

UPPER PALAEOLITHIC, MESOLITHIC AND LATER FINDS FROM OXLEASE FARM, ROMSEY, HAMPSHIRE: SUMMARY REPORT

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ABSTRACT

In March 2016, archaeological excavation was undertaken at four areas of land at Oxlease Farm, Cupernham Lane, Romsey, Hampshire. The fieldwork recovered a lithic assemblage from all four excavation areas, although the majority was recorded from a single flint-bearing deposit in Area 1. The assemblage included several elements that may belong to the Terminal Upper Palaeolithic Long Blade industry, as well as three flints of Mesolithic date. A small number of undated features were also uncovered, including pits and possible postholes, which may have been of a prehistoric date. A small and residual assemblage of Late Roman (3rd – 4th century AD) pottery was also recovered from probable medieval/post-medieval field boundary ditches or plough furrows.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2016 Cotswold Archaeology (CA) undertook a programme of archaeological mitigation for Bellway Homes Ltd at land at Oxlease Farm, Cupernham Lane, Romsey (centred on NGR SU 36047 22774; Fig. 1). A desk-based assessment (SAU 2012), geophysical survey (WA 2015) and trial trench evaluation (CA 2016a) were undertaken prior to four areas of targeted excavations (CA 2016b). All archaeological works were agreed following consultation with the Local Planning Authority and their archaeological advisor, David Hopkins of the Hampshire Historic Environment team. The site lies to the north of Oxlease Farm and the town centre of Romsey, and c. 800m east of the River Test, along the valley edge. The site lies at approximately 21–22m above Ordnance Datum (aOD) and slopes down to the river floodplain to the west at c. 18–19m aOD. The

underlying bedrock geology varies across the site, but was all formed 34–60 million years ago in the Palaeogene period (BGS 2017); Wittering Formation is located to the south, London Clay to the north-west and Whitecliff Sand Member to the north-east. Superficial river terrace deposits, formed 3 million years ago in the Quaternary period, were uncovered in each of the excavation areas. This natural substrate was sealed by a subsoil (0.2–0.3m deep) and in turn topsoil (up to 0.30m deep).

The full report (CA 2016b) for this project, including specialist reports and data, photographs and additional illustrations, can be found on the Cotswold Archaeology website: <http://www.cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk/>. The archive will be deposited with the Hampshire Museum and Archives Service (Accession Number: A2016.29).

SUMMARY RESULTS

The excavation of Area 1 (Fig. 2) revealed the extent of a deposit containing a worked flint assemblage of possibly Terminal Upper Palaeolithic/Mesolithic date (c.10,700–9,800/post-9800 BP). The flint-bearing deposit, a yellowish-grey, sandy silt, measured 15m long, 6m wide and up to 0.3m deep. The majority of worked lithics recovered from the excavation were found in Area 1 (191 pieces – 67% of the entire assemblage), of which 77 pieces (40%) were recovered from the flint-bearing deposit. Examination of the typological and technical traits of the worked flint has shown that it is possible that some elements of the assemblage derived from a Long Blade lithic industry, dating to c. 10,700–9800 years before present (Hey

