

Early humans in the Vale of Taunton – a new perspective

Chris Norman

Situated on the fringe of the West Somerset uplands, the Vale of Taunton is bounded on three sides by ground reaching over 300m in height. Along its southern edge, it is overlooked by the north-facing scarp of the Blackdown Hills, which is capped by chert bearing Upper Greensand. To the north and west, the Quantock and Brendon Hills are formed of relatively hard Devonian grits, slates and sandstones. The central part of the Vale around Taunton, with which this paper is largely concerned, is composed of soft Permo-Triassic rocks, principally the reddish mudstones of the Mercia Mudstone Group.

The main drainage of the Vale is provided by the River Tone. Rising in the Brendons, this medium-sized stream is joined by many short tributaries, the largest of which converge on the river between Wellington and Taunton. At the present day, this area is subject to rapid fluctuations in water discharge, resulting in frequent flooding episodes and the entrenchment of stream beds into their valley floors. Under the more extreme conditions which occurred during the cool climate stages of the Pleistocene, a considerable amount of fluvial erosion is likely to have taken place here.

Of potentially equal importance as an agent of cold-climate erosion was periglacial mass-wasting, for which there is abundant evidence in the south-west of England. Along the Blackdown scarp, the freeze-thaw weathering of the Greensand Beds produced a vast quantity of sand, silt and chert rubble, which was transported downslope by mass-movement (solifluxion) to form sheets of sludge

gravel (Head). Much of this would have been redistributed as fluvial gravel by the action of swollen meltwater streams. The Triassic mudstones around Taunton were also subjected to this form of erosion, resulting in the destruction of stream terraces and the accumulation of Head and stony hill-wash on all but the steepest slopes.

Although gravels of Pleistocene age are present in the Vale, very little is known about their detailed structure or mode of deposition. To the north of the Tone, the British Geological Survey (BGS) has mapped two distinct terrace levels, although current research is indicating that at least one other is present in this area (Edmonds and J 1985). The higher or Second Terrace, which is thought to be of Later Middle Pleistocene age (475–130ka BP) is best represented by isolated patches of thin gravel at Cotford St Luke and Norton Fitzwarren, the latter having produced Lower Palaeolithic artefacts. Deposits belonging to the lower or First Terrace are quite well preserved in the North Taunton area and are composed largely of sub-angular rock fragments of Quantock origin. The bulk of these gravels are probably of Late Pleistocene age (1–130ka BP) and no palaeoliths can be definitely attributed to them.

To the south of Taunton, much of the landscape is blanketed by cherty Head and hill-wash deposits at all levels. Vigorous fluvial erosion has clearly taken place and there is only limited evidence for the survival of gravel deposits pre-dating the Late Pleistocene. However, on the basis of their elevation above the present valley system, a few small patches

