

A Middle Palaeolithic Flint Handaxe from Aylestone, Leicester

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DISCOVERY

In May 1984 a Middle Palaeolithic *bout coupé* type flint handaxe (Fig. 1) was brought to the Jewry Wall Museum for identification by Mr G. York of Eyres Monsell, Leicester, who has since kindly agreed to its donation to the Museum collections (Accession number A14.1984). It was found on the north side of Glenhills Boulevard, Aylestone, Leicester during the final stages of construction of this stretch of the City's Southern District Distributor Road (N.G.R. SK57250012). Fieldwork by the Museums Archaeological Survey Team earlier in the road construction process had not revealed any finds, nor did a further search of the area subsequent to this discovery. The handaxe lay on a pile of stones on the surface between two trees in a newly planted row on the landscaped verge of the new road. Some topsoil had been imported for the landscaping from a nearby area of the river floodplain (centred at SP5859990). However the extremely good state of preservation of the handaxe makes it seem unlikely that it was brought to the findspot with this soil from the floodplain, where it would have been subject to much abrasion and disturbance. It seems more probable that the handaxe was dug up and brought to the surface during tree planting or the laying of services along the new roadline.

GEOLOGY

The findspot lies on the edge of the plateau east of the river Soar, 75 feet above its floodplain. The Keuper Marl in this area has been cut into by older terrace gravels deposited by the former Soar, a larger predecessor of the present river. These are in turn overlain by the more recent drift deposits of the penultimate, 'Wolstonian' glaciation, consisting of tills interbedded with horizons of glacio-fluvial sand and gravel. During the last ('Devensian') glaciation Leicestershire was never overwhelmed by ice, so the basic land forms and river valleys established here by then were those we see today, apart from the superficial changes brought about by weathering, and by later human activity in the landscape (Martin 1982, 8). At the likely period of deposition of the handaxe, therefore, around the beginning of the last glaciation, the findspot was situated (as now) close to the edge of an expanse of raised ground overlooking the valley of the river Soar. This seems a situation more likely than the floodplain itself to have provided the context in which the handaxe could have lain relatively undamaged for so long until its recent discovery.

BOUT COUPÉ HANDAXES

This is the first recorded find of a *bout coupé* handaxe in Leicestershire. For some time these handaxes have been regarded by several authorities (see for example Roe 1981) as a distinct morphological group, although as yet no clear metrical limits have been set to define the group. This subject is now being studied by one of the writers (JAT) as part of a doctoral dissertation. The descriptive name *bout coupé* (or 'cut-off butt'), which is of slightly doubtful origin and which is not used by French archaeologists, is not always employed in

Britain to describe these particular implements. For example Wymer (1968) has referred to the handaxes as 'flat butted cordate type N', and Collins (1970) has named them 'Paxton type'.

The classic *bout coupé* is a broad flat biface with a well worked, straight or slightly convex butt forming two distinct angles or corners at its intersection with the symmetrical, slightly convex sides. There is often delicate flat 'soft hammer' flaking on both faces, and large patches of cortex are rare. Tranchet finishes may or may not be present.

DESCRIPTION

The present specimen is fairly small (*cf.* Roe 1968 Fig. 2). Its maximum length is 93mm, breadth 69mm and thickness 25mm, in relation to the long axis, and the weight is 158.37g. There is white cortication over most of both surfaces, but the opaque pale grey flint of which it is made is visible in parts, including the two modern damage scars on the butt. A small area of cortex remains on one face, water worn and stained yellow (left in Fig. 1). The remainder of this face, however, is in extremely sharp condition with crisp flake ridges. It has a lustre or gloss and there is chemical weathering or pitting towards the edges (light stippling in Fig. 1), producing a rough, cortex-like condition in these areas. The other surface by contrast is completely corticated, lacks any lustre, and has more extensive staining and pitting or weathering, which has obliterated some flake ridges.

The handaxe may have been made from a flake, since a small facet on the butt may be the remains of a striking platform (left and below in Fig. 1). This may be compared with that on the specimen from the Thames at Tilbury (British Museum 1926, 45 and Fig. 35; Roe 1981, Fig 6:7.4). Delicate 'soft hammer' flaking on both faces contrasts with many flakes which have 'stepped out', perhaps because of the poor flaking qualities of the flawed, opaque grey flint. The tip has a twisted profile, and has been finished with a tranchet blow on one face, (right in Fig. 1), forming a cutting edge by the removal of an oblique flake. Unfortunately, as yet we have no knowledge of how the handaxes were used, or indeed of which edge formed the main working part of the tool; it is possible that detailed microwear analysis of suitable unpatinated and unworn specimens might one day answer these questions.

