

## SHORTER PAPERS

### A LATE MESOLITHIC SITE AT LARKBARROW ON EXMOOR

Larkbarrow, Somerset, lies at SS 8203 4289 within the moorland block forming the former Royal Forest of Exmoor at an altitude of 395m OD. It is located at the eastern end of Long Combe, where the combe is fed by a series of small springs at the heads of shallow tributary combes. The geology is composed of Devonian rocks from all three of the major divisions of that geological time period. To the west and east of Lynton and the Lower Devonian Lynton Beds, are the Hangman Grits of the Middle Devonian period (Edwards 2000). The landscape around Larkbarrow is remote, open moorland, but it also comprises the semi-improved infields

around the former Larkbarrow Farm (Fig. 1). The site, which is owned by Exmoor National Park Authority, is bordered by a public bridleway along a rough track and is also on open access land (Fig. 2).

Today Larkbarrow comprises an abandoned 19th-century farmhouse which was destroyed during and after WWII when the area was requisitioned by the army for artillery training. The 19th-century relict landscape is of considerable interest in itself (Hegarty forthcoming). Flint core-trimmings were found to the east of the farmhouse at SS 8215 4285 in 1956 (SCM Accn no. 56.A.49) and classified as Mesolithic/Neolithic by the finder, Mr Hallam



*Fig. 1 The Larkbarrow landscape with the remains of beech shelter belts surrounding the former 19th-century farmhouse; flints have been found to the right of the farm complex (photo Rob Wilson-North)*



comprising a decayed peaty layer over a residual mineral soil below which was an orange layer of iron-pan and then natural. The depth of stratigraphy on the site was very shallow with natural being encountered at a depth of around 0.3m. No definite features were encountered in any of the trenches.

During the excavations about 479 pieces of flint were recovered and a further 26 collected from the surface. Flint was recovered from Trenches 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11 (and 12 which adjoins 11), together with five retouched pieces from molehills and/or spoil heaps. The total number of pieces of debitage was 505; there were 75 retouched tools. Trench 3 produced the greatest number of flint with 348 pieces of debitage and 40 retouched tools. The raw material is predominantly beach pebble flint, with one Greensand Chert blade (unstratified). The collection includes some pieces with evidence of fire crackle (Trench 3) and one small piece of crystal quartz (unmodified). The collection includes numerous pieces, both debitage and retouched tools, of a honey-coloured pebble flint, which appears to be distinctive to this flint collection, although there are a few pieces of this colour of material at Hawkcombe Head. Of the classifiable pieces there are four cores; three denticulate pieces; two

possible microburins; one lanceolate; two elongated scalenes; two backed bladelets and six identifiable microliths. The collection includes several small, snapped square blades with utilised edges and notches, similar to those found at Hawkcombe Head (Gardiner 2008). The collection includes one crested blade (from Trench 3) (see Wilson-North 2010).

The overall classification of the flint collection is Late Mesolithic, as evidenced by the elongated scalenes, backed bladelets and microliths. The cores are small, which are typical of the Late Mesolithic, and the other retouched tools, together with the debitage, are very similar to the flint collection from Hawkcombe Head, which has been dated by its tool typology and radiocarbon dates to the later Mesolithic period (Gardiner 2007; 2009).

### Interpretation

So far as can be ascertained from the current work, Late Mesolithic activity at Larkbarrow is focused around a small shallow springhead. The spring forms one of a number which together feed into the headwaters of Long Combe. The striking

