

NOTE ON A HAND-AXE FOUND AT MORTIMER

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The hand-axe illustrated, Fig. 1, was found on Mortimer Common in the parish of Stratfield Mortimer, and is the first record of a palaeolith from that parish. It was a chance find, made by the writer when walking across the common on Boxing Day, 1969, casually inspecting low mounds of disturbed soil around the north-eastern edge of a rectangle of ground that had recently been cleared and levelled by bulldozing. The point is in Holden's Firs, about 200 m north of the Mortimer Barrow Group (National Grid Reference-SU 64256525) and close to where a small bowl barrow previously existed (Grinsell's 3a, *Berks*

Arch. J. 43 (1939) 16). This barrow was partly destroyed by fencing construction in 1952, was still visible in 1955, but is now obliterated.

The hand-axe is 8 cm long of twisted cordate type, that is the edges in profile have an inverted S twist, a feature peculiar to this type of Acheulian hand-axe. It has a lustrous white patina and it has suffered from weathering, for there are some hair-line incipient frost cracks and three small, irregular depressions from actual fractures. The ridges between the flake scars on the least damaged side are worn slightly, apparently by weathering and not by

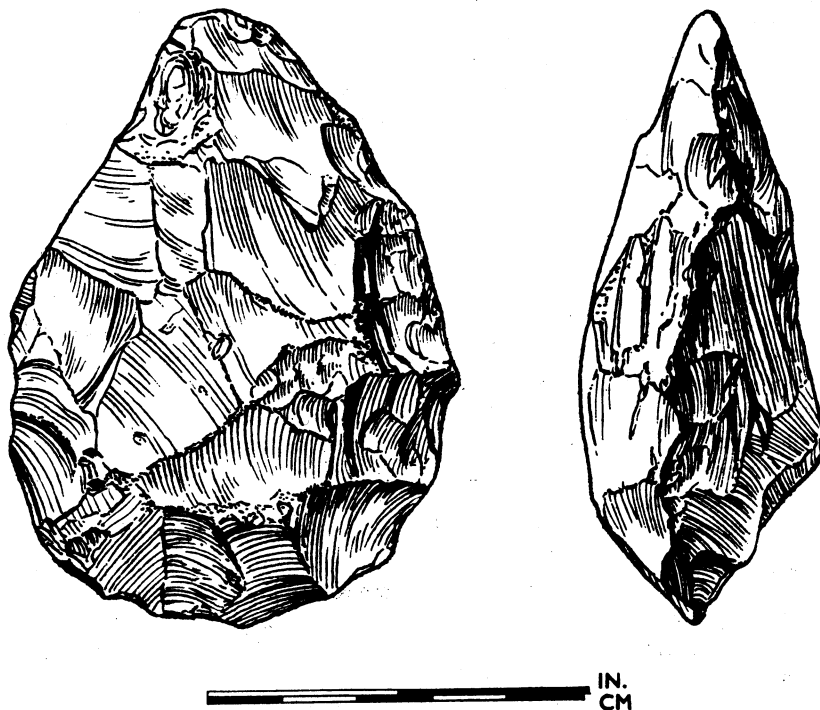


Fig. 1

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rolling. Typologically, this is an evolved form of hand-axe of standardised type which is likely to belong to a Late Middle Acheulian Industry (Wymer, 1968), considered to be present in Britain during the latter part of the Hoxnian Interglacial (c. 250,000–200,000 B.C.) or in various stages of the succeeding Gipping Glaciation. As the gravel of Mortimer Common is almost certainly the outwash of the proto-Kennet during the much earlier Lowestoft Glaciation, c. 500,000 B.C., its position and relationship to previous discoveries in this area warrants examination.

Mortimer Common is part of the extensive gravel-covered plateau which extends from Burghfield to Brimpton, and is continued westwards on the other side of the River Enborne as far as Wash Common, Newbury. The surface grades from 412 ft O.D. at Wash Common to 312 ft at Burghfield, a drop of 100 ft in 13 miles, a similar gradient to the present Kennet Valley, so the gravel maintains a height of about 150 ft above the modern floodplain. It is a feature which creates a distinctive landscape in this part of the county, with a stony, bleached podsolised surface supporting little but heather, birch and pine. Underlying Eocene clays make the drainage poor, and peats have formed in boggy parts, but this is an advantage from the aspect of water supply for human occupation, as good fresh water is available anywhere on the plateau by constructing a shallow well, a factor which must have influenced the siting of Roman and pre-Roman Silchester.

