. 94-120).

Cores. Thirty eight cores were found, one being typically Mesolithic in profile (No. 1).

CLASSIFICATION

A. One platform	1. Flakes removed all round	9
	2. Flakes removed part way round	15
B. Two platforms	1. Parallel platforms (No. 2)	1
	2. One platform at oblique angle	2
	3. Platforms at right angles	2
C. Three or more platforms		—
D. Keeled	Flakes struck from 2 directions	—
E. Keeled	One or more platforms	8

Seven of these cores had been retouched for use as scrapers and a further six adapted for use as spurred implements. Fifty per cent of all cores were found within trenches G and H.

Flakes. Many flakes show signs of secondary working (Nos. 3-10), and it would be quite reasonable to assume that others could have been used without recourse to retouch. Blunting of varying degrees, by removal of small spalls from one edge of some flake blades is noticeable, and in some cases this backing technique is applied to the entire length of the blade (Nos. 11-12). The average length of these

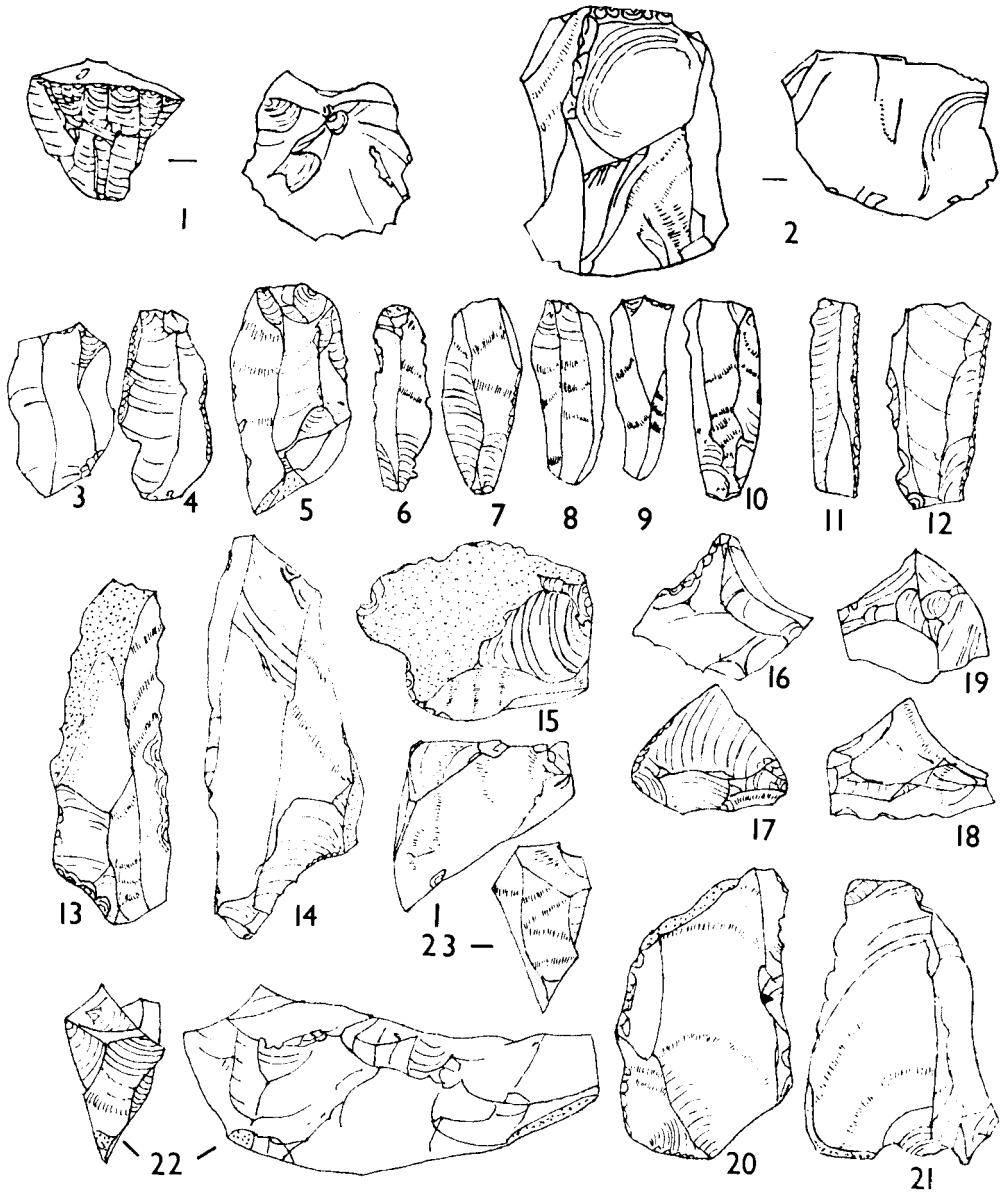


Fig. 5 Sefton Street, Putney: Flints Nos. 1-23 (2/3)

blades is 33mm. Some larger flakes could have been used as single blade sickles (Nos. 13-14). The two illustrated have tangs at one end; No. 13 has been retouched to a slightly concave cutting edge and No. 14 is very thin in section needing the minimal amount of retouch to produce a very sharp cutting edge. Some flake blades seem to be of very shoddy workmanship but this could represent an implement being casually struck for a specific purpose and then discarded after use (No. 15).

Spurred flakes. These unusual flakes are thin and nearly as broad as they are long. Each blade rises to a point at the middle of its upper edge; the ridge up to the point on one side is sharp, while the other ridge is blunted, either by backing (Nos. 16, 18-19), or snapping (No. 17). Some pressure flaking is apparent on the sides of all of them. These implements could have been used as harpoon barbs.

Blunt back knives. There seem to be two types of these; one being oblong in outline, usually with a naturally blunt back and thin in section (Nos. 20-21). The other is wedge shaped in section and much more massive in bulk; the shapes vary considerably; of the two illustrated (Nos. 22-23), one has an elongated convex cutting edge and wide back (No. 22), and the other has a shorter, pointed, and slightly concave cutting edge with the same wide back.

