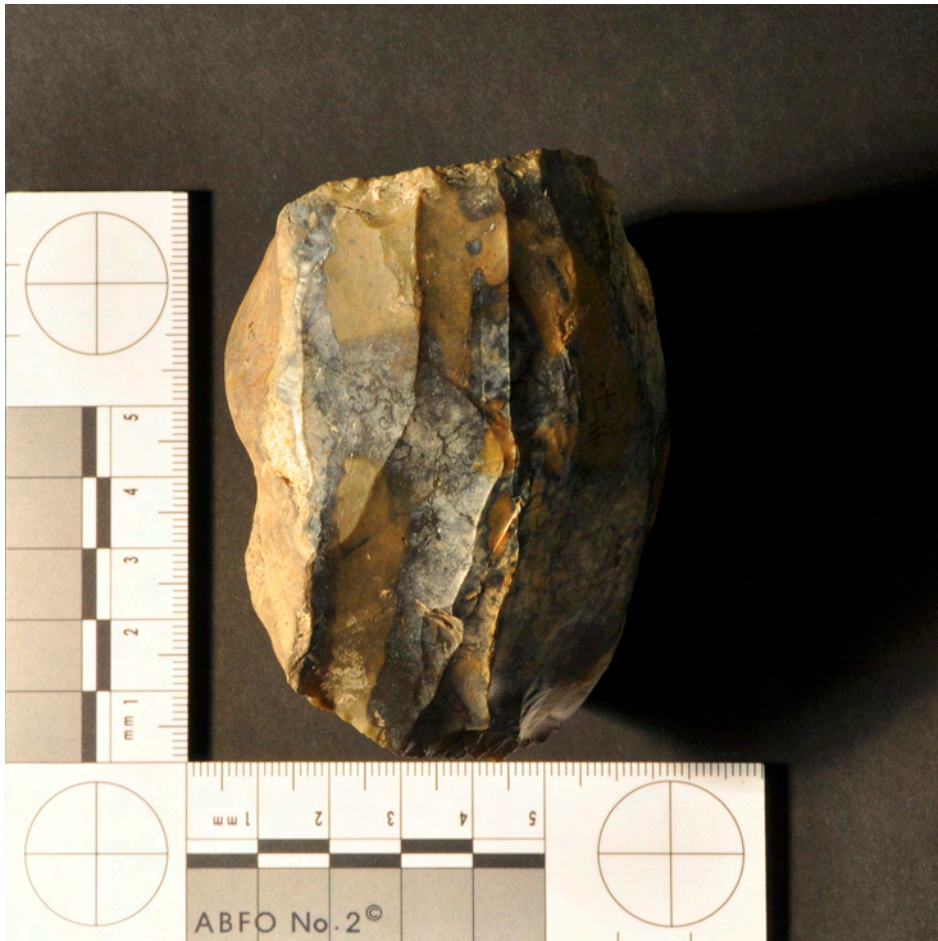


**Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age lithic artefacts
from the Bell Collection, Iffley Fields, Oxford**

Prepared for the East Oxford Archaeology and History Project



Mesolithic blade core

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Olaf Bayer July 2014

Introduction

The East Oxford Archaeology and History Project or ARCHEOX is a community archaeology project hosted by Oxford University's Department for Continuing Education, and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Oxford University's John Fell Fund. The Bell Collection is the largest single assemblage of Holocene lithic artefacts from the ARCHEOX study area. Access to the collection was granted by the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) and the collection was used to train project volunteers in lithic artefact identification and analysis in spring 2013. The author subsequently undertook a summary analysis of the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age portion of the collection with the assistance of project volunteers.

History and context of the Bell Collection

The material discussed in this report comes from the Iffley Fields area of East Oxford. Iffley Fields lies at the northern end of Iffley parish as it runs along the eastern bank of the Thames, crosses the valley of the Boundary Brook and meets Cowley St John Parish. Located at what was then the southern edge of Oxford's urban expansion, the turn of the 19th/20th centuries was a time of great change for the area. The collection was made at a time when formerly open countryside was gradually being incorporated into the built up area of the city with the construction of Fairacres Road and Howard Street.

