

# A STRATIFIED PREHISTORIC SITE FROM THE KENNET FLOODPLAIN AT UFTON NERVET, BERKSHIRE

J R L ALLEN and S ALLEN

## SUMMARY

*There is considerable evidence for Mesolithic activity in the Kennet Valley, mainly reported from between Newbury and Hungerford. Now a potentially important site has been found at Ufton Nervet, 11km southwest of Reading. Field walking combined with a sondage revealed a layer of tightly packed flint flakes with conjoining fragments above clean, gravelly sand but beneath a shallow deposit of dark silt. A knapping area seems to be present, the character of the flint assemblage hinting at a Mesolithic date.*

## INTRODUCTION

The floodplain, terraces and valley-shoulder of the R Kennet between Hungerford and Newbury (Blake 1903; Osborne White 1907, 1925) are known to have been the scene of intense human activity in Mesolithic times (Fig 1a). More than 50 sites are described from this stretch of the river (Froom 1963, 1965, 1970, 1972a, 1972b, 1976; Wymer 1962; Sheridan *et al* 1967; Barton and Froom 1986; Froom *et al* 1993). Downstream from Newbury, however, the recorded evidence is very sparse, and limited essentially to the major cluster of sites at Thatcham (Wymer 1962; Churchill 1962; Healy *et al* 1992). At Pingewood, on the floodplain a few kilometres southwest of Reading, Mesolithic flints formed only a minor element in a

primarily Bronze Age assemblage (Johnston 1983-85). Our purpose in this paper is to draw attention to a site between Thatcham and Reading that is potentially as significant as any in the Hungerford-Newbury reach. The collection of flintwork, resulting from a small-scale, preliminary investigation, has been placed in Newbury District Museum. (Acc. No. NEBYM 1996.40).

## THE SITE

The site (SU 6192 6844) lies on the floodplain in the corner of a field on the southwest side of the lane connecting Ufton Green by way of Ufton Bridge with the main Reading-Newbury road (Fig 1b). It was first seen as a scatter of worked flints extending over an area of a few square metres of recently ploughed arable. Although the debris was thinly distributed over the dark grey soil, it was tightly packed, in places with no intervening sediment, in the lighter-coloured, sandy subsoil which the plough had here and there upturned. As much surface material as possible was collected at this stage and on subsequent occasions as cultivation and weathering progressed.

At the end of the season, the tenant-farmer kindly allowed us to make a rapid *sondage* over an area measuring 1 × 2m where the greatest surface concentration of debris had occurred. The flints lay stratified within the following sequence. Sealing the site to a depth of 0.27m, was a grey, sandy-pebbly loam