Blade segments. These square ended snapped blades (Nos. 24-31), are thin in section and could have been used in series of two or three, butted together to form composite knives or sickles. A possible example of a composite knife consisting of two prepared pieces butted together, forming a convex blade, with diagonal snappings at the terminal ends of the cutting edge is illustrated (Nos. 27-28).

Microliths. There are a small number of microliths of late Mesolithic date, with well controlled secondary working (Nos. 32-34). Some microblades and rods were also found (Nos. 35-36).

Saw blades. The cutting edge of these blades does not usually exceed 30mm in length, the majority being between 20-25mm. In most cases a terminal tooth or wedge, larger than the rest on the blade acts as a stop to the length of the sawing action, while others have a notch removed at both ends. Five main categories are recognisable:-

- A. With an elongated tooth or wedge at both ends (No. 38).
- B. With an elongated tooth or wedge at the front end (No. 39).
- C. With an elongated tooth or wedge at the back end (Nos. 37, 41-42, 48).
- D. With incised ends in the central portion of a larger blade (Nos. 40, 44, 46).
- E. Without stops (Nos. 43, 45, 47). Some blades have thin upper edges and others have tangs, as if a handle was to be fixed; others have been backed to allow them to be used without a handle.

Awls. These have all been utilized from waste material, one being the distal end of a snapped blade waster (No. 49). They vary both in size and shape, some being made on flat flakes (Nos. 50-54), while others are fabricated from larger pieces of flint, and trimmed to points, with either rounded or more often D shaped sections (Nos. 55-58).

Flake-scrapers. There are convex ended scrapers, both long (Nos. 59-63), and short (Nos. 64-67), plus straight ended scrapers, long (Nos. 68, 71-72), and short (Nos. 75-77). There are also examples of narrow rounded ended (Nos. 69-70), concave (No. 73), and pointed (No. 74) scrapers. There are only three side scrapers, two utilized from thermal flakes and one made on a prepared flake. Scrapers of a thick heavy form consist of narrow round ended (No. 83), spurred (Nos. 81-82, 85), and straight ended (Nos. 78, 84) types. There are also 19 small scrapers of Beaker type (Nos. 86-93).