The collection was made by Oxford based antiquarian Alexander James Montgomerie Bell (Nicholas and Hicks 2013, 289-93; Nicholas 2009a and 2009b). The current analysis studied 529 artefacts drawn from 17 separate catalogued groups held by the PRM (see table 1). 12 groups (110 artefacts) were donated to the PRM by Bell between 1900 and 1912. 2 large groups (constituting the majority of the collection) were purchased by the PRM from Bell's son in 1921 (377 artefacts) following his death in 1920 (Nicholas 2009b), and a further 4 groups (42 artefacts), presumably originally from earlier depositions, were catalogued in 2011 during enhancement work on the PRM's English collections.

The wider Bell Collection also contains over 180 Lower Palaeolithic lithic artefacts discovered during gravel extraction at Cornish's Pit, also in the Iffley Fields area (Nicholas and Hicks 2013, 290-291; Nicholas 2009b). The Palaeolithic material, which has seen publication elsewhere (see Nicholas and Hicks 2013, 290 for further references), has been excluded from the current analysis which focuses only on the Holocene portion of the collection.

No primary records exist for the Bell Collection. Although mention of Bell's manuscript/archive is made in correspondence between Bell's son and the PRM (Nicholas 2009a), the manuscript was never deposited at the museum and appears to have been lost. Mention of the later prehistoric portion of the collection is made in notes taken by Percy Manning during a lecture given by Bell on his discoveries in 1907 (see figure 1).

"Behind Fairacre House, towards Donnington House over about 10 acres. Gravel over laid by humus about 2'6", many flints found on the surface. In places shallow linear shaped hollows sunk down to gravel c.15 ft diam. Factory of flint numerous core + flakes, cores mostly small, some larger. Mostly quite black = transparent, 3 or 4 fabricators (small fragment of entirely polished celt: surface" (Percy Manning Archive quoted by Nicholas and Hicks 2013, 292).

Based on this description Nicholas (2009b; Nicholas and Hicks 2013) suggests that this location is between Fairacres Convent of the Incarnation and Donnington Lodge (see figures 1 and 2). This places the collection on slightly raised ground overlooking

the Thames valley to the west, the Boundary Brook valley to the south, and Cowley Marsh to the east.

Nicholas and Hicks (2013, 292) suggest that the Holocene portion of the Bell Collection has never been studied since its deposition in the PRM. In fact this material has been examined at least twice since the 1920s.

1. Humphrey Case in his study of Mesolithic Oxfordshire, illustrates 5 microliths from the collection (1952, 3-11) and see figures 5-8 below.
2. Robin Holgate in his study of Neolithic settlement of the Thames basin, catalogues 44 potentially Mesolithic (1988, 211/221), and 274 potentially Neolithic (1988, 253) artefacts from the collection. Holgate refers to the site as reflecting possible Later Neolithic *domestic activity* and Earlier Neolithic *task-specific activity* (1988, 249). Holgate's work is referred in George Lambrick's recent article on Prehistoric Oxford (2013, 29).

Analysis and methodology

Due to the size of the assemblage, and the fact that it could not be removed from the PRM for study, it was decided to only conduct a summary analysis of this material. The aim of this analysis was to characterise the chronology and nature of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Early Bronze Age activity in this area of East Oxford. To this end the following analyses were undertaken:

- **Typological analysis** was conducted to give information about when the assemblage was created and the kinds of activity that created it. All artefacts were classified by type. Where possible the definitions set out in the unpublished draft of the Lithic Society's *'Post Glacial Lithic Artefacts: Introduction and Glossary'* and Butler (2005) have been adhered to. Only where these definitions proved inadequate for categorisation of the assemblage have new type classes been given.
- **Raw material** colour and type was recorded. This gives information about the scales of mobility, interaction, and trade/exchange of the communities who created an assemblage. It can also indicate whether certain raw material types or colours were selected for specific uses.
- The presence/absence of **burning** was recorded for each artefact. It has been suggested that distribution, and/or, proportion of burnt stone, in conjunction with the distribution of other tools, can be used as an indicator of domestic activity within a lithic assemblage (Edmonds *et al.* 1999, 54; Richards 1990).
- Artefact **weight** gives an alternative to artefact count for quantifying aspects of a lithic assemblage. Weight was measured to the nearest gram.
- The stage of **reduction sequence** for each artefact was inferred from the extent of cortex (the original outer surface of a flint nodule/pebble) surviving on its **dorsal face**. This surface layer, modified by physical and or chemical action, is more difficult to work than the 'fresh' material in the centre of a nodule (Andrefsky 2008, 103). Based on the assumption that the first stage in the reduction of any block of raw material would have been the removal of the cortex, the amount of cortex on the dorsal face of an artefact can be used to indicate the stage of the stone working process or reduction sequence that it represents (Andrefsky 2008, 103). Simply put, the more cortex remaining

on the dorsal surface of an artefact, the earlier in the stone working process it belongs. In this analysis each artefact was assigned to one of 6 classes according to the percentage of cortex surviving on its dorsal face.