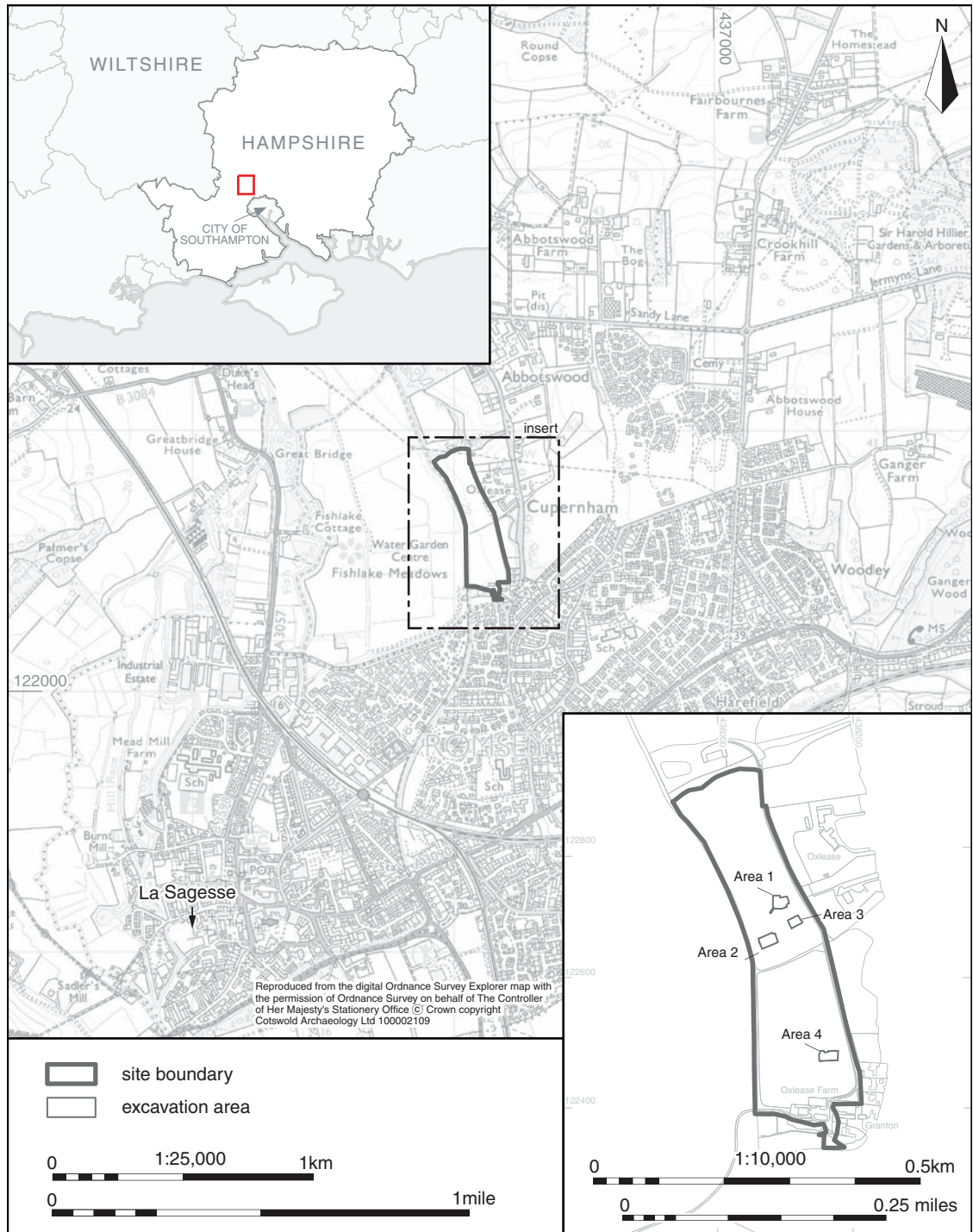


Fig. 1 Oxlease Farm: site location (1:25,000) and area location plan (1:10,000)

