

A Neolithic Flint Axe from Poole Keynes, Gloucestershire

By TIMOTHY DARVILL

In June 1984 a complete Neolithic flint axe was found by Mr Anthony Edmondson at Friday Island within what is now the Somerford Lakes Reserve, Poole Keynes, at approximately SU 009948. The axe was discovered while digging gravel ballast and loading a dumper with a mechanical excavator; fortuitously, it was spotted before being covered with further ballast. The find was reported to the Corinium Museum in Cirencester who made the initial identification (CM ID 32) and published a brief note on the discovery (Clews 1985). This short report provides further details of the find and sets it within a wider context.

The Poole Keynes axe (Fig. 1) was manufactured from fairly coarse grey flint of the kind widely available across the Wessex chalkland. Remnant cortex on the butt and near the blade suggest derivation from a small elongated nodule. A milky-white patina with localized areas of iron-staining covers the surface of the implement. The basic form was achieved by flaking, finished off by grinding and polishing to produce a curved blade, a smoothed body, and slight side facets. Apart from the area of the blade, extensive traces of the original flake scars can be seen across the body of the axe. Striations on the polished sections suggest that the final treatment was done longitudinally. At least seven flake beds can be seen cutting through the finished surface – mainly around the butt, at the waist, and on the blade – which being well patinated suggests ancient damage caused by the use of the implement as a tool. A large unpatinated flake-scar with a hinge-fracture on the side of the blade indicates relatively recent damage caused by a sharp blow to the side of the piece such as might occur during ploughing or earthmoving operations.

The axe is slightly unusual in form with a broad butt, curved blade, curved sides, slight facets, and a maximum width well behind the blade. In its present surviving state it has a maximum of length of 120.3mm, a maximum width of 51.2mm, and a maximum thickness of 27.3mm. It weighs 200.13g. The opposed blade and butt, and the symmetrical longitudinal profile, suggests that the implement was mounted perpendicular to the haft in the traditional manner of an axe. Its size and finish suggests it was a functional tool rather than a ceremonial piece. Damage in the centre of the sides indicate that it was mounted in a wooden haft of the kind known from waterlogged contexts elsewhere in Britain (Pryor 1998, 150–1). On typological grounds it can be dated to the fourth or early third millennium BC. Similar flint axeheads have been found in or beside the River Thames at Twickenham, Isleworth, Kingston, Hampton Court, and Mapledurham (Adkins and Jackson 1978, nos.13, 15, 17–19). A flaked and polished axe from Lechlade (Darvill 1985) has a more trapezoidal form but together with the other examples suggests a light scatter of broadly similar implements along the middle and upper Thames Valley. On the Cotswolds and in the adjacent Severn Valley axeheads of similar form have been found at Condicote, Gloucester, and Brockworth, and it is notable that within this environment about 6 per cent of all the flint axes recorded by Alan Tyler were flaked and ground (Tyler 1976, 2).

