

**APPENDIX 11. REPORT ON CUXTON HANDAXES (KENT
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GIANT HANDAXES from Cuxton

SYMBOLIC
CAPACITY
COMPATIBLE
WITH
EXPRESSION
THROUGH
LANGUAGE?

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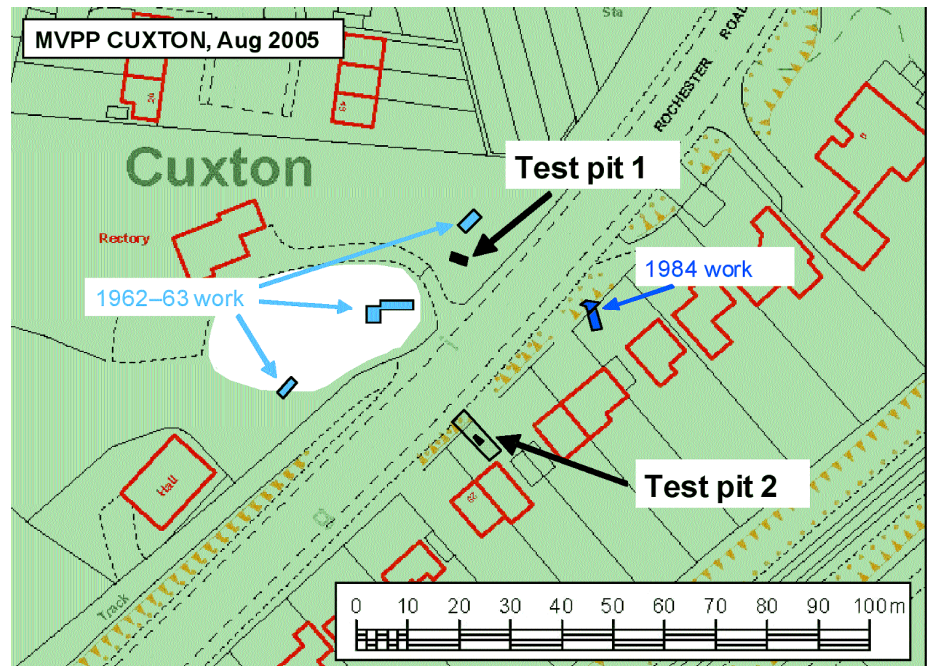


CUXTON GIANT HANDAXES

Background

In August 2006 two small test pits were dug at the Lower Palaeolithic site at Cuxton Rectory. The site was first identified in 1889 when, as reported by George Payne (*Collectanea Cantiana 1893*), "on entering the rectory garden I picked up a fine Palaeolithic flint celt that lay upon the bank". Further finds within a few yards of the same spot led Payne to conclude that the site represented a Palaeolithic settlement. But it was not until the 1960s that the importance of the site was fully recognised. Tester (1965) recovered an incredible 210 handaxes from three small test pits, as well as numerous cores, flake-tools and waste flakes. The finds came from a thin bed of river gravel close beneath the ground surface at c.17m OD. Typologically, the collection was dominated by pointed handaxes. Therefore Tester concluded that the site was probably of the same age as the Middle Gravels at Swanscombe, despite the great difference in elevation and the presence at Cuxton of ficrons and cleavers, types absent at Swanscombe, and the relative abundance of flake-tools.