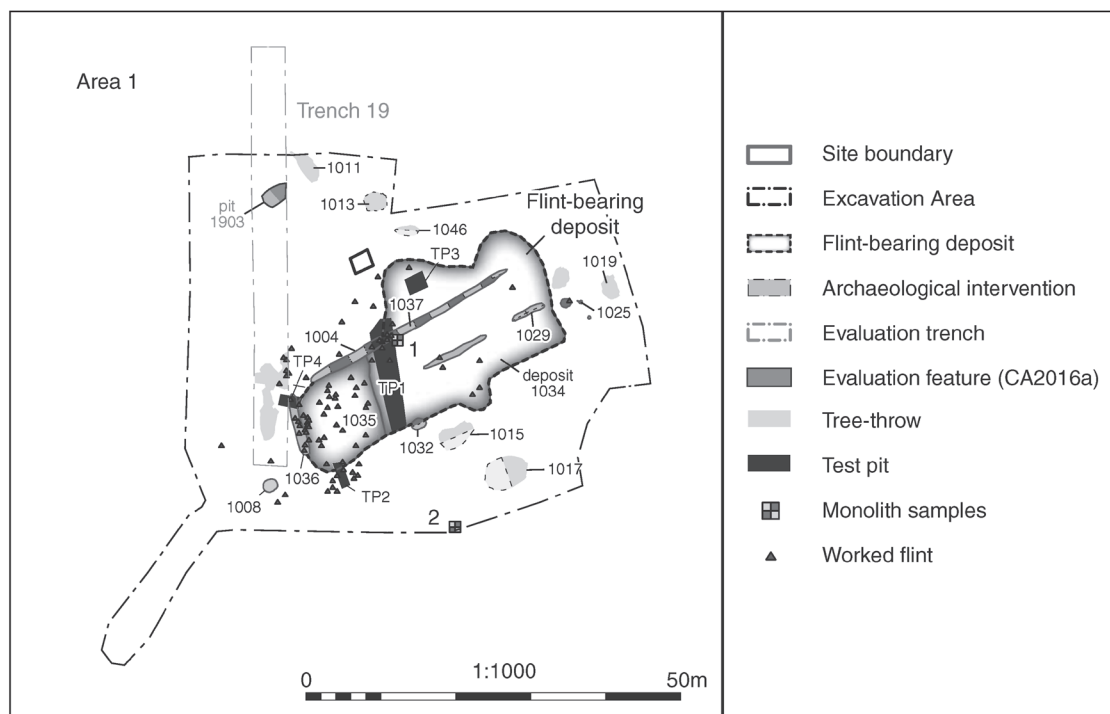


Fig. 2 Oxlease Farm: plan of Area 1 (1:1000)

2014, 63). These elements include the blades, bladelets, a bladelet core and possible 'bruised blades'. Three items from the assemblage (two backed blades and a truncation) are diagnostically of later (Mesolithic) date (post – c. 9800 BP). The density of worked flints increased downslope to the west (Fig. 2). A fragment of broadly prehistoric pottery (1g) was also recorded from the flint-bearing deposit. Geoarchaeological assessment of the flint-bearing deposit confirmed that the lithics were within a secondary deposit (i.e. not *in situ*), derived from early Holocene erosion and downslope-movement of superficial River Terrace Deposits 4 from upslope.

Some undated features including pits, ditches and gullies were recorded in Areas 2–3 (details in the full report).

THE LITHICS by Jacky Sommerville

Introduction

A total of 283 worked flints (5.124kg) and 125 pieces of burnt, unworked flint (415g) was recovered from the four excavation areas (Figs 3–4). The flint was fine- to moderately fine-grained, although 53% featured moderate to large cherty inclusions. Cortex was chalky on 35% of flints and abraded on 63%. River gravel pebbles would have been available locally and flints may have been collected from the chalk plateau of the Hampshire Downs, upstream of Romsey (Conneller & Ellis 2007, 202). The largest proportion of this assemblage (65%) was from Roman or unphased features, mainly ditches or pits/postholes. A total of 77 pieces (28%) was from layers with substantial numbers of lithics (Table 1: 'flint-bearing deposits').

