

# EXCAVATION AT CHARTERHOUSE ON MENDIP, 1994-6: MESOLITHIC AND EARLY NEOLITHIC SETTLEMENT

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The mineral deposits of the Mendips have long been recognized as one of the most significant natural resources in southern Britain. Pre-eminent among these are the deposits of galena, yielding silver and lead, zinc and iron. The programme of study here recorded was specifically designed to gain further information on exploitation of the minerals in the Charterhouse area and on any associated sites. Although earlier work and chance finds over a lengthy period had indicated the importance of the Charterhouse valley in this connection, there had been little in the way of clearly focussed survey and excavation with defined objectives. In order to provide a firmer basis for knowledge of this central site, several visible sites were chosen for detailed examination. As it turned out, evidence was recovered which added much to the basic record and, more importantly, gave precision to the date of two of the known enclosures. The present paper is confined to the evidence for Mesolithic and early Neolithic activity at Charterhouse, a subject which has so far attracted little attention, at least in published sources.

## THE ENCLOSURE (SITE 1)

This enclosure on the north-eastern side of the Charterhouse valley has long been regarded as a prehistoric work and is so designated on local information boards. It was decided to test this in 1993 and 1994 by cutting sections through those parts of its defences which lay outside the scheduled area (Fig. 1). Before excavation commenced, it seemed unlikely that this was a prehistoric work. The surrounding bank and ditch are very sharply defined for an earthwork which is 2000 years old. The ditch, in particular, has a profile which does not suggest an original cutting at such a time, without frequent redefinition. The bank, too, seems an implausible relic of so remote a date, given the soft and friable nature of soils in this area.

The internal area of the main enclosure measures 35 by 26.5m. The north-west angle and a length of the northern side has been levelled by agriculture. There are no evident openings in the north-west and south-east sides. A gap at the south-east angle may well be recent. A smaller enclosure, measuring 20 by 12.5m internally, was inserted in the south-east area. This was bounded by a single low bank and ditch. It was not possible to examine the scheduled area, so that excavation was confined to two trenches, across the north-east and north-west defences.

The much reduced rampart of the main enclosure was sectioned in trenches 1 and 2. In both, the body of the bank was composed of yellow clay, loose limestone blocks topped with sandy loam, the whole measuring 1.6m in width. No turfwork was observed in the structure. There was no sign of rebuilding or modification to the work during its life. The accompanying ditch

