FINDS FROM COCKLES WOOD CAVE, NETTLEBRIDGE, SOMERSET

BY M. J. L. HICKLING AND W. A. SEABY[1]

INTRODUCTION

The two caves at Cockles Wood are a hundred yards from the Fosse Way, south-west of the village of Nettlebridge (Nat. Grid Ref. 31/646486). They are on different levels of the same slope. The upper cave, a rock shelter, was excavated in 1905 by the Rt. Rev. Dom Bruno Hicks (Downside Abbey), but no detailed report was published. Two human skeletons (male and female) and coarse potsherds, decorated with finger-nail impressions, were discovered and are now preserved in Wells Museum. The lower jaws of both skeletons are unusually narrow, slim and square at the chin.

Excavations, begun in the lower cave in October, 1947, by the Downside Archaeological Society were continued during 1948, 1949 and 1950. The finds, cleaned sorted and examined at Downside School, have been sent on long-term loan to the County Museum at Taunton.

RESULTS OF EXCAVATIONS

The cave opens north on a cliff facing generally east and is 640 feet above sea level. The natural rock is Dolomitic Conglomerate over Carboniferous Limestone.

From the abundance and distribution of animal bones encountered, the cave was at first thought to be a rubbish dump belonging to the rock shelter above. There was, however, some stratification, showing layers of bones, animal and a few human. All the bones were found scattered, except those members of the non-fleshy parts of the body (*e.g.* hard bones from the wrist downwards, vertebrae in the case of the larger animals, and jaw bones). Many rib bones showed signs of having been broken with stones and one vertebra had been incised with a sharp implement.

1 A report on the excavations at this cave was originally written and published in *Proceedings and Journal of the Downside Archaeological Society*, i, No. 1 (1948), 1-3, with plan and section, and *ibid.* i, No. 2 (1949), 1-5, 19, Pls. 1, 2 and 3. The report given here is very largely taken from the account by M.J.L.H., with a reinterpretation of the pottery and other additional notes by W.A.S.

Among the deer bones was a round flint scraper (fig. 2 No. 6) and a white flint chip. There was indication of fire from remains of carbonised material in the soil but natural carbonisation cannot be ruled out without chemical tests. Sherds of late Neolithic grooved ware, finger-tip or rusticated ware and about one-third of an A Beaker came from the lower deposits beneath the red deer bones, the grooved ware underlying the beaker fragments. Scattered human remains were also found : amongst them are the bones of a large adult, presumably a man, and the bones of a very small adult.

THE FINDS

(*a*) *Grooved Ware* (fig. 1, Nos. 1 and 2). Two fragments of this type of pottery, which does not appear to have been found, or at least recognised, further south-west than Wiltshire came from near the floor of the cave.

As the illustrations show, the ware, of which Nos. 1 and 2 almost certainly form part of one vessel, is coarse, being over half an inch in thickness. It is black and brittle with a backing of ground white shell and it is inclined to fracture laterally in layers. Decoration is in the intaglio style[1] and consists of a series of grooves, approximately $\frac{1}{16}$ in. deep, made with a square-ended flat tool, giving the effect of a ribbed surface. It is probable that the curvature of the design is a ' flattening-out ' of a chevron decoration, such as that on bowls from Lion Point, Clacton ;[2] but even if this is so, the bowl is certainly not straight-sided as are those from Essex, but curved and perhaps round-bottomed of a conventional Neolithic form.

The surface has a slightly burnished appearance and the tendency to flake is most apparent in the first three millimetres of the outer surface of the ware, suggesting that the decoration was carried out in wet slip on a dried surface ; smudges may have been caused by the fingers holding the tool. Moreover, in places where it had been over-moistened, the clay appears to have oozed up between the grooves, which for the most part are reasonably parallel.

The large quantities of Grooved ware found in the submerged surface of the Essex coast, at Lion Point, Clacton, and Dovercourt,

1 S. Piggott, *Proc. Prehistoric Soc.*, ii (1936), 191-2.
2 *Ibid.*, fig. 4, No. 4. We are indebted to Prof. Piggott for pointing out this feature.

resulted in an investigation into its affinities both in Holland and in this country.[1] It has been found at some twenty-five other sites, mostly in southern England, but as far west as Lough Gur, Limerick.[2] In many of these sites, Grooved ware has been found with Neolithic B pottery, with both A and B beakers and the related rusticated wares, made both with finger-tipping and bone-impressing ; in addition, circular scrapers and *petit tranchet* derivative arrow-heads have been discovered in association with it.

