

AN EXCAVATION AT GIBBET HILL, SHELFORD

by

STANLEY REVILL

INTRODUCTION

Gibbet Hill is the name given to a large mound standing on the edge of the escarpment formed by Malkin Hill, which directly overlooks the valley of the Trent six miles north-east of Nottingham. From this point there is a sharp fall of about 100 feet to the river floodplain on the west, and a less abrupt slope to the south. The mound stands, therefore, on what is virtually the extreme tip of Malkin Hill, and provides a remarkable view north and south over the river valley. The name of this feature goes back at least to the end of the 16th century. A map in the Public Record Office¹ showing this part of the Trent Valley, and which from other evidence must date from about 1600 A.D., has this mound shown clearly on it, and for good measure the cartographer has added a gallows with a hanging figure. There is, of course, no reason to take this too literally, and the artist was probably commenting on a local and traditional name.

Beyond this reference there can be only speculation. The mound lies just within the parish boundaries of Shelford. The medieval manor of Shelford was originally part of the Domesday barony of Geoffrey Alselin, or Hauselin, which had its *caput* at Laxton. At some date before 1150 this barony was divided,² and the larger part of it passed a little later by marriage to the Bardolph family, and is thereafter referred to as the barony of Shelford. The main interests of this family were, by the end of the 12th century, transferred to Wormegey in Norfolk, but Shelford, along with Stoke Bardolph on the opposite bank of the river, seems never to have been alienated, perhaps, if for no other reason, because the Bardolphs, through their Alselin ancestors, were founder's kin to the Augustinian priory of Shelford, which lay a little to the north-east of the existing village. Between the middle of the 12th century and the beginning of the 15th century, the Bardolphs maintained a house here in Castle Field, Stoke Bardolph, which, although large, was almost certainly no more than a fortified manor.

Shelford and its appurtenances had therefore, as the *caput* of a minor barony, rather more than the normal manorial significance during the Middle Ages, and it is not surprising to find that the franchisal rights of its lords ran the usual gamut of liberties, including that of gallows.³ It is unlikely that this right was exercised very frequently, for the difficulties put in the way by the policies of the rulers from the reign of Henry II at the latest were considerable, but it was nevertheless a privilege jealously guarded by the baronage as a symbol of lordship. In this respect, the dominating position of this hillock, and its situation just within the boundaries of Shelford, make it probable that it is, in fact, the site of the medieval gallows mound, just as it undoubtedly was of that of the 16th century.

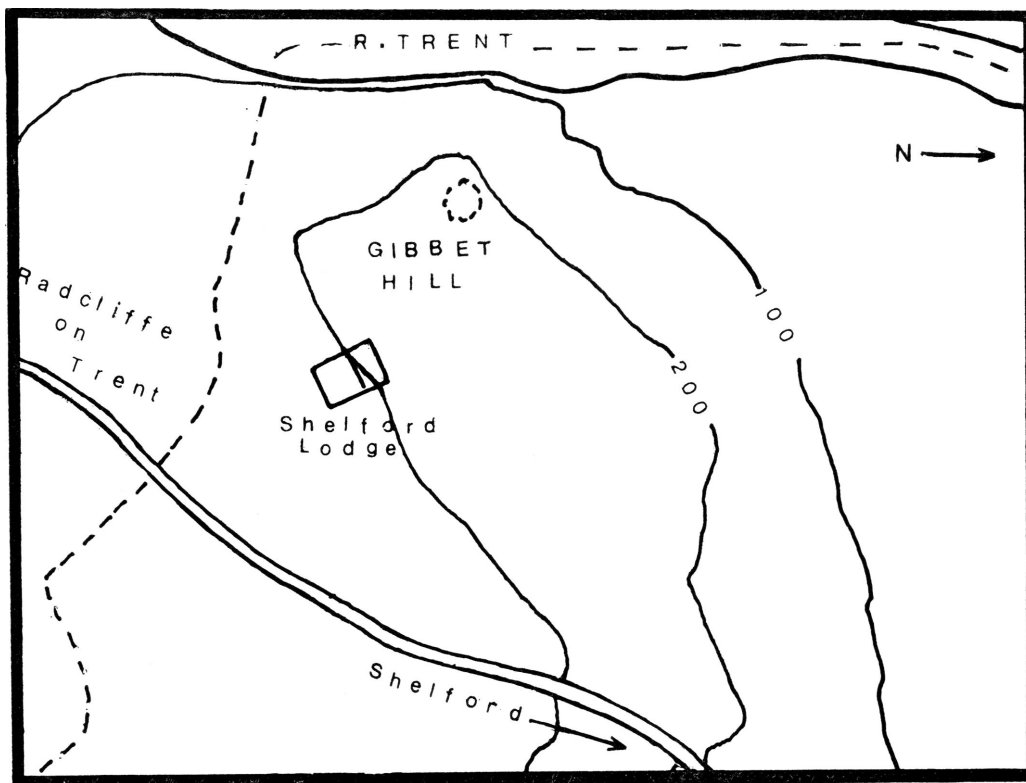
¹M.R.P. 10. Thanks are due to Professor M. W. Barley for drawing my attention to this map.