- The shape of **dorsal scars** on each artefact was recorded. The size and shape of lithic debitage has the potential to indicate assemblage chronology. Several authors (for example, Smith 1965; Pitts and Jacobi 1979; Ford 1987; Ford *et al.* 1984 and Edmonds 1995) have suggested that certain aspects of lithic artefact morphology, principally the shape of artefact blanks, are chronologically sensitive. They propose a change from proportionally long, narrow, thin blades during the Mesolithic to proportionally shorter, wider, thicker flakes by the end of the Early Bronze Age. Within this framework the presence of a significant blade-based component in an assemblage is seen as indicative of *early*, probably Mesolithic or Early Neolithic, activity. Similarly a significant flake-based component is likely to reflect *later*, potentially Neolithic/Early Bronze Age, activity. Rather than conducting a full chronometric analysis of the debitage component of the current assemblage (after Bond 2006; Snashall 2002; Ford 1987; Ford *et al.* 1984), a more expedient approach was adopted with the current assemblage. Here dorsal scar morphology was used as a crude chronological indicator on all artefacts. Effectively the presence of blade-based stone-working practices was taken as being indicative of *early* (Mesolithic or Early Neolithic) activity.

On completion of this analysis an attempt was made to determine differences between each of the assemblage's component groups on the basis of the above attributes. As no discernable difference was identified it was decided for the purposes of this report to treat all material as a single unstratified assemblage, with no attempt at further subdivision being made. All PRM cataloguing information for each artifact is retained in the raw data spread sheet (included as an attached .xls file). Should further information about the original location of specific elements of the assemblage become available in the future it will be possible to introduce a spatial element to the analysis of this data.

Chronology, typology and activity

The analysed assemblage consists of 529 pieces of flaked stone with a combined weight of approximately 5675g. Table 2 gives a typological and chronological breakdown of the assemblage. The assemblage consists of 183 pieces of unmodified debitage and 346 pieces with macroscopic traces of retouch or utilisation. Of these retouched pieces 30 are chronologically diagnostic and span the Early Mesolithic to the Early Bronze Age in date.

- *Mesolithic -9600-4000 BC* (see figures 3-8)
The assemblage contained 7 microliths, a microburin and a heavy possible pick, all of Mesolithic date. This material is likely to include both earlier and later Mesolithic artefacts. Earlier Mesolithic material is represented by a well-prepared, opposed-platform blade core (see figure 4).
- *Neolithic – 4000-2500 BC* (see figures 9-14)
The assemblage contains a range of arrowhead forms spanning the Neolithic. This includes fragments of at least 3 Early Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowheads, 2 Mid Neolithic chisel arrowheads, a single Late Neolithic oblique arrowhead and a triangular arrowhead of indeterminate Neolithic date. Two flakes from polished flint axes of indeterminate Neolithic date were also identified.

- *Early Bronze Age 2500-1800 BC* (see figures 15-16)
The assemblage also includes 9 thumbnail scrapers and 2 barbed and tanged arrowheads all of Early Bronze Age date.

The date range indicated by distinctive artefacts is also reflected by the less diagnostic elements of the retouched and debitage components of the assemblage. Taken as a whole, 30% of the assemblage's artefacts display traces of blade-based stone working practices, which are commonly associated with Mesolithic and to a lesser extent Early Neolithic activity. The remainder of the assemblage is characterised by a flake-based reduction sequence and could be Mesolithic to Bronze Age in date.