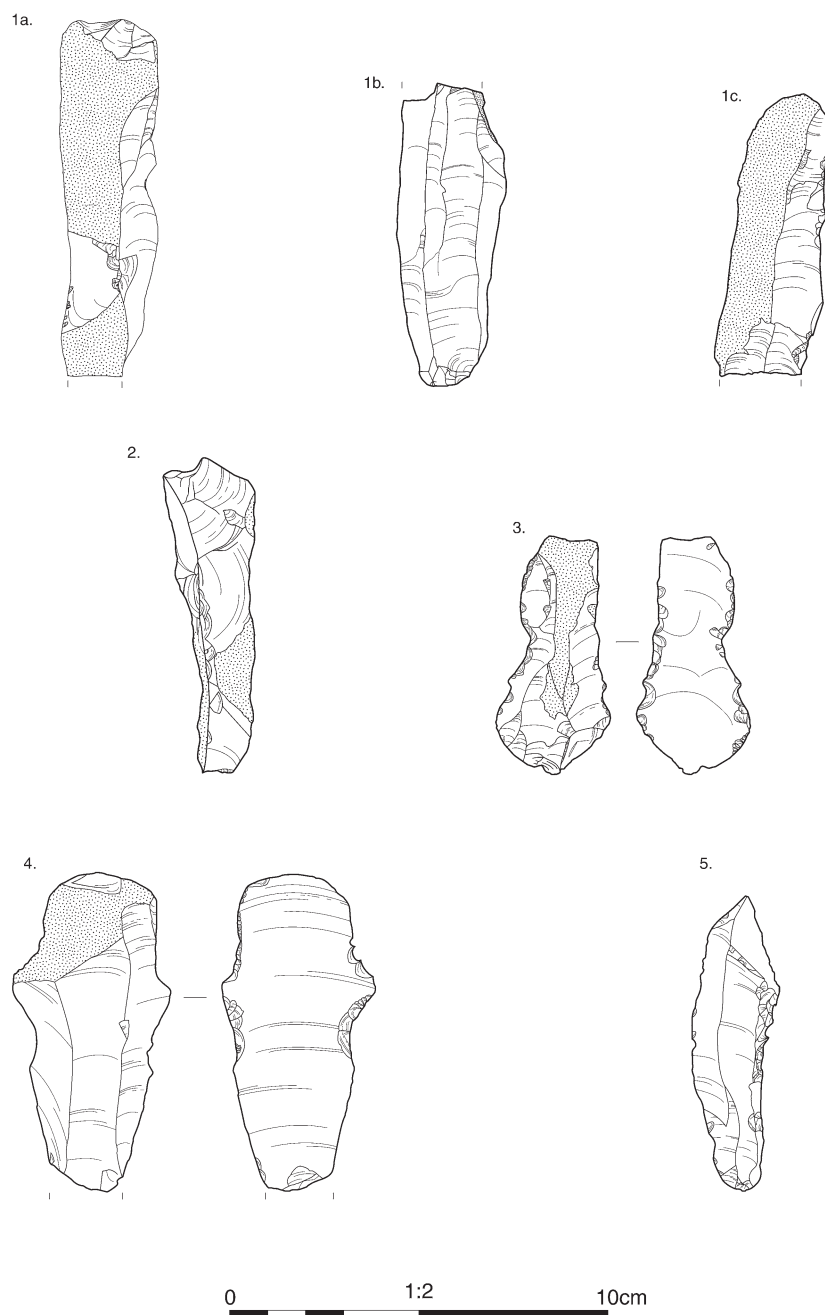


Fig. 3 Worked lithics 1–5 (1:2) **1a–c:** Area 3 Subsoil 3001, a selection of (broken) blades; **2:** Area 1 Subsoil 1001, bifacially crested blade (Ra. 760); **3:** Area 1 Flint scatter 1036, bruised blade (Ra. 677), featuring edge damage on the centre of the left ventral and dorsal edges; **4:** Area 1 Flint-bearing deposit 1034, bruised blade (probable), with the butt end missing (Ra. 709), with bruising on the centre of both lateral ventral edges; **5:** Area 1 Subsoil 1001, bruised blade (possible), with damage on the centre of the right dorsal edge

