Proc. Univ. Bristol Spelaeol. Soc., 2002, 22 (3), 289-290

A POSSIBLE PREHISTORIC CHERT SOURCE ON MENDIP.

by

B. HACK

During the year 1989 a watching brief was undertaken on a small area of the Mendip plateau. The area which is c.0.8 hectare in extent is situated and centred at NGR ST 56155017, 260m OD, and lies in the Parish of St. Cuthbert Without.

The motivation for undertaking this work was prompted by the chance finding on the surface of ploughed land of an object which resembled a crude artefact of lower palaeolithic type. The object was formed from the locally occurring coarse chert which is attributable to the Harptree Beds (Green and Welch, 1965). Repeated searching of the area showed that pieces of this chert were scattered yet confined within this small area.

This local chert is rather intractable and would be somewhat unpredictable in its response to tool-knapping. The raw material is coarse in texture and is not formed from constituents which would allow it to fracture conchoidally. Nevertheless, examples strongly suggestive of artificial alteration were noted and collected. Fourteen of these items were displayed at the King John's Hunting Lodge Museum, Axbridge, for a period of two years.

The raw material was found to compare macroscopically with examples taken from the documented exposures which occur in Wurt Pit, NGR ST 55885391. It was not possible to examine the ground which surrounds Wurt Pit due to its retention as grass.

There is a large pit or swallet (not shown on O.S. maps) laying to the north of Sideling Plantation and adjacent to the St. Cuthbert Without scatter. It was not possible to ascertain whether, like Wurt Pit, the raw material occurred within the walls of this large pit as it had been used and filled as a repository for large items of scrap. The suggestion that the chert might have been quarried from within this pit with the view of exploiting its tool-forming potential remains an open question.

The area under discussion lies on the Biddle Fault and is close to the largest closed basin on the Mendip plateau. Hippopotamus were active on nearby Milton Hill. (Balch, 1937, Donovan, 1988). This would seem to support the possibility that great changes have taken place in this area as the result of geological and climatic forces (Stanton, 1999).

Should early man have arrived on Mendip, an area not noted for the occurrence of tool-making raw material, the chance discovery of this poor quality chert might have been welcomed as a means for him to achieve the cutting-edged artefacts which were necessary for his survival. Possible artefacts which now appear crude and unstandardised may have been unavoidable due to the intractability of the raw material, and its subsequent chemical alteration.

It is worth noting that after some twenty years of intensive searching and study on Central Mendip that no other examples of items formed from this raw material have been found.

RERERENCES

BALCH, H.E. 1937. *Mendip, its swallet caves and rock shelters*. Wells. Clare.

DONOVAN, D.T. 1988. The Late Pleistocene sequence at Wells, Somerset. *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society*. **18.** 241-57.

GREEN, G.W. and WELCH, F.B.A. 1965. *Geology of the Country around Wells & Cheddar*. HMSO. 94-5.

HACK, B. 1990. Tower Hill, Mendip: was early man here? *Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society, RETROSPECT* **125.** Feb. 1990. p3.

HACK, B. 1999. An unrecorded chert outlier on the Mendip Hills. *Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society. JOURNAL*. 23-5.

HACK, B. 2000. To whom it might concern. *Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society, RETROSPECT* **126** May 2000. 6-7.

STANTON. W.I. 1999. *Early stages in the development of Westbury Cave*, pp13-18 *in* P. ANDREWS, COOK, J., CURRANT, A. and STRINGER, C. *Westbury Cave: The Natural History Museum Excavations 1976–1984*. Bristol. Western Academic & Specialist Press Ltd.

Brian Hack
94, Stubbington Lane
Fareham, Hampshire.
PO14 2PE.
brhack94stub@lineone.net