

PREHISTORIC ACTIVITIES AT BOSTON SPA

Malcolm Barnes, 2002.

Since the group was formed in 1999, Boston Spa & District Community Archaeology Group has been conducting fieldwork near the village on a prehistoric lithic-working and settlement site that is rare in lowland West Yorkshire. They have recorded flint artefacts that suggest temporary or permanent settlement activity from the hunter-gatherers of the Mesolithic period (8000-4000) to Neolithic (4000-2000) and early Bronze Age (2000-1000), plus thousands of pieces of burnt flint and waste pieces from flint tool manufacturing. Among the artefacts are a flint barb from a Mesolithic fishing harpoon, a Neolithic axe fragment made of Langdale stone, barbed and tanged, leaf-shaped and oblique flint arrowheads, scrapers, cores and blades from various periods, as well as awls and piercers.

The prehistoric flint, which is good quality, blacky-brown and semi-translucent, must have been very important to the people using the site, as it was brought all the way from the east coast, though there is a tiny amount of poorer quality Yorkshire wolds flint. Some of the coastal-till flint (13%) has developed an off-white, blue or grey patination through chemical action in the soil. Unusually, a very few metal-knapped gun flints have been found, crudely made from material of a particularly fine quality which seems to have come from another source (perhaps even Thorp Arch flint mill, which obtained its flint from the south of England).

The percentage of worked flints varies from 1.9% on the main discrete flint-knapping area, which has a high proportion of manufacture waste, to 9%, 11% and 17.5% on the larger field scatters, where activity seems to have taken place from Mesolithic through to Bronze Age times. Indeed, one of the fieldwalking plots on a river terrace of approximately 2500 m² produced a total of 170 flints of which 23.5% were worked, including 7 microliths and 1 Mesolithic, 2 Neolithic and 1 Bronze Age cores; the remainder, consisting of 23 blades, 3 cores, 2 scrapers and 1 awl, were undiagnostic. On the site as a whole blades (59%), scrapers (14%) and cores (10.5%) tend to dominate the worked assemblage.

Other finds from fieldwalking at the 100-acre site near the River Wharfe come from later periods, including a small amount of Roman and medieval pottery and masses of post-medieval field-manuring material. By the end of 2001, 45473 finds had been collected and processed, of which 6766 are flint and 17863 burnt flint. Another 18415 pieces of burnt flint were recorded in situ, which provided an overall plan of the distribution of burnt flint and an indication of settlement activity across the site.

One of the members has completed an archaeo-botanical survey of the woodland on the site which suggests that it is remnant ancient woodland and that one of the perimeter hedges is approximately 1000 years old and others 400 years plus. In medieval times the area was an outlying part of the parish of Clifford and the monks of Kirkstall abbey owned some of the woodland and pasture there. Excavations have been carried out on an internal woodbank and an unusual earthwork feature.

Recently the group's chairman has been out in the field prospecting for other prehistoric flint sites in the locality in order to see how the site fits into the wider prehistoric landscape, investigating several more sites on river terraces near Linton, Wetherby, Boston Spa, Thorp Arch and Smaws. The group is also gradually plotting the background distribution of flint on arable fields away from these flint sites. The Boston Spa site is significant because of the amount of manufacture that took place there, reflected in the high proportion of flint debitage. Further work is planned by the group, including excavations and geophysical surveys.

The group reports its findings to the Sites and Monuments Record at WYAS and provides information and occasional exhibitions of finds in the Boston Spa and Wetherby libraries.



Key to Worked Flints

1.Backed knife; 2.Platform-opposing core; 3.Blade core; 4.Microlith rod for fishing harpoon; 5.Microlith piercer; 6.Blade; 7.Leaf-shaped arrowhead; 8.Oblique arrowhead; 9.Barbed and tanged arrowhead; 10.Single-platform core; 11.Scraper; 12.Burnt-flint retouched scraper; 13.Scraper; 14.Wolds-flint blade; 15.Gunflint; 16.Blade pressure-flaked near end.

Nos. 1,2 - Early Mesolithic; 6 - Mesolithic; 3,4,5 – Late Mesolithic; 7 – Neolithic; 10,11 – Late Neolithic; 8 – Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age; 9,13 – Early Bronze Age; 15 – Modern; 12,14,16 – Non-diagnostic.