If these wares are in fact native, as has been suggested by Piggott and Childe,[3] the Clacton forms need not necessarily be the earliest, and perhaps Woodhenge should be considered the type site for the south-west. Sherds from Cockles Wood are of high quality, although the decoration is simple and, as already suggested, the design degenerate.

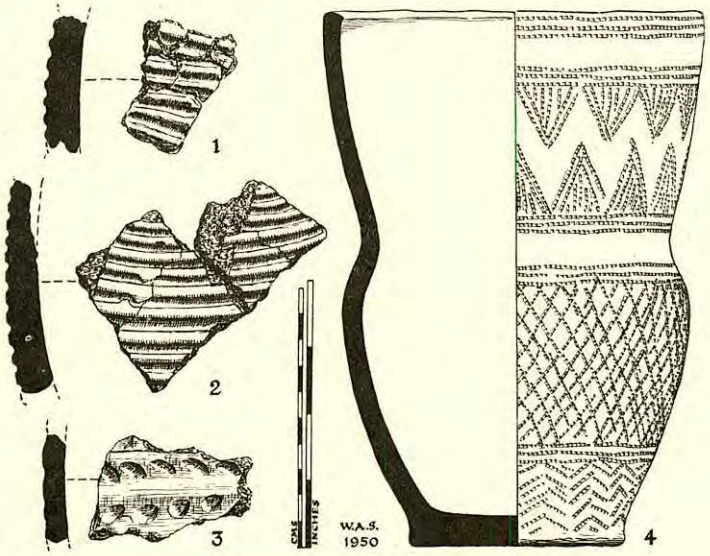

Fig. 1. Pottery from Cockles Wood Cave, Nettlebridge ($\frac{1}{3}$).

(*b*) *Rusticated Beaker Ware* (fig. 1, No. 3). Two fragments only were discovered and these were of light red colour with smoothed

1 *Ibid.*, 197-201.
2 O'Riordain, *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, liv, Section C, No. 2 (Nov. 1951), 62, fig. 8, Nos. 1-8.
3 Information received verbally through A. M. ApSimon.

but unburnished surface, decorated by evenly spaced finger-tipping, in which the nail mark is the most obvious feature.

The finger-nail bands, made with paired finger-tips, appear to run horizontally and this method of decoration (Holdenhurst ware) has been discussed both by Grahame Clark[1] and W. F. Grimes.[2] Rusticated ware is already known in Somerset from the examples found during the excavations at Gorsey Bigbury.[2] Here, however, the examples show a more marked ridging between the finger impressions than on the Nettlebridge sherds.

It is probable that the fragments of the finger-nail impressed ware from the upper cave at Nettlebridge, now at Wells museum, are part of the vessel under review.

(*c*) *A Beaker Ware* (fig. 1, No. 4). Rather more than one-third of an A Beaker was found in the same layer as the Grooved ware. This is a somewhat friable pottery from which most of the shell or other calcareous grit in the paste has dissolved away, leaving a pitted surface.[3] The wall of the beaker is approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ in., swelling to $\frac{1}{2}$ in. at the base ; the height of the vessel, as shown in the reconstructed drawing, is 8 in., the diameter at the base being $3\frac{3}{8}$ in., and at the mouth a fraction under 6 in. Such measurements are only approximate in view of the incompleteness of the vessel.

The ware ranges from drab colour to ochreous yellow and light red on the exterior and a slaty blue-grey interior colour. The outer surface has a burnished or polished appearance, a fact noticed by H. St. George Gray in describing a beaker from Wick Barrow excavations, which he ascribes to burnishing with a smooth stone, bone implement or pad of raw hide.[4]

The decoration, divided into zoned patterns by series of three horizontal lines rather clumsily incised, is executed by the imprint of a fine square-toothed comb which yields an almost continuous hyphenated line. Ornamentation consists of : (i) in the lowest panel, crude herring-bone or disjointed zig-zag ; (ii) on the main swell of the body, a lattice-work design ; (iii) constriction above body, bare ; (iv) on the slightly incurving neck, interspaced triangles, vertically filled, to give an open running chevron design.