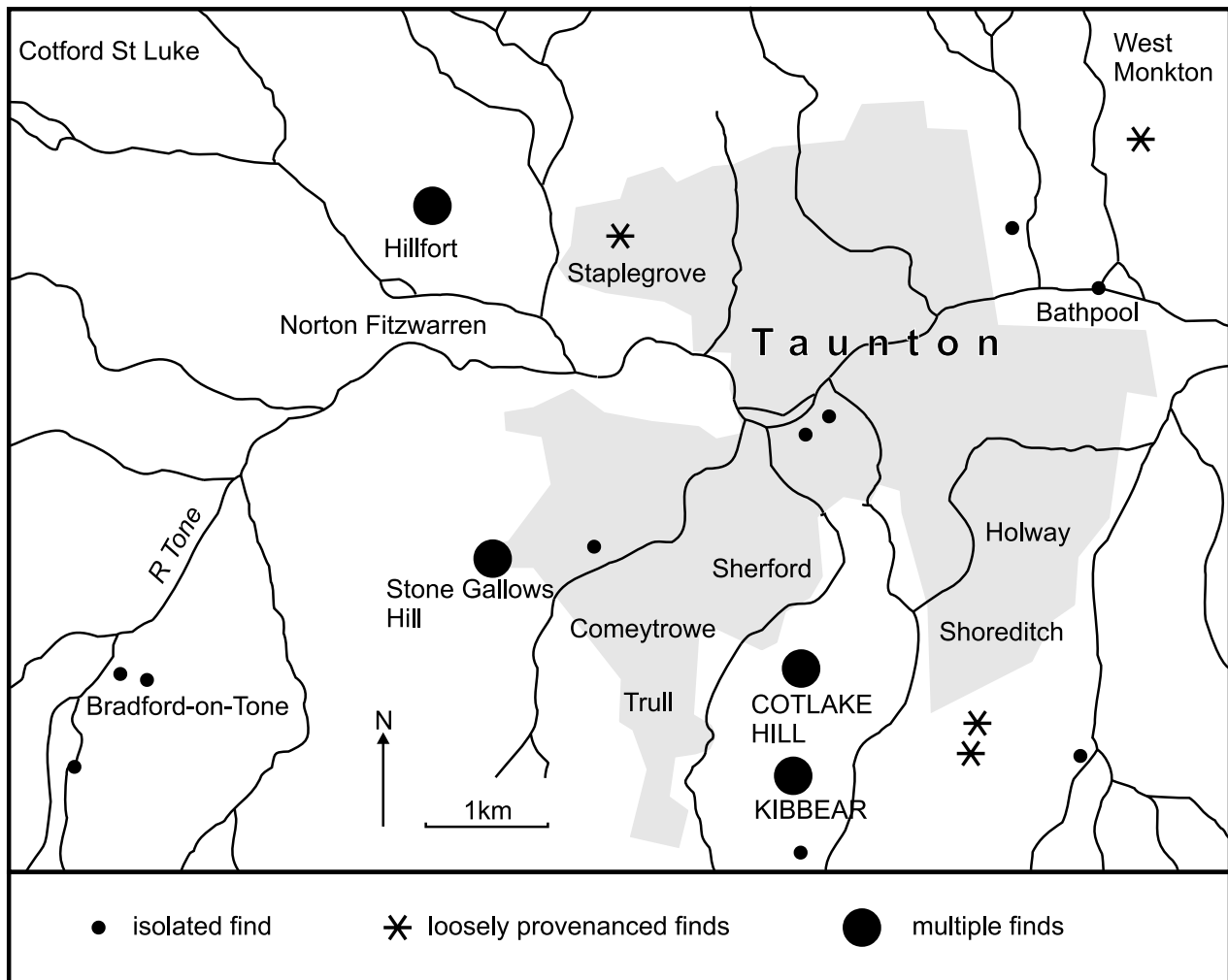


Figure 9.1: Map showing sites mentioned in the area around modern Taunton (shaded).

mapped by the BGS as “valley gravel” could be of earlier date.

At elevations of 40m and 38m above their adjacent valley floors respectively, the isolated summit areas on Cotlake Hill and Stone Gallows Hill are potentially the oldest surviving remnants of the Middle Pleistocene landscape in the immediate vicinity of South Taunton. At both locations, cherty ploughsoils containing palaeoliths appear to be degraded remnants of Head or fluvial gravel of some antiquity.

The geological situation as outlined above has clear implications for the study of Lower Palaeolithic activity in this part of Somerset. Apart from a few isolated remnants, Middle Pleistocene terrace deposits which could have contained archaeological material appear to have been largely destroyed by later erosion. The residue of such evidence is represented today by heavily weathered stone artefacts incorporated within more recent deposits or

scattered across the modern land surface. No older terrace deposits suitable for gravel extraction appear to have survived in the area; the few small pits which have been traced being confined to spreads of First Terrace gravel. This contrasts markedly with the situation in many other English river valleys, where the commercial digging of Middle Pleistocene terrace gravels has been the source of the vast majority of Lower Palaeolithic finds.