CLASSIFICATION

A. End scrapers	1. Long	20
	2. Short	35
B. Double ended scrapers	1. Long	2
	2. Short	—
C. Disc		—
D. Side scrapers	1. Long	2
	2. Short	1
E. On broken flakes		6
F. Hollow scrapers		2
		—
		68

Leaf-shaped arrowheads. There are two types of leaf-arrowhead present.

Class A is bifacially retouched with shallow pressure flaking reaching nearly to the centre. There are

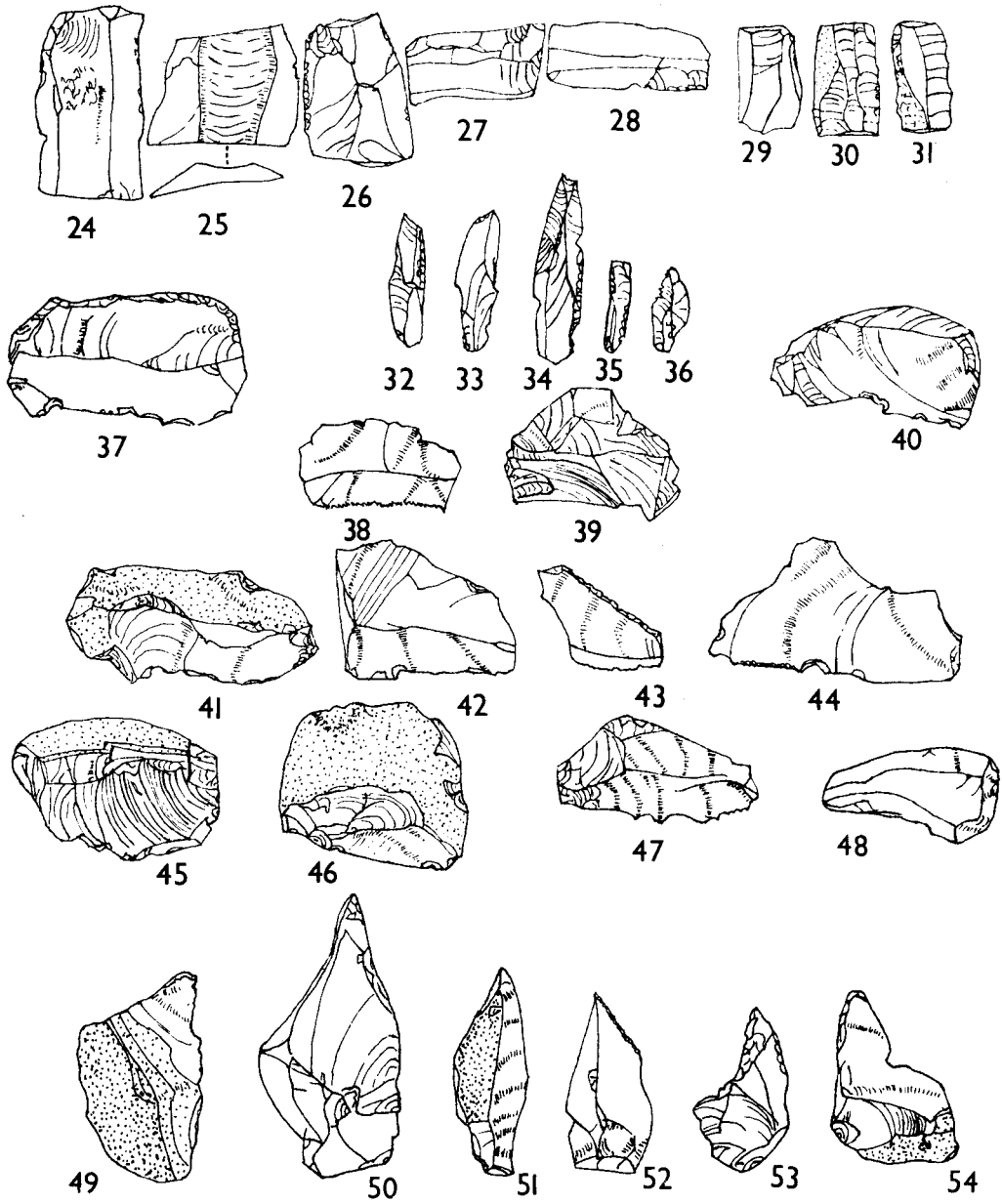


Fig. 6 Sefton Street, Putney: Flints Nos. 24-54 (2/3)

only two of this class (Nos. 94-95).