There is a significant bias in the assemblage towards retouched and modified pieces (64%), over unmodified debitage (36%). When compared to other equivalent lithic assemblages this frequency of artefact retouch is unusually high (for example see Bayer 2011, 185-90). Rather than reflecting prehistoric activity this is considered likely to be the result of a bias in the Bell's artifact collect/retention strategy towards identifiable artefacts over unmodified debitage. However, even taking this trend into account, the manufacture, maintenance, use and discard of a range of stone tools is apparent in all periods represented. Retouched/modified artefacts include scrapers, retouched blades and flakes, axes and awls indicating a wide range of activities from felling, cutting, scraping to piercing. Projectile points (microliths and arrowheads) are present from each period potentially indicating the enduring importance of hunting in this area. Very little of the assemblage (only 3%) shows any trace of burning.

Raw material and reduction sequence

With the exception of two pieces discussed below, all artefacts are struck from flint (see table 3). Where they survive, areas of cortex on almost all artefacts are relatively unabraded suggesting that the vast majority of this material is derived from a nodular flint source, either from within *in-situ* chalk or from clay-with-flints deposits. The closest sources of such raw materials are on, or close to, the Chilterns and the Berkshire Downs at least 15km to the east, south and south-west of Oxford. Only 3 pieces retain areas of water-worn cortex derived from a wider range of riverine or gravel sources, potentially much closer to Oxford. As none of these 3 pieces is chronologically distinctive it is not possible to link the use of this raw material to a specific period.

As shown in table 4 the majority of the nodular flint retains little or no dorsal cortex suggesting that assemblage represents the mid (41%) and late (53%) stages of the stone working process. The implication being that the earliest stages of the reduction sequence (extraction and initial core preparation), occurred elsewhere in the landscape, and probably close to the raw material source. 2 of the 3 pieces of water-worn/pebble flint retain proportionally higher areas of dorsal cortex suggesting that much more of the process of working this raw material occurred on the site and reaffirms the likelihood of a more local source for this material.

The majority of the flint (87%) ranges from dark to light grey in colour. Much smaller quantities of brown, orange and red/pink flint are also present in the assemblage. Two potential associations were apparent between certain artefact types and raw material colour. Both fragments of polished axe come from a pale creamy grey flint, potentially indicating the import of axes from a specific source (Bayer 2011, 226). 2 of the 3 fragments of leaf shaped arrowhead are struck from a mid to dark orange flint, potentially indicating the deliberate selection of a specific colour of raw material for the manufacture for this type of artefact, a tendency noted elsewhere in the country (Clarke *et al.* 1960, 215-6; Cummings 2010, 70).

In terms of raw material 2 artefacts are considered anomalous within the assemblage. Side and end scraper 1907.53.7 is struck from clear glass and is suggested as an early twentieth century attempt at experimental archaeology utilising a modern raw material. The second is side and end scraper 1921.91.405.322 which is struck from an unidentified, opaque mid-green raw material.

Interpretation and summary

This analysis of the Bell Collection suggests that a sustained focus of prehistoric activity existed in the Iffley Fields area between the Mesolithic (c. 9600 – 4000 BC) and the end of the Early Bronze Age (c. 1500 BC). The lack of records detailing the exact location and context of the discovery and collection of the current assemblage make it difficult to determine the precise nature of the activity that created it. Those records that do exist suggest that it is derived from both surface finds and archaeological features (see extract from the Manning archive above). However, a number of issues remain unresolved. Does the location inferred from the Manning archive by Nicholas (2009b) and Nicholas and Hicks (2013), account for the whole assemblage? And if so were all finds found together or in separate concentrations? With this lack of detailed spatial information it is only possible to discuss the location and nature of the assemblage in the broadest of terms.

No attempt has been made here to associate particular artefacts with Holgate's (1988, 249) '*task-specific*' or '*domestic*' activities. The composition of the lithic assemblage suggests that a wide range of activities were conducted in this location during all periods. The assemblage is likely to have been created by millennia of multiple episodes of inhabitation, by at least partially mobile communities. Certainly the evidence of the assemblage's raw materials indicates that the communities that created it were keyed into patterns of movement, contact and exchange that reached beyond the immediate Oxford area. Whittle (1998) proposes a spectrum of different practices from total mobility to complete sedentism that characterised the inhabitation of specific places between the Mesolithic and Early Bronze Age.