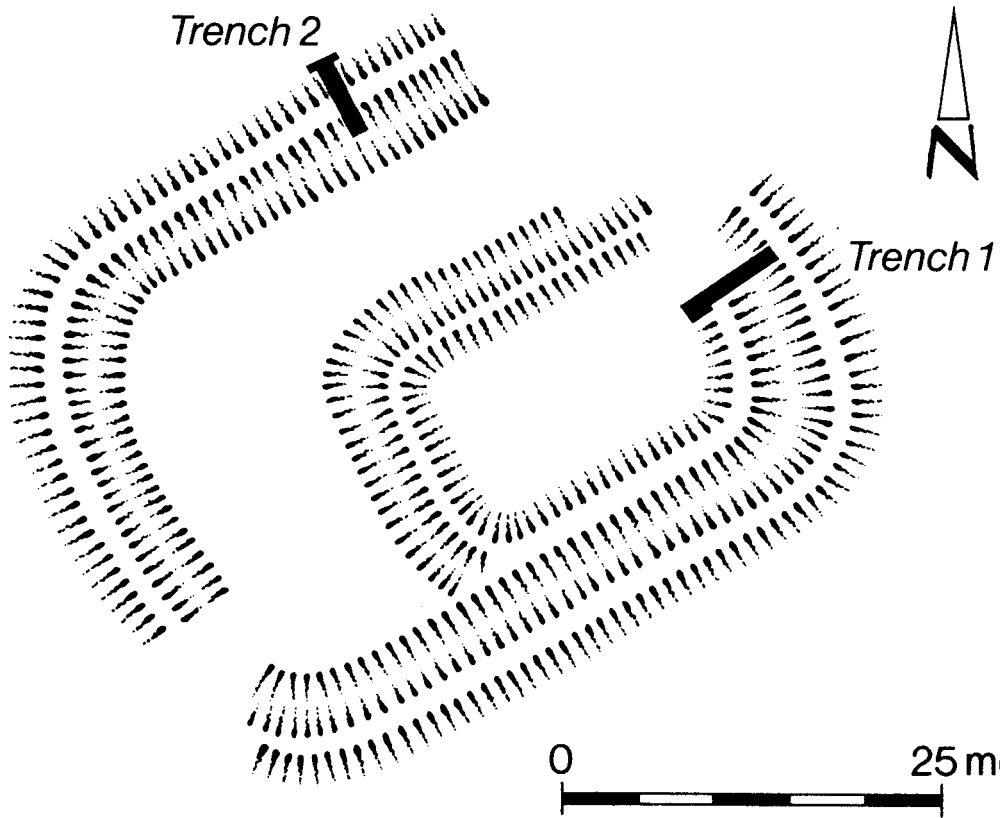


Fig. 1 Site 1: medieval and later enclosures

had been cut into the underlying limestone to a depth of 1.1m. The base of the ditch was flat, its inner slope gentle, the outer steeper and stepped. The lowest filling was of yellow clay, with loose loam above. There was no indication of recutting or other intrusion in the two excavated sections. The ditch had silted up gradually over a lengthy period of time. When largely levelled, the upper filling was burrowed into by animals, probably rabbits. No objects were found in the ditch-filling or in the body of the bank.

The smaller enclosure was defined by a bank of turf and loose earth, and a single ditch. It was not possible to examine the ditch, but the bank was sectioned. No artifacts were found in or under it, but all the indications were that this was a recent work. The turfwork had not consolidated and had been loosely constructed in the first instance. Although undated, this small enclosure is probably to be assigned to the twentieth century, possibly to the years of the Second World War.

Below the bank and immediately inside it a buried land surface was identified. From it was recovered a small assemblage of Mesolithic flint artifacts and a quantity of flint debitage (Fig. 2). No features were found in association with this material, nor were concentrations of the objects evident. Unfortunately, permission to excavate to the natural subsoil was not forthcoming so that full examination was not possible. Nevertheless, as relatively little Mesolithic material has been published from Mendip, a record of this site is offered here.

Probably all the flint was derived from beach pebbles. Much of it is brown or medium grey; a small proportion is dark grey to black but is clearly not derived from the deposits at Beer.

