

SHORTER PAPERS

THE CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF A PALAEOLITHIC HAND AXE FROM WINSCOMBE

In 1995 Mandy Brading noticed a solitary Palaeolithic hand axe lying in topsoil that had been heaped up during landscaping to create a new rugby pitch at Winscombe recreation ground (NGR ST 419570). Nothing else was found apart from scraps of post-medieval pottery. This part of the parish slopes down gently towards the west and lies at the head waters of the Lox Yeo River which drains south-west into the River Axe and ultimately to the Severn Estuary. As such this provides a favourable location for settlement at 45m OD where the area is mapped

as Keuper Marl/Mercian Mudstone capped by patches of 'Head' (BGS Sheet 280).

The implement (Fig. 1) is made of Upper Greensand chert and is a pointed hand axe of Wymer's (1968) type F. It measures 138mm long, 90mm wide near the butt and is 47mm thick. It is in a 'sharp/slightly rolled' (Wymer 1968, pl. xi) condition, with traces of post-depositional edge damage, which indicate that it is has moved, although possibly not far, from its original point of deposition. The hand axe has developed a rich honey-coloured

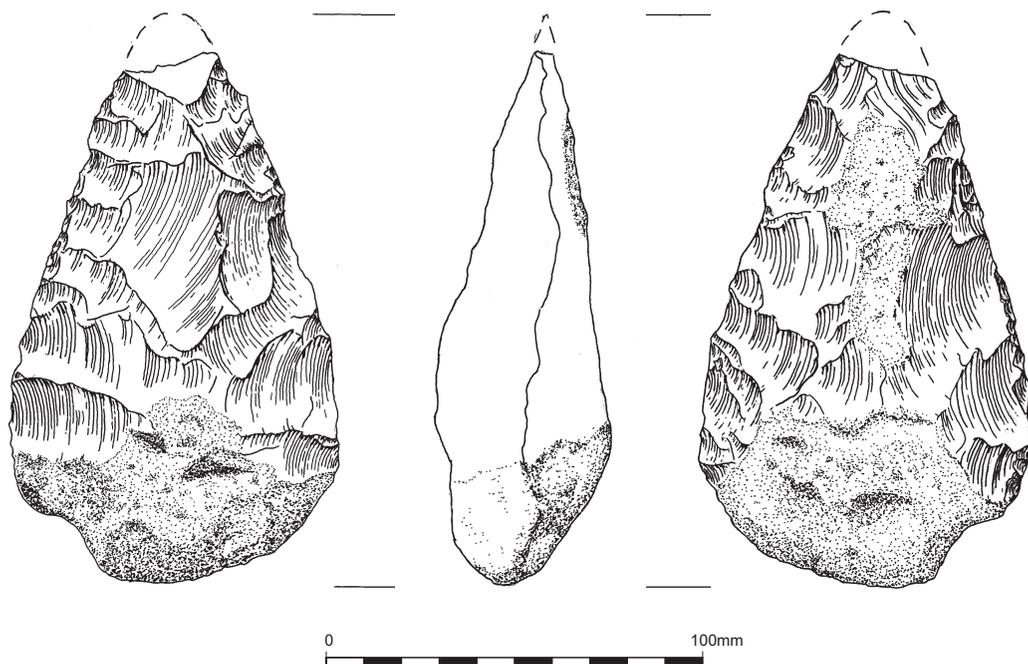


Fig. 1 The Winscombe hand axe

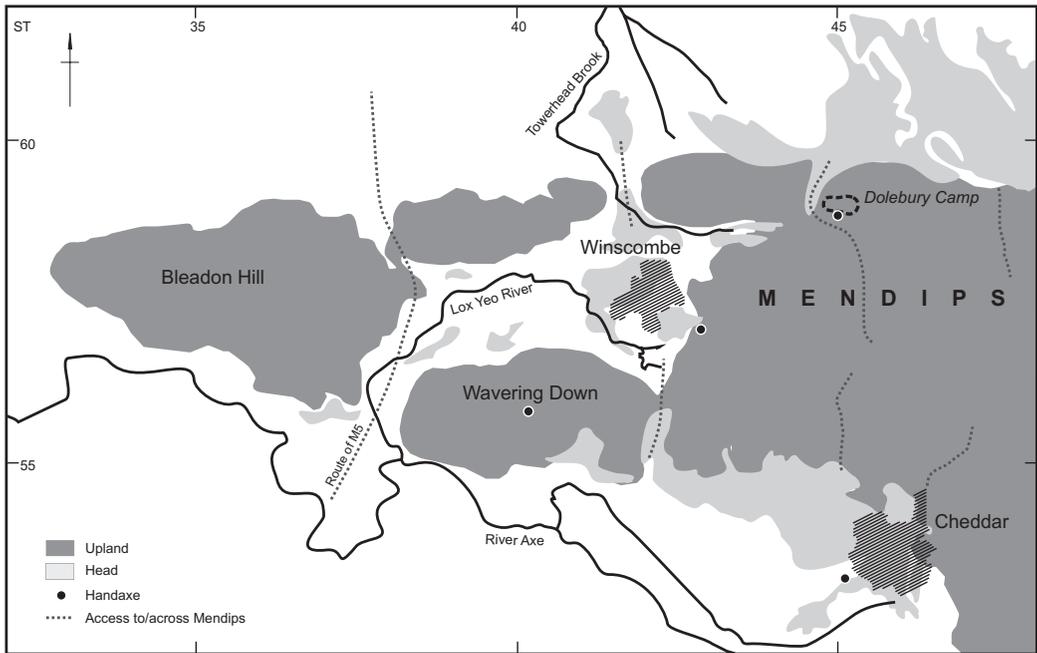


Fig. 2 Map showing location of all recorded hand axes from the area, topography and routes across the Mendips

patina that is present on all surfaces apart from the tip, which is missing, possibly detached by medieval or more recent ploughing. The butt is totally cortical; well executed bifacial flaking has been used to create a symmetrical, attractive implement that tapers towards the tip.

The discovery is significant but, in the context of the immediate locality, not totally unexpected. The hand axe joins three others, recorded and described with varying degrees of detail that are said to have been found within 6km of Winscombe (Fig. 2); of these two have been found within the borders of the Lox Yeo River basin. Somerset SMR no. 11407 lists a 'probable' hand axe from Wavering Down, Compton Bishop (ST 402558), but which is also partly in Winscombe, as being in Axbridge Museum, although no trace of the implement could be found in 1986 and nothing more is known of it.

Slightly more reliable information is available for an ovate flint hand axe, with an attached handwritten label by Harold St George Gray which states that it was 'said to have been picked up towards the bottom of the southern slopes of Dolebury Camp' in 1926 (Anon, 1939, 76). It was subsequently passed to St George Gray before ultimately being accessed by

Taunton Museum (Acc. no. 2010). This implement measures 114mm long and 85mm wide. It is in a sharp condition and is unbroken except for a small flake scar, of recent formation, along one edge. This shows that the implement has developed a thick chalky cortex, typical of that found in calcareous soils and is perhaps the best indicator that the implement did indeed come from the Mendip area together with the fact that the then owner, Mr J. Poyner, was a local man from Midsomer Norton.