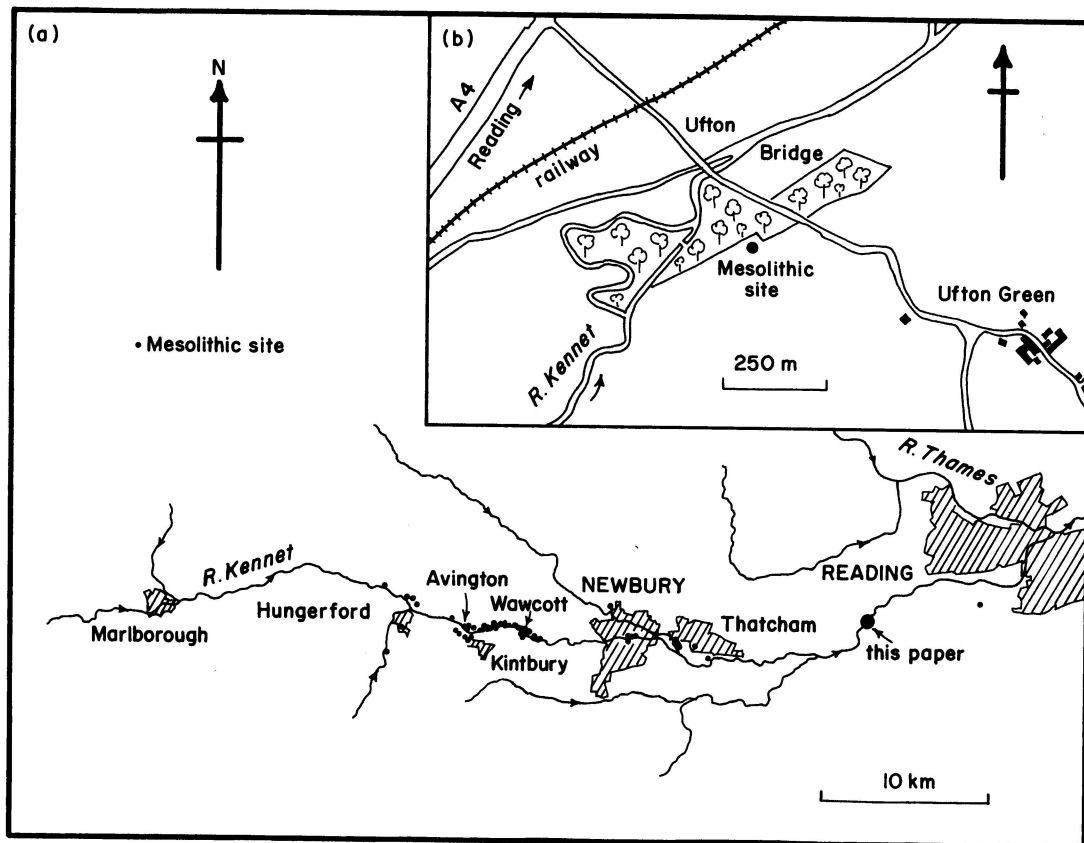


Figure 1 Mesolithic sites in the Kennet valley. (a) General distribution (Wymer 1962; Sheridan et al 1967; Froom 1972a; Johnston 1983–85; Healy et al 1992). (b) Ufton Nervet site

(plough-soil) that graded down unevenly into undisturbed dark grey clayey silt. Below was at least 0.28m of clean, yellow, fine-grained quartz sand with scattered water-worn flint pebbles, particularly toward the top. The worked flints, chiefly flat-lying, lay scattered to closely packed within the uppermost part of the sand and the lowermost silt and ploughsoil. As the soil and sediment from the excavation could not be sieved, the excavated material was carefully broken down by hand, and many flakes less than 10mm across were successfully recovered. A total of 270 flints (1979gm) was obtained from the site, of which about one-half by

number and weight came from the *sondage*. No charcoal or pottery was found, and there were no traces of pits or post/stake holes.

#### RAW MATERIALS

Both fresh, nodular flint and water-worn flint cobbles had been used. Cortex was found on 102 (37.8%) flakes, 8 having been struck from there. Five flakes (1.8%) had been struck from cobbles with smoothed surfaces carrying percussion marks, features that are familiar from flint pebbles and cobbles on stream beds and beaches of today.

Almost half of the flints, including many with cortex, could be assigned with confidence to four, intergrading lithologies, probably from either different parts of a single large nodule or different nodules found near each other at the same geological horizon. Typically, lithology A (54 flints, 413gm) is brownish yellow to yellowish grey and almost opaque, with a dull surface, becoming here and there paler and more translucent and shiny. As no cortex was seen, it is presumed to have come from near the heart of a nodule. Lithology B (37 flints, 577gm) is mottled brownish yellow, yellowish grey and light brown, varying from opaque and dull to translucent and shiny, especially toward the cortex, just below which the flint is laminated by a series of paper-thin, parallel cavities. Like lithology A, some flakes include voids lined with finely crystalline quartz. The cortex is off-white to pale grey and finely granular. Lithology C (7 flints, 346gm) is light brown, shiny and translucent, with mottles of dull yellowish grey and some streaks and flecks of white. The cortex resembles that of B and quartz-lined cavities are again present. Lithology D (12 flints, 186gm) is light brown, shiny and translucent, with abundant white flecks and streaks, and occasional dull mottles of yellowish grey. The cortex is pale to mid-grey and finely granular.

The remaining flints had little to distinguish them but, in addition to the cobbles, it is presumed from the varieties of cortex that a range of other nodules had been used. One sort of cortex was conspicuous in being off-white and coarsely pitted and gnarled.

### THE FLINTS

#### General

The flints were classified as follows:

	Number	No. %
Shatter	18	6.7
Cores (3 pieces conjoining)	6	2.2
Trimming/reshaping flakes	67	24.8

	Number	No. %
Blades and bladelets (with butts and segments)	70	25.9
Oval flakes	17	6.3
Elongate flakes	16	5.9
Other flakes	70	25.9
Tools	6	2.2
Totals	270	99.9

Oval flakes are all those that are neither parallel-sided nor irregular and which do not reach the length:width ratio of blades; flakes classed as elongate are wider than long. Most of the flakes are irregular. Many of the flints carry a very slight, milky patina.

#### Cores

There are three cores each in a single piece. The smallest has a single platform and conical to parabolic sides; one of the edges of the platform had been prepared by abrasion for further removals of bladelets (Fig 2.1). A second, larger, single-platform core is broken but appears to have had convex sides (Fig 2.2). Overhangs had again been removed from the edge of the surviving part of the platform in preparation for further flaking. The third, roughly equidimensional core is ill-shaped and its surface carries much cortex (Fig 2.3). Flakes had been removed in no less than four different directions, including from the cortical surface.