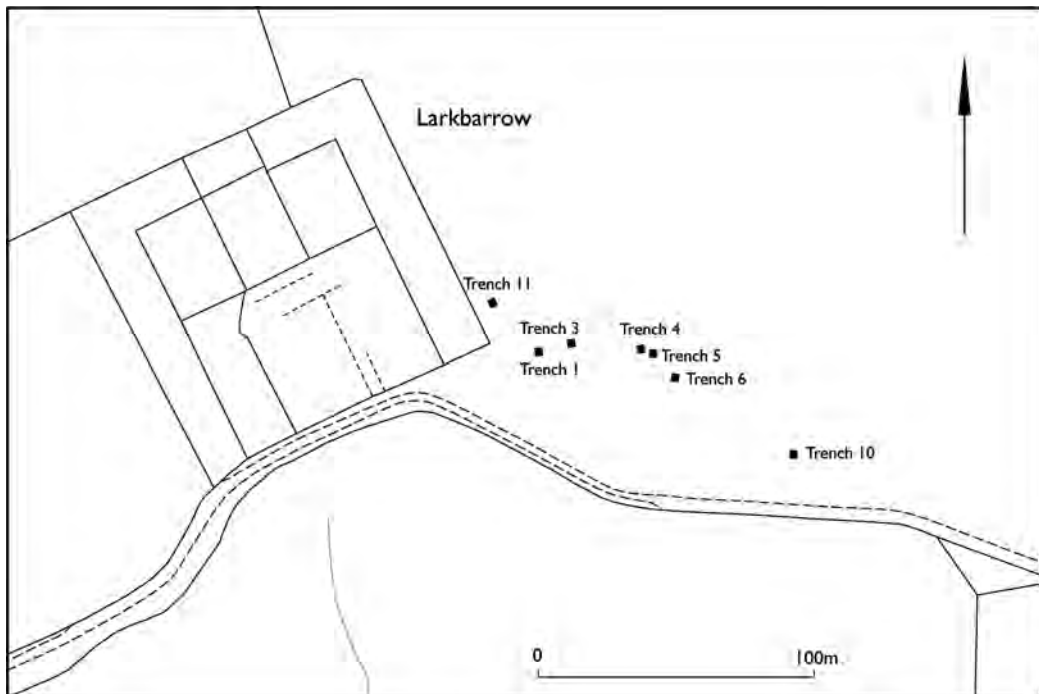


Fig 3 Location of 2008 excavation trenches (drawn by Hazel Riley)

coincidence of the 19th-century farmhouse almost directly on top of the Mesolithic activity attests to the value of this location as a water source, and yet the site does not look down thecombe or occupy a striking vantage point. With this it shares a feature with the hunter-gather activity at Hawkcombe Head, for both are springheads set high in the landscape, but at the same time are not vantage points to look out over the wider landscape.

The absence of environmental data from both Hawkcombe Head and Larkbarrow, means that a confident assessment of the nature and extent of woodland cover here in the Late Mesolithic is not possible (charcoal from Hawkcombe Head does indicate the presence of hazel, holly and oak but does not allow the extent and evolution of woodland cover to be extrapolated). The ability to speculate on the significance of the locations is restricted, because there is a consequent danger of placing too much emphasis on the topographical position of the site. However, valley mires below Larkbarrow and to the east at Madacombe may have early prehistoric peat inception dates and further work on these deposits may provide evidence to allow some reconstruction of contemporary (or even successor) environments which would inform understanding of the landscape at the time.

The raw flint was brought to Larkbarrow to be knapped on site. It is derived from beach pebble, which may have been found on Porlock beach and elsewhere along the coast in the Late Mesolithic. The collection includes hunting tools and composite tools for cutting and/or skin working. Comparison must be made with the larger Mesolithic site at Hawkcombe Head, 1.5km away to the east. The flint typology is the same at both sites, with the exception of the inclusion of 17 pieces of honey-coloured flint at Larkbarrow, with only three to four at Hawkcombe Head (from a much larger total assemblage, indicating that the honey-coloured flint from Hawkcombe Head makes up a much smaller proportion of the flint brought there). From the close similarity between the tool types and working patterns it could be inferred that the same hunter-gatherer group used both sites. However, in the absence of scientific dating evidence from Larkbarrow, it is safer at this stage to conclude that hunter-gatherers at both sites were from the same tradition rather than the same specific group.

The distinctive honey-coloured flint in the Larkbarrow collection may suggest that the hunter-gatherers using this site, had access to a type of beach pebble, which those at Hawkcombe Head

did not. Whether this can be taken to imply slight chronological variance between activities at the two sites or that the group using Larkbarrow had different exchange networks or simply access to a different beach, it is currently impossible to tell. Set against the background of the extensive flint collection from Hawkcombe Head and the current long term fieldwork project there (eg Gardiner 2007; 2008), the excavations at Larkbarrow have provided a wider perspective on Late Mesolithic activity on Exmoor. Using English Heritage's criteria (Schofield 2000) the site is of national significance in terms of its Mesolithic archaeology. To the west of Larkbarrow, a series of Mesolithic sites have been found on and around Brendon Common in recent years. Taken together, these locations begin to offer opportunities to investigate hunter-gatherer activities at a landscape scale.

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