

Lithic finds, Newport 1991.

Commentary

Introduction: these finds were made during excavations in 1991 by the Dyfed Archaeological Trust in advance of the building of a school at Long Street, Newport (Murphy 1994). They comprise a total of 171 items including a transversely sharpened *tranchet* axehead of igneous stone, a drawing of which was published in 2004 (David and Walker 2004, fig 17.8, p 310). The following notes provide further information on this and the other lithic material recovered.

Context: All the finds, except a microlith recovered from the top of the subsoil, were residual in topsoil or medieval or post-medieval contexts. The axehead was found in a medieval soil. Approximately half of all the pieces (51.5%) are unmodified flints that presumably once formed a part of naturally-occurring clasts in the local soils. Some of these may have been tested by flaking, or be other fragments of debitage, but reliable discrimination between deliberate and accidental breakage is not always possible so a few natural items may have been mis-identified as artefacts and *vice versa*.

Raw materials and condition: of the 83 pieces believed to be artefactual most are of flint of a variety of textures, conditions and colours typical of the mixture of locally occurring drift-derived material available for example in topsoil, stream beds and on beaches. A single flaked cobble of Greensand chert would have been similarly sourced. Yellow, brown and reddish colours predominate over greyer material, which is mostly opaque and unpatinated. A few pieces, including one of the cores, have been burnt. There are four items of rhyolitic-type rock: the *tranchet* axehead, and three flakes. Two of the latter, from a medieval soil (context 200), are probably from the same core but do not re-fit; the third is a very large weathered flake (135mm x 47mm x 25mm), out of character with the rest of the material and recorded as unstratified.

Technology and debitage: nearly all the artefacts are debitage: flakes, with a few blades, bladelets, various fragments, cores, and flaked cobbles (see Table 1). The associated technology is best signified by the 7 cores (average length or 'height' of 32.7mm), mostly of quite crude platform type, derived from small water-worn cobbles (Figure 1, 1-2). All stages of primary through to tertiary reduction are represented. Detachment with a hard hammer is evident in most instances, although occasional use of a softer hammer is possible. Whilst such features are consistent with Mesolithic reduction technology, it is likely also to be a feature of later activity. At least one splintered pebble (Figure 1, 3) is representative of a hammer-and-anvil (bipolar) technology associated in west Wales with Neolithic and especially Bronze Age activity (David, 2017-18).

Tools: The only clearly diagnostic tools are the *tranchet* axehead and the microlith. Although not petrologically identified, the axehead (122mm x 44 mm x 27mm) is made from fragment of a fine-grained igneous rock such as a rhyolite, the original surfaces of which survive at the butt end and on the mid-portion of one face (Figure 2). These suggest that the raw material was obtained either as an uneroded clast from a secondary deposit, or sourced directly from the parent material. The piece has been neatly shaped by bifacial flaking along each flank, and the blade is defined by a highly characteristic transverse removal. The flake beds and ridges overall are crisply defined and unworn (to the naked eye); this contrasts with the condition of the similarly-sized but much more weathered flake of rhyolite also from the site (see above). No axe-sharpening or thinning flakes were found.

The microlith (Figure 1, 8) is a simple obliquely backed point of a shape and dimensions (36.8mm x 9.4mm) typical of Early Mesolithic assemblages throughout Britain. No micro-burins were found, although the proximal end of a notched and broken blade may be a 'miss-hit' (Figure 1, 7).

None of the other tools are chronologically diagnostic (Figure 1). They include a number of flakes and a blade with signs of edge damage or use, and a flake with informal retouch. A further flake of rectangular outline has retouch and use-wear around one end and is classified here as a possible scraper, although it lacks the usual convex working edge of most scrapers (Figure 1, 4).

Summary discussion: This very small and heterogenous collection, mostly of rather poor quality debitage and miscellaneous items of indeterminate affiliation, includes elements that probably date widely between the Mesolithic and the Bronze Age.

It will be no surprise that Neolithic and/or Bronze Age activity is represented, given the density of find-spots and monuments of this age in the immediate locality, both near the coast and on the adjacent slopes and tops of Preseli. Comparable finds were made only about 300m away during the excavation of Carreg Coitan Arthur (Healey 2012), and assemblages with Bronze Age (bipolar) technology have also been identified to the west of Parrog (at SN 0445 3975) and at Cwm Rhigian near the Cerrig-y-Gof burial chambers (SN 036 392), some 2km to the west. Finds of bipolar material have also been made at locations just across the estuary (SN 05408 40123; SN 05480 40103; SN 06025 39738; SN 06112 39715 and SN 06214 39637: Children and Nash 2008, 13, 36; G. Nash pers. comm.).

The likelihood of Mesolithic activity at Newport is also unsurprising given the favourable topography, and the finds of a few blades and cores from below peat just ~500m to the east near Traeth Mawr bridge (Thomas 1923; Rees 1973). This latter collection apparently included a single narrow-blade microlith and may therefore be later Mesolithic although this remains unconfirmed (Lewis 1992). Whilst there are no microliths amongst the lithic collections made by George Nash from the north side of the estuary, referred to above, the presence of distinctive platform cores and debitage suggests that Mesolithic activity is represented here too.

