ISLE OF WIGHT: UPPER PALAEOLITHIC AND MESOLITHIC RESOURCE ASSESSMENT

Rebecca Loader, September 2006

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). Appendix 1 contains a list of dated deposits.

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 Rob Scaife (pers. comm.) feels the pollen suggests Neolithic.

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. 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, gravers, 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 off 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.

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 maceheads 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).

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Appendix 1: Isle of Wight radiocarbon dates

Site	Lab No.	Sample context	Material	Radiocarbon age (BP)	Calibrated date range (95% confidence)
Bouldnor Cliff	GU-5420	Bouldnor sea bed. Oak tree bole, one of many rooted in a peat land-surface at the foot of the underwater cliff at approximately -12m OD.	Wood-oak heartwood?	7440±60 BP	6430-6120 cal BC
Bouldnor Cliff	Beta-140102	Underwater cliff. Base of upper peat bed (Bouldnor 1) at -4.10m OD. (Ref LIFE report)		5580±60 BP	4525-4330 cal BC
Bouldnor Cliff	Beta-140103	Underwater cliff. Middle peat bed (Bouldnor 2) (Ref LIFE report)		5870±80 BP	
Bouldnor Cliff	Beta-140104	Underwater cliff. Basal peat bed (Ref LIFE report)	Wood	7640±70 BP	6615-6395 cal BC
Bouldnor Cliff	Beta-209564	Underwater cliff. Feature BCV/CF02 (HWTMA 2005)			6100-5880 cal BC
Bouldnor Cliff	Beta-207809	Underwater cliff. Feature BCV/CF02. Layer of twigs 15cm below base of peat (HWTMA 2005)	Twigs		6240-6000 cal BC
Newtown East Spit	GU-5427	Core A. Organic silt (Gytjja) from strat unit 16 at -13m OD.	Organic silt (Gytjja)	7570±80 BP	6570-6180 cal BC
Newtown East Spit	GU-5425	Core A. Peat from top of strat unit 2 at -3.0m OD. This date, although rechecked by the laboratory, is anomalously old for a stratum above GU-5426.	Peat	5060±70 BP	4030-3700 cal BC
Quarr Beach	GU-5251	Wootton Quarr intertidal feature Q24. Hazel post from a Mesolithic/Neolithic in situ structure composed of six irregularly set posts. Extensive lithic debitage and burnt flint waste is noted nearby. Post protrudes from silt at -1.89m OD.	Wood-hazel post	5100±60 BP	4040-3710 cal BC
Quarr Beach	OxA-7165	Top of peat beneath marine silt underlying trackway Q190. Sample between -3.07m and -3.10m OD.	Peat (organic silt)	5470±80 BP	4470-4040 cal BC
Quarr Beach	OxA-6352	Bottom of peat at Q99	Peat	5300±65 BP	4340-3990 cal BC

Quarr Beach	OxA-6353	Top of peat at Q99	Peat	5145±65 BP	4220-3780 cal BC
Quarr Beach	OxA-7183	Q99 Charcoal from above layer with burnt flint at -1.61m OD	Wood - Salicaceae & Quercus sp. sapwood	4645±65 BP	3630-3110 cal BC
Yarmouth West Spit	GU-5397	Core 3. Oak from strat unit 17a at -9.3m OD.	Wood-oak heartwood?	7230±110 BP	6370-5840 cal BC
Yarmouth West Spit	GU-5382	Core 3. Base of peat in strat unit 10 at -6.5m OD.	Peat	5680±100 BP	4790-4340 cal BC
East Cowes	NZA-25646	Borehole BH103. Top of peat	Phragmites	7058±35 BP	6010-5840 cal BC
East Cowes	NZA-25645	Borehole BH104. Top of peat	Phragmites	6978±30 BP	5980-5740 cal BC
Gatcombe Withybed	SRR-1339			6385±50 BP	