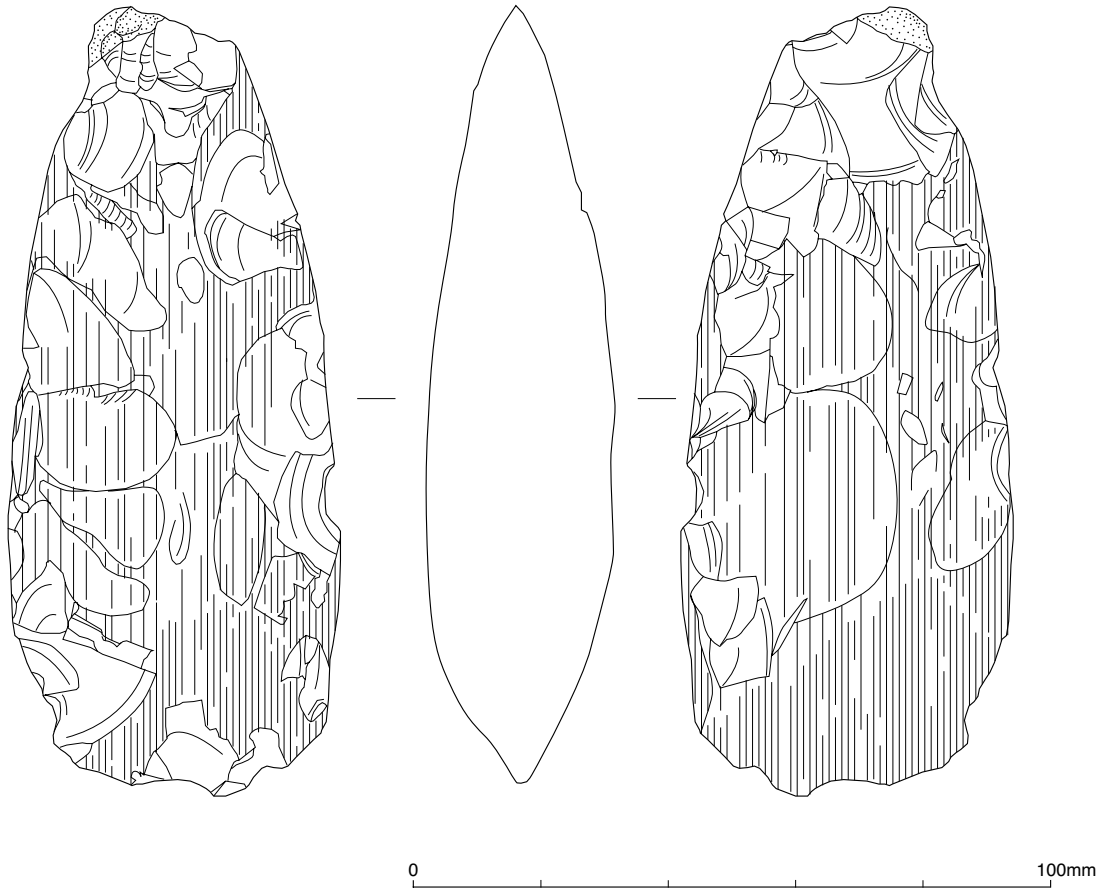


Fig. 1. Flint axe from Poole Keynes, Gloucestershire (Drawing by Lorna Gray, Cotswold Archaeology)

Discussion

The Poole Keynes axe derives from the interfluvial area between the River Thames and the Flagham Brook. It is an area that would have been attractive for early occupation but was not archaeologically investigated prior to gravel extraction. Retrospective analysis of aerial photographs reveals a few crop-marks suggestive of small enclosures, trackways, and field boundaries, and a scatter of Romano-British finds has also been recorded from the area (RCHME 1976, 94; Leech 1977, Map 2). Little can therefore be said about the archaeological context of the Poole Keynes axe beyond speculating that it derived from an unrecognized cut feature of some kind. However, the object itself is typical of a relatively small class of distinctive flaked and polished axes and confirms activity and deposition in this sector of the upper Thames landscape during the fourth or early third millennium BC. Unusually, this example displays a small area of cortex at the butt end, a trait that Rudebeck (1998) suggests may be a sign not only of the nature and source of the flint used but also of the skill of the flintworker in using the full extent of the selected nodule in the production of the axe.

Acknowledgements

Access to the axe for recording, description and drawing was facilitated by Leslie Jones with the kind permission of its owner Anthony Edmondson who retains the piece. The drawing was made by Lorna Gray through the generosity of Cotswold Archaeology.

Bibliography

- Adkins, R. and Jackson, R., 1978. *Neolithic and stone flint axes from the River Thames. An illustrated corpus* (British Museum Occasional Paper 1, London).
- Clews, S., 1985. 'Poole Keynes, Somerford Lakes Reserve'. *Trans. BGAS* 103, 236.
- Darvill, T., 1985. 'A Neolithic flint axe from Lechlade'. *Trans. BGAS* 103, 207–9.
- Leech, R., 1977. *The Upper Thames valley in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. An archaeological survey of the river gravels* (Committee for Rescue Archaeology in Avon, Gloucestershire and Somerset Survey 4, Bristol).
- Pryor, F., 1998. *Etton. Excavations at a Neolithic causewayed enclosure near Maxey Cambridgeshire, 1982–7* (English Heritage Archaeological Report 18, London).
- RCHME [Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England)], 1976. *Ancient and historical monuments in the County of Gloucester. Volume I: Iron Age and Romano-British monuments in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds* (HMSO, London).
- Rudebeck, E., 1998. 'Flint extraction, axe offering, and the value of cortex', in M. Edmunds and C. Richards (eds.), *Understanding the Neolithic of north-western Europe* (Cruithne Press, Glasgow), 312–28.
- Tyler, A., 1976. *Neolithic flint axes from the Cotswold Hills* (BAR British Series 25, Oxford).