The striking feature of the collection under current discussion, however, is the presence of two distinctively early Mesolithic forms: the *tranchet* axehead and the obliquely backed point. Both have exact parallels on Early Mesolithic sites of c 8,500 cal BC in west Wales, at the Nab Head Site I and at Daylight Rock, Caldey Island, both in Pembrokeshire. In north Wales there are clear typological parallels also with material excavated at Aberffraw on Anglesey, and from Rhuddlan, Denbighshire. Several further undated Welsh assemblages that include one or both types are also confidently assumed to belong in the same broad family of Early Mesolithic sites – for example at Aberystwyth and at other locations in south and west Wales (Thomas and Dudleyke 1925; David 2007, 2020; David *et al.* 2015; Walker and Davis, forthcoming).

On their own, both these Early Mesolithic finds from Newport could be casual losses in the landscape, but more settled and *in situ* activity may be represented. This possibility is strengthened by the find of another distinctively early microlith amongst the mixed assemblage from the excavation at Carreg Coitan (Healey 2012, figs 36, 38), and both sites also include blades which, with the larger platform cores, might be contemporary. A site or sites here would have advantageously looked northwards over the Nevern river valley, with access to a coast and estuary some kilometres distant from the present-day shoreline. The valley would also have been allowed ingress to the Preseli hinterland where recently obtained radiocarbon determinations infer tantalizingly unspecified activity throughout much of the Mesolithic (Darvill and Wainwright 2014; Parker Pearson *et al.* 2015, 2019). The use of local igneous rock for *tranchet* axehead manufacture in areas where flint cobbles were of inadequate size demonstrates that alternative rock types, and perhaps sources, were recognised and exploited well before the Neolithic.

North Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion have seen relatively little reconnaissance for lithic material compared to other parts of the Welsh periphery, yet there is no reason to doubt that pre-Neolithic exploitation will have been any less intense here than it has been shown to be elsewhere.

Table 1: summary composition

Debitage	Flakes	35
	Blades	6
	Bladelets	3
	Fragments	13
	Platform cores	7
	Bipolar/scalar pieces	2
	Flaked pebbles	7
Tools	Utilised flakes	4
	Utilised blade	1
	Retouched flake	1
	Retouched blade frag	1
	Microlith	1
	Scraper?	1
	Tranchet axehead	1
Total		83
Patinated		1
Burnt		5
Greensand chert		1
'rhyolite'		4
Non-artefactual 'natural'		88

Figure 1: tranchet axehead: see below

Figure 2: selected flint artefacts: see below

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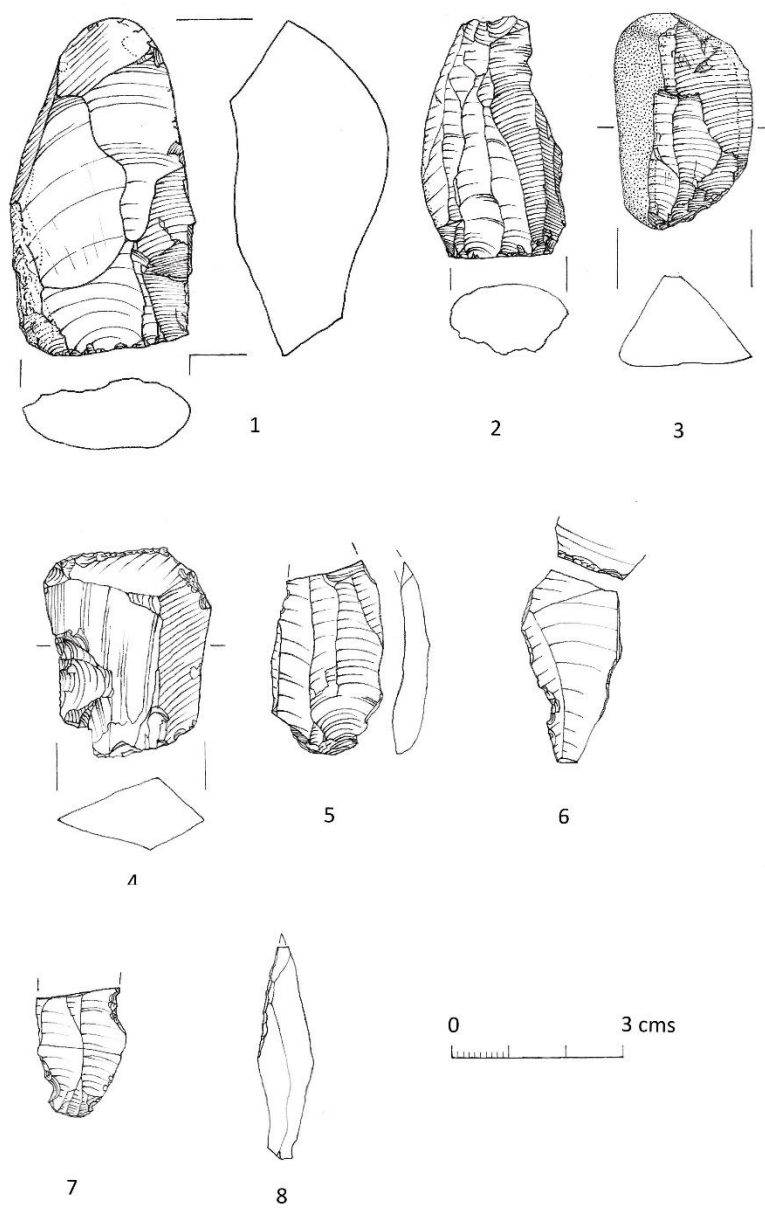


