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Alfred Jowett Selley (1854–1945): the man and his ‘collection’

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Alfred Jowett Selley (1854–1945): the man and his ‘collection’

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The ‘Selley Collection’ and other objects associated with its creator, Alfred Jowett Selley, are stored at the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. A small number of items are on display in the ‘Archaeology of the South West’ exhibition. The museum records show that a number of flint tools were purchased from Selley in 1915 and that over the next 40 years further diverse items were purchased from him or from third parties or were donated by him or others, including his family after his death in 1945. C.M. Sykes wrote in 1977 that a part of the material acquired Selley and on display was destroyed in an air raid in the years 1941–2.¹ Although there is no record of what was lost, assumptions can be drawn from items recorded that appear to be missing.

The main component of the ‘Selley Collection’ is perhaps best described as some 3,800 stone tools found by Selley on field trips mainly on the Mendips but he did not confine his collecting to flint. Over 50 years he scoured the Bristol area for any artefact that he could sell or that he felt was worthwhile to retain or donate to the museum. It is estimated that as many as 5,000 objects acquired by Selley are now stored at the museum. In 1945 his son Hubert wrote that Selley’s house had been badly bombed in the Second World War and that part of his collection had been destroyed.

After his death some of Selley’s papers were given to the museum. These include fourteen diaries and three note books covering part of the period from 1904 to 1932 and bundles of correspondence. Much of the correspondence dates from before the First World War and is with S.G. Percival of Bristol. These papers and other documents at the museum relating to the collection, among them press cuttings and three photographs, have been an investigation of Selley’s collecting from Sea Mills and from the Mendip Hills and areas close by. The research entailed examining all his diaries and associated papers and many of the letters. There remain a considerable number of areas for future investigation.

Selley’s methods of collecting and recording are questionable by today’s standards. He scavenged in barrows, bought from night watchmen and failed in many instances to record anything other than the general locations of finds. His interest in the archaeological importance of his finds was limited. He appears to have been obsessed with the act of collecting and there is also evidence of his buying and selling artefacts for quite considerable sums. This article sets out to profile the man and summarise his collection and its contribution to the archaeology and history of Bristol and north Somerset.

The Selley Family

Alfred Jowett Selley was born 14 May 1854 in Exeter and died 28 November 1945. His obituary in the proceedings of the Bristol Naturalist Society for 1945 states that he came to Bristol in 1874

1. Avon Archaeology Council newsletter for 1977.

and the 1901 census records him as a portmanteau maker residing with his family at 17 Alington Road, Southville. By 1922 he was apparently living at Clifford House, 116 Coronation Road. No record has been found that gives the name of his employer or the location of his work. Although his name was registered on his birth certificate as Alfred Jowett Selley, he is referred to as Alfred William Selley in his obituary. In 1901 his wife Elizabeth, who also came from Devon, was 46, his elder son Alfred Carl, aged 22, was a commercial traveller, and his younger son Hubert, aged 18, was a pupil teacher.

From the diaries it seems that Hubert went to live in London and paid occasional visits to Bristol with his family. He then moved to Arundel in Sussex and died in 1954. Alfred Carl had at least one child Francis Carl, born 4 April 1908. This information comes from entries in the diaries and also from Francis's son Christopher who lives in Bristol. Christopher knew something of his great-grandfather's activities but not the extent of the 'Selley Collection' in the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. He believes that the family had a German connection and that his grandfather Alfred Carl was divorced.

Francis Selley is mentioned in the diaries during the late 1920s. He was travelling in the area as a fashion representative and Selley occasionally went with him and took the chance to visit museums. There is virtually no information about Elizabeth Selley. In the diaries the only mention of her appears to be in January 1929 when Alfred remarked that his wife was ill. She was then 74 years old. It is possible that Francis came to Bristol to care for his grandfather after Elizabeth had fallen ill or died.

Christopher Selley reports that his family did have some wealth and were well connected. There is a family coat of arms and, he says, a very strong connection with freemasonry.

The Man and the Collector

As an employee A.J. Selley is unlikely to have received a high wage. His diaries show that until his retirement he only went searching at weekends and on holidays. However he was mixing with and corresponding with professional people such as Fredrick Ellis, a well-known local 'archaeologist' and a solicitor in Manchester. He conducted a considerable correspondence with S.G. Percival of Royal York Crescent, Bristol, who was a donor to the Bristol museum. The letters and diaries show that Selley was trading and engaging in debate with these people soon after the turn of the century. Later there are cryptic entries in his diaries referring to collecting rents and the selling of a cottage.

