

Palaeolithic and Mesolithic

by Louise Austin

I. Lower and Middle Palaeolithic

The recently published *Research Framework* (Prehistoric Society 1999) has set national parameters for the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic of Britain.

The *Resource Assessment* has identified both the importance of East Anglia's Pleistocene deposits and the paucity of recently excavated *in situ* sites (Austin 1997). Any opportunity to investigate and study further *in situ* remains will undoubtedly provide information of national importance. Most aspects of the period could be described as poorly understood at present, even though East Anglia has provided some of the best information from Britain.

The research themes which come out of any document such as this will undoubtedly address the burning questions of today but cannot hope to second-guess what future generations will wish to know of their past. Research in this period has in recent years benefited from renewed interest, resulting particularly from advances in scientific techniques and methodologies borrowed from other disciplines. This has resulted in the archaeological community at large recognising and appreciating the potential the remains from this period have to push back the bounds of our understanding of human development and its relationship with the developing landscape.

There is a need for a flexible framework which is not exclusive and allows new information and interests to be accommodated. It is recognised that any research agenda must be evolving and not fixed. Previously published articles have raised questions on archaeological research into the Palaeolithic and these were referred to in the preparation of this section (Andresen *et al.* 1996; Isaac 1972; Potts 1994; Gowlett in press). Wymer (1999) provides a national overview and discussion of the current evidence.

The construction of a tiered set of research aims and objectives for this period is therefore thought most appropriate. Layers of questions, answerable at differing levels, linking the broad questions of national and international significance with the more specific local questions was considered necessary. This agenda comprises two parts, the first includes a number of broad research topics while the second looks at specific geographical areas across the region.

At all levels these research questions also need to include methodologies to survey and evaluate the archaeological potential of Pleistocene deposits, formulating predictive models and scales of importance as well as a planned response to identified threats.

The most important first stage is more detailed survey of the surviving Pleistocene deposits in East Anglia. An audit of the present resource would produce a baseline data set which could form the basis for more specific project proposals to be drawn up.

II. Broad topics

Survey: quantification and qualification of the resource

Detailed survey following on from the successful results of *The English Rivers Palaeolithic Survey* (Wessex Archaeology 1995–1996) is required to adequately understand the Pleistocene archaeological resource which survives in East Anglia and needs to include an assessment of its environmental potential.

The research potential of different types of Pleistocene deposit needs to be investigated and mapped *e.g.* good survival of environmental remains in buried soils and fine grained channel-edge sediments, or high energy deposited outwash gravels containing redeposited artefacts. More understanding of past and present impacts on the surviving resource is needed and the types of threats which are currently affecting the remaining deposits. Identification, exploration and assessment of new ways to mitigate these threats are also required.

Due to the nature and location of the 'natural' deposits which contain this Pleistocene archaeological material, the usual methodological approaches to evaluation and excavation have been shown to be problematic. New methodologies need to be developed and tested to allow the economic evaluation of such sites in order to understand their potential and enable deposit modelling and predictive landscape models to be developed.

Chronology

Of fundamental importance to understanding the period is the chronological framework. This is still poorly understood for many sequences across the region. The potential for broadening chronological understanding through linking such sequences needs to be explored both within the region and at national and international levels.

Landscape

As with many other periods, the importance of studying the archaeology of the period within its landscape context is now more fully realised. Various sub-themes can be drawn out within this heading such as environmental reconstruction, transportation dynamics, on site/off site recognition among many.

Hominid behaviour

The potential is present for *in situ* remains such as working floors, kill sites, hearths, shelters *etc.* to provide as yet unparalleled information on the culture and behaviour of individuals and groups. However there is also much to be understood from less well-preserved evidence of hominid activity and its relationship to the surrounding landscape.

Economy

Almost nothing is known about the economies of hunter-gatherers in the region. Retrieval of biological remains from *in situ* Palaeolithic and Mesolithic sites is a very high priority. For the Palaeolithic, the results of the English

Rivers Project (Wymer 1996; 1997 and 1999) will document where such sites may be found; for the Mesolithic, buried surface-intact sites are known in the Fens, in the Lea Valley and elsewhere. Project briefs and specifications for archaeological interventions at any buried site of these periods must include a substantial 'environmental' component. Extensive sampling is required.