The incomplete fourth core, surviving as three conjoining fragments, probably was originally large and with convex sides (Fig 2.4-6). The surviving working platform is partly cortical, with abraded edges.

#### Trimming and reshaping flakes

These are of variable but generally large size and commonly retain cortex (Fig 2.7-18). They make up a substantial part of the assemblage, especially in terms of weight. A number display more than one direction of flaking (Figs 2.12, 13, 16-18). Others have come from the convex sides of large cores (Fig 2.7-11).

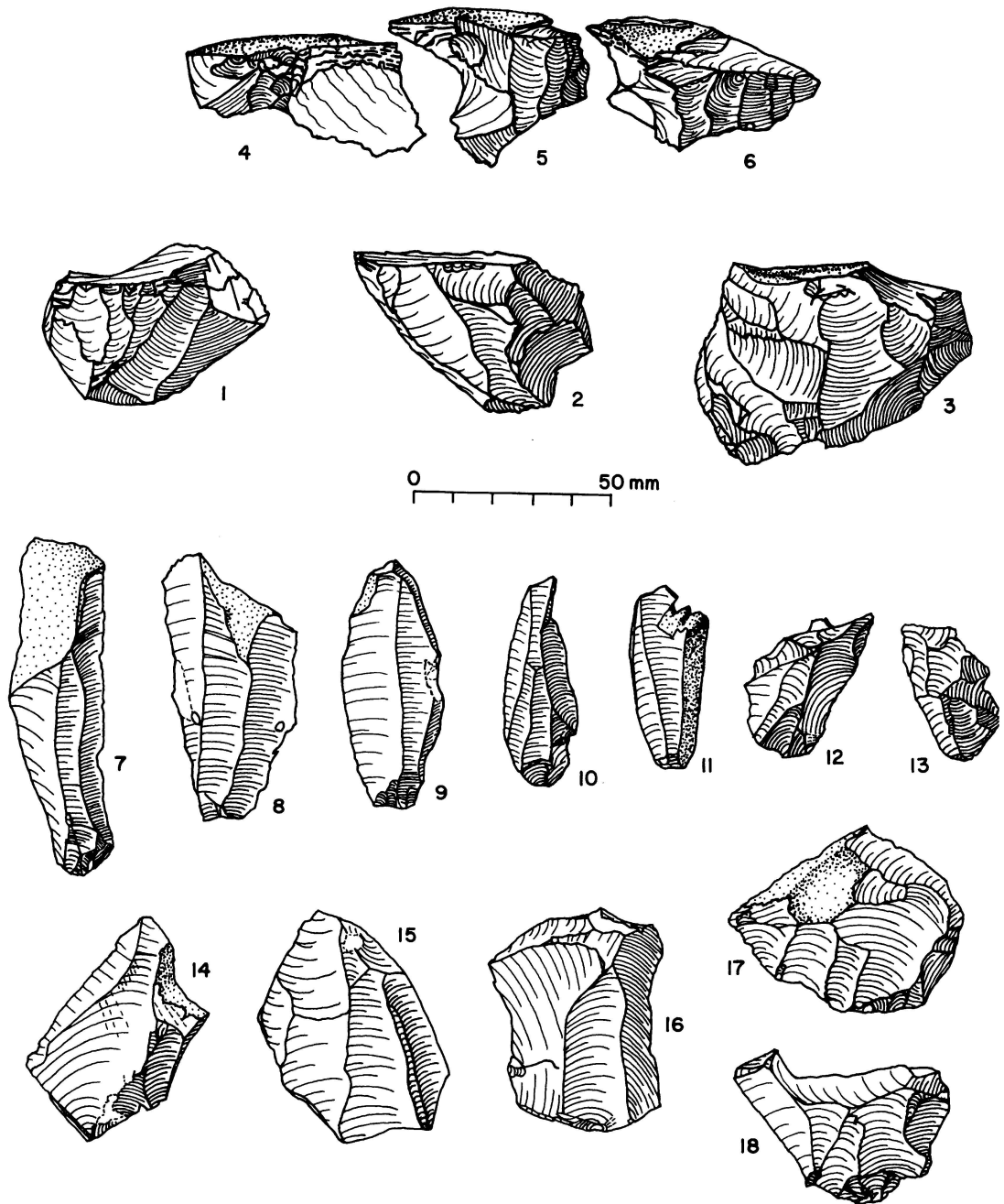


Figure 2 *Flints from Ufton Nervet. 1-3, cores. 4-6 conjoining core fragments. 7-18, trimming reshaping flakes*

### Blades and bladelets

Mostly snapped blades and bladelets, together with butts and segments, form about one-quarter of the assemblage by number (Fig 3.1-16). They vary in cross-section from triangular to four-sided and a few are pointed. Only one shows signs of possible retouching, in the form of a deep, distal notch on the left edge of the dorsal face (Fig 3.1).