1 *Ibid.*, ii, 19-23.
2 *Proc. Univ. Bristol Spel. Soc.*, v, No. 1 (1938), 38-42.
3 Originally thought to have been part of two beakers, one A and one B. Now identified as part of only one A beaker.
4 *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, liv (1908), ii, 25. It may be noted that fragments of rusticated ware were also found in Wick barrow listed under item 12, p. 24.

From its form the vessel belongs to phase II of Abercromby's type A beakers.[1] In general shape the beaker may be said to have a number of close relatives,[2] but the decoration is less easy to parallel. At Corston, Bath, an A beaker, decorated entirely with herring-bone ornamentation was found with a skeleton in a cist during 1940,[3] but this is a type of decoration found more commonly in East Anglia and especially in Yorkshire and NE. England. J. F. S. Stone illustrates a single fragment of a beaker thus decorated from a settlement site at Easton Down, Winterslow, Wilts.[4]

Cross-hatching on a bowl, but arranged in narrow bands, is found on the beaker from Fernworthy, Dartmoor, Devon,[5] and in a grave with a food vessel at Fargo Plantation, near Stonehenge ;[6] but a number of late A beakers found in Hampshire exhibit this feature and ApSimon suggests, particularly in view of the Wiltshire connections, that these parallels may indicate some kind of migration between Somerset and Hampshire.[7]

The chevron decoration is relatively common all over the country, but vertically filled triangles are much less common. Two examples, however, both from western Britain may be noted : a rather degenerate beaker from Brigmerston or Brigmilston, Wilts., where the pendant triangles are similarly treated, the zones also being divided by three horizontal hyphenated lines ; and at Wick Barrow, Stogursey, where the design is quite different but where some at least of the triangles are filled in the same way.[8]

Excavations at the 'henge' monument at Gorsey Bigbury, although probably not *constructed* by Beaker folk, produced only A, AC and rusticated types of beaker wares up to a number of some sixty or seventy vessels.[9] Examples of B beakers have been found at Wick Barrow and elsewhere, but the A beaker can be said

1 We are indebted to A. M. ApSimon for classification and for suggesting parallels in form and decoration.
2 Abercromby, *Bronze Age Pottery*, i, Pl. V, Nos. 8 and 10 ; Grimes, *Proc. U.B.S.S., loc cit.*, fig. 13, Nos. 10 and 18.
3 B. A. and K. M. Crook, *Proc. U.B.S.S.*, v, No. 2 (1943), 141-4.
4 *Wilts. Arch. Mag.*, xlv, No. 154 (June 1931), 368, fig. 6.
5 Abercromby, *op. cit.*, Pl. V, No. 13.
6 J. F. S. Stone, *Wilts. Arch. Mag.*, xlviii, No. 119 (Dec. 1938), 362-3, Pl. IIIA.
7 Glenferness Avenue, Talbot Woods, Bournemouth, see J. B. Calkin, *Trans. S.E.U.S.S.* (Bournemouth Nat. Hist. Soc. 1935), 21 ff ; from a gravel pit at Lower Farringdon, see M. D. Waterman, *Ant. Journ.*, xxvii (1947), 80.
8 Abercromby, *op. cit.*, Pl.V, Nos. 13 *bis* and 11, and *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* liv, ii, 27-8, and Pl.VII, No. III.
9 For a discussion on the significance of the pottery from this site see A. M. ApSimon in *Proc. U.B.S.S.*, vi, No. 2 (1951), 186-99.

to predominate in Somerset. The disturbance at Cockles Wood cave prevents any clear picture being made of the sequence of occupation, but it is unlikely that there was much difference in time between the Grooved ware occupiers and the Beaker users.

(*d*) *Flints* (fig. 2, Nos. 6 and 5). Associated with these finds was a small flint scraper which is finely but steeply chipped by pressure flaking though it retains some of the cortex. In section it is seen to have a large and prominent bulb of percussion which has on it a facet or *éraillure*. The large flint scraper is of the horse-shoe type with small rough chipping around the edge. The section shows the S-curve of the flake typical of Neolithic and Beaker phase work, the underside also showing a well-marked *éraillure*.

