

ISLE OF WIGHT: UPPER PALAEOLITHIC AND MESOLITHIC RESOURCE ASSESSMENT

Chronology

In the early 20th century antiquarians collected worked flints which they believed to be of Upper Palaeolithic date from the eroding cliffs of the south west coast of the Island. However, none of their identifications have been confirmed and the material warrants reassessment. There is little material from the Isle of Wight that can confidently be assigned an Upper Palaeolithic date, although recent finds from submerged sites in the Solent may date from the Upper Palaeolithic or Early Mesolithic periods (Momber 2000, 2001, HWTMA 2005, Wessex Archaeology 2004).

Hubert Poole, a local antiquarian and honorary curator of Carisbrooke Castle Museum was the first researcher to characterise the Mesolithic of the Isle of Wight. He believed the Mesolithic industries of the Isle of Wight to divide into two groups (Poole 1936). The first, characterised by heavy tranchet axes, gravers and a few microliths, was found in gravel and brickearth deposits such as those found along the south west coast and at Werrar in the Medina estuary. The second, later, group comprised surface finds mainly confined to the Greensands, and consisted of a greater number of microliths, petit tranchet arrowheads and fewer, lighter, tranchet axes. Suzanne Palmer (1977) more recently suggested that all of the island's Mesolithic sites should be attributed to a generally homogeneous coastal culture in which axes, picks, convex scrapers, burins and microliths occur in variable numbers.

Landscape, land use and site distribution

Site distribution, subsistence patterns and land use

A thin scatter of find spots which were thought by early antiquarians to be of Upper Palaeolithic date is concentrated on the south west coast of the Isle of Wight, but their identifications are open to question. However, the offshore zone of the Island's northern coast offers a greater potential for the survival of material of this period. The distribution of Mesolithic sites recorded in the Isle of Wight Sites and Monuments Record shows a concentration on the north coast, the Medina Estuary and the Greensands to the south of the Island's median chalk ridge, similar to that described by Poole (1936). However, there are a considerable number of lithic scatters recorded in the SMR as being of 'prehistoric' date, some of which may include material of Mesolithic character.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the collection of lithic material, in particular picks and tranchet axes, from the intertidal zone on north coast of the island led antiquarians to speculate whether this apparent concentration should be attributed to collection biases or 'whether their distribution may point to the submergence of the old land surface on which the men who made the implements had their hunting grounds' (Poole 1929, 657). The significance of this concentration was also highlighted by Rankine, particularly when considered together with a similar distribution on the northern shore of the Solent (Rankine 1956). Recent surveys, including the Wootton-Quarr project and the Isle of Wight Coastal Audit have added significantly to the number of picks and tranchet axes recovered from the Island's north coast and the Medina Estuary (Tomalin *et al* forthcoming; Isle of Wight County Archaeology & Historic Environment Service 2000). Again, it may be questioned whether this coastal research focus has biased the distribution maps, but associated field walking in the Wootton-Quarr hinterland found little evidence of Mesolithic activity.

Key sites and areas for further investigation

Sites of Upper Palaeolithic or Mesolithic date on the Isle of Wight have received scant attention compared with similar sites on the mainland. However, there are several sites and areas which have been highlighted as being of significance (Basford 1980). Werrar (Poole 1936) This site, on the western bank of the River Medina, was identified by Hubert Poole in 1925 and had been revealed during the extraction of clay for brickmaking. The excavation of brick pits, dug through an intertidal saltmarsh, had uncovered an 'old land surface... indicated by a distinctly darker shade of clay, an interrupted and scanty line of flints, occasional hearths, and in some places roots and stools of trees, the roots in many cases penetrating downwards, stools and branches lying partly in the Oligocene and partly in the Holocene strata' (Poole 1936, 569). Lithics including tranchet axes, a microlith, burins, scrapers, a saw and debitage were recovered. Poole believed the assemblage to be of purely Mesolithic character but pers comm. Rob Scaife – pollen suggests Neolithic – Rob may want to add detail.

Newtown East Spit

This site was also first identified by Hubert Poole, who recorded lithic material in a low, cliff just above high-water mark (Poole 1936) at the mouth of the Newtown Estuary. According to Poole, Mesolithic flintwork was found lying on an old land surface in the estuarine clay. He illustrated a burin, scrapers, cores and a microlith from this level. This was sealed by an overlying brickearth, lighter in colour, which contained worked flints of Neolithic character. Limited survey during the Isle of Wight Coastal Audit revealed worked and burnt flints still visible in the eroding cliff face (Isle of Wight Archaeology and Historic Environment Service 2000).

