

LITHIC FINDS FROM LARKBARROW FARM, EXMOOR

Location and finds

A stratified chert blade and an unstratified flint microlith were recovered from the gentle south-west facing slopes of Long Combe in a probable sheep scrape. The site is located at *c.* 400m OD on the north side of the track to the east by south of Larkbarrow Farmstead at NGR SS 82251 42827.

Previous records of early prehistoric lithic material recovered from this area (HER 33053) and recent palaeoecological work undertaken immediately to the south (Fyfe 2005) provide a context for the finds reported here and enhance the significance of the stratified item.

The scrape comprised a vertical-sided, eroded feature 2.72m long, oriented *c.* east–west, with a



Fig. 1 Soil profile; scale division 0.2m

0.54m wide, horizontal bench; it was cut 0.32m deep on the northern, rear, upslope side. The regularity of the scrape suggests that it may have been a recent, anthropogenic feature cut specifically to clean back a section of the soil profile and then subsequently used by sheep to shelter against (Fig. 1). The soil profile so exposed comprised four visually identified units here described from the top down.

Unit 001 comprised the dense root mat of the predominantly *Molinia caerulea* ground cover and was <0.05m thick.

Unit 002 formed a merging boundary with 001 above it and comprised a very dark grey (10YR 3/1) finely fibrous organic deposit 0.06m thick. There was significant root penetration from above.

Unit 003 formed a merging boundary with 002 above and comprised a dark brown (7.5YR 3/2) silty

sand 0.06m thick. Course components included root penetration from above and moderately sorted, occasional well rounded to sub-rounded sandstone pebbles <0.07m but more generally <0.03m.

Unit 004 formed a more abrupt boundary with 003 above and comprised a strong brown (7.5YR 5-4/6) sandy silt and was exposed to a depth of 0.13m; this unit continued below the surface of the ledge so its lower section was not visible. Course components included fine root penetration from above and frequent small (<15mm) sandstone and quartz pebbles. Several insect pupae sacks were recorded in this unit and, although generally aligned vertically, may have been lateral intrusions.

The toffee coloured, chert blade was recovered from the lowest part of the organic soil 002 and in contact with the merging boundary between units 002 and 003; it lay horizontally towards the west end of the exposed profile (Fig. 1). It is triangular in section, modified by longitudinal flaking on the top of the proximal end to create a flatter surface (Figs. 2 and 3). It is 49mm long, 16.6mm wide at the proximal end tapering to 5.2mm at its distal end and

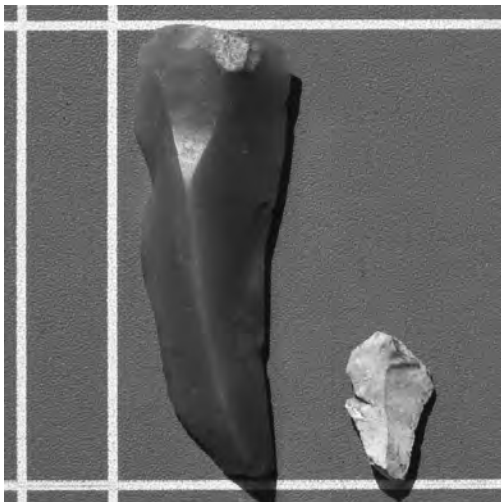


Fig. 2 Blade and microlith; white rectangle 50mm by 20mm

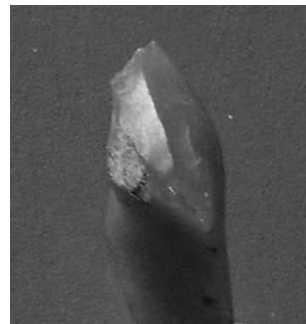


Fig. 3 Proximal end of blade with longitudinal flaking creating a flatter surface.

between 8.5mm and 3.8mm thick. Cortex survives at the proximal end and at the tip of the distal end.

The microlith is a trapezoidal, flaked flint 15.5mm long by 8.7mm wide and burnt to a dull, opaque grey (Fig. 2). It was recovered loose on the surface of the bench below the vertical face at the rear of the scrape.

Both items are considered to be Mesolithic.

Discussion

There are two previous records of early prehistoric lithic material being recovered from this immediate area. In 1956 A.D. Hallam found 'pebble core trimming flints' at SS 8215 4285, 100m to the north-west of the present site (Anon 1956; HER 33053). These were interpreted by Hallam as being Mesolithic/Neolithic. In 1984 five small flakes and a core were recovered from the surface of the track 140m to the north-west of the present site in front of the south-east corner of the Larkbarrow Farmstead enclosure (HER 33053). The excavated Mesolithic site at Hawkcombe Head lies 3.6km across the plateau to the north-east (Gardiner 2007).

Of particular significance is the recent survey to assess the palaeoecological potential of spring-line and flush-site peat deposits for the Exmoor moorland units 7 and 13 (Fyfe 2005). This work has produced skeleton pollen diagrams showing very low levels of open heath communities at the start of the Larkbarrow (head of Long Combe), Swap Hill and Madacombe sequences. Biostratigraphic comparison

suggests that the onset of peat at these sites may date to the later Mesolithic (*ibid.*). The northern edge of the area of the Larkbarrow sampling sites lies within 150m of the scrape.

Given the proximity of the palaeoecological sampling sites to the lithic material reported here it is important that radiocarbon measurements are secured for the earliest organic deposits in Long Combe as recommended by Fyfe (2005: 6.1.3). This will enable peat inception and that part of the column with very low levels of open heath communities to be dated and its temporal relationship to the lithic site determined. The thin layer of organic soil (002) under which the chert blade was recovered is not part of the valley mire system but resembles the shallower periphery of blanket peat whose onset is unlikely to be synchronous with the valley mires in Long Combe, despite their proximity.

References

- Anon, 1956. 'Additions to the Museum from 1 January to 31 July, 1956', *SANH* 99/100, 7.
- Fyfe, R., 2005. *The Palaeoecological Potential of Exmoor's Moorlands: Moorland units 7 and 13*, unpub report for Exmoor National Park Authority.
- Gardiner, P., 2007. 'Chasing the tail of hunter-gatherers in south-western landscapes', in M. Costen (ed.), *People and Places: Essays in Honour of Mick Aston*, Oxford

RICHARD MCDONNELL