Most recently a pointed hand axe, also made of flint, measuring 70mm long, deeply stained and in a 'rolled' condition, was found (Russett 1987, 5) in 1984 at the base of the south-facing slopes of the Mendip anticline at Cheddar during the construction work at New Road (NGR ST 53204513). This implement, like that at Winscombe, was also found in spoil, here a dump of 'Head' deposit that had accumulated from deep excavations at Cheddar Pumping Station. This hand axe, of which no illustration was made, was also deposited with Axbridge Museum although it too could not be located following a recent request to re-examine it.

The Winscombe and Cheddar hand axes were both found in, or at the edge of, 'Head' deposits that exist

around the fringes of the Mendip anticline. These deposits, generally associated with periglacial conditions, comprise unbedded material that has moved down-slope from higher ground in mud flows or that has been moved from an original location by streams formed by melt water, factors that help to explain the condition of the Winscombe hand axe. Other flint implements, including three considered to be Middle Palaeolithic hand axes, have been recorded from the crest of the Mendip anticline itself around Priddy (Hack 1986). These implements were all classified using typology, are all from ploughsoil and therefore poorly provenanced, so some degree of caution must be given to their interpretation as being Palaeolithic. Nevertheless hand axes are known from the crest of the Mendips where they were incorporated into the fillings in caves (Roe 1981, 245) and fissures (Vranch 1981, 70) and from other upland parts of Southern Britain (Scott-Jackson, 2000) indicating that Palaeolithic groups did not restrict themselves to the low lying river valleys.

There is nothing to indicate one way or the other whether the implements from the Winscombe area are contemporary with one another; sites across the Mendips have provided crucial evidence for Palaeolithic occupation in Britain from the earliest times. Work at Westbury-sub-Mendip (Andrews *et al.* 1999; Stringer 2006) was pivotal in establishing that human presence predated the onset of the Anglian Glaciation *c.* 500,000 years ago. Elsewhere hand axes associated with late-Neanderthal groups and dating from the end of the Middle Palaeolithic, 50,000 years ago, during the Last (Devensian) Glaciation (59,000–26,000) have been found at Wookey Hole (White and Jacobi 2002) and other caves (Roe 1981, 245) and fissures (Vranch 1981, 70) across the Mendips, frequently with distinctive faunal assemblages. Whether the Winscombe hand axe belongs to either the Lower Palaeolithic or earlier part of the Middle Palaeolithic, 300,000–140,000 years ago, is impossible to say; however those from Wookey Hole and others from the Mendips frequently comprise small ovate or cordiform (heart shaped) implements suggesting that the Winscombe implement may well be older than this. Greensand chert was frequently used for hand axe manufacture in this area and is therefore of no assistance in resolving this issue.