### Tools

The assemblage includes only six tools – three edge scrapers, an end scraper, a scraper-knife, and a serrate – none of which need necessarily be regarded as finished.

The largest edge scraper is based on a blade-like flake (Fig 3.17). It shows a series of scaled to subparallel removals along the right-hand edge of the dorsal surface which are larger close to the butt and the distal end than medially. The distal end of the flake is lacking, possibly broken off during the retouching. The butt is small and elongated, with irregular removals due to abrasion. The two smaller scrapers are based on oval flakes, with scaled to subparallel removals limited to the distal half or one-third of the right-hand edge on the dorsal face (Fig 3.18, 19). One has a cortical butt; the butt of the other is small, with evidence of preparation by abrasion.

A stout, pear-shaped, curved flake with a large, dihedral butt was used for the end scraper (Fig 3.20). The scaled removals are limited to the distal margin of the dorsal surface; fine retouches from both surfaces occur along the concave section of the left-hand edge.

The scraper-knife is based on a delicate blade with a small, linear, heavily abraded butt (Fig 3.21), the fine retouching being limited to the dorsal surface at the distal end, which has snapped off, possibly during manufacture.

A delicate flake with a linear, coarsely abraded butt was used for the serrate (Fig 3.22). There is an area of systematic retouch at the distal end of the ventral surface (and

also an area of damage), and two areas of systematic removal along the left-hand margin of the dorsal side.

### DISCUSSION

From this potentially significant site on the floodplain of the Kennet at Ufton Nervet, 270 flakes were recovered from a concentrated area of a few square metres of the field surface and a *sondage* of 2m<sup>2</sup> at the same place. A similar density of flints prevails at Mesolithic sites in the Kennet valley, for example, *c* 76/m<sup>2</sup> at Wawcott I (Froom 1972b), up to 180/m<sup>2</sup> at Wawcott IV (Froom 1963), 28–1550/m<sup>2</sup> at Wawcott XXX (Froom *et al* 1993), and up to 240/m<sup>2</sup> at Thatcham III (Wymer 1962).

The date of the assemblage must to some degree remain an open question until much more material has been recovered and assessed. Microliths combined with microburins, the sign *par excellence* of a Mesolithic age, are not known at Ufton Nervet, but the general character of the small flint assemblage hints at this period. These so far unrecorded elements in any case make up only *c* 1–2% of Mesolithic assemblages elsewhere in the Kennet valley (Froom 1963, 1970, 1972b, 1976; Wymer 1962; Healy *et al* 1992; Froom *et al* 1993), and can be lacking altogether, as in the Avington complex (Froom 1963) except for the latest Palaeolithic/Mesolithic Avington VI with its long blades, no microburins and some microliths (Barton and Froom 1986). Even if microliths and microburins were to be recovered in the future at Ufton Nervet, there is a substantial probability that they would not be represented in such a comparatively small sample as we felt able to secure in a preliminary examination without the aid of sieving. Compared to other Kennet-side sites, especially Wawcott III (Froom 1976), Wawcott XXX (Froom *et al* 1993) and Thatcham III (Wymer 1962), the character of the neatly made small–large cores,

