

The early prehistoric landscape and material culture of Wyre and its Environs: the significance of selected flint artefacts ADAM MINDYKOWSKI

This is the first in what is hoped will become an occasional series of articles that focus on archaeological artefacts that have, over many decades, been found in Wyre and its surroundings. The record of finds that have a definite provenance to Wyre is relatively small considering the significant area covered by the forest and its setting. Some examples recovered during the 19th and 20th centuries that have been referred to in journals have since been lost or, at least, are of unknown whereabouts. The forest itself provides a partial explanation. Take a walk through the wooded landscapes of Wyre, be they broadleaf, coniferous or mixed and consider the combined effects of shade, ground flora, leaf litter and in dense conifer plantation, the thick mat of discarded needles. These are not conditions conducive to the prospection for or accidental discovery of ancient artefacts. Chance discoveries, therefore, have more often been a result of soil erosion (e.g. by vehicles or the banks of watercourses) exposing artefacts and occasionally during groundworks. To begin, it is worthwhile setting the scene with a brief presentation of Wyre's earliest known human settlement.

Early Mesolithic Settlement

The landscape history and prehistory of the area we associate with Wyre has been complex and dynamic. The forest of today is broadly similar in area to that of the early 17th century, which through our human perception is a time that reaches far back into our history and yet, in the context of human associations with Wyre's landscape, 400 years is a relatively short measure of landscape evolution. Humans have been interacting with the landscape of Britain for millennia. Highly mobile populations would respond to the slow ebb and flow of ice sheets; changes barely perceived by generation after generation, yet each leaving their mark in the material record. The earliest recorded settlement in Wyre's landscape is one of high significance both locally and nationally. Archaeological monitoring of excavations in advance of laying the Trimpey to Blackstone Aqueduct in the summer of 1992 encountered a rare Mesolithic settlement. This would have been a seasonal hunting camp that was possibly occupied for a short period by an extended family group representative of nomadic



Visualisation of a nomadic temporary settlement similar to the site recorded at Lightmarsh Farm
(image © Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service)



Visualisation of a Mesolithic hunting party at the Devils Spittleful (image © Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service)

society at this point in prehistory (Jackson et. al. 1994). Crucially, a small assemblage of charred hazelnut shells (*Corylus avellana*) were recovered and dated using the Radiocarbon method to around 8800 BP (Before Present).

The environmental context of the site can be inferred from a Mesolithic pollen sequence recorded in waterlogged deposits at Cookley. Evidence from Cookley indicated that tree species increasing in numbers during the post-glacial period were *Quercus* (oak), *Tilia* (lime), *Alnus* (alder) and *Coryloids* (hazel types). This represents mixed woodland, containing lime, oak, and hazel, some ash and elm, and can therefore be defined as being of the Lime Province "wildwood" defined by Rackham (1986, 69). Woodland cover was probably quite dense, but with sufficient light to promote a sustainable community of hazel (Simmons et al 1981, 99). The Cookley pollen diagram, therefore, indicates the area of landscape now occupied by Lightmarsh Farm was likely to have been heavily forested in the Mesolithic although not without exception. Fragments of Gramineae were recovered from Mesolithic soil deposits indicative of some variation in land cover. It is unknown if grassland

had developed through natural processes or through the agency of human or faunal activity; however, it suggests a mosaic habitat was present prior to largescale clearance of wildwood.

The Mesolithic site at Lightmarsh Farm offers, perhaps, only a glimpse of early human activity yet it provides an important backdrop towards developing a narrative of prehistoric societies that interacted with the landscape now associated with Wyre. We see the first direct evidence of a nomadic settlement established on high ground overlooking the Severn Valley; a rich hunting ground that would have been supplemented with foraging for wild fruits and seeds.

Neolithic and Bronze Age flint find in Wyre

The advancement of human technology and more settled cultural practice was constant yet slow. Farming in Britain began its slow introduction around 7000-6000 BP (5000 – 4000 BC) being, by no means, the product of revolution. Established nomadic, hunter-gatherer lifeways would have coexisted with more settled farming-based practice for many generations until eventually it became an obsolete way



Visualisation of forest clearance during the Neolithic period (image © Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service)

of life in comparison with the economic advantages of agricultural practice, its associated markets and wealth of material culture. This was the time of monumental landscapes: Stonehenge, Avebury to name but two places that have survived as enigmatic symbols of early complex society in Britain. Farming, of course, demanded productive land and a need to manage natural resources. While it is well-understood from

the analysis of pollen sequences that clearance of wildwood marked a strategic change in land use, there was, nonetheless, a balanced need to manage woodland, valuable for its timber, bark, coppice wood and sources of food.

The extent, if at all, of Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement in Wyre is currently unknown. However,



Dr Sargeant's Neolithic polished stone axehead

Rosemary Winnall

there is a small yet significant assemblage of artefacts dated to those periods that indicate the area was far from being marginal and unoccupied. The following presents a selection of these finds.