Class B has retouch at the edges and points of triangular and leaf-shaped flakes. There are 27 of this class, most showing the minimum of retouch (Nos. 96-103).

Transverse arrowheads and derivative forms. There are 36 of these and can be classified as follows:-

A. Square ends.	Base half of apex. (Nos. 104-105, 109)	11
B. Square ends.	Base more than half of apex. (Nos. 106-108)	9
C. Triangular	1. Long (No. 110)	5
	2. Short (No. 111)	4
D. Triangular.	Elongated apex. (No. 112)	1
E. Triangular.	Elongated curved apex. (Nos. 113-115)	6

Spurred implements. While examining flint cores for secondary working, it was noticed that six of them had been utilized as spurred implements, five had squared tips 2mm across, and one worked to a 110 degree point (No. 116). Two more had been worked on pebbles, and one on a flake (No. 117).

Axes. There were four small axes in various stages of manufacture (Nos. 118-119), one with pressure flaking completely covering both sides. There was no sign of polishing on any of them.

Fabricators. One complete fabricator was found (No. 120), and two broken pieces of flint could represent the tips of two others.

Hammerstones. There are 11 hammerstones roughly shaped from river pebbles and varying in size from 114 x 110 x 75mm to 45 x 35 x 34mm.

POTTERY

The total assemblage consists of 34 sherds of plain pottery, 27 being grit-tempered and 7 shell-tempered. The colour of the grit-tempered ware varies between reddish brown and black; the shell-tempered ware between reddish brown and light brown. Thickness differs slightly, the grit ware from 5 to 12mm, and the shell ware 4 to 9mm. There are only two rimsherds, both of simple upright form, all the rest of the sherds being fragmentary wallsherds, too small for any assessment to be made of pottery shape. The paucity of the collection of sherds, and the smallness of their size does not allow enough scope for further analysis. This pottery seems to have an affinity with the early Neolithic Windmill Hill ware¹ but, like many other potsherds found near the Thames, contains an unusually high amount of sand. Dr. Isabel Smith, when commenting on the Neolithic pottery found at Twickenham, noted that it appeared to be early but did not fit into any established type and could represent a local form, and in fact, parallels have been found on excavations from Kingston to Putney, suggesting a fabric peculiar to the area bordering the Thames.

There are two later, decorated sherds, one being a piece of Ebbsfleet rim, with corded impressions on the outside extending over to the extremity of the incurve of the rim. There are fingernail impressions along this extremity, and the inside of the rim has incised slashes diagonally inscribed. The other piece is a small wallsherd of grooved ware. This late Neolithic type is quite rare in the London area, mostly being found in the Thames.

Number of potsherds in each layer:-

Layer 2.	Early Neolithic	1
3.	Early Neolithic	8
	Ebbsfleet	1
	Grooved Ware	1
4.	Early Neolithic	23
		—
		34

