

SURFACE FINDS OF NEOLITHIC-BRONZE AGE FROM MELLS, SOMERSET, by R. D. VRANCH

ABSTRACT

During field walking near the village of Mells a series of Neolithic-Beaker flint implements were found by the author. Reported here is the site upon which they were found and comparable sites in the area. The threat from quarrying and the need for field study is noted.

INTRODUCTION

The village of Mells is situated on the northern flank of eastern Mendip, 4km. to the west of the market town of Frome. Above the village is an area of flat arable land bordered by the steeply incised, densely wooded valleys of the river Mells and a small brook known as Fordbury Water. It is on this farm land that a scatter of flint implements was discovered while field walking in the spring of 1979.

Geology

The underlying rock types consist of carboniferous limestone belonging to the Black Rock—Clifton Down group. This in turn is overlain unconformably by 2 to 3 metres of Upper Inferior Oolite limestone of Jurassic age. Lower Fullers Earth clay is found in the banks of Tedbury Camp. Flint, the source rock for the implements is foreign to the local geology. Today the nearest chalk is found in the cretaceous escarpment of the Warminster area, 14km. east of the site. Inspection of the numerous fissure infillings and soil covering the New Frome Quarry has revealed only a small percentage of local residual flint in the ancient and modern soils. Greensand chert, however, occurs in cobble size pieces in the fissures and during recent river straightening of the Fordbury Water it was a common constituent in the valley infill. It does not appear to have been used in making implements from this site.

DESCRIPTION

The Area

The site was discovered by field walking across freshly ploughed ground. The area investigated was a partially ploughed section of a large field to the south of the Mells to Frome road, between ST 733.481 and 736.482, maximum height above O.D. is 130m. with a fall of about 15m. between the map references given above to the south-west.

The area was walked from north to south and back along the strike of the plough furrows at approximately 4m. intervals. A typical yield for two hours field work consisted of 35 to 40 fragments of flint, which upon washing revealed 5 to 10 implements. There was a marked increase in the surface density of the flint material on the south gently sloping field surface. The distribution on this slope was even, no high concentrations being observed in the area investigated.

The Finds

In all 170 pieces of flint showing human workmanship were found. The variety of flint used ranges from dark blue to light brown in colour. Artefacts which have been struck from the original nodule retain the cortex on at least one surface. About 700 fragments of flint were collected excluding actual artefacts. Of these waste flakes a large proportion (317) were heavily patinated and included one virtually untouched nodule.

Identification by Mr. N. Cook of Wells Museum has shown the flints to be of late Neolithic-Beaker age, with a few tentatively assigned to the earlier Mesolithic period. The finds are grouped into the following types: end scrapers, round scrapers, retouched knives, borers and a possible pick. Two fragments of individual partly polished hand axes show signs of re-use as a scraper and a core. A single barbed and tanged arrow head was found.

Two small sherds of Samian ware were discovered, one only slightly abraded and referable to Dragendorf type 33. All material from this site is deposited in the Frome Museum.

DISCUSSION

The author had little previous knowledge of flint artefacts being found on the surface in the area but research has revealed that comparable sites do exist. These are briefly outlined below.

The Rev. Dom Aelred Watkins (Watkins 1969) in his presidential address to the Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society recalls much time spent looking for flints in the fields between Mells and Whatley. He does not comment on the culture to which his finds belong.

During excavations at Tom Tivey's Hole (ST 705.445) Mr. J. H. Barrett (1966) noted in the fields a short distance from the cave a distribution of flint material. This includes large nodules, cores, waste flakes and crude implements. Surface disturbance by motor bikes on the nearby scrambles course often reveals similar material which can be collected after meetings. He dates these finds to the Neolithic-Bronze age.

At Binegar (Tratman 1966) in the garden of No. 1 Dalleston about 100 pieces of flint were found. These were identified as belonging to a late Secondary Neolithic-Beaker age and included end scrapers, small discoidal scrapers and part of a retouched knife.

The object of this note is to place on record the site above and in a small way highlight the need for a careful watch to be kept on quarry concession land. This is not an original idea as H. E. Balch (Stanton 1969) indicated this need for Mendip many years ago.

Eastern Mendip has been designated a sacrifice area to the quarry industry. There are few obvious cave entrances in the region in which archaeological material might be expected to exist.

This site lies on quarry concession land (Somerset County Council 1971). Removal of the quarry overburden will destroy it and the many other surface sites that must exist. The area lies between the chalk uplands of the

Warminster district and the archaeologically well documented central and western Mendip. The area may have been used as an important transport route for flint, the raw material from which the implements were made, thus necessitating the need for short stay occupation-manufacturing sites along the length of the Mendip hills.

A large proportion of the waste flakes collected from the site are patinated along with a few artefacts tentatively assigned to the earlier Mesolithic. This may point to an earlier occupation or alternatively different stages in the oxidization of the flint, leaving us with a few possible Mesolithic stray implements.

The field is cultivated on a lay system, so that the extent of the flint accumulation could not be delineated with any certainty. The even scatter could indicate the site being ploughed out or that the habitation area lay further to the south, possibly a shelter against the Whatley Bottoms sheer side. This would have been out of the wind and closer to a ready supply of water with a working area in the wood above.

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