In 1974 a large, complete polished stone axehead, approximately dating to the later Neolithic (5000 – 3000 / BP 3000 – 2000 BC) was discovered in a ploughed field just west of the Lem Brook at Far Forest by Dr David Sargeant. The axe appears to be made of chert, a silica-rich sedimentary rock distinguishable by its light creamy-grey colour. Chert is not naturally present in Wyre's landscape with the closest outcrop being the Pentre Chert Formation in north east Wales. There are many other more distant outcrops, however, the presence of this object in Wyre indicates that it was either worked locally from traded material or was traded as a finished object. This is significant because it endows the object with a value greater than that of a simple utilitarian tool. Just as today, objects fashioned from materials that might be considered exotic to a location symbolised a connection beyond the locale and were perhaps indicative of greater status, or an aspiration therefore: conspicuous display of wealth. The circumstances of its disposal remain open to interpretation. There is no clear evidence of Neolithic settlement remains at or close to the location of discovery, although the absence of evidence should not be taken as definitive. Rather, the location should be considered of unknown potential. The Lem Brook is of course an ancient watercourse, part of the Dowles Brook catchment, and is a dynamic watercourse that has carved deep into its landscape. It is tempting to postulate that such a valuable object would be unlikely to be casually discarded or lost, but perhaps deliberately discarded into the brook as a votive offering.

Other more utilitarian finds are no less valuable as archaeological snapshots of past activity. One such example is a flint scraper that was discovered by Dr

Cedric Quayle whilst digging a hole to plant a tree in Far Orchard at Bowcastle Farm, near Bewdley in 2002. Once again, this is a complete object that has survived in good condition. Flint, like chert, is an imported material, however, it differs in that flint artefacts are commonplace objects in the setting of Wyre. It is more likely that flint was traded as a material to be worked into objects required for particular tasks at the place of need, although there will be exceptions. In skilled hands a flint scraper would be quick to produce and would be one item in a toolkit of similar objects that would be produced on demand, reworked or retouched to extend their lifetime as practical objects. The uses of a scraper were no doubt many and varied, however, it is clear to see how they could be applied in the context of butchery or the finer tasks of woodworking. Dating of this type of object to a specific period is generally difficult due to their persistent use well into the Bronze Age with many examples recorded across the full span of Neolithic to Bronze Age (approximately 7000 – 3000 BP / 5000 – 1000 BC).

The final object presented here is another well-preserved example discovered very recently by Linda Iles in October 2018 on the surface of a forest track in Lord's Yard Coppice close to the southern fringe of Wyre. Once again, fashioned from flint, this object is a plano-convex knife, sometimes referred to as a slug knife. Perhaps in the field this type of object could be mistaken for a somewhat petrified example of the venerable shell-less gastropod. Dating to the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age (approximately 5000 – 3500 BP / 3000 – 1500 BC) these are fine objects that were frequently reworked or retouched to maintain their function. The example here, at only 5cm in length, is relatively small suggesting it may have been resharpened (Hedge pers. comm.). Therefore, it is possible the knife had reached the end of its useful life, being already too small to resharpen, and was simply discarded. However, it is equally plausible that such a small object could quite easily be lost at the frustration of its owner. As with the flint scraper, this would have been a tool used in day-to-day activities with a wide range of applications.

Discussion

The three artefacts presented here offer a tangible insight into activities that took place long before Wyre Forest became a feature of the landscape. They are not unusual objects in the cannon of archaeological study, yet they are rare in a landscape that does not routinely yield its prehistoric material culture. In the context of chronology, it is impossible to pinpoint their timeframe with more accuracy than broad period with



Dr Quayle's flint scraper from Bowcastle Farm Rosemary Winnall



Linda Iles's late Neolithic - early Bronze Age plano-convex knife or slug knife
Linda Iles

perhaps centuries or even millennia separating their fabrication and use. The polished axe was a highly prized item that may have been valued as an object of status as for its practical function. It is possible that such an object might be handed down through generations before being discarded, perhaps as a deliberate act. By contrast, the scraper and slug knife were tools created for specific, everyday tasks and may have been in use for a matter of days or weeks, although it is tempting to view the knife as a valued object that was reworked to maintain its sharpness. With such a limited assemblage, landscape-scale interpretation should be approached with caution. However, these objects are a tiny sample of what must still be scattered across Wyre and its setting.

They point to a landscape that was clearly occupied and undergoing some level of management at a time when society was becoming more settled and based on a mixed regime of hunting, foraging and farming. The Severn is a significant natural feature that would have provided variously good hunting ground and a trade route to far off markets. The 2007 LiDAR survey (Light Detection and Ranging) of Wyre's landscape revealed a small number of earthwork enclosures that are of a form comparable to late prehistoric or Romano-British settlements. Notwithstanding this comparison, none have been archaeological dated as yet. It may be that one or more of these sites have origins dating to the Neolithic or Bronze Age. This remains a task for the future, however, in the interim the objects presented in this article are part of an emerging assemblage that warrant further research. A synthesis of existing artefacts would greatly contribute towards understanding how human activity shaped the prehistory of Wyre's landscape the Severn Valley.

References

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Old trackway, Corbet's Park, Wyre 16 March 2018

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