The first recorded finds of Lower Palaeolithic artefacts from within the Vale were made around 1900 by Mr T Leslie of Taunton (Anon 1902). Although most of his collection, now housed in the Somerset County Museum, consists of naturally shaped pieces of chert, it does include two badly weathered ovate handaxes from Shoreditch, just south of Taunton. Over the ensuing decades, a steady trickle of stone objects thought to be of Palaeolithic date was deposited in the County Museum or, in a few instances, retained in private collec-

tions. In 1993/4, a complete review of all traceable finds was undertaken, much of which was incorporated into a regional survey of Lower Palaeolithic sites compiled by the Southern Rivers Palaeolithic Project (Wymer 1994). Of the many supposedly worked stones which were examined, a disappointingly large number were clearly of natural origin; the majority of these being thermally flaked pieces of Greensand chert. However it was possible to locate fifteen genuine findspots with a reasonable degree of accuracy, most of which had produced isolated examples of Acheulian type handaxes. Four other genuine handaxes could not be accurately provenanced and a further two are thought to be of later, Middle Palaeolithic date (Tyldesley 1987). Of those artefacts which could be verified as genuine, all but two appear to have been surface finds.

It has for long been generally accepted that, throughout the Middle Pleistocene, Somerset lay on the north-western fringe of the inhabited world (Roe 1974). At the time the artefact review was undertaken, it was widely believed that the scatter of palaeoliths around Taunton suggested nothing more than occasional forays into the Vale by pre-Neanderthal hominids whose home base areas were located elsewhere. As such visits were probably of short duration, it was thought likely that many items of equipment, including handaxes, were brought ready-made into the area.

It was against this background that, in 1993, systematic fieldwork was begun in areas where useful evidence of Lower Palaeolithic activity might be expected to have survived. From the outset, it was accepted that such evidence would probably consist entirely of stone artefacts from more or less disturbed contexts and that any meaningful indication of date would almost certainly be absent.

In order to provide a framework within which this archaeological data could be usefully compared with the records from other parts of southern England, some basic geomorphological work was also initiated. This was felt to be essential, as the apparently poor survival of Middle Pleistocene deposits within the Vale could well have had a profound effect on the distribution and volume of artefact finds.

Early in 1993, fieldwork was commenced within the ploughed interior of Norton Fitzwarren hillfort, some 3km west of Taunton (see Figure 9.1 on the facing page). Situated about 1km north of the present River Tone, this isolated hill top is capped by a small patch of gravel, attributed to the Second Terrace by

the BGS. The hillfort interior, some 5ha in extent, had already produced three handaxes, the first having been found in 1981 by a local nurse whilst exercising her dog (Norman 1981). At about 55m OD, a gently-domed plateau some 0.7ha in extent forms the highest part of the hill. The ploughsoil here is very gravelly and includes numerous waterworn pebbles of quartz, gritstone and haematite, probably of Brendon origin, and pieces of a rather coarse Greensand chert from the Wellington area. This suggests that the underlying gravel was transported by an easterly flowing stream, which may well have been an ancestor of the modern Tone.

Although it cannot be demonstrated that the plateau is a true terrace remnant, both its isolated position and the absence of nearby higher ground reduce the likelihood of its thin gravel capping having originated as Head rather than as a waterborne deposit. As no gravel of similar composition is known to occur at this altitude elsewhere in the Taunton area, it seems possible that the landform could be the only surviving fragment of an ancestral river floodplain elevated some 35 metres above the floor of the present Tone valley.

Fieldwork at Norton, totalling some 60 hours, has produced about one hundred artefacts, including an additional sixteen handaxes. Most were found on slopes skirting the plateau area, where they lay on the surface of a gravelly hill-wash derived from the adjacent higher ground. Many pieces are stained and waterworn and the absence of frost damage suggests that they have been brought to the surface relatively recently, perhaps as a result of the mass-wasting of the hill top during the Late Pleistocene.

Both in terms of size and refinement, much of the Norton collection clearly reflects the indifferent quality of the raw material supply in the immediate area. Many of the handaxes are small, pointed pieces, some 60–90mm in length, which were made rapidly from suitably shaped chert pebbles obtained from the gravel. However, a few larger examples may have been brought ready-made from the south side of the Vale, where supplies of better quality chert were available in abundance. The rest of the collection consists of a few scrapers, crude cores or trial pieces and about 80 flakes. Apart from two small flint flakes which may be Palaeolithic, there is no evidence that any rock type other than Greensand chert was used as knapping material.