According to his obituary, signed FSW (presumably F.S. Wallis) - Museum Director,² and an undated press cutting Selley was modest and retiring. However, he appears to have been assertive when it came to collecting. On 11 February 1930 at 'Blackmore Museum' he recorded that he saw a man at the door with a small bag, in which he thought was something for sale. The man asked for the curator but he was out. Selley followed the man and asked to see what he had. He then bought from him seven Palaeolithic celts for 12 shillings. Where precisely the museum was located has not been established and it is highly likely that Selley deliberately used a false name. It may be significant that Selley often frequented an area in the Mendips called Black Down, though the Blackmore Vale, shared between Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire, may have been the inspiration for the name of his mysterious 'Blackmore Museum'.

C.M. Sykes, who wrote of Selley later,³ met him at the Bristol museum in 1939, when his best finds were on display, most of them labelled as from Shirehampton. He comments that Selley was

2. Obituary printed in the proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists' Society 1945.

3. Article published in the Avon Avon Archaeology Council newsletter for 1977.

perhaps deliberately vague about locations of finds to avoid others poaching on his grounds and adds that 'with obvious glee he told me he had always let people assume they were from hill top finds when in fact they were from the banks of the Avon'. A letter from Percival in 1904 chides Selley for refusing to divulge the locations of finds from Shirehampton.

Comments in his early notebooks and letters indicate that Selley had at least some technical knowledge, but he offered virtually no observations on the archaeological or historical significance of his artefacts.⁴ In 1905 he recorded that he went to Priddy to a barrow on Wellington Farm (OS Nat. Grid ST 486542). It seems that he had been digging it without assistance. He asked the landowner's permission to re-open it and went on to record finding 'drills' and seeing fragments of charcoal. On 22 April he notes finding a 'well worked core' from which 'flakes' had been 'struck'. He also describes a 'barbed arrow'. Selley writes of Samuel Seyer, mentioning his book 'Memories of Bristol',⁵ and of a Roman villa site and a 'Druids' stone in a field near Wick. He also describes how the field had been 'ploughed out'. His note book for 1905 refers to his having visited sites twelve years earlier, indicating that he was collecting artefacts from at least 1893.

Today Selley might not only be condemned for some of his collecting methods but perhaps be liable to prosecution. However his activities need to be seen within the context of what was acceptable nearly a hundred years ago.

There is no question that he was not an avid collector. His diaries show that up to 1918 he spent most weekends and holidays field walking or visiting demolition sites. On occasions called on night watchmen at 6.30 a.m. to buy items. In later years his trips were far more frequent no doubt due to his retirement. The last diary in the archive is for 1932 but it is reported elsewhere that Selley uncovered a short stretch of Roman walling in 1934.⁶ Distance and weather were no obstacle. He undertook bicycle journeys of over 30 miles when he was well into his seventies. He reports snow storms and driving rain and in 1912 mentions that he was blown over a wall. According to the diary entry for 17 January 1927:

Cold wind. Left for cycle trip to Tyntesfield ground not all suitable for the walk heavy mist for the first 3 hours then sleet after another 1.5 hours made for home in snow storm not a fragment worth saving.

On one occasion in his 60s he had to walk home from Charterhouse to Bristol, a distance of over 15 miles, after his bicycle became unusable.

He was a frequent visitor to the senior staff at the Bristol museum. He records numerous sales and donations to the museum and its catalogues also record large numbers of the purchases and gifts. The first purchase recorded in the museum register is of 129 flint objects for a sum of £18 in 1915. Comparing the weekly wage of a skilled worker, and also the price of beer, then and today this puts the value in today's prices at about £1,800.