The base of this handaxe is angular in outline at one corner, and rounded at the other. This slightly 'D-shaped' base resembles that of some Mousterian implements (for example, British Museum 1926 Fig. 135). Other *bout coupé* handaxes, such as that from Tilbury (above), seem to share this feature, a variation on the symmetry of the classic examples.

DATING

Typologically, *bout coupé* handaxes are unlike British Lower Paleolithic (Acheulian) handaxes, but resemble some of the early French Middle Palaeolithic (Mousterian of Acheulian Tradition) bifaces such as the well known *café au lait* series from the site of Le Tillet so called from their colouration (Bordes, 1954). Unfortunately the British implements are often recovered as stray unstratified finds, and so few can be dated with any degree of accuracy. Those few which can be dated seem to belong to the beginning of the last ('Devensian') glaciation. It is noticeable that while no *bout coupé* handaxes have been recovered from Acheulian contexts in Britain, they have occasionally been found in association with Mousterian artefacts, and more frequently close to known Mousterian sites. This evidence suggests that the *bout coupé* in its typical form might reasonably be regarded as a 'classic' Mousterian, and identified as such even when occurring as an isolated or undated find.

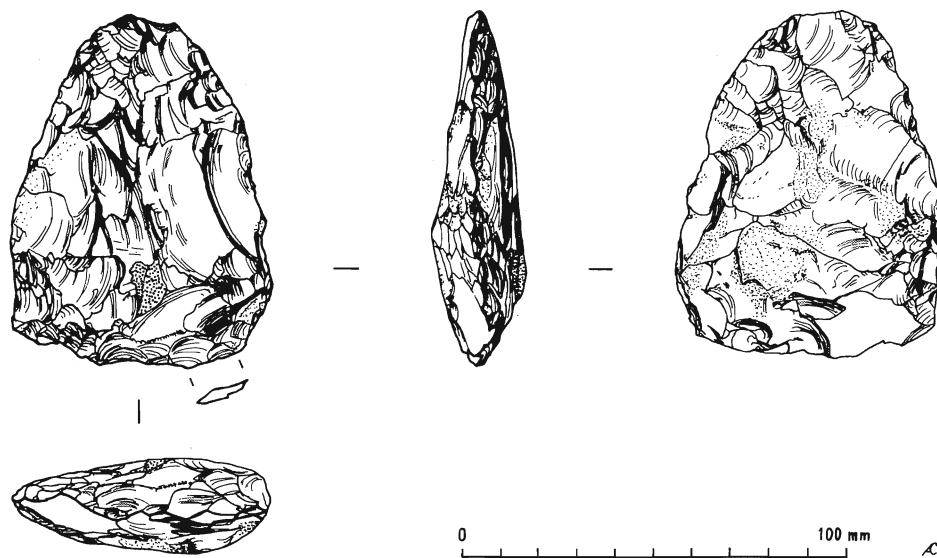


Fig. 1 Middle Palaeolithic Handaxe: Aylestone, Leicester (Leics. Museums A14.1984).



Fig. 2 The findspot of the Leicester handaxe in relation to the distribution of *bout coupé* handaxes in Britain (after Roe, 1981, Fig. 6.6)

DISTRIBUTION

The counties to the south and east of Leicestershire have each yielded at least two classic examples of the type, but the majority of the known *bout coupés* have come from North Kent, Hampshire and the Ouse Valley. Leicestershire, on the north west edge of the lowland zone, is also somewhat to the north west of the main *bout coupé* distribution (Fig. 2).

CONCLUSION

The handaxe constitutes at present the only certain evidence for the occasional presence of man in Leicestershire in the Middle Palaeolithic period, around the beginning of the last glaciation. It perhaps represents an accidental loss by one of a small hunting party of Neanderthal man with their Mousterian toolkit, perhaps on a seasonal visit to Lowland Britain. The few other handaxes found in the county, of an earlier (Acheulian or Lower Palaeolithic) type, will of course have been disturbed and transported from their original sources by the ice movements of succeeding glaciations, and have all therefore been found in derived contexts. From its extremely fresh condition, this handaxe seems likely to be the earliest artefact in Leicestershire to be found at or very close to its original site of deposition.

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