²Stenton, *Lincs. Record Soc.*, vii (1953), App. 2.

³*Rot Hundredorum*, II (1818), p. 27.

EXCAVATION

Gibbet Hill lies on land farmed by Mr. K. L. Wilson, of Shelford Lodge, and it was primarily his interest in this feature which led to the decision by the archaeological section of the Thoroton Society in 1968 to undertake a short trial excavation to determine, if possible, its archaeological significance. We are greatly indebted to Mr. Wilson, both for his interest and help, and particularly for his undertaking the restoration of the site at the conclusion of the dig.



Scale: 6 inches = 1 mile Grid. ref. SK. 652407

FIGURE 1 General site plan

Assuming that, as is frequently the case, the mound had been re-used as a gallows mound from some previous purpose, and its size and situation made this seem possible, the alternatives were a round barrow, a small motte, or even an example of that not very positive feature, a moot hill. For this last suggestion there is no historical evidence at all, and it was unlikely that excavation would reveal any. A hastily constructed and temporary motte was a feasible explanation, although there were no surface indications of either a ditch or of any outworks. The most obviously attractive possibility therefore was that the mound was a barrow, since both its appearance and siting were consistent with this idea.

The mound is not quite circular, measuring almost 23 metres east to west and 20 metres north to south. This irregularity could well be accounted for by soil slip, since the underlying

strata consist of stiff blue Keuper marls, and the upper soil along the edge of the escarpment is unstable. For similar reasons the original height of the mound has probably been reduced by spreading. Today its highest point at the centre is nearly 1·5 metres above the skirts of the hillock, which is defined by a circle of hawthorns, planted in pairs, so as to ring the mound completely. On the mound itself are a number of large trees irregularly spaced, and making anything more than an exploratory excavation out of the question.