Further work took place in the 1980s on the opposite side of Rochester Road (*Cruse et al. 1987*). Closer attention was paid to the river gravel that contained the artefacts. Lithological analysis confirmed it was laid down by the Medway, and, controversially, it was correlated with the Binney Gravel on the Hoo, attributed [at that time] to only around 45,000 BP. Contradictory dating (besides the abundance of mint or fresh handax-



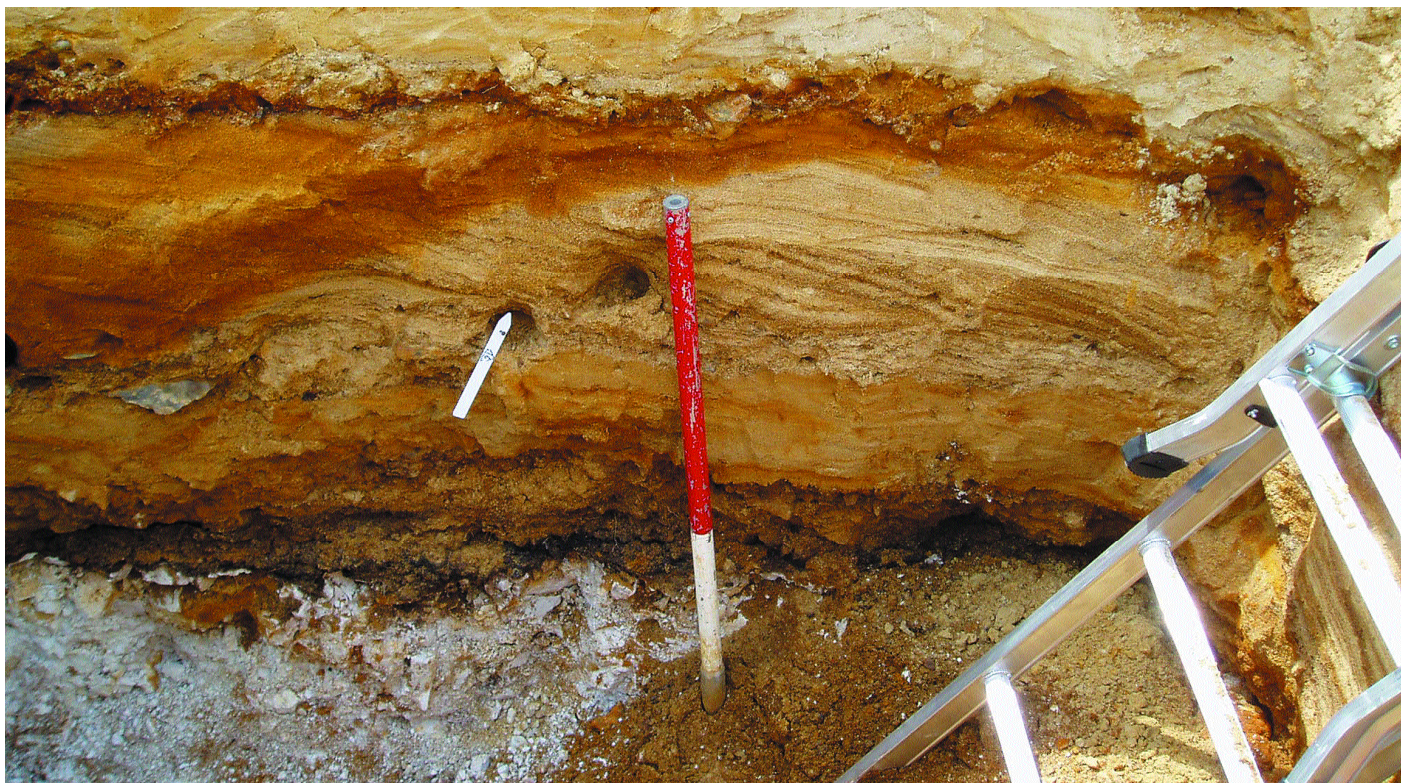
COVER : *The ficron.*

ABOVE : *Location and layout.*

LEFT : *David Norwood watching excavation of his front lawn.*

Below : *Sondage section with cleaver in situ and holes left by other handaxe finds.*

OPPOSITE PAGE : *The cleaver*



es!) was provided by TL-dating of loam capping the gravel to at least 100,000 BP. Overall, the second phase of work did little to resolve the date of the site.