This is the only entry in the museum registers that notes the price paid. However there are numerous letters and other entries indicating that articles were being purchased directly from Selley. However by the 1920s the museum was only accepting flints as donations. It is possible that it was willing to pay for flints earlier on in order to build a collection but declined to expand

4. Excavations in 1923 and 1938 are reported in A. Trice Martin, 'Excavations at Sea Mills, Bristol', *Trans. BGAS* 45 (1923), 193–201; Dobson, Walker and Kirkman, 'Excavations at Sea Mills, near Bristol', *ibid.* 61 (1939), 202–23.
5. *Memoirs Historical and Topographical of Bristol and its Neighbourhood* (2 volumes. 1821–3).
6. Dina P. Dobson, F. Walker, and J.S. Kirkman, 'Excavations at Sea Mills, near Bristol, 1938', *Trans. BGAS* 61 (1939), 202.

it by purchase. Other items, particularly Roman material, medieval coins and examples of Bristol pottery, continued to be purchased.

The museum was also purchasing and acquiring artefacts from other collectors. One of them, the antiquary Lewis John Upton Way, seems to have bought material from Selley and donated it much later to the museum. In his letters and diaries Selley was quite reticent about recording details of the sales he made but his recording of his purchases is less vague. In some of the diaries are series of accounts that seems to indicate trading.

A letter of 11 July 1911 from the British Museum offered Selley £6 for the gold coin he 'found' on the Roman site at Sea Mills. In today's money this equates to about £1,500. An envelope, presumably that which contained the letter, is marked in pencil 'in British Museum' but the Museum has no record of any such purchase being made. It is possible Selley sold the coin for more to someone else or that it has been lost over time. It might have been on display in Bristol when the bomb damage occurred and so may have been lost then.

Selley's business was not confined to collecting from archaeological sites. He also visited house sales and auctions. Although there is no easily accessible record of his trading activities, there is evidence that they involved significant sums. His early papers contain references to rents, but the most explicit entry is for 21 October 1929 when he recorded 'sold cottages for £210'. It is possible Selley had used his profits from selling artefacts to invest in property.

Sea Mills

The sheer volume of artefacts and the thousands of diary entries plus bundles of letters mostly written in pencil have, for the time being, prohibited a detailed study of every aspect of Selley's collecting. His activities in the Sea Mills area have been singled out as a case study.

By Selley's time the Roman port of *Abona* at Sea Mills had been known of for three centuries and on 23 October 1893 Fredrick Ellis, a friend of Selley, was involved in archeological excavations or investigation there.⁷ Selley's first specific written reference to the area, in a notebook, is dated 28 December 1904 but it is known from other comments that he visited the area well before this. In total his diaries record 195 visits between 1904 and 1932 but there are 14 years for which no diaries or records exist and an undated press cutting indicates that he was still active there in the mid 1930s.

In his earliest reference, in 1904, Selley reports finding a Roman coin. In 1905 he recorded a very poor search yielding only a small Roman coin and the following week he found nothing. Later in the year he noted finds of a small piece of samian pottery with a potter's mark and a barbed arrow of perfect dark flint worked on both sides and illustrated the latter in a pencil drawing but recorded no provenances.

This pattern of collecting at Sea Mills is prevalent throughout his diaries from 1914 through to 1921. On 20 October 1921 it changed and his first purchases are recorded. Selley wrote that at 6 o'clock he bought coins for 6s. 6d. but gives no further detail. For the next five years the diaries detail a large number of purchases. The entry for the 4 February 1925 reports the purchase for 5s. 6d. of a 'fibula not elaborate but perfect in every way. Pin working order'. Precise details are scarce but there are references such as 'men on Roman site found nothing' and 'bought small coin from night watchman'.

Over the years there was considerable activity in the Sea Mills area. For examples, a new road was built bypassing the area around the Roman port and the cutting containing the railway station

7. The 19th-century excavation or investigation of sea Mills by Read is referred to in Selley's papers but no details are given.

cut was widened. Selley records that he took tobacco to watchmen, encouraged workmen to sell him finds and gave cigarettes to the foreman.

It is not possible to estimate the number of Roman coins Selley found or collected. His diaries sometimes mention only 'coins' and occasionally 'farthings'. At other times they specifically record 'Roman coins'.

In the archaeology store at Bristol some of his Roman finds are conserved and kept with other similar material. The fibula found in 1925, part of a spoon, rings, medallions and other artefacts are attributed to Selley. In addition there are numerous pieces of samian ware and fragments of roof and floor tiles plus later coins and artefacts. Other material from the area and from Bristol in general is in different storerooms throughout the museum. Other museums in the area do not report any Selley material.