An interesting question raised by the assemblage is why did this location see multiple episodes of inhabitation potentially spanning several millennia. One school of thought on such '*persistent places*', (for example, Barton *et al.* 1995; Foley 1981), stresses economic and environmental factors. As such, repeated return to the Iffley Fields area could be due to the continued availability of resources in this slightly elevated location, overlooking the Thames and Boundary Brook, and close to Cowley Marsh. Another, and not necessarily mutually exclusive, explanation emphasises the role of social factors in maintaining the persistence of places (for example, Pollard 1999; 2000; 2005; Tilley 1994). Within this framework, over time, and through repeated episodes of inhabitation, locations developed meaning and history. As such repeated return to prehistoric Iffley Fields may have had as much to do with its associated memories, myths, stories, and traditions, as with its calorific and raw material potential.

Aside from the specific interpretation of a group of stone tools, this analysis underlines the research potential of historic lithic assemblages held in museum stores. Although their collection was characterised by very different ideas and methodologies to those of present day prehistorians, these assemblages are a valuable and often under-utilised resource. In the case of the Bell Collection interpretation is hindered by missing records and Bell's collection bias towards retouched artefacts. However, from the details of individual artefacts, to its study as an interrelated assemblage, the Bell Collection still offers valuable clues about the communities that inhabited the prehistoric landscapes of East Oxford.

Acknowledgements

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Collection	Count
1900.2	4
1901.21	2
1902.1	4
1903.37	1
1903.6	1
1904.27	7
1905.35	2
1906.75	1
1906.9	6
1907.53	5
1912.19.8	77
1921.91.405	367
1921.91.459	10
2011.3	10
2011.4	1
2011.5	30
2011.6.1	1
Total	529

Table 1. PRM references for groups of artefacts analysed

Type	Date	Count
Unmodified debitage		
Blade (unmodified)	Mesolithic/Early Neolithic	32
Blade (crested)	Mesolithic/Early Neolithic	4
Flake (unmodified)	Uncertain	105
Blade core (single platform)	Mesolithic/Early Neolithic	3
Blade core (opposed platform)	Mesolithic/Early Neolithic	4
Blade core (keeled)	Mesolithic/Early Neolithic	1
Blade core (rejuvenation flake)	Mesolithic/Early Neolithic	2
Blade core (fragment)	Mesolithic/Early Neolithic	11
Flake core (multi-platformed)	Uncertain	2
Flake core (rejuvenation flake)	Uncertain	2
Flake core (fragment)	Uncertain	6
Hammerstone	Uncertain	1
Tested nodule	Uncertain	1
Chip	Uncertain	8
Chunk	Uncertain	1
Total		183
Retouched tools		
Blade (edgeworn)	Mesolithic/Early Neolithic	1
Blade (notched)	Mesolithic/Early Neolithic	7
Blade (retouched)	Mesolithic/Early Neolithic	29
Blade (serrated)	Mesolithic/Early Neolithic	5
Flake (serrated)	Uncertain	1
Flake (notched)	Uncertain	37
Flake (retouched)	Uncertain	122
Scraper (chunky)	Uncertain	6
Scraper (concave)	Uncertain	2
Scraper (end)	Uncertain	10
Scraper (fragment)	Uncertain	6
Scraper (side and end)	Uncertain	51
Scraper (side and point)	Uncertain	5
Scraper (side, end and concave)	Uncertain	1
Scraper (side)	Uncertain	13
Awl	Uncertain	7
Denticulate	Uncertain	1
Fabricator	Uncertain	2
Retouched fragment	Uncertain	10
Total		316
Diagnostic tools		
Microburin	Mesolithic	2
Microlith	Mesolithic	5
Microlith (backed blade)	Mesolithic	1
Microlith (curved back)	Mesolithic	1
Pick/axe	Mesolithic	1
Arrowhead (leaf-shaped)	Early Neolithic	3
Arrowhead (chisel)	Mid Neolithic	2
Arrowhead (oblique)	Late Neolithic	1
Arrowhead (triangular)	Neolithic	1
Polished axe (fragment)	Neolithic	2
Scraper (thumbnail)	Early Bronze Age	9
Arrowhead (barbed and tanged)	Early Bronze Age	2
Total		30
Grand total		529