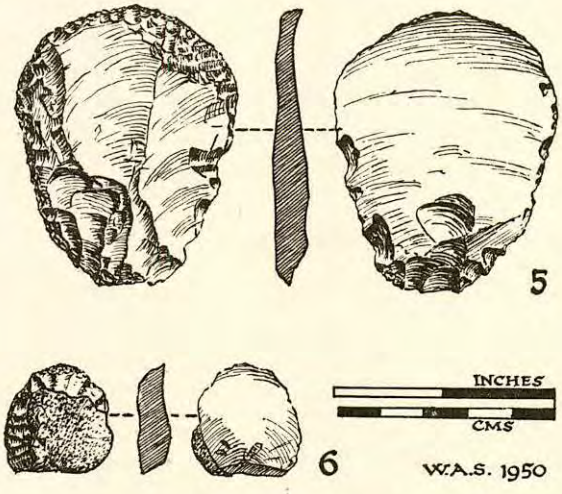

Fig. 2. Flint Scrapers from Cockles Wood Cave, Nettlebridge ($\frac{1}{2}$).

Scrapers of this form are extremely common on sites of the period, and those found at Gorsey Bigbury[1] and at Woodhenge[2] may be noted. They were almost certainly used for dressing skins of animals or similar purposes.

(*e*) *Human Remains.* Although very fragmentary, the certainty of two individuals, one a good deal larger than the other, and the probability of three or more, is borne out by the remains.

1 *Proc. U.B.S.S.*, v, No. 1, 17, Pl.VIII, No. 35-49.
2 *Woodhenge*, 117, Pl.XXIV, Nos. 6, 7, 9.

Axial. Part of lower temporal bone of skull, showing external auditory canal ; fragments of cranium. Fore portions of *two* mandibles, each having the mental process well developed. In one case the jaw is delicate and pointed. Due to age the teeth sockets of the two left incisors and the canine, to where the jaw is broken off, are worn down and partly sealed over, while the right teeth sockets are still present. The jaw is that of a middle-aged or elderly person, probably a woman.

In the second case, the jaw is square, stronger and the incisor teeth sockets are deeper, although, like the former, there is nothing like the depth of the present-day jaw. It is apparently that of a person in early manhood.

The sixteen teeth, none of which can with certainty be associated with either fragmentary jaw, consist of the following :—

(i) R : $\frac{\text{PM 1}}{\text{I 1 PM 1, 2 M 1}}$; L : $\frac{\text{C}}{\text{C, PM 1, 2 M 1}}$

All probably belong to one individual and show very considerable attrition but are in a perfectly healthy state.

(ii) L : $\frac{\text{M 3}}{\quad}$ R : $\frac{\quad}{\text{M 1, 2}}$ L : $\frac{\quad}{\text{M 1, 2}}$

These show nothing like the attrition of (i) and it is noticeable that, although the molars pair off well, the root surfaces of those on the right side are ivory in colour while those from the left are yellow. There is no certain evidence that the wisdom tooth of the upper jaw is from the same individual.

(iii) L : $\frac{\text{C}}{\quad}$ apex fractured *post mortem.*

This shows considerable attrition and a very steep angle to the grinding surface which means that it cannot belong to (ii), while an upper left canine is already accounted for in (i).

There are some dozen vertebrae, mostly fragmentary, including two second cervicals (axes).

Appendicular. Part of a left scapula and the upper portion of a radius with head. Carpal, metacarpal and digital bones from two or three (?) hands. Most of an ilium, probably that of a woman, part of the rounded head of a femur and a patella. A few foot bones, including a hallux with its phalange.

(*f*) *Animal Remains.* Bones are very numerous and only those which have been identified are listed.

Bos longifrons (Celtic shorthorn). Bones include vertebrae, foot bones, horn-cores, teeth and mandible, scapulae, pieces of skull (the auditory canal).

Equus caballus (Horse). These bones are smaller than the modern in formation. Bones include teeth and part of mandible, hooves.

Capreolus capreolus (Roe deer). Animals are small—probably young. Bones include teeth.

Rangifer tarandus (Reindeer). Bones include teeth and foot bones.

Cervus elaphus (Red Deer). Bones include teeth.

