

A Review of the Evidence for Human Activity in the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic by Alice Cattermole, Senior Historian, Environment Officer, at the Town Auditorium, Norwich Castle, 5th September 2015

An English Heritage-funded project (£30,000) to enhance Norfolk's early prehistoric records, in partnership with Norwich, King's Lynn and Thetford Museums was completed in December 2014. It aimed to reassess all records for early prehistoric material in the Norfolk Historic Environment Record (NHER), and re-examine and index all the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic artefacts in the collections of the Norfolk Museums Service (NMS). Much of the material in the collections was digitally photographed for the first time, and key objects were selected for illustration using the excellent line drawings by Peter Robins. As a result 4,500 records have a detailed description; 2,218 monument records were enhanced, with early prehistoric evidence being added to 333 records where none was recorded previously; 2,320 existing event records were modified, and a further 1,343 new event records were added; 6,166 new source references were added from 1,301 unique sources, of which 895 were entirely new. Additional information was integrated into the NHER from the archives of prehistorians such as John Wymer and Roger Jacobi. The enhanced monument and source records are available via the (Norfolk Heritage Explorer) website.

Alice explained this had filled in gaps in the record and led to re-classification of items in the Lower/Middle/Upper Palaeolithic in light of new understanding of particular lithic technologies. It had provided a more detailed timetable of glaciation in East Anglia – the old linear technology is now questioned. She illustrated her talk with detailed Distribution Maps of finds in Norfolk.

Lower to Middle Palaeolithic 900,000 to 359,000 year ago

In specific areas along the north Norfolk coast and the forest beds at Cromer; sites near Norwich and Thetford; river beds in the west and south-west. Originally recognised by antiquarians - finds like the Happisburgh hand axe changed perception about finding material in context in the archaeological deposits. British Museum excavations at Happisburgh I were not as exciting as Pakefield nr Lowestoft but Happisburgh III produced worked flints from deposits 900,000 old. Various assemblages have helped us reconsider early 20th century discoveries and reclassify previous finds such as flint tools and fossilized animal remains but so far no human remains although footprints at Happisburgh of a family group with children have been found.

Late Lower Palaeolithic 500,000 to 250,000 BC

The emergence of hand-axes (Feltwell in SW Norfolk gravel beds and at Keswick) shows a dispersed distribution with stratified assemblages of non-surface finds. These are post Anglia glaciation where there was discontinuous occupation by homo heidelbergensis.

Early Middle Palaeolithic 350,000 to 170,000 BC

Finds are mainly pieces of flint broken off the core, the beginning of Levalloisian artifacts as at Lyndford Quarry - the first Neanderthals

Middle Palaeolithic

There is a general decline in objects but Wensum and Yare river beds have yielded hand axes.

Late Middle Palaeolithic 60,000 to 35,000 BC

Is a long hiatus, a warm period when rising sea levels isolated England. Late Neanderthals produced Mode II flat butted axes which are not Levalloisian artifacts = a retrograde step showing episodic activities of small groups searching or migrating. Rather than settlement.

Upper Palaeolithic 40,000 to 10,000 BC

A new technology of long flint blades, 120mm plus, struck from prepared prismatic cores is evidence of homo sapiens. A period split into Early Upper and Late Upper. There were few recorded artifacts but these have increased due to the new classifications; yet only a small number of assemblages found in the Early period. The Late Upper shows short-lived migration associated with these 'long-blade' flint tools – for instance the shoulder-points in SE Norfolk. Altogether an uncertain chronology.

Terminal Upper Palaeolithic 13,000 to 10,000.

Shows large assemblages as at Carrow Rd, bottom of the Wensum Valley in low-lying locations. At Thornham and Titchwell near Brancaster, objects have appeared out of the Boreal peat and exposed on the beach. Hockwold cum Wilton and Methwold show evidence of long blade industries. Again uncertain dating so difficult to separate from the Mesolithic.

Mesolithic 10,000 to 2000 BC

Here sea levels rose with the melting of the end of the last ice-age. A 'busy' distribution of sites but only sketchily understood. A simple chronology from large to small with most sites not producing assemblages and a lack of reliable radio-carbon dates for the deposits. However, becoming increasingly sophisticated with miniaturised blade-based tool as well as new forms of core tools including picks, tranchet adzes and axes. These are more finely worked such as those in large assemblages at Banham and Gt.Melton.

Grimes Graves has thrown up some unexpected finds with surprising radio-carbon dates probably Neolithic. Two-Mile Bottom, Thetford shows large-flint knapping with geometric forms, Gt.Melton and Banham have revealed thousands of flint artifacts.

The project looked at microliths and microburins distribution in West and SW Norfolk comparing these with adzes and core tools more widely dispersed in river valley sites of central Norfolk= a difficult chronology with several anomalies. These are not settled sites but sporadic, temporary occupation areas. Few sites on the coastal margins probably mean most settlements were in the North Sea area before flooding.

The President Sophie Cabot thanked Alice for the detailed account and took questions from the floor.

How does Grimes Graves fit in with the categorisation? Alice said they had expected Neolithic material but some dates show Mesolithic artifacts.

Are there any clues as to why Banham has so many Mesolithic finds? The area has a huge number of pit holes with water all year round so deer available for hunting – an episodic explanation of the anomalies.

Sophie Cabot asked about the flint collection of Group Captain Knocker. Alice said the notebooks and field books had been used where relevant; proper antiquarian collections and publications make the project records classification as comprehensive as possible. Dr. Keith Robinson said the results and flints would be on display at Thetford Museum.

Is there a connection between Pakefield in Suffolk and Happisburgh and the Cromer beds, and any website links about this? Alice said she didn't know but reminded the audience that Pakefield is 10,000 years later than Happisburgh.

Are there any connections with Dogger Bank? Alice explained that the work was about data enhancement. All new finds are being recorded and added, individual object descriptions digitised and imputed. It was not a research project to link disparate sites.

Edmund Perry
Hon.Gen. Secretary
10th September 2015