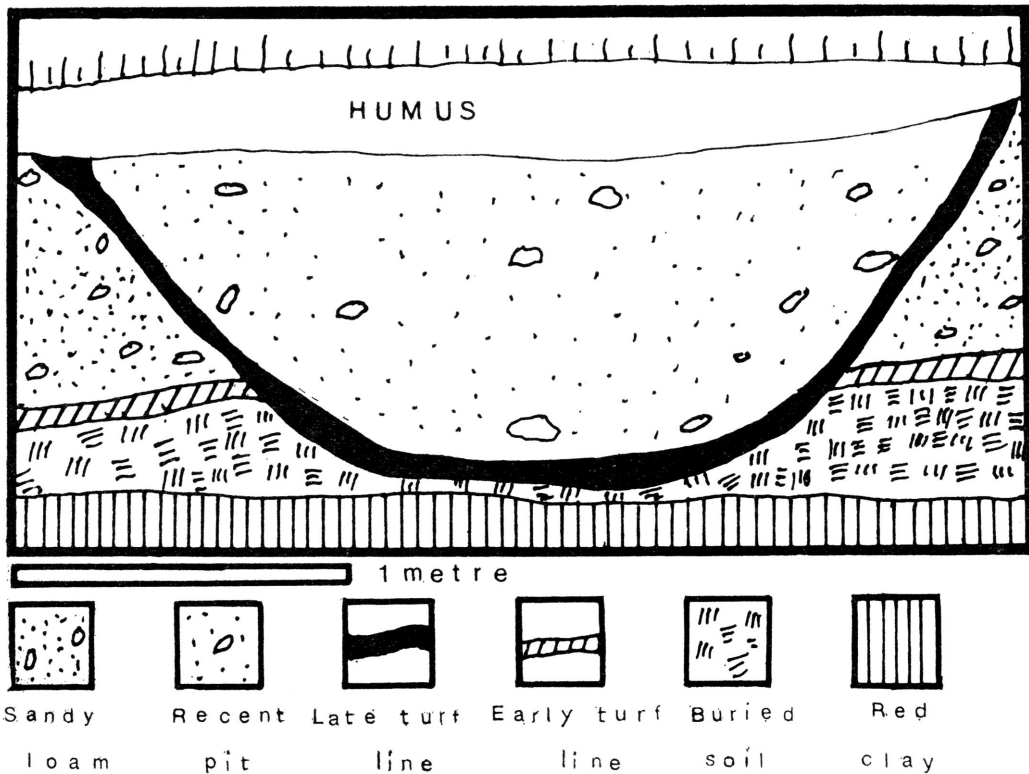


FIGURE 2
Section along North face of centre cutting

The first stage, therefore, consisted of opening up a rectangular area, 5 metres by 2 metres, at a point where a gap in the hawthorn ring made this possible, and extending beyond the limits of the mound proper. This was taken down to the natural clay, and produced no features other than the root holes of two thorn trees which had disappeared. A trench 1 metre wide was then driven towards the centre of the mound. Neither in this trench, which was continuous but for one short length where tree roots made excavation very difficult, nor in the original stage of the excavation, was any trace found of a ditch. This did not in itself, of course, preclude the possibility of the mound being a barrow, but, taken together with a complete absence of any medieval pottery, did seem to rule out the motte theory.

There did appear, however, at a point rather more than 1 metre into the body of the mound from its present limits, a thin dark line which could be traced to the centre, and which was clearly an early turf level, below which was a greyish, finely comminuted buried soil, different in texture and colour from the mound. It became plain, therefore, that the hillock had been constructed by the heaping-up of soil from the surrounding land onto the existing surface, and not by throwing up the spoil from a ditch. This was borne out by the substance of the mound itself, which was of a uniform sandy loam, not greatly different from that of the cultivated field around. It increased in compactness towards the base and contained throughout a scatter of skerry fragments. There was, however, no trace of clay before the natural undisturbed levels were reached, as there would certainly have been had a ditch been dug.

The excavation had to this point yielded only a few indeterminate pieces of flint and some scattered and abraded sherds of Romano-British pottery, in addition to 18th- and 19th-century fragments and pipe stems in the humus level. Field walking in the area produced precisely the same kind of material.

The trench was then enlarged to a rectangle 3·5 metres by 2 metres as the crest of the mound was approached. This was taken down to the natural clay over the whole area. Here there was found a much heavier buried surface 6 centimetres thick, which from its more fibrous and turf-like composition was certainly more recent than the one already mentioned. This feature was traceable from a point just below the base of the present humus to a little over 50 centimetres below the earlier turf line (see section). It was not possible to obtain its full dimensions from east to west, but its appearance was entirely consistent with the existence of a large pit. This must have been open for some time, as the thickness and coarseness of the turf line suggested a growth of vegetation upon the steep sides of the pit; it would have been impossible for turves thrown in by way of refilling immediately after such a pit had been dug to have lined the sides in this way. The weight of decayed material and the much less compact fill suggest also that the pit had been dug comparatively recently, perhaps during the last century in a search for possible grave goods.

Of more significance was the finding from outside the area enclosed by the secondary turf line, but from below the level of the earlier surface, of a number of sherds of Romano-British coarse ware, one fragment at least of 4th-century date.¹ This discovery, combined with the absence of any pre-Roman or Roman material in the body of the mound in any but insignificant quantities, would seem to be conclusive. Roman pottery on the edges of the mound would not mean anything, as sherds are to be found in the surrounding fields, but those appearing below an undisturbed turf line argue positively against any but a post-Roman date, and it may be considered fortunate that firm evidence of this kind was yielded by so limited an excavation.

The assumption, therefore, is that this was indeed a gallows mound from the beginning, and as such may tentatively be assigned to the medieval barony of Shelford. It would have been more satisfactory to have had positive proof in the shape of bone remains, but their absence may be explained partly in terms of the restricted nature of the excavation, partly,

¹Mr. M. Todd kindly identified this material.

as already suggested, in the probably very limited use of such a gallows, and most of all in the acid nature of the soil, which would rapidly decompose any bones buried in it.