This gravel spread was referred to by Osborn White as the Silchester Terrace. Treacher, Arkell and Wooldridge have all equated it with the Winter Hill Terrace of the Thames on the basis of its height above the present valleys and lower, more recent terraces. In surveys by the Sealys (1956) and Thomas (1961) these gravels are mapped as Lower Winter Hill Terrace. Downstream, towards Reading, it is clear that this level grades into the level of the 'Ancient Channel' between Caversham and Henley. At Rotherfield Peppard the floor of this 'Ancient Channel' is at 250 ft O.D., or

about 150 ft above the present Thames. Although these levels are in good agreement, there are two significant differences between the gravels of the Silchester plateau and those which constitute the floor of the Ancient Channel, both in their make-up and their contents. The Silchester plateau gravels, as at Mortimer, are clayey, appear to have been subjected to extreme cold (permafrost) and hence lost most traces of their original bedding, and contain numerous erratic sarsen stones derived from the west of the county and Wiltshire. The gravels of the Ancient Channel are, on the contrary, sandy and often strongly bedded, and contain numerous erratic rocks such as Bunter quartzites derived from the Northern Drift of the Lowestoft Glaciation. The second difference is that the gravels of the Ancient Channel contain numerous Lower Palaeolithic flint artifacts, recognised as coming from two main industries: Clactonian and Late Middle Acheulian. There are *some* palaeoliths from the Silchester terrace, and the new find from Mortimer adds to them, but they are very few and can be reviewed briefly. They come from four sites:

Greenham

1 pointed hand-axe

Brimpton

1 cordate hand-axe (Newbury Museum)

Wasing

1 cordate hand-axe (Reading Museum)

1 small pointed hand-axe (Newbury Museum)

1 butt of hand-axe (Newbury Museum)

Sulhampstead Abbots

1 flat-butt cordate hand-axe

1 ovate hand-axe (Reading Museum)

Full details of these implements and their provenances can be found in Wymer (1968). The Greenham hand-axe appears to have come from the area of the U.S. Army Air Force aerodrome. It is patinated and frost-cracked. The Brimpton one came from the small gravel pit in Holdaway's Farm, at 322 ft O.D. A section seen in this pit in 1953 showed that the upper 5 ft of a total of 8 ft 6 in. of gravel was much disturbed by the effects of intense cold. It is not known whereabouts in

the gravel the hand-axe was found. Nothing is known of the circumstances of the finding of the cordate hand-axe from Wasing, which is in sharp condition but deeply strained. The other artifacts from Wasing were found in 1961 by Mr R. Sheridan on the gravelly surface of the fields close to the Borson Barrows. They are also in sharp condition. The flat-butted cordate hand-axe from Abbots Pit at Sulhampstead Abbots is of a type generally considered to be of very late form, and similar implements in France are known to belong to industries of the Last Glacial period. In the Lower Thames Valley they have been found in deposits of the present floodplain, strongly supporting their relatively recent date. This one from Sulhampstead Abbots is, however, both stained and apparently rolled. The ovate is sharp and patinated. It may be relevant that loam-filled channels have been found (Jarvis, 1968), cut through the gravels, and these may be considerably more recent than the gravels themselves.

None of these few artifacts has definitely come from deep within undisturbed gravel of the Silchester plateau: three, including the new find from Mortimer, have come virtually from the surface, and the condition of all the others, with the exception of the flat-butted cordate from Wasing, is commensurate with surface finds of great antiquity. The conclusion is that they are casual surface losses during the Lower Palaeolithic period, although permafrost during succeeding glacial periods, and the normal effects of sub-aerial erosion, have mixed them to some extent with the upper, disturbed part of the gravels. If this is so, stratigraphically they must be more recent than the Lowestoft Glaciation, which is what would have been expected on the grounds of typology.

Between the Silchester plateau gravels, and the Ancient Channel, a few palaeoliths have come from pits at Englefield, Bradfield and Sulham, all at about 150 ft above the present valley floor. Most are sharp and of late forms and could also represent casual losses on surfaces which have not changed much since the Lower Palaeolithic period, but at least two

are a little rolled. Although there can be little doubt that the proto-Kennet which deposited the Silchester plateau gravels must have joined the Thames somewhere in the Sulham-Reading area, and flowed through the Ancient Channel in a direct line to Henley, it does not mean to say that all the deposits which now lie along this course are contemporary. The great mass must have resulted from the effects of the Lowestoft Glaciation, but the effects of the later Gipping Glaciation were very marked in this part of Britain and many of these early deposits may have been churned up and resorted at periods of high river level. The Wallingford fan gravels testify to the extreme conditions of this time, and they fan out for the most part on to a terrace about 330–350 ft O.D. Factors of this sort probably account for the presence of so many palaeoliths in the Ancient Channel.

Twisted cordate hand-axes have not been found in the Ancient Channel, and it may be that such forms are more recent than the other Late Middle Acheulian implements found there. Flat-butted cordates are also absent from the Ancient Channel and, as has been commented, may even be of Last Glaciation date. Tenuous as it is, the typology of the few hand-axes from the sites listed above on the Silchester plateau suggests that none is earlier than at least Late Hoxnian. As they appear to be casual losses this in no way contradicts the dating of the Lower Winter Hill gravels of the Silchester Plateau to the time of the Lowestoft Glaciation.

The hand-axe has been deposited in Reading Museum (accession no. 7:70).

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