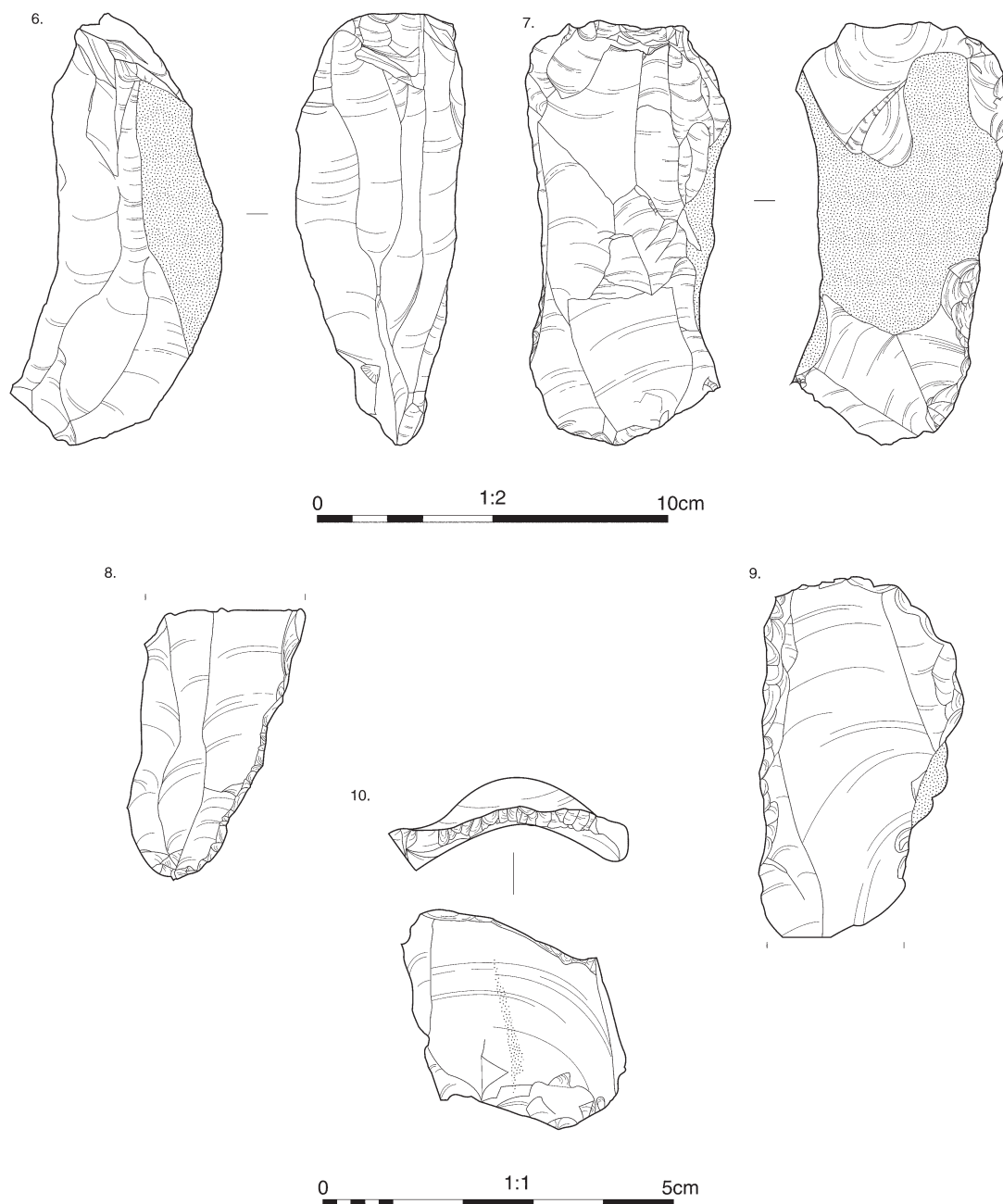


Fig. 4 Worked lithics 6–10 (1:2, 1:1) **6:** Area 1 Subsoil 1001, blade core (Ra. 758) with dual-opposed platforms; **7:** Area 1 Flint-bearing deposit 1035, blade core with dual-opposed platforms, one of which displayed evidence of preparation; **8:** Area 1 Tree throw 1013, backed blade, distal fragment from a broad, thin blade, which featured fine, regular abrupt retouch along the left dorsal edge; **9:** Area 1 Flint scatter 1036, backed blade, proximal blade fragment with fine, nibbled retouch along the right dorsal edge; **10:** Area 1 Subsoil 1001, truncation, secondary flake with steep, fine, regular retouch across the distal dorsal edge

Table 1 Lithics assemblages from flint-bearing deposits and flint scatter

	<i>Flint-bearing deposits (1027; 1034; 1035; 1048; 1050)</i>	<i>Flint scatter 1036 1048; 1050)</i>
<i>Primary technology</i>		
Blade	6	3
Bladelet	1	
Bruised blade	1	
Core	2	1
Core rejuvenation flake	2	
Flake	45	6
Shatter	2	
<i>Subtotal</i>	59	10
<i>Secondary technology</i>		
Backed blade		1
Retouched blade	1	
Retouched flake	2	1
Saw	1	
Scraper (side)		1
Scraper (on a thermal blank)	1	
<i>Subtotal</i>	5	3
<i>Grand total</i>	64	13

Primary technology

Debitage totalled 261 items (Table 2). Evidence of soft hammer percussion was noted on 11% of flakes and on 58% of blades.

Blades

A total of 40 blades was recorded (21% ofdebitage), of which only 10 were unbroken. The unbroken blades ranged from 34–96mm long, 13–41mm wide and 6–20mm thick. The longest broken blade measured 93mm (Fig. 3.1). Dorsal scar pattern was established on 29 blades: 48% were from dual opposed platform cores; 28% from single platform cores; and 24% displayed both lateral and longitudinal dorsal scars. A crested blade (Ra. 760) was recovered from subsoil 1001 (Fig.