Table 2. Typology and chronology

Reduction sequence	% Dorsal Cortex	Flint
Early (>6%)	100% cortical	1 (>1%)
	76-99% cortical	7 (1%)
	51-75% cortical	24 (5%)
Middle (41%)	26-50% cortical	47 (9%)
	1-25% cortical	169 (32%)
Late (53%)	Non-cortical	281 (53%)
	Total	529

Table 3. Raw materials

Raw material	Count
Nodular flint	248 (47%)
Water-worn flint	3 (>1%)
Non-cortical flint	276 (52%)
Glass	1 (>1%)
Unidentified green material	1 (>1%)
Total	529

Table 4. Reduction sequence/dorsal cortex

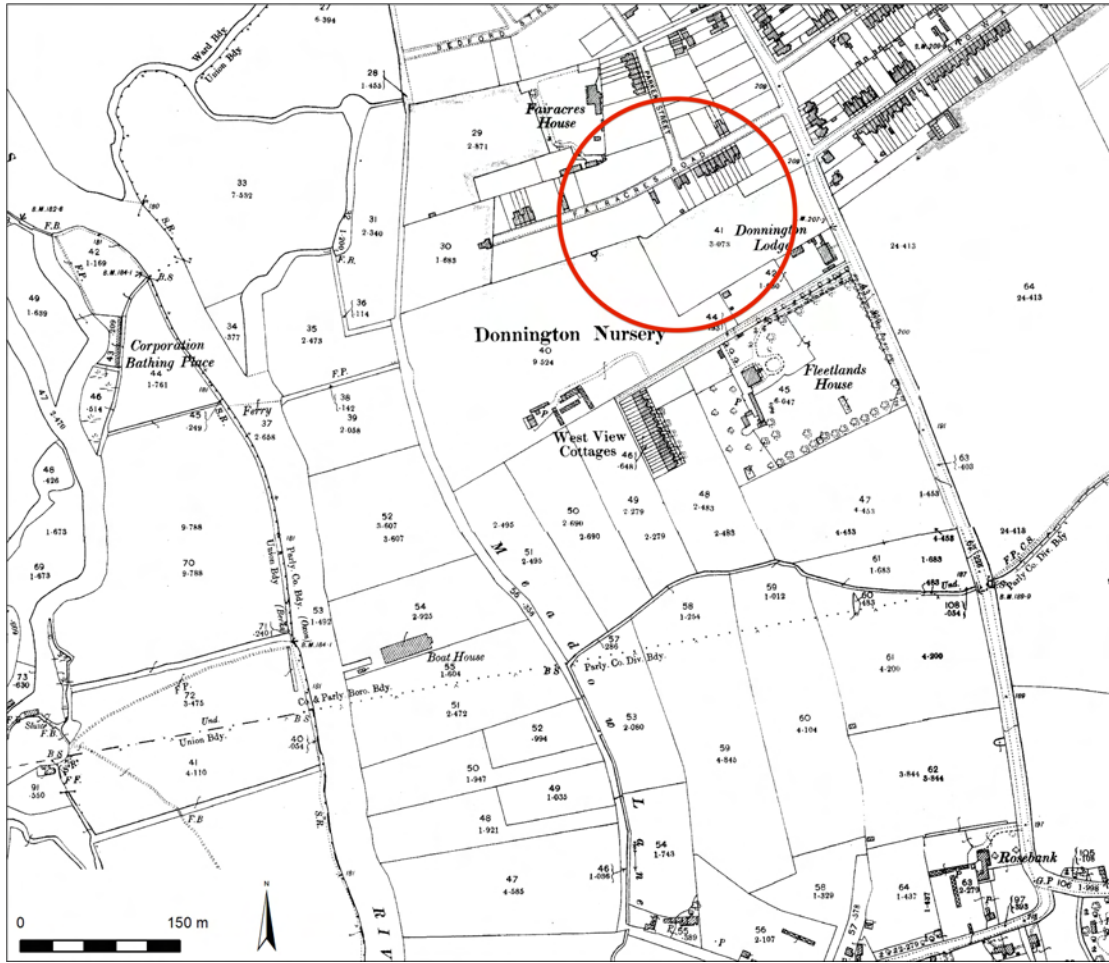


Figure 1. Approximate location of the Bell Collection in 1900 (shown in red ring). Mapping is © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2014). All rights reserved. (Ordnance Survey First Revision: Oxfordshire, 1:2,500, 1899-1900).