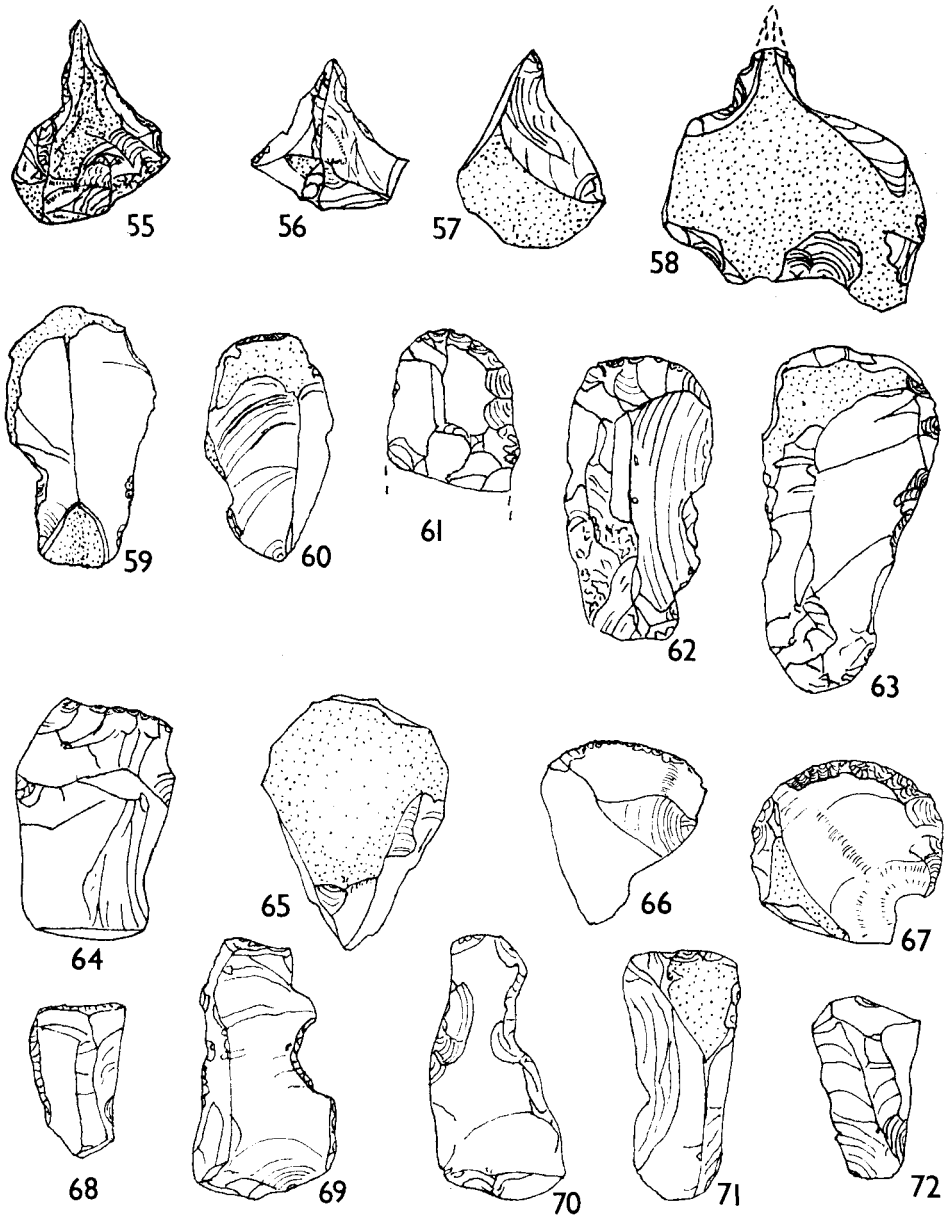


Fig. 7 Sefton Street, Putney: Flints Nos. 55-72 (2/3)