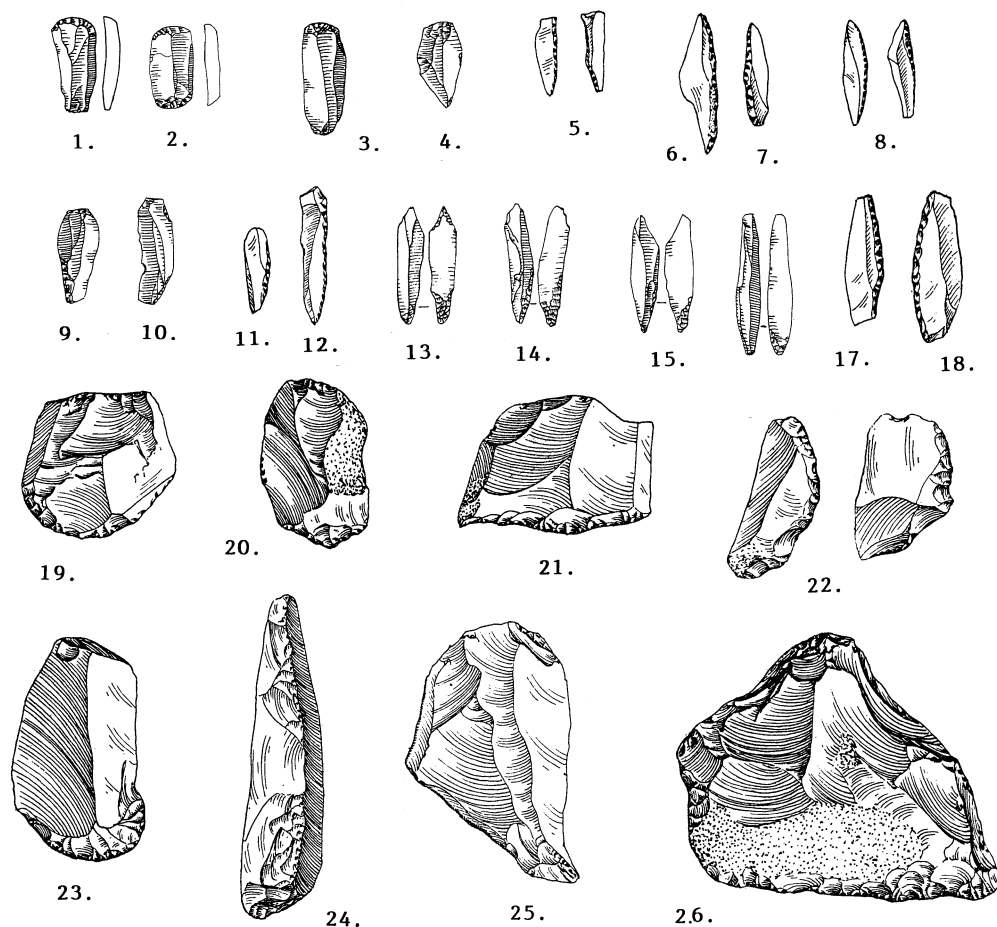


Fig. 2 Flint artifacts from Site 1; scale 1:2

The assemblage mainly comprises microliths, micro-burins and a few scrapers. There are also two cores and a fabricator. The remaining pieces consist of unworked flakes and waste.

1-5. Microliths in grey-brown flint. Secondary working on blunt ends and edges.

6-18. Larger flakes in grey flint with working on one edge.

19. Scraper in dark grey flint with secondary working on one face.

20. Scraper in grey-brown flint.

21. Scraper in dark grey flint with secondary working on one face.

22. Side scraper in dark grey flint.

23. End scraper in brown flint.

24. Fabricator in grey-brown flint.

25. Flake in dark grey flint with secondary working on its blunt point.

26. Large ?scraper with secondary working on most edges.

Samples of charcoal recovered from below the bank and immediately to the rear included fragments of broom, hazel, willow, ash and hawthorn. All these species are still represented on the Mendip plateau. The absence of oak may be noted, but in these small samples may not be significant.

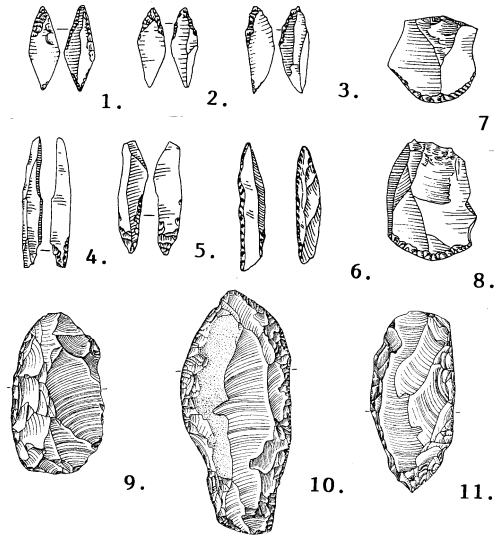


Fig. 3 Flint artifacts from Site 2; scale 1:2

## SITE 2

A second Mesolithic site was identified, by chance, after the end of the main programme of work in 1995. An exposure at the side of the track running along the north-east side of the Charterhouse valley, some 60m south-west of the enclosure described above produced a small scatter of flint implements and debitage. This material was not securely stratified and could have been derived from deposits on the adjacent slope. As the worked flint was recovered from an area measuring only 4m by 3m, however, it is at least possible that it represents a significant working site, even if not intact and undisturbed by later processes.

The diagnostic material (Fig. 3) is as follows:

- 1–6. Microliths in grey-brown flint; nos 4–6 slender and with finely trimmed edges.
- 7–8. Small scrapers in dark brown flint.
- 9. Finely trimmed edge scraper in grey flint.
- 10. Edge scraper in dark grey flint, with secondary working on both edges.
- 11. Edge scraper in grey-brown flint with secondary working on both edges.

Nos 9–11 and possibly 7–8 could be encountered in late Mesolithic or early Neolithic contexts.

## AUTHOR

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