Figure 2. Approximate location of the Bell Collection in 2014 (shown in red ring). Mapping is © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2014). All rights reserved. (2012). Topography is derived from 1m LiDAR DTM © Environment Agency/Geomatics Group 2013.



Figure 3. Mesolithic flint pick © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1904.27.17

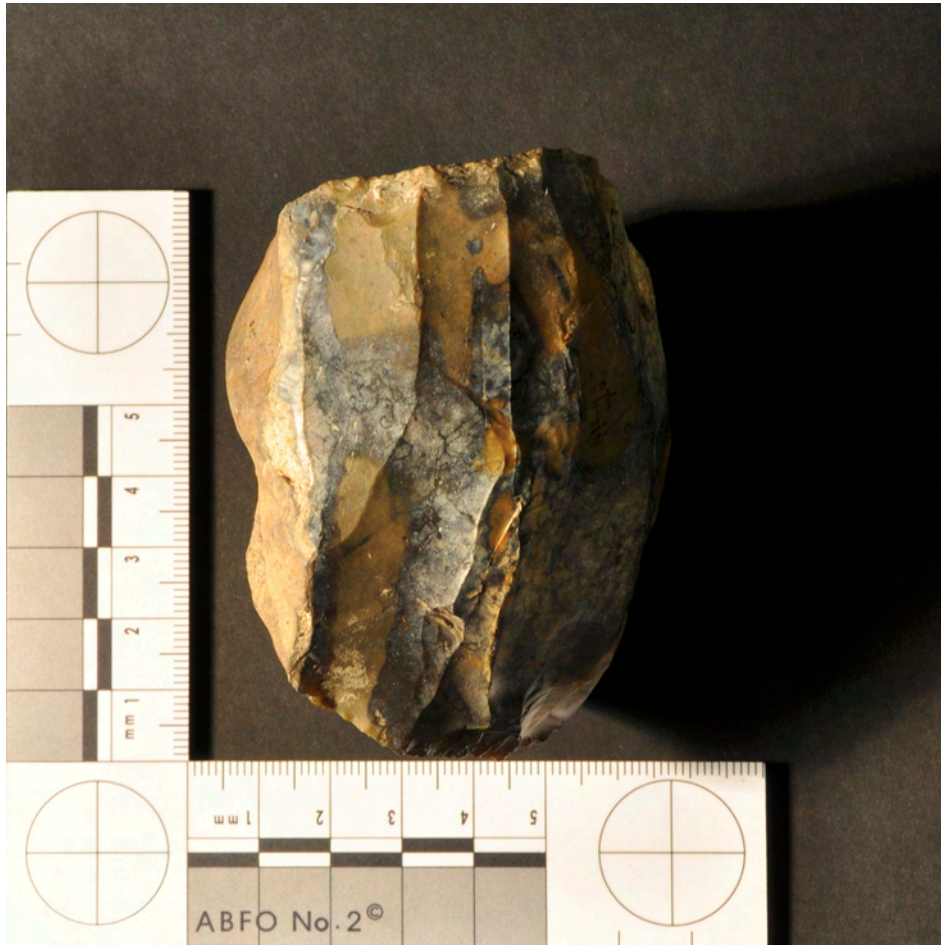


Figure 4. Mesolithic blade core © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.1



Figure 5. Mesolithic microlith, illustrated as artefact 1 by Case (1952, 3). © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.9



Figure 6. Mesolithic microlith, illustrated as artefact 2 by Case (1952, 3). © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.11



Figure 7. Mesolithic microlith, illustrated as artefact 3 by Case (1952, 3). © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.10



Figure 8. Mesolithic microlith, illustrated as artefact 4 by Case (1952, 3). © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.8



Figure 9. Base of Early Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead (tip missing). © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.350



Figure 10. Mid Neolithic chisel arrowhead © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.363



Figure 11. Neolithic triangular arrowhead © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.362



Figure 12. Late Neolithic oblique arrowhead © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.358



Figure 13. Neolithic serrated blade © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.94



Figure 14. Fragment of Neolithic polished flint axe © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.211



Figure 15. Early Bronze Age barbed and tanged arrowhead © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.359



Figure 16. Early Bronze Age thumbnail scraper © Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, accession number 1921.91.405.311