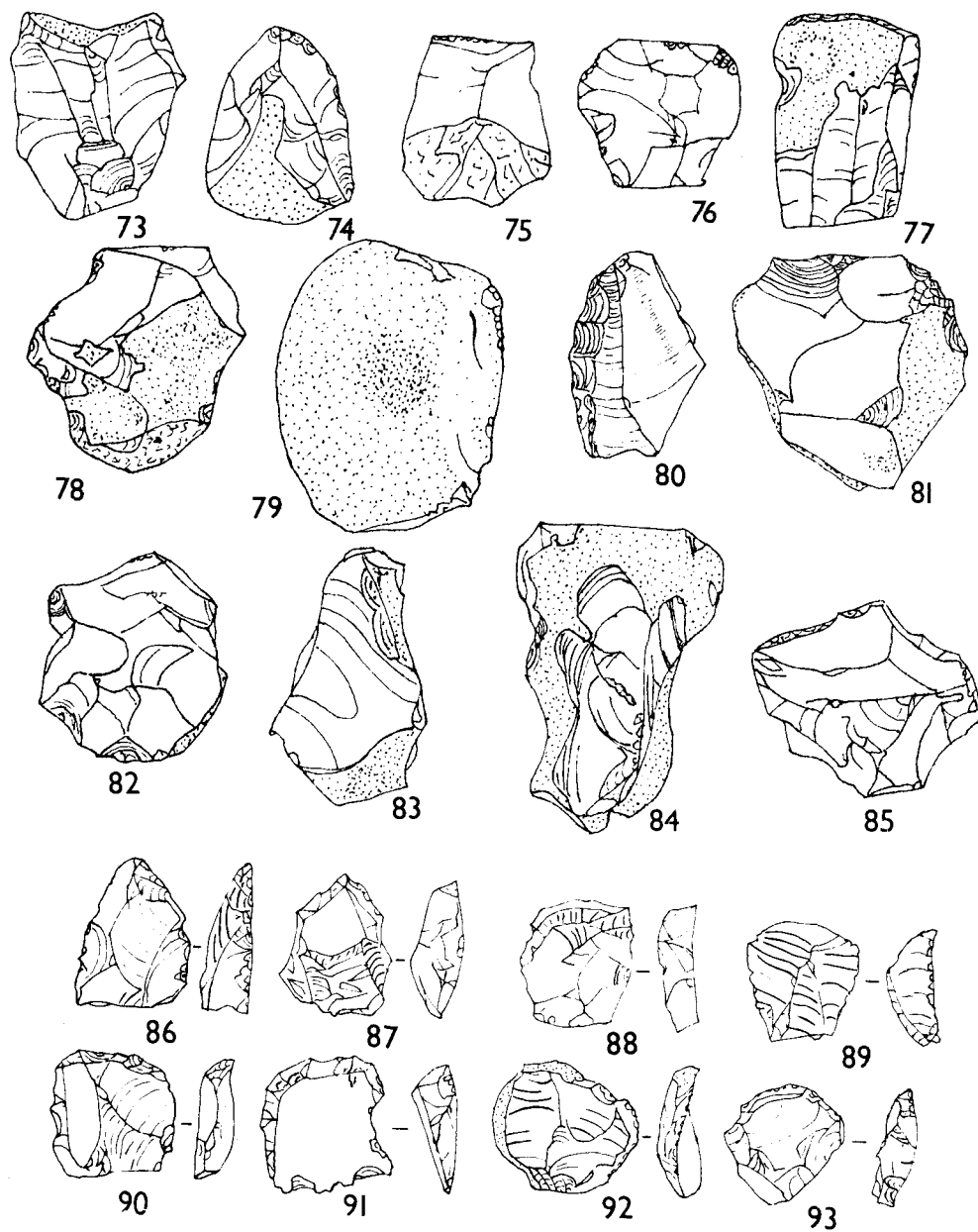


Fig. 8 Sefton Street, Putney: Flints Nos. 73-93 (2/3)