A quite unexpected and eventually more rewarding by-product of the dig came as the result of field walking in the immediate neighbourhood of the mound, in the shape of a collection of worked flints which were picked up from the surface. They were found most thickly along the edge of the escarpment in a strip 30 to 50 yards wide. No signs of occupation were noticed, but the number of these artifacts obtained after a single ploughing suggests settlement somewhere in the area. The material has been examined by Dr. A. P. Phillips, and the results of her analysis follow in the form of an appendix to this report.

Appendix

THE SURFACE COLLECTION OF FLINT ARTIFACTS

by

DR. A. P. PHILLIPS

Two-hundred-and-seventy-six flints were collected from the Malkin Hills in the vicinity of the Gibbet Hill site as a result of field walking in the intervals of the excavation. The flint is in the form of fairly small nodules and comes presumably from the Trent river gravels at the bottom of the escarpment. It varies in colour from light brown to dark brown and dark grey. The collection does not necessarily represent a single occupation, since no site was associated with the flints, and it has been analysed in two ways, by tool types, and by size groupings, in an attempt to bring out its main characteristics. Of the collected flints, 64 were rejected from the analysis since their fractures seemed to be the result of natural forces or of plough action.

Of the remaining 212, 10 are primary flakes and 16 are cores, so that the 'wastage' amounts to approximately 13 per cent of the total. Some of the primary flakes appear to have been used, and all the cores have prepared scraping edges. Of these cores, one belongs to Clark's Class A 1, three each to his classes A2 (for example, Figure 1: 7) and B2 (Figure 1: 2 and Figure 2: 8); and nine to his Class C (Figure 1: 3).¹ Two flakes struck to rejuvenate cores were also found.

The remaining 185 flint artifacts comprise 145 scrapers (or flakes with one or more scraping or serrated edges) and 40 other tools. The scrapers consist of two thumbnail scrapers (Figure 2: 14), two endscrapers on long flakes (one of which is opposed to a burin: Figure 1: 5) and six fine frontal and/or lateral scrapers (in Class 2, mentioned below). The majority of the scrapers are on irregular flakes. The tools comprise a possible arrowhead (Figure 2: 9) and a saw (Figure 1: 4), both on blades; nine notched flakes (for example, Figure 2: 12); three borers (for example, Figure 2: 11, 13); two burins (Figure 1: 5, 6); three or four flake knives (for example, Figure 1: 1); and 20 blades (for example, Figure 2: 10).

The 203 retouched cores, flakes and blades were measured for length, breadth and thickness, and the results plotted on graphs. Of these artifacts, 122 fell into eight groups, one each of blades and blade flakes, and the other six of flakes and cores. The results of this analysis are given below, with the size range for each type. Measurements are in millimetres.

<i>Type</i>	<i>Number in type</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Breadth</i>	<i>Thickness</i>	<i>Description</i>
1	29	24-31	15-22	6-9	Small, retouched flakes, usually with some cortex remaining
2	10	30-36	25-33	7-10	Medium-sized thin retouched flakes, mostly scrapers
3	12	30-35	18-30	11-16	Medium-sized scrapers on cores and flakes
4	11	29-50	20-30	13-20	Medium-large retouched pieces
5	14	24-35	18-25	10-22	Small nugget scrapers from small nodules
6	5	25-51	13-16	7-10	Blade-flakes
7	21	27-52	10-19	3-6	Blades
8	19	17-23	10-16	3-7	Tiny retouched flakes

The 81 flakes and cores left outside these categories were allotted by eye to their nearest group as a sub-group. Fifteen of these fell into Type 1a, six into Type 2a, five into Type 3a, seven into Type 4a, 24 into Type 5a, and 18 into Type 8a. In addition there were four very large cores with prepared scraping edges, apparently of Clark's Class C, one of which was battered, and had probably been used as a hammerstone; and two broad flake knives (for example, Figure 1: 1).

¹J. G. D. Clark, E. S. Higgs, I. H. Longworth, 'Excavations at the Neolithic site at Hurst Fen, Mildenhall, Suffolk, 1954, 1957, 1958, *Proc. Prehistoric Soc.*, xxvi (1960), 202-245.