Selley makes little comment about the significance of his finds. Locations are hardly referred to and are rarely specific but it is possible to form a general idea by visiting those mentioned. The railway cutting is a very obvious example.

A photograph in the Bristol museum shows Selley probably at Sea Mills in the mid 1930s (Fig. 1). A press cutting refers to him being given permission by Bristol City Council to dig there at that time, when he would have been in his early 80s. The general opinion is that the excavation is of a shop front and not of the villa that Selley thought he had found many years previously. This is typical of the tantalizing evidence from much of the Selley material: a photograph of an archaeological site without any record of the event. Selley does, however, mention in his diary for 1925 that men were working at the Roman site and he used the term excavation.

There is little evidence to show that Selley made a significant contribution to advancing our archaeological or historical knowledge of the Sea Mills area. The existence of Roman settlement had been known for centuries. His artefacts illustrate the type of material that would come from a small and growing port but, interesting as the objects may be, they do not give any particular insight into the Roman site.

Selley was not the only person acquiring objects from this area and period. In his life three excavations took place at *Abona* and artefacts were found within the context of a professional dig. It could be argued that Selley undermined these explorations by removing finds. However value lies in the fact that they survive in a museum collection when perhaps they might have been destroyed.

The retrieval of a few flints tools led Selley to write 'Found well worked flint tools on Roman site...fine barb arrows found some years ago on same site now at Cambridge. It shows the field was occupied in Neolithic time before Roman use'. This is in fact quite a rare comment by Selley. Usually he makes no analysis of the significance of his 'finds'. These flint tools were of a type in use for at least 2,000 years. Each one he found could have been lost or discarded over a very long period. Rather than indicating occupation, they may be evidence for hunters passing through from time to time.

There is no direct evidence from Selley's diaries and letters to show that he had any great interest in the relevance of the artefacts he collected to the archaeology and history of the local area. In reality his collection now forms part of the general body of evidence for the accepted archaeological picture of the Shirehampton area without radically adding to or altering it in any way.

The Collection of Flints

A wooden cabinet in the archaeological store at the Bristol museum houses stone tools collected by Selley (Fig. 2), the vast majority being flints from the Mendip Hills and adjacent areas. In total there are about 3,800 pieces, of which over 90 per cent are scrapers. There are a few axes, burins



Fig. 1. A.J. Selley at Sea Mills probably in the mid 1930s.

and microliths. All the artefacts are numbered and registered in bound volumes and stored in plastic bags. A number are referred to or even illustrated in Selley's diaries (Fig. 3).

Many of the stone tools in the collection are identified to a parish or place on or around the Mendip Hills. Some of the finds have been narrowed down to a much smaller area such as a field or lane. These locations are marked on ten hard-backed maps that form part of the archive in the museum. The maps are on a scale of about two inches to the mile and date probably from the 1930s. It is possible but not certain that the information came from Selley's diaries. There are some notes lodged with the collection on finds from the Charterhouse area. These were compiled by a volunteer who it seems went through the diaries noting any reference to Charterhouse. These notes are useful as they record farms Selley visited and information such as (6 August 1904) 'Another day at the barrow on Wellington farm...arrow same as the one at the museum found on the first opening'.

In his diaries Selley records usually the general, and only occasionally a more precise, area he visited and his finds. He notes the weather and provided some sketches of finds. There are the odd comments about going to church, meeting other collectors and buying and selling but the diaries are by no means a personal social record. They are mainly a record of his field walking or his other methods of acquiring artefacts.

His field walking strategy is not described in detail.⁸ It appears he was interested in ploughed fields, other places that had been disturbed and barrows. He walked a field in two directions. Dry

8. Selley gives an insight into his views and collecting in an undated and unsigned hand-written text, in the Bristol museum archives, entitled 'A Day's Prehistorical Hunt on the Mendips'.



Fig. 2. Cabinet at Bristol museum housing stone tools collected by A.J. Selley.

days or bright sunlight made finding difficult. He had his favourite sites and returned to them over a forty year period. Although he was no doubt helped by the fact that no natural flint occurs on the Mendips he clearly was highly skilled at finding stone tools.

Selley walked in many areas he associated with barrows, tumuli and routes of Roman roads. He either used maps (the hard-backed maps in the archive do not indicate barrows or tumuli) or he found these areas by experience. Visits today to some of the areas Selley mentions indicates that there may have been more ploughing in his time. Currently many fields are grazed or set aside under agricultural agreements. Walking these fields does not enable serious opportunities to locate finds.