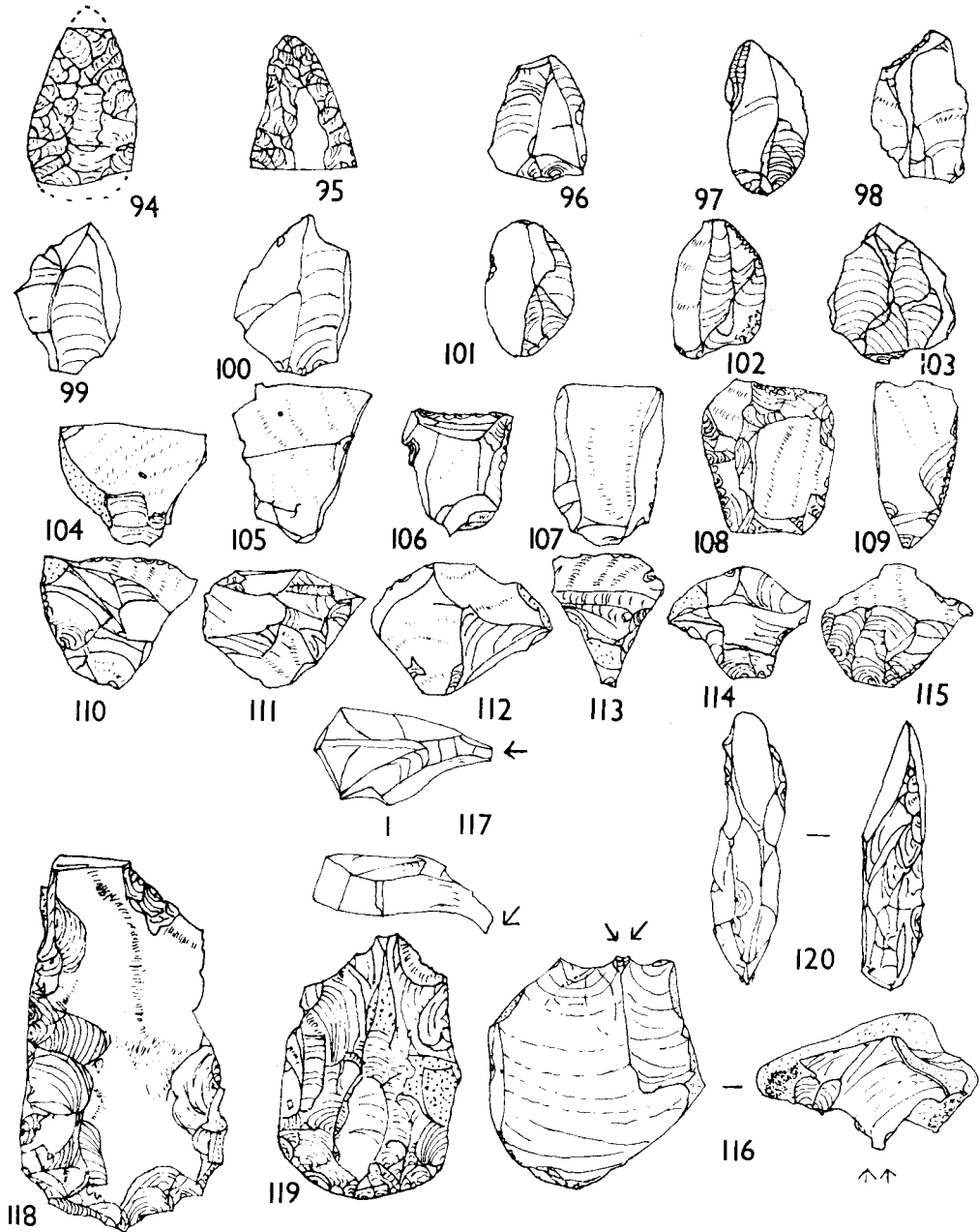


Fig. 9 Sefton Street, Putney: Flints Nos. 94-120 (2/3)

6. CONCLUSION

The flint artifacts found in this small area of excavation covers a time scale from Mesolithic to the Beaker period. Evidence for Mesolithic occupation cannot be assumed from the meagre assemblage of this date, as the flints discovered need only represent a field scatter in a district well known for random surface finds. There is more concrete evidence for occupation in Neolithic times, as the vast majority of artifacts are of this period. The plain pottery could be contemporaneous with the Windmill Hill Culture, as also could many of the flint artifacts. The volume of finds in trenches G, and more especially H, with the evidence of its hearth, flint cores, the pot boilers dumped in the channel and the high percentage of early Neolithic potsherds, point to habitation, most likely of an early Neolithic date. How long habitation persisted here it is impossible to assert, but from the evidence of pottery of Ebbsfleet and Grooved Ware types, plus the existence of flint tools from the late Neolithic and Beaker period, it would seem that the area was used, even if not permanently occupied, throughout the whole of the Neolithic period.

In the wider aspect, evidence of Neolithic artifacts found along the banks of tributaries of the Thames at Kingston², Twickenham³, Brentford⁴ and Fulham⁵, as well as Putney could indicate the existence of early settlements a little way inland from the river, rather than on its banks, so as to minimize the possibility of the inhabitants being imposed upon by transitory groups moving up and down the Thames.

1. A. Keiller *Windmill Hill and Avebury 1925-1939* (Oxford, 1965) 43-84.
2. *Kingston Geological Society Review* 1 (1968) No. 1.
3. S. Sandford *Excavation in Church Street Twickenham* (1969) 19-20.
4. R. Canham 'Excavations at Brentford' *London Archaeol.* 1 No. 13 (1971) 291-295.
5. K. Whitehouse, personal communication.

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