While the discovery of a hand axe at Winscombe may owe much to chance it is possible that its topographical location may be more deliberate and reflect areas of activity favoured by Palaeolithic

hunting groups. As noted above it joins two other implements that have been found around the head waters of the Lox Yeo River. Pettit (*n.d.*) has suggested previously that the River Axe formed a 'local operational area' at the western end of the Mendips for late-Neanderthal hunting groups based around the caves at Wookey Hole and Uphill Quarry. Wymer (1999, 109) also noted the undeniable importance of river systems as a source of water, attracting prey and as a means of communication. He considered that watersheds were equally important as a means of bridging one drainage basin to another. He illustrated this (Wessex Archaeology 1994, 86) by reference to a hand axe from Hankerton, which was found at the watershed of the Rivers Thames and Bristol Avon. Subsequently hand axes have been found (Harding 2007) at the headwaters of the River Wiltshire Avon at Pewsey, Wiltshire, and the River Wylve at Warminster, Wiltshire; the latter overlooking access to the Bristol Avon and the Mendip Hills beyond. The record of a flint hand axe at Dolebury Camp reinforces the concept of oscillating movement across the landscape from the Chalk to the east and it is just as likely that similar movement occurred from north to south. It is noticeable that Winscombe overlooks the watershed of the Lox Yeo River and the Towerhead Brook, which flows north to the River Liddy Yeo. The upper slopes might well have provided a suitable vantage point from which to observe movements of game that was funnelled through the gap, which provides the most clearly defined north to south lowland passage through the Mendip anticline (Fig. 2). Other traverses of the western Mendips might also have been possible including the corridor now occupied by the M5 motorway. Access to the higher ground to the east was also feasible exploiting coombes draining from the Mendips such as Burrington Coombe and Cheddar Gorge.

Chance discoveries of this type, in isolation, have limited scientific value; nevertheless it is vital (Wessex Archaeology 1994) that they should be recorded in detail and illustrated to place them, as here, with existing collections in their local and regional context. This makes it possible to speculate on patterns of early human behaviour in what Frere (1800) correctly described as 'a very remote period in our history'. Implements in this part of Britain are of considerable importance, lying not only near the very edge of early human occupation in North West Europe, but also the margins of the Anglian and Devensian ice sheets, the two most major ice advances to have descended on Britain. Their

discovery is frequently the only indicator that people were active in the area, although regrettably there is nothing to indicate whether they were lost or abandoned at a kill site or camp site. Discoveries from cave sites, which may contain associated faunal and palaeo-environmental evidence as well as material demonstrating a broad range of human activities, frequently command greater attention; however it is discoveries of the type made at Winscombe that supply evidence of 'open-air' occupation and exploitation of the broader landscape and river systems.

Thanks are offered to Mandy Brading for reporting the discovery; it is currently retained in her possession. Thanks are also due to Linda Coleman of Wessex Archaeology for having prepared Fig. 2.

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PHIL HARDING AND MICK ASTON

PREHISTORIC STANDING STONES IN BANWELL

Resistivity surveys were carried out at the sites of two prehistoric standing stones in the parish of Banwell. The Yarborough Stone is a single surviving orthostat lying immediately south of Yarberry Farm at NGR ST 390 578. It is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (NMR 22810), with the scheduled area describing a circle with a radius of 5m around the stone. On a previous field visit, one of the writers (NJC) had noted what appeared to be a heavily truncated, but nonetheless distinct, mound and a possible ditch immediately east of the stone, which appeared to stand in the western arc of the putative ditch. Arising from this observation, in October 2008, an area around the stone was targeted for both

standard zig-zag and cross-section survey, the former method using a TR/CIA Meter twin probe array. Three 20m grids were set out, only one of which was complete, the second curtailed to the east by a ditch, the third curtailed to the west by a ditch and with a 10m by 10m space around the stone to avoid encroaching on the Scheduled Monument. All the geophysical work was planned and supervised by BS.

The survey suggested the existence of what appears to be an artificial mound, c. 7m in diameter, surrounded by a ditch some 15m east of the standing stone. The results are consistent with this being a barrow, which the builders so sited as to deliberately incorporate the standing stone in the western part of the ditch.