Today many of the sites have no visible features and are not marked on OS maps. It is not known whether features visible in Selley's day are now ploughed out. However, from Selley's records it is possible to rediscover sites that are perhaps now unknown. At Wellington Farm in Priddy there is no indication of a barrow on the OS map but Selley described opening a barrow and recorded as a good field with many arrows there.

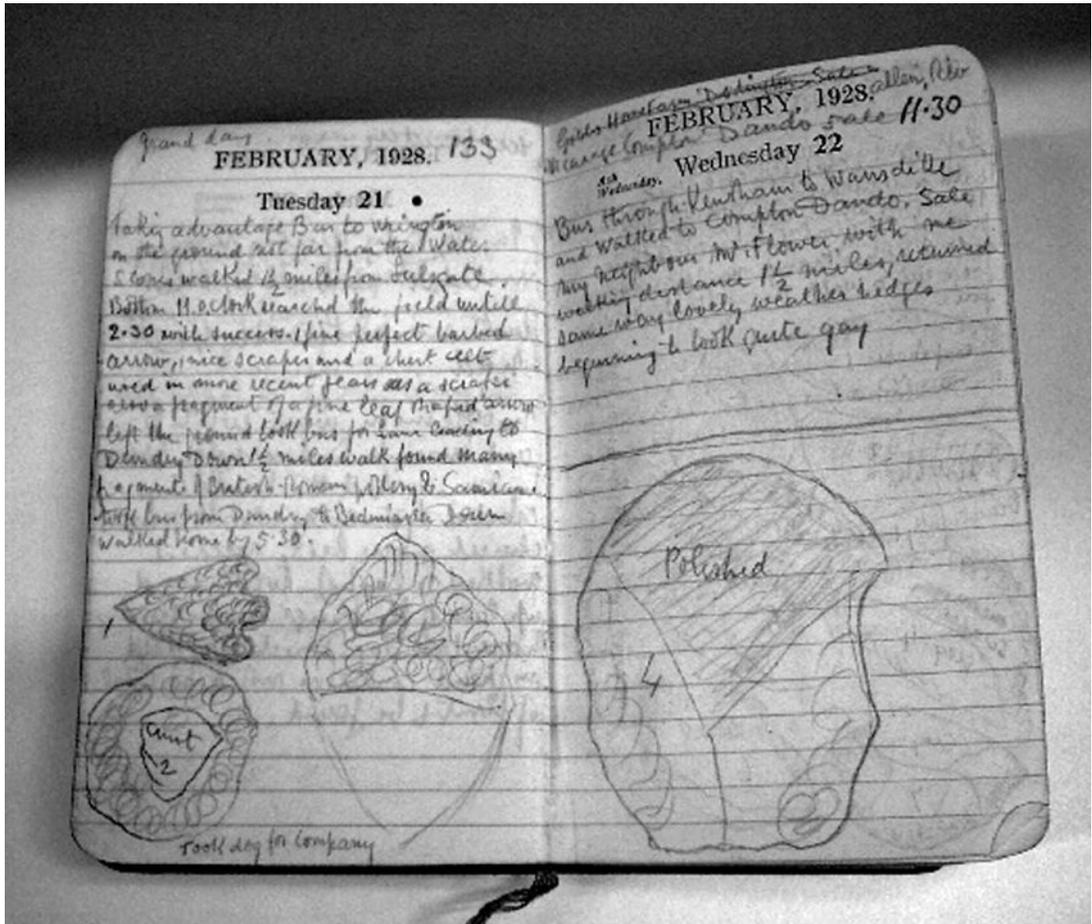


Fig. 3. Entries for 21 and 22 February 1928 in A.J. Selley's diaries.

In one entry in his diary he recorded that at the end of a field walk on leaving the site he discarded at the gate poor specimens or ones he had doubts about. It is hoped that others have not interpreted Selley's spoil heap as a prehistoric one!

This author's research the arrowheads from the Mendip Hills and surrounding areas were singled out for scrutiny because they are manageable in number and easily identified. They represent over 95 per cent of the arrows in the collection. In all there are approximately 263 arrowheads in the collection. There is a small discrepancy between the number in the museum register and the number in store or on display.