Capra hircus (Goat). Bones include teeth and part of mandible, left scapula and foot bones of three animals.

Sus terifus (Wild Boar). Bones include teeth (molars and canines) and right ilium. This appears to be a small animal.

Felis catus ferus (Wild Cat). Bones include teeth and mandible and leg bones.

Canis familiaris (Dog). Bones include teeth and mandibles of two young animals, and left scapula.

Canis lupus (Wolf). Lower mandibles.

Cryctolagus cuniculus (Rabbit). Bones include a skull (modern) and lower mandibles.

Arvicola amphibius (Water Vole). Bones include eight lower mandibles and teeth.

Lepus timidus (Common Hare). Bones include leg bones.

Mustelidae (the Weasel Family). Bones include lower mandible—probably *Mustela martes* (Pine Marten).

Other bones include a sternum of a bird, probably pigeon.

(*g*) *Fossil Crinoids.* Several crinoid ossicles were found associated with the animal and human bones. Little attention was paid to them at first since they are characteristic of the Carboniferous Limestone. Nevertheless, the position in which they were discovered suggests that they may have come there other than having been directly derived from the limestone.

Fossil crinoids have been found in barrows in Wiltshire, Somerset and Devon,[1] sometimes associated with necklaces of lignite and

1 The evidence is set out by Dr. Stone in *Arch.* lxxxv (1935), 213-4.

other beads.[1] The present examples show no signs of artificial enlargement of the perforation nor wear with use, and from the evidence at Tynings Barrow Group on Mendip there is no suggestion that the fossils have any other signficance than amulets, probably to be placed with the deceased at burial.[2]

(*h*) *Nuts.* Two carbonised hazel nutshells (*Corylus avellana*) complete, without the kernel.

Samples of soil and charcoal have not yet been analysed.

Conclusions

The fauna exhibited by the bones, with the possible exception of the reindeer teeth, which may have been derived from an older deposit, and the more modern rabbit, is consistent with that of the Sub-Boreal period. *Bos longifrons*, the Celtic shorthorn, has been recognised in Beaker food-refuse in Lincolnshire, Wiltshire[3] and Somerset ;[4] while dog is also found associated with Beaker folk,[4] and goats or sheep were herded from Neolithic times.[5] The wild animals may all have been used for food or clothing, the limb-splitting, cuts and rough saw marks on some of the bones indicating that this was indeed the case.

The presence of human bones mixed up in the filling is less easy to explain, but instances of fragmentary human remains buried on occupation sites of this period are numerous enough to say that there is nothing exceptional in the circumstances.[6]

Assuming the bodies to be contemporary with the pottery and animal remains, it can only be argued that these people met their fate inside the cave or were buried there, either whole or in fragmentary condition. In any case there seems little evidence of anything approaching permanent habitation over a long period[7] and it has been suggested that the bodies represent those of a family of Grooved

1 A very late cist-burial at Clevedon with glass beads and crinoids is fully discussed by H. St. George Gray in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lxxxviii, ii, 73-6.
2 H. Taylor, *Proc. U.B.S.S.*, iv, 92.
3 V. Gordon Childe, *Prehistoric Communities of the British Isles* (1947), 98.
4 At Gorsey Bigbury, *Proc. U.B.S.S.*, v., 53.
5 Childe, *op. cit.*, 34.
6 cf. Gorsey Bigbury, *loc. cit.*, 13-4.
7 P. J. Edwards, ' Cockles Wood Inhabited ', *Proc. & Journ. Downside Arch. Soc.*, i, No. 2, 13-4, and P. J. O'Donoghue, ' Cockles Wood in Retrospect ', *Ibid.*, i, No. 3, 2-4.

ware folk who were followed shortly afterwards by Beaker occupants. Such a statement, of course, can only be made with reserve.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writers would like to express their thanks to all who have contributed to the drawing up of this report. They include Mr. A. ApSimon, Mr. R. J. Atkinson, Mr. H. E. Balch, Mr. A. D. Hallam, Abbot Hicks, Abbot Horne, Dr. W. Holmes, Mr. A. E. Parrott and Prof. Stuart Piggott. They would also thank the landowner, Mr. Horler of Park Farm, Ashwick, near Oakhill, for facilities afforded to the Downside Archaeological Society to carry out the excavations.