Therefore, as part of the Aggregates Levy *Medway Valley Palaeolithic Project*, a small reinvestigation of Cuxton took place. The main objective was merely to dig the smallest possible trenches to gain access to sand-rich deposits for optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) dating. If in the course of this work we recovered further well-provenanced artefacts, that would be a bonus.

We were kindly permitted by the present vicar, Rev. Roger Knight, to dig a test pit to the north of the rectory drive. And we dug a second test pit at 21 Rochester Road, directly opposite, which produced the spectacular finds discussed below. We, and the archaeological community, are forever indebted to David and Sarah Norwood for allowing us to excavate on their front lawn.

Two giant handaxes

After clearing away overburden of turf and made ground, a sondage was carefully dug by machine. The upper levels comprised fluvial sands, lacking artefacts. About 60cm down, the sands came down onto a more gravelly layer. As this level was being reached, the scrape of the machine bucket revealed the butt of a large handaxe in the bottom of the trench, with the tip buried by the recently disturbed spoil. Upon retrieval, the handaxe was found to be a monstrous ficron, 307mm long, making it the second longest handaxe known in Britain (after a pointed specimen from Furze Platt found in 1919 — Wymer 1968: 224). Besides its extreme size, the workmanship is exquisite, almost flamboyant. The

narrowed waist of the ficron is approximately two-thirds towards the butt. From the waist to the tip, both sides are straight and perfectly symmetrical. As a final flourish, one side of the tip has been finished with two tranchet blows, creating a sharp edge extending 75mm, without affecting the overall symmetry.

A sharp-edged flake was also found, well-embedded in the section, and removal of this was left until the section had been recorded and OSL sampling completed. Upon excavation it quickly transpired that we were dealing not with a flake, but another giant handaxe, this time a cleaver 179mm long by 134mm wide at its widest point and with a transverse cutting blade 110mm wide. The workmanship is again extraordinary. Despite the large size, there are no mistakes such as step fractures across the wide expanse of the faces. The cross-sections along the long axis and across it are perfectly symmetrical. The cleaver edge, straight and perfectly orthogonal to the long axis, has been achieved by two immaculate opposing tranchet blows, one from each edge. The cleaver came from exactly the same thin gravel band as the ficron, and was found within one foot of it.

Language in the Lower Palaeolithic?

What can we make of these finds? There is debate about whether Palaeolithic handaxes genuinely reflect deliberately made types, or whether the varied types most analysts perceive are the accidental by-product of the application of a general bifacial knapping approach to flint nodules of varying shape. As a relatively experienced flint knapper I can confidently assert that, particularly at this scale, the clear point, straight edges and symmetrical waist of the ficron would not arrive except by design. Above all, the use of diverse

approaches to tranchet-sharpening in each of these contrasting types of handaxe is inconceivable other than as a finishing touch to deliberately create a much sharper cutting edge than would result from continuing the more natural bifacial knapping pattern orthogonal to the main axis of each tool. If one accepts that these handaxes were deliberately shaped into a desired form, then, many would argue (eg. Davidson & Noble 1993), this reflects a symbolic capacity compatible with expression through language.

Dating and cultural development

We don't yet know the date of the site. Preliminary indications of the OSL sampling are for a final Lower Palaeolithic date, between 200,000 and 300,000 BP. It is beginning to look as if this period was characterised by an increasing diversity of handaxe types, and specifically the co-occurrence of cleavers and ficrons at many sites. Perhaps, the Lower Palaeolithic is not, therefore, the period of stasis that is often suggested, but incorporates a trajectory of cultural, cognitive and behavioural development that is continued into, and through, the Middle Palaeolithic.

Acknowledgements

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Web-links: Medway Valley Project:
<http://www.arch.soton.ac.uk/Research/MedwayValley/welcome/index.php>

A more detailed report on these new discoveries is published in April in *Lithics* 25: *Essays in Honour of R.J. MacRae*, a special issue of the Annual Journal of the Lithic Studies Society

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