South West Coast ('Old Western Yar')

Since the early 20th century, numerous 'hearths' have been exposed in the cliff face of the south west coast of the Island, eventually being lost to coastal erosion. Early investigators believed them to be of Mesolithic date, mainly due to their general relationship with deposits associated with the former Western Yar, which are exposed in the cliff face to the west of Chilton Chine, in Brook Bay and near Shippards Chine. (Clifford 1936, Poole 1936; Scaife 1987), although none have been radiocarbon dated. Rob Scaife will probably elaborate on palaeoenvironmental aspects of this. Hearths at Chilton Chine and Brook are to be radiocarbon dated in as part of an English Heritage funded Coastal Assessment Enhancement project within the next few months (Loader 2006).

The Wakes, Shorwell (IWSMR 385)

During the 1960s, excavations by an amateur archaeologist in the garden of a property in Shorwell produced quantities of worked flints, comprising nearly 1200 waste flakes and over 400 implements, including scrapers, microliths, graters, burins, awls, a small pick and the tip of a leaf-shaped arrowhead. The assemblage was said to include both Mesolithic and late Neolithic types, although unfortunately a large amount of the debitage is not present in the Isle of Wight Archaeological Collection. Although the excavator published a note about his work (Bennet 1966, 1967) the site has not undergone systematic study.

Wootton-Quarr intertidal zone

The English Heritage funded Wootton-Quarr survey was carried out over a c 6km stretch of the north east coast of the Isle of Wight focused between Wootton Creek and Ryde Pier, and its hinterland and offshore zone. During the survey more than 100 picks and tranchet axes were recovered from the foreshore. Many of these were from lithic scatters located on firm ground adjacent to palaeochannels which crossed the intertidal zone. The scatters, comprising thousands of worked and burnt flints, included microliths, mostly edge blunted points but also including obliquely blunted points and geometric forms, burins, leaf, kite and transverse arrowheads, scrapers, and

debitage (Tomalin *et al*, forthcoming). Some of these lithic scatters (for example IWSMR 5402, IWSMR 5647) were seen to be sealed by eroding peats and organic silts. At Quarr, a sample of charcoal from sediment overlying the lithic scatter at site Q99, (IWSMR 5647) has been radiocarbon dated to 3630-3110 cal BC, 4645±65 BP (OxA-7183). No excavation has taken place, and limited amounts of material have been collected from the surface. The date of the lithic material remains inconclusive and there is a need to record and scientifically date material from a sealed context.

Bouldnor (IWSMR 1804)

The existence of a submerged site at Bouldnor was first suspected in 1976, when peat and fragments of trees were dredged up by fishermen. The source of these was traced to the foot of an underwater cliff by John Cross of Southampton University in the mid-1980s. Preliminary investigations by the Isle of Wight Maritime Heritage Project in the late 1980s identified three layers of peat intercalated with silts. In the mid 1990s, a sample from a tree bole rooted in the lowest level of the cliff was submitted for radiocarbon dating during the Wootton-Quarr Project and produced a radiocarbon date of 7440±60 BP, 6430-6120 cal BC (GU-5420). Study has continued into the 2000s (Momber 2000, 2004, McInnes *et al* 2001, HWTMA 2005), during which time worked and burnt flints, and humanly modified timbers have been recorded at a depth of c-11m OD. More detail from Rob or HWTMA?

Society and resource exploitation

Material culture

By far the majority of the Isle of Wight Mesolithic material culture comprises flint artefacts. The lithics recovered during the Wootton-Quarr are in the main of good quality, grey-black flint. Those from Werrar and Newtown are less homogeneous, perhaps indicating that locally available flint gravel was used for their manufacture. In addition at least sixteen chert picks were recovered from the Island's north-east shoreline during the Wootton-Quarr intertidal survey, some of which may have been manufactured using material from secondary deposits. Chert can be found just to the south of the median chalk ridge, but is currently more readily accessible where it outcrops in the inland cliff which forms the landward boundary of the Undercliff area at the Island's extreme south tip (White 1921).

Several mace heads are recorded in the Sites and Monuments Record, (e.g. IWSMR 17; IWSMR 144; IWSMR 361; IWSMR 485), some of which may be of Mesolithic date. Although few have undergone petrological analysis, they are thought to include examples produced in non-local stone.

Transport and communication

Although it has not yet been established with confidence when the final severance of the Island took place, it is likely that coastal and riverine transport had an important role to play in the lives of Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic communities on the Isle of Wight. The distribution of Mesolithic sites and findspots shows a marked concentration on the coast and following the river valleys, in particular the Medina, although how much this can be attributed to current accessibility and erosion is open to question. It has been suggested that the recovery of chert picks from the north coast of the Island implies that journeys were made from the southern tip of the Island to the north coast because 'the Solent had particular resources to offer the late Mesolithic and early Neolithic population' (Tomalin forthcoming).

Rob will probably add info re contribution to sea level studies & formation of Solent.

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