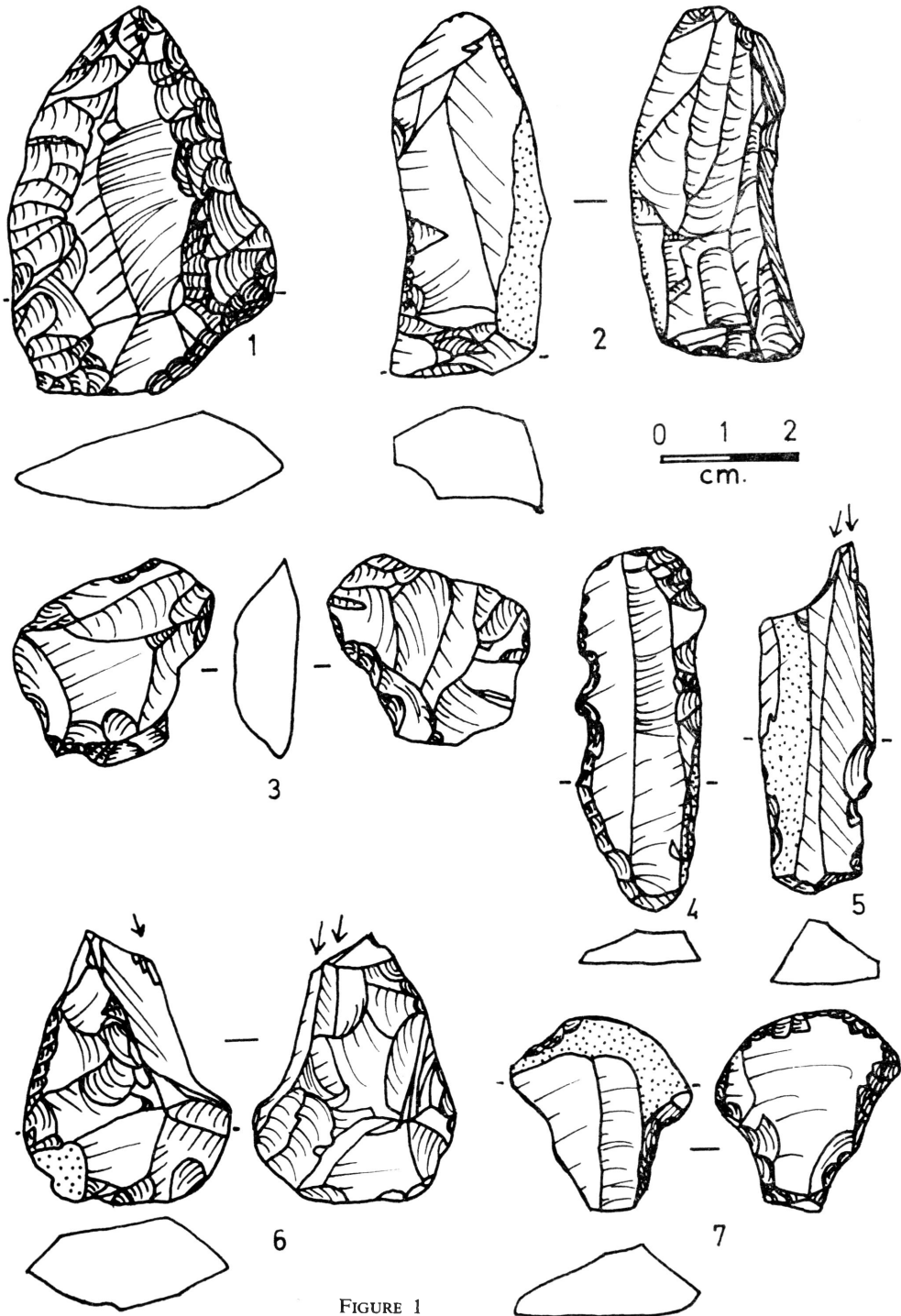


FIGURE 1

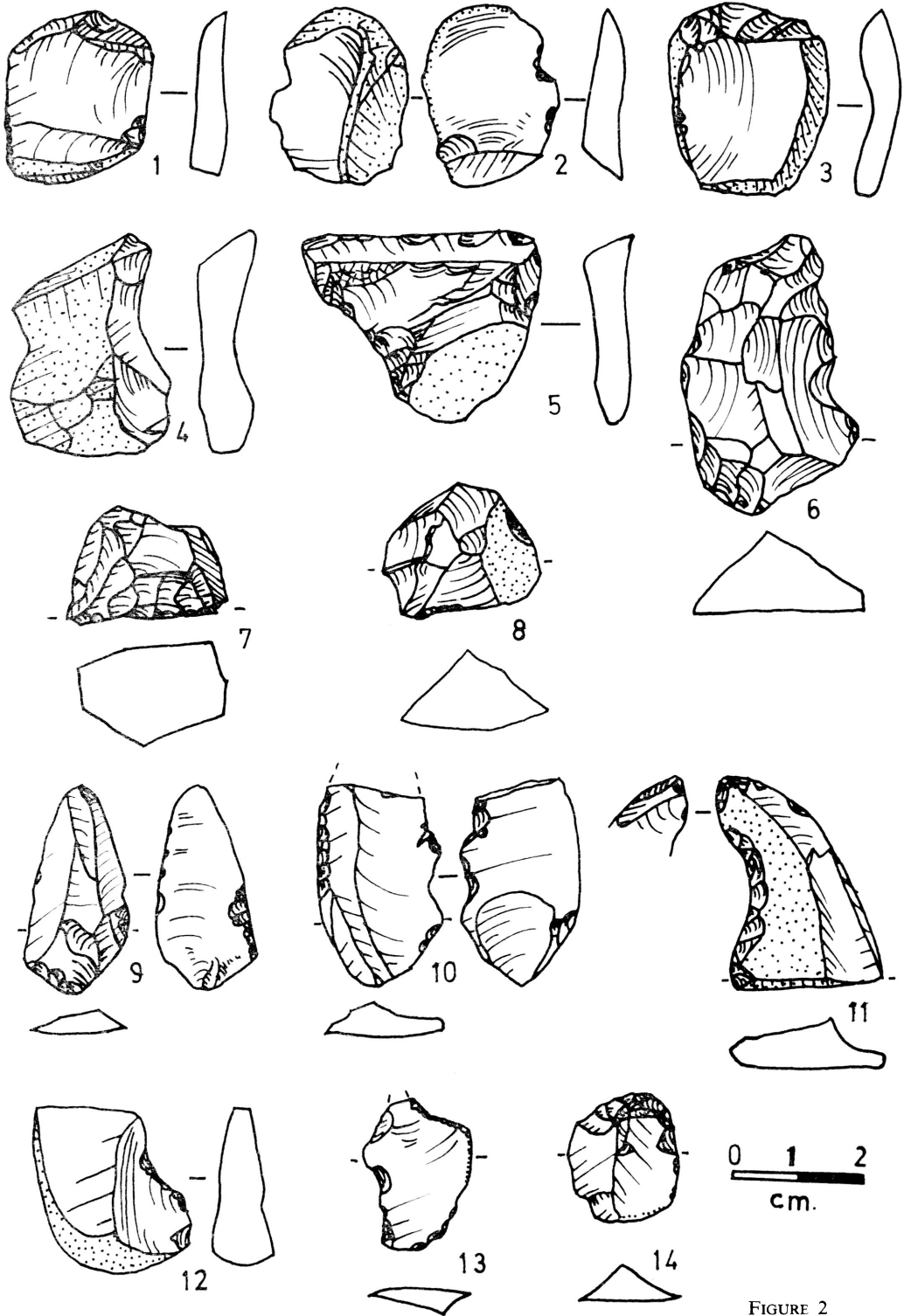


FIGURE 2

The distribution of cores and tools other than scrapers in the size categories is shown in the following table:

Type	Arrowhead	Saw	Notch	Borer	Burin	Flake knife	Core with prepared scraping edge
1			3	1			1
2						1	
3							4
4			1		1		1
5							
6					1*		
7	1?	1					
8				1?			
1a			5	1?			
2a						1?	
3a							2
4a							3
5a							1
Other						2	4

*opposed to end scraper

Graphs of the lengths and breadths of the 145 scrapers (or serrated flakes) and the 18 tools on flakes (total 173), prepared in the manner of those produced by Clark (1960: 219) indicate that 50 per cent of the scraper industry is between 24 and 35 millimetres long and 16 and 25 millimetres broad. These averages are closer to the Peacock's Farm and Plantation Farm Late Neolithic industries than to the earlier Hurst Fen, Abingdon and Windmill Hill Neolithic industries, also analysed by Clark. The results of this comparison of lengths and breadths, plus the flat ripple flaking on some of the tools (for example, Figure 1: 1) suggests a Late Neolithic (or at least an Early Bronze Age) date for the majority of the Malkin Hill collection. The proportion of tool types is dissimilar to those obtained by Clark for the Hurst Fen site.

The very low incidence of primary flakes, taken with the re-use of all cores as scrapers, tends to suggest that the area was not a knapping site, and even perhaps that flint supplies needed to be conserved.