

# MEDWAY VALLEY PALAEOLITHIC PROJECT FINAL REPORT:

## THE PALAEOLITHIC RESOURCE IN THE MEDWAY GRAVELS

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### SUMMARY

At its heart the *Medway Valley Palaeolithic Project* (MVPP) is about aiding the curatorial community in managing the Lower/Middle Palaeolithic resource contained in the aggregate extraction landscape. The project was implemented in the Medway region, but many of its methods and outcomes are directly transferable to the wider aggregate resource. Within the context of this broad goal, the project included:

- Development of a Medway region *Palaeolithic Research Framework*, incorporating (a) an integrated chronological and stratigraphic framework for sand/gravel aggregate deposits, (b) a regional framework of cultural change/patterning and hominid settlement history and (c) regional research priorities
- Characterisation and predictive modeling of the Palaeolithic resource in the Medway region, identification of zones of significance and research priorities
- Specification of appropriate methods for evaluation/excavation of Palaeolithic remains within different zones of the Medway Palaeolithic resource
- Enhancement of Palaeolithic SMR datasets in the Medway region

The MVPP has built on previous work, in particular the *Southern Rivers Palaeolithic Project* (SRPP) and *The English Rivers Palaeolithic Survey* (TERPS) in the 1990s, and the *Thames Estuary Survey of Mineral Extraction Sites* (TESMES). These projects were essentially about collating known information on Palaeolithic find-spots, and relating them to existing British Geological Survey (BGS) mapping.

The MVPP built on this work in three main directions. Firstly, fieldwork was carried out to validate and develop the essential chrono-stratigraphic framework (Fig. 1). Current geological attribution of most Pleistocene aggregate deposits is highly suspect, with inconsistencies between adjacent map-sheets and major problems of correlation between more widely separated groups of deposits. The fieldwork focused on dating, environmental sampling and artefact recovery.

Secondly, the MVPP has involved a more detailed analysis of previous Palaeolithic finds from aggregate deposits in the study region, including: recording of typology and condition and reviewing provenance information. These data have contributed to

assessing the significance of surviving aggregate bodies, as well as in constructing a regional framework of Palaeolithic occupation and cultural change.

Thirdly, while previous projects have generally produced relevant information from which to develop a predictive model, this step has not yet been taken. The MVPP has combined collation and analysis of findspot information with better understanding of the Pleistocene framework to, for the first time, generate a GIS *Palaeolithic Resource Predictive Model* that both characterises the Palaeolithic resource and predicts zones of higher interest and significance. This model (Section 7 of the report) is perhaps the most important product of MVPP, not so much in itself, but as a starting point for a future dynamic resource, that can predict areas of interest based on algorithms applied to relatively simple raw data.

In course of addressing these core curatorial objectives, MVPP has also contributed to a number of national and regional Palaeolithic research priorities. These primarily concern developing the framework of cultural change and settlement history in the Medway region, and comparing/contrasting this with that of other parts of southeast England. In addition, work has been carried out that has enhanced understanding of a number of key sites; in particular: (a) Cuxton in Kent, where we have done new dating analyses, and recovered important new finds; and (b) Westcliff High School for Girls, in Southend, Essex, where we have identified lithic artefactual evidence of pre-Anglian hominin presence.

The Cuxton site has been reliably dated by OSL to *c.* 230,000 BP (the start of Marine Isotope Stage 7), making it the youngest site in the country with its almost exclusively handaxe-focused material culture. In addition, we recovered at Cuxton, immediately beside each other and in the same specific archaeological level, two magnificent specimens of contrasting types of handaxe — a cleaver and a ficron (Fig. 2). Confirmation of (a) the deliberate manufacture of specific types of handaxe, and (b) the co-occurrence of contrasting types within the same material cultural tradition, has a number of implications