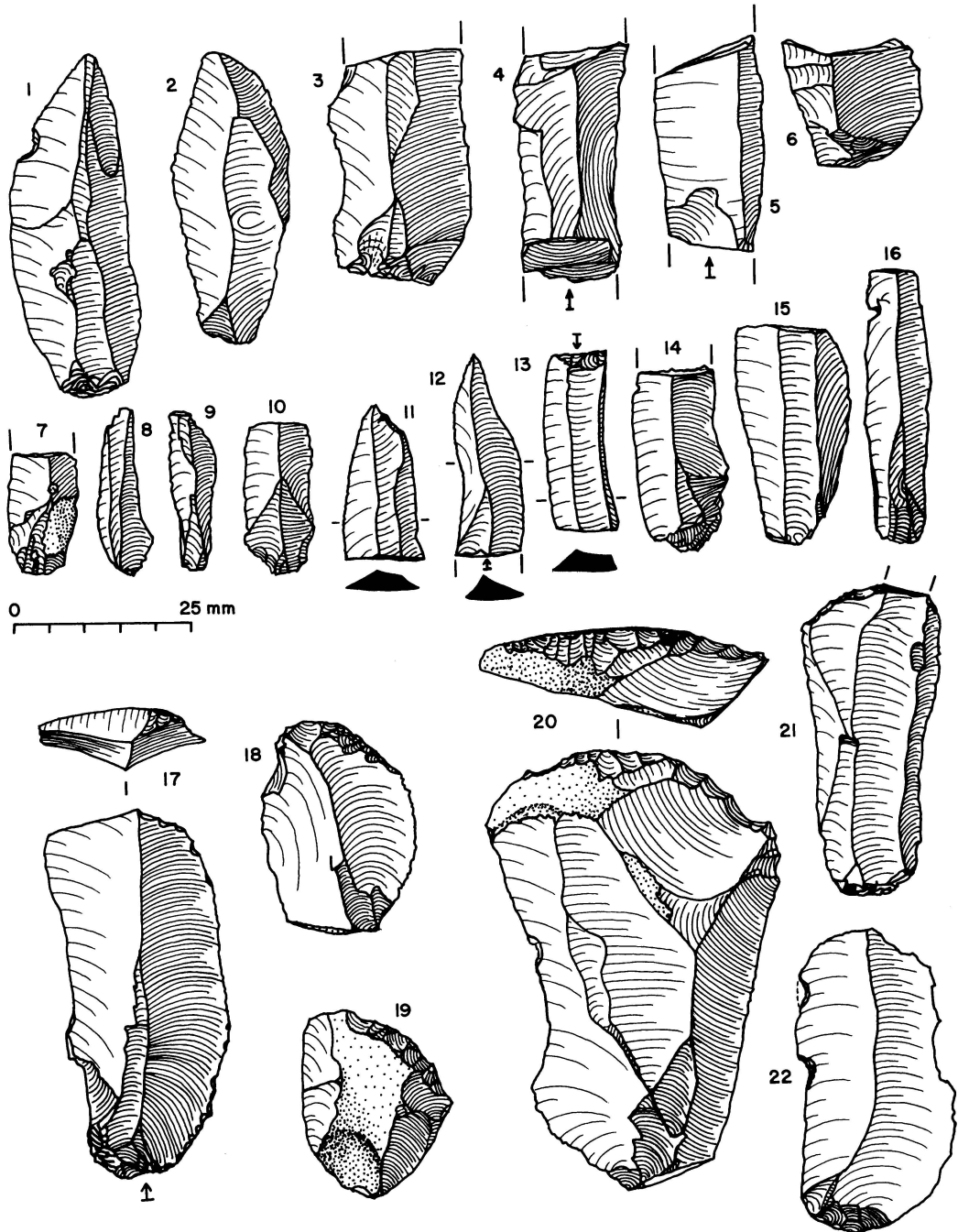


Figure 3 *Flints from Ufton Nervet. 1-16, blade elements. 17-22, tools*

core-trimming debris, and blade elements (Figs 2, 3), together with the substantial ratio of the latter (25.9%), in particular hint at a Mesolithic date. Blade elements comprise 9.7% of the assemblage at Wawcott I (Froom 1972b), c11–14% of the collections from Wawcott III (Froom 1976), 14% at Wawcott XV (Froom 1970), 7.5% at Thatcham III (Wymer 1962), and 27.6% of the assemblage at the Thatcham site excavated by Healy *et al* (1992); blades are not separately distinguished at Wawcott XXX (Froom *et al* 1993). These ratios quoted from Kennet-side sites are not out of keeping with values for Mesolithic occupations in south-central England generally (eg Higgs 1959; Rankine *et al* 1960; Palmer 1970; Hughes and ApSimon 1978; Palmer and Dimpleby 1979; Collins and Lorimer 1989). The flints from Ufton Nervet are especially comparable with those from Downton in Wiltshire (Higgs 1959) and West Heath, Hampstead (Collins and Lorimer 1989).

No signs of protracted occupation – pits, post/stake holes, charcoal or hearths – were found at Ufton Nervet, but the very small scale of our investigation cannot exclude that possibility. The tight packing of some of the flints, and the conjoining core fragments, certainly point to a knapping area (see also Barton 1981; Collins and Lorimer 1989). If the Mesolithic date hinted at should prove to be correct, the site at Ufton Nervet will become the only one known in the long tract between Thatcham and Reading (Fig 1a). A more thorough investigation, together with a search of the wider area, would then seem appropriate in order to establish the extent to which the Kennet valley as a whole was exploited during this period.

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