To the south of Taunton, more extensive fieldwork has been carried out on arable land between Sherford



Figure 9.2: *Taunton from Cotlake Hill in 1899. This view from just below the summit shows the northern tip of the hill, with Taunton and the Quantock Hills in the background. The near-level area beyond the hay wagon appears to be a stream terrace, beyond which the land drops some 20m to the floodplain of the present Sherford Stream. The position of the wagon marks the upper limit of a prolific surface scatter of palaeoliths, most of which have been carried downslope in Head or hill-wash from the higher parts of the hill. From an original painting by Harry Frier (1849–1921), courtesy Taunton Deane Borough Council.*

and the M5 motorway at Kibbear (see Figure 9.1 on page 54). Forming an interfluvium between the Sherford Stream and the Black Brook, this area is dominated by Cotlake Hill which, at 73m OD, is a prominent landmark overlooking the town.

Ongoing geomorphological work is indicating that this part of the Vale has undergone considerable erosion by streams rising along the Black-down scarp, some 5km to the south. The present day topography is of relatively recent origin, the oldest surviving land surface being represented by the isolated summit area of Cotlake Hill. Here, traces of Head or fluvial gravel containing a few abraded palaeoliths suggest that this may be a remnant of an earlier valley floor elevated some 40m above that of the modern Sherford Stream. During subsequent periods of erosion, the hill would have emerged as an elongated knoll rising above the adjacent stream

floodplain; achieving its present proportions by the end of the Pleistocene some 10,000 years ago.

Across most of the area, the ploughsoil contains much Greensand chert and appears to overlie Head or more recent accumulations of hill-wash. Although some of this is derived from the summit of Cotlake Hill, it is likely that as least as much has been produced by the destruction of lower level lateral terraces of which little trace now remain. Much of the chert would have been suitable for making good quality handaxes, many examples of which have been found over the past five years.

To date, the Cotlake area has produced several hundred Lower Palaeolithic artefacts, all made of Greensand chert, including about a hundred complete and broken handaxes. There is a thin scatter of material over the entire area, many pieces being in very poor condition as a result of being