3.2). Blades feature most prominently in Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic assemblages, with ‘long blades’ characterising the industry of the Terminal Upper Palaeolithic. None of the unbroken blades measured in the 100–120mm range typical for this technocomplex (Barton 1998, 159). It is however probable that some fragments will have derived from blades exceeding 100mm and the possibility allowed that ‘long blades’ are represented.

Bruised blades (possible)

Three items may represent bruised blades, a class characterised by microflaking (bruising) to the lateral edges resulting from use, possibly for chopping bone, antler or hardwood, or working sandstone hammers. Ra. 677 (Fig. 3.3) from gully 1037 (Area 1) conforms most

Table 2 Breakdown of the lithics assemblage

(Burnt unworked	125)
Primary technology	
Blade	40
Bladelet	4
Bruised blade	3
Chip	36
Core	22
Core fragment	1
Core rejuvenation flake	4
Crested blade	2
Flake	147
Shatter	3
Subtotal	262
Secondary technology	
Awl	1
Backed blade	2
Miscellaneous retouched	3
Notched flake	2
Retouched blade	1
Retouched flake	5
Saw	1
Scraper (end)	2
Scraper (side)	2
Scraper (on a thermal blank)	1
Truncation	1
Subtotal	21
Grand total	283

closely to the class and there are further possible examples from flint-bearing deposit 1034 (Ra. 709, Fig. 3.4) and subsoil 1001 (Fig. 3.5). All are of chunky proportions and made on secondary blanks with unidirectional dorsal scars. Bruised blades are a feature of Terminal Upper Palaeolithic assemblages, *c.* 10,000 BP (*ibid.*), although Mesolithic examples are

known occasionally (Conneller & Ellis 2007, 203).

Cores

Twenty-two cores were retrieved, of which eight had been used to manufacture blades – all single platform or dual-opposed platform types. Ra. 758, from subsoil 1001 (Fig. 4.6), had been used to produce relatively large, long blades: the longest remaining scar was 107mm. The platform from which it was struck had been rejuvenated, so longer blades may have been previously removed. Flint-bearing deposit 1035 also produced a large blade core (Fig. 4.7). The longest remaining flake scar was 52mm long, however, two removals had ended in step fractures due to a flaw. If one of these had continued the full, final length of the core, the blade produced would have been approximately 120mm long. Five core rejuvenation flakes were recorded from the occupation layers and subsoil 1001, all but one with blade-like proportions.

Secondary technology

Retouched tools totalled 21 items (7%). Most were not chronologically diagnostic, such as ‘miscellaneous’ retouched items, notched flakes, retouched flakes, a saw, an awl and five scrapers.

Backed blades

Backed blades from tree-throw 1013 (Fig. 4.8) and flint scatter 1036 (Fig. 4.9) are typically Mesolithic tools. Small, narrow backed blades can also feature in Long Blade assemblages (Barton 1998, 160), however, these examples were not particularly narrow. The truncation from subsoil 1001 (Fig. 4.10) was also probably Mesolithic. Both of these tool types were in use throughout the Mesolithic period. Truncations also feature during the Terminal Upper Palaeolithic (Barton & Froom 1986, 81; Gardiner *et al.* 2015, 15) but were more frequently made on blade blanks.

Scrapers

The assemblage included five scrapers: two end scrapers; two side scrapers; and one made on a thermal blank. The end and side scrapers were

all made on flake blanks. The end scrapers both featured steep retouch along the distal dorsal edge. The retouch was rather crude on the scraper from gully 1004 (fill 1005) and more regular on that from subsoil 3001. The two side scrapers had been quite regularly, steeply retouched along one lateral edge – the example from tree-throw 1907 (fill 1908) was made on a broken flake. The scraper on a thermal blank (from flint-bearing deposit 1035) displayed abrupt, rather irregular retouch along two edges at right angles to one another. None of these scraper types were closely dateable and their condition suggested redeposition.