Figure 1: 1-2 (500, 161): platform cores; 3 (190): bipolar core; 4 (409): retouched flake or scraper? 5 (161): broken blade; 6 (011): retouched flake; 7 (384): retouched blade fragment, or miss-hit? 8 (259): obliquely backed point.

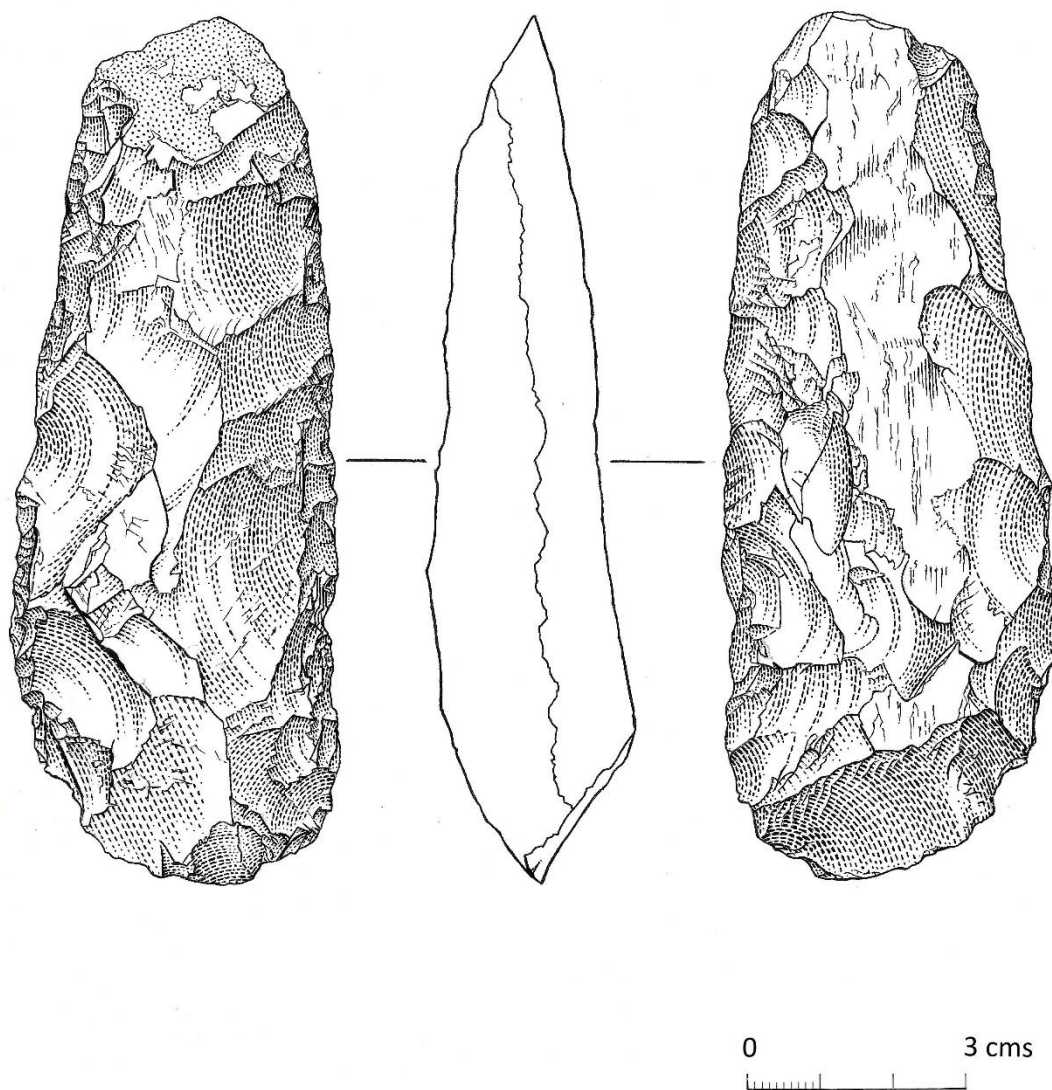


Figure 2: Tranchet axehead of ?rhyolite (3010, context 162). Drawing by Hazel Martingell.