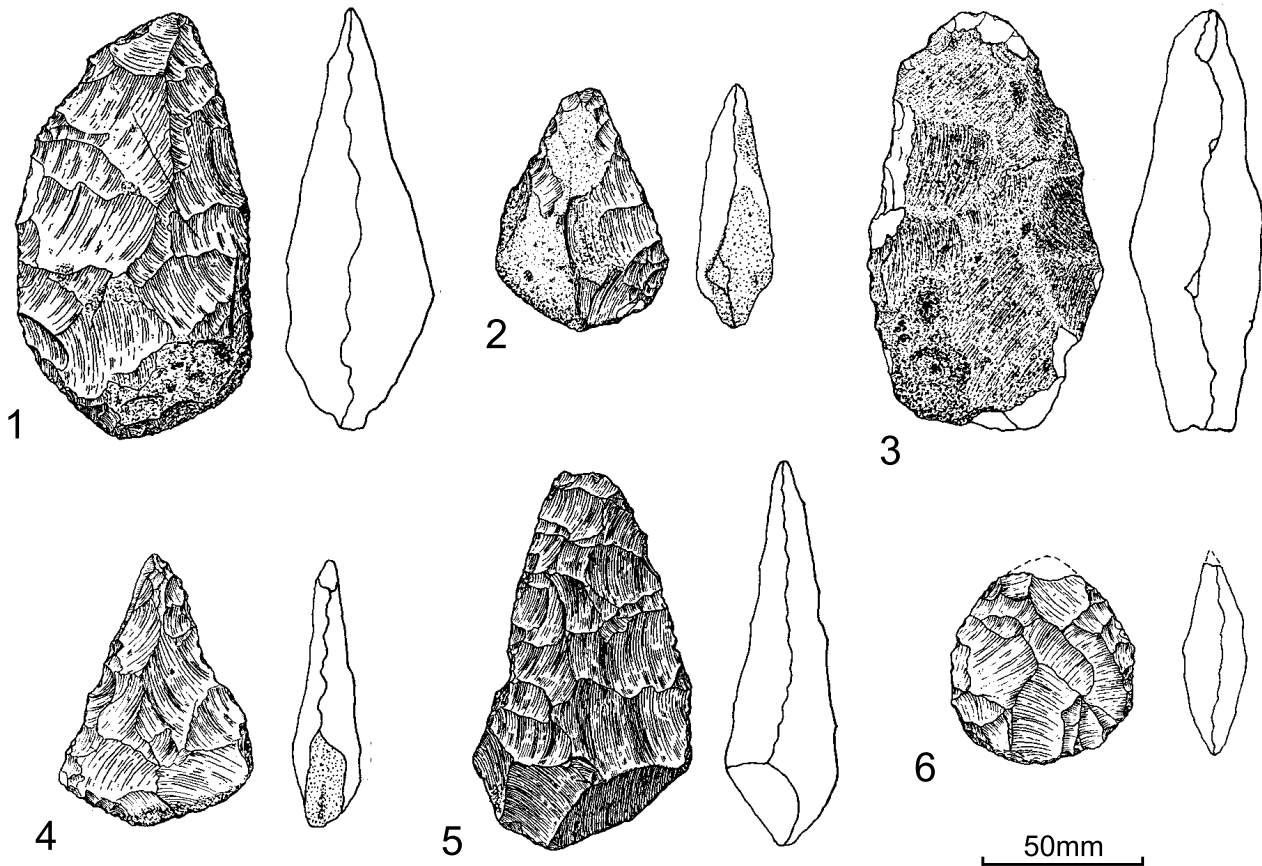


Figure 9.3: Recent handaxe finds from the Taunton area. 1 from Kibbear; 2, 4, 5 from Norton Fitzwarren Hillfort; 3, 6 from Cotlake Hill.

moved some distance within Head or stony hill-wash. However, the majority of the artefacts have been found on the northern tip of Cotlake Hill, between about 40m and 55m OD. Here an area of about ten hectares has produced numerous ovate, cordate and pointed handaxes as well as roughouts, cores, a few scrapers and a large number of flakes.

Much of the Cotlake material is heavily weathered with extensive frost damage, indicating that it has been exposed on or near the surface for a long period of time. Although battered and abraded by down-slope movement within a stony matrix, relatively few pieces show signs of being transported any distance within a fluvial gravel. Indeed, the relatively fresh condition of some artefacts indicates that they have moved only a short distance from where they were originally discarded. This may be of some significance, suggesting that at least part of the collection may represent human activity in the immediate area; perhaps during an early stage in the formation of the present hill. If this can be confirmed by further

research, it might suggest that the emerging land-form served as a focal point for Lower Palaeolithic groups, providing a ready supply of raw material and a vantage point from which to observe the movements of animal herds on the adjacent floodplain.

Although the systematic fieldwork carried out to date has been largely restricted to the two areas described above, several other locations which may yield further archaeological material have also been identified. However, on the basis of the evidence already available, it seems possible to make a few preliminary observations regarding the nature and extent of Lower Palaeolithic activity within the Vale.

It has become clear that, in the Taunton area, early human groups were making a range of stone tools from locally obtained Greensand chert. Nothing has been found to support the idea that handaxes were brought ready-made into the area, although this may have happened in some instances. However, the essentially local nature of the raw material supply is emphasised by the absence of diagnostic pieces

made of flint, especially as this material occurs in artefact collections from the Axe valley, some 25km to the south-east of Taunton.

No evidence has been found for the knapping of any of the Devonian rock types which abound within Pleistocene deposits over much of the Vale. This was particularly apparent at Norton Fitzwarren, where even small pieces of poor quality chert were used in preference to the other hard rocks present in the gravel. There may be implications here for any future study of Lower Palaeolithic activity elsewhere in West Somerset or North Devon, where such rock types would have been the only local raw materials available for stone tool making.

It is becoming apparent that the amount of surviving evidence for Middle Pleistocene hominids in the Taunton area is likely to be considerably greater than had been anticipated at the time of the artefact review in 1993. When seen in the context of the recent geological history of the Vale, there seems no reason to suppose that early human activity was any less intense here than in other parts of England which are thought to have lain well within the limits of the Lower Palaeolithic "world". Indeed, the quantity of artefacts present on the North side of Cotlake Hill places it amongst the more prolific findspots of surface palaeoliths in the country. Thus, whilst accepting the marginal position of the Vale in geographical terms, any supposition that this will be reflected in the nature of the Lower Palaeolithic activity which took place must now be open to doubt.