III. Geographical areas

Each of the following identified areas has high potential for survival of Palaeolithic archaeological remains. The questions which can and are currently being asked of the archaeological material from each of these areas are numerous and only a brief few are noted here. This list is by no means exhaustive and is intended to just give an indication of the types of questions which a particular area might answer. All of the broad themes can also be addressed in all of these areas and in others which have yet to be identified.

Chiltern Brickearths

There is at present a lack of environmental and dating evidence which has been studied although it is believed that there are suitable remnants of the deposits to allow this work to be carried out (M. White pers. comm.). Survey is initially required to identify suitable deposits, also the development of new methodologies to provide sufficient information.

Thames — including the current course as well as palaeo-channels

Further investigation of the pre-Anglian channels of the Thames should be undertaken which will allow more detailed assessment of the presence of archaeology in these deposits (Bridgland 1994). Further investigation of the dating of the present Thames terrace deposits is needed. The results of such investigations can also feed into the further work required to link the terrace sequence into the surrounding landscape. There is also potential for linking such a sequence with the Lowestoft till deposits.

Ingham/Bytham River

These pre-Anglian deposits include sites which have proved to be prolific such as Warren Hill (Wymer 1985) and well-preserved such as High Lodge (Ashton *et al.* 1992). The full sequence of the river's deposits need to be identified and studies carried out to assess the potential for archaeology in the whole of the sequence. There is also potential to identify a linking point in the pre-Anglian river systems.

Post-Anglian lacustrine deposits

These include stage 11 lake deposits such as those identified at Hoxne (Wymer 1983). Survey work is required to identify other similar surviving pockets. The presence and interpretation of these deposits needs to be linked to an understanding of the broader landscape. The possibility of a tiered approach to understanding the environment may help to build a better picture of this landscape.

North Norfolk coast

The area has had little previous study. However it has been recognised that the Pleistocene deposits have a high potential for archaeological and environmental information, with the possibility of evidence for a stage 10 glaciation (N. Aston pers. comm.). At present there is little archaeological information from this area.

Ouse and Cam valleys

Recent work (see Reynolds forthcoming) has challenged the accepted chronology of these terrace sequences. Recent evidence recovered from gravel extraction suggests that these deposits are far richer than antiquarian collection had suggested. Further investigation and identification of *in situ* remains and the recovery of good dating evidence is needed.

Other river valleys

Other valleys where there has been no systematic, or in some cases any, concerted study currently lack enough information for their archaeological potential to be assessed. This lack of consistent evidence needs to be addressed. Many other river valley terrace deposits are likely to contain comparative material.

Linking of these areas

More exploration of the archaeological, stratigraphic and sequential links between these specific areas is also needed.

IV. Projects

Specific projects will need to be formulated to address these and other specific questions concerning these areas of interest within the region. The projects should always be explicit in the way the results of the work will feed into the broader questions and themes directly adding to the larger picture.

Work also needs to be done to ensure that Pleistocene archaeology is viewed as part of mainstream archaeology and not as a separate discipline, and that it is properly integrated into the archaeological aspects of the development control process. This can perhaps be most easily achieved by ensuring that all appropriate landscape or site assessments and studies incorporate an assessment of the Pleistocene deposits by a suitably qualified specialist.

Research is required which will enable detailed recording strategies to be formulated for particular types of site in order to provide advice and guidance to planning archaeologists.

Research strategies need to be developed to enable the study of Palaeolithic archaeology to be more strategic and proactive in its approach rather than the present situation which is *ad hoc* and reactive.

V. Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic

The particular research questions for this period perhaps relate more easily to the general themes which have been picked up elsewhere in the regional agenda, as well as nationally by English Heritage, than those for the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic.

Although the region includes areas where there is an identified high potential for the survival of well preserved

Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic sites, for example the fen/fen edge, there is a scarcity of known occupation sites, in particular recent well excavated examples where there is associated environmental data in good condition.

In order to identify more of these sites, a baseline understanding of the surviving archaeological record is required. Comprehensive survey of the resource is undoubtedly first on the list of priorities. This will confirm the identification of areas of potential as well as allowing the identification of specific sites. Understanding the location, extent, nature, state of preservation and significance of the surviving resource is of fundamental importance as a first step towards addressing the wider research themes.