Other

The awl, in a heavily edge damaged and rolled condition, was retrieved from tree-throw 1011 (fill 1022). It had been made on a pebble blank, with a thick point formed from abrupt, quite regular retouch on two faces. The saw (Ra. 808), from layer 1035, was made on a medial flake fragment and had serrations *c.* 5mm wide formed along both the lateral and distal dorsal edges. Neither tool type is chronologically diagnostic.

Lithics discussion

This small assemblage includes a number of elements possibly derived from a Long Blade industry of the Terminal Upper Palaeolithic *c.* 10,000 BP. Later dating, to the Mesolithic, remains possible for some classes (blades, bladelets, a bladelet core and bruised blades), and likely for items including two backed blades and a truncation. Features of Long Blade assemblages, defined by Barton (1998, 159–60), include: blades typically 100–120mm long, bruised blades, occasional bladelets and core working, most commonly featuring dual-opposed platforms. This assemblage lacks blades 100–120mm long (perhaps partially due to the high level of breakage) but includes: possible bruised blades, bladelets and evidence of dual-opposed platform core working on over 50% of the blades. Barton (*ibid.* 160, fig. 21.4) identified 28 sites across south and east Britain with both long and bruised blades, none of which were in Hampshire. Although uncertain, elements of the assemblage from

the site at Oxlease Farm, though redeposited, may belong within this corpus.

DISCUSSION by Chris Ellis

The most significant result from the fieldwork is the possible further characterisation of a regionally and nationally important Terminal Upper Palaeolithic (Long Blade industry) and Mesolithic lithic assemblage. Although lithics were recovered from all four excavation areas, the majority (67%) was recorded from the flint-bearing deposit in Area 1, which was sealed below topsoil and subsoil at a depth of 0.54m below ground level. Several elements of the total lithic assemblage may belong to the Terminal Upper Palaeolithic Long Blade industry or to the Mesolithic, however, given the mixed nature of the assemblage, it is possible that material from later periods has also become mixed with this possible earlier material. Geoarchaeological assessment of the flint-bearing deposit in Area 1 confirmed that the lithics were within a secondary deposit, derived from early Holocene erosion and downslope-movement of superficial river terrace deposits. While the worked flint assemblage from Area 1 was not *in situ*, the concentration of this material within a relatively small area may suggest that it did not travel far from its point of origin, possibly upslope and to the east of Area 1.

Only a small number of *in situ* Long Blade scatters have been recorded in southern Britain including Three Ways Wharf, Uxbridge, (Lewis & Rackham 2011), Avington IV and Wawcott III near Newbury (Froom 2005), Sproughton (Barton 1986), Swaffham Prior, Norfolk, and Springhead in Kent (Burchell 1938; Barton 1989). Long Blade sites are located close to major river valleys (Barton 1995) and faunal assemblages recovered from these sites indicate that they were used as seasonal hunting camps in relatively forest-free landscapes of Late Glacial southern Britain (Barton & Dumont 2000).

Significant evidence for prehistoric activity has been found within Romsey and the surrounding area. The River Test valley has produced prolific evidence for Palaeolithic activity in the form

of flint tools found at several sites to the east and north-east of the town centre (Wymer, 1999a, 111; Wymer 1999b, map 28, 10, 14). A nationally significant hunter-gatherer site was excavated in 2001 at La Sagesse Convent (Fig. 1), just south of Romsey Abbey (Coneller & Ellis 2007). Located on a gravel terrace on the floodplain of the River Test, the site contained two worked flint scatters; one each of Final Upper Palaeolithic (12,500 – 11,000 BC) and Late Mesolithic (6500 – 4000 BC) date. Although both scatters were not *in situ*, little lateral movement was indicated for at least one of the scatters. Whichever technocomplex and date the lithic assemblage from Oxlease is assigned to, the results of the fieldwork add significantly to knowledge of hunter-gatherer sites in the Romsey area including La Sagesse, Broomhill, Braishfield (O'Malley & Jacobi 1978) and Bowman's Farm (Wenban-Smith & Green, *forthcoming*).

A small number of undated and dispersed features uncovered during the excavations are of possible prehistoric date. The low density of the features and lack of associated finds suggest episodic and transitory later prehistoric activity. A small pottery assemblage of almost exclusively

Late Roman local and regional wares, derived predominantly from Areas 1–3, was found as residual material in later field boundaries or plough furrows. The pottery may suggest the presence of some form of Romano-British settlement activity in the general area.

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