In the collection all the arrowheads are numbered and registered with the letter F or Fb as a prefix. This process dates back to 1915. All the Fs have a card that usually records a description, the location of the find, parish and sometimes a grid reference, how the object was acquired and any general cross reference to a description in Selley's diaries. The Fbs are recorded in the main register but many of them have no accompanying card but only a brief description on the plastic bags in which they are kept. Some of the finds have no given location and for a few the

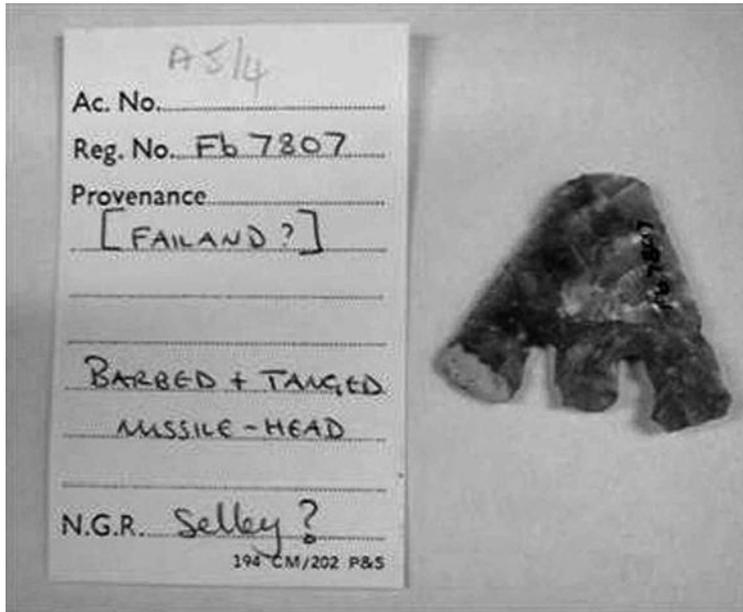


Fig. 4. Arrowhead Fb 7807.

identification is tenuous (see Fig. 4). For a number from outside the Mendips or surrounding area the place recorded cannot be identified. The 22 flints on display represent a selection from the 'Selley Collection'.

There is no way of ascertaining the actual range of Selley's collecting. Presumably, as now, many areas would not have been suitable for field walking, the soil not being sufficiently exposed except around ditches, rabbit warrens and scuffed areas. Selley mainly depended on searching ploughed fields. His searches were perhaps confined to one per cent of the land. If he found 5,000 flints and we assume that he had a ten per cent success rate it could be speculated that at least 500,000 flints or more are scattered over the areas detailed. However this has to be put in perspective. As the flints span a period of about 2,000 years the discard of even a small number each year would soon mount to a large total.

Selley noted a number of sites that may be of particular interest to researchers. He locates barrows that have long since disappeared. One site where he found many artefacts he associated with fighting. It may be worth investigation. The condition of a site, at OS Nat. Grid ST 505558, he described as the 'most interesting field in Mendips' is hardly conducive to field walking now.

Some of the arrowheads in the collection are of exceptional quality and are fine examples of their type. One of the celts is also a fine example. The collection is probably the most extensive assemblage of arrowheads in the region and important evidence for future research. There is no record of any study of the remaining tools in the collection, among which are many good flints (see Figs. 5 and 6). The sheer volume can be disconcerting. It may be possible that some patterns can be established from the types and distribution.

The collection does create frustration. Locations are poorly recorded and no contexts are described. It may not be possible to determine whether some of the cores, flakes, tools and arrowheads could be from a specific location that might indicate settlement. The poor recording



Fig. 5. Flint F2939 from Portbury.



Fig. 6. Flint axe F2487 found by A.J. Selley on the Mendips near Barrow in 1912 or 1913.

makes it hard to make links with other records of prehistoric activity in the Mendips. What can be said is that Selley's finds add to, and confirm, the prehistoric history of the Mendips and surrounding areas.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Selley the man has made a contribution to the history of archaeology. There were (or are) perhaps many 'Selleys', although perhaps not as active as their namesake, who have delved, found, collected and purloined artefacts. What makes Alfred Jowett Selley somewhat different is that, unlike the majority of his contemporaries, he was working-class man. Most importantly the notes he kept, inadequate as they are, enhance and contribute to the value of his stone tools collection. There remains much scope for further investigation.

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