The areas of research which need to be addressed by future work can be divided into a number of broad themes.

VI. Broad topics

Before any of the themes are addressed, basic quantification and qualification of the resource is required, and this should include survey. Areas which have a high potential for the survival of well preserved Palaeolithic and Mesolithic ground surfaces need to be mapped. Areas need to be identified where for example sealed valley deposits, sealed/waterlogged fen-edge deposits or estuarine deposits have the potential to contain late glacial/post-glacial archaeological remains. Using this information, predictive modelling strategies can then be developed. This information will also inform the planning process and should enable the formulation of management strategies to respond to current threats which include potential dewatering as a result of mineral extraction, drainage and so on.

Landscape

Study of the landscape needs to incorporate the environmental context, as well as landscape dynamics. Another aspect which needs to be addressed and investigated is the increasing impact of humans on the environment and the effect of this on its changing use. More palaeo-environmental data needs to be obtained which can be tied in with the archaeological record. With such information, landscape modelling should be accomplished which can feed back into predictive modelling, survey and investigation.

The question of what is a site and what isn't needs to be explored. What is it that defines a site? On site/off site differentiation needs to be addressed along with the problem of identifying activity areas without buried features and high-density flint debitage. The scale of investigation and the sample size needs to be considered. If the activity takes place across several hectares, looking at one small part of that activity which may discretely cover only tens of square metres will give a very different picture. Site/territory dynamics also need to be explored.

Further aspects of activity which need to be investigated through study of landscape include such matters as the sources of raw materials.

Transitions

Investigation of the transition period from the Palaeolithic to Mesolithic is needed. Exploration to identify possible changes, continuities, processes and causes particularly relating to such aspects as the environment and

technology, among others, are required. The Mesolithic to Neolithic transition also requires study, particularly into the processes of change *c.* 5000–3000 BC.

Human behaviour

Even more so than with earlier Palaeolithic evidence there is potential for the survival of well preserved *in situ* remains such as working floors, kill sites, hearths, shelters *etc.* particularly in waterlogged contexts. These can provide excellent evidence of individual as well as group behaviour. However, there is also a need to consider the rest of the landscape. There is potential in the study of evidence within previous collections of material which may help to elucidate the relationship of these people to their surrounding landscape.

Interpretation of occupation sites and related 'scatter' sites

Identification, sampling and excavation of occupation sites, particularly those with associated well preserved organic remains, is needed. This should provide more information on the environment and the economy. Sites with good animal bone assemblages are of particular interest.

VII. Projects

In order to formulate specific rather than broad theme objectives, projects will need to identify baseline information, that is identify the surviving level of resource for the period. Targeted surveys which will identify appropriately dated deposits and their potential for preservation, and survival of important archaeology, are needed. In particular these are necessary as planning tools as well as research tools.

Example — The Thames Northern Tributaries Project

The high potential of the Lea Valley for Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic remains has been noted in the resource assessment. Investigative work in the Broxbourne area has identified a number of sites. However, the full extent of deposits dating to this period and the potential these have for the survival of important archaeological remains in the Lea and other Thames tributaries is by no means fully understood. Project work which brings together available information, identifying areas where deposits do survive, is therefore considered particularly necessary to inform the development control process both of where deposits survive and the relative importance of those remains.

Concerns have been raised about the threat to the resource in the southern part of the region posed by mineral extraction. The implications of gravel extraction and other forms of development increasing the pressure of urban spread in the tributary river valleys running south into the Thames, result in both direct and indirect impacts on the resource. In particular, gravel extraction has produced a draw-down effect and dewatering of well preserved organic deposits has resulted. The Thames Northern Tributaries Project (Lewis 1995) has been envisaged as a survey to produce a tool for the planning process. As part of the project, a management strategy will be formulated for the surviving remains, which include high archaeological potential. Similar management strategies are required for other high potential areas such as the Fen/Fen edge and Breckland.



Plate I An Ice-Age feature known as the Blakeney esker, near the north Norfolk coast.
 (Photo: D.A.Edwards, 2 March 1986, ref. TG0242/J/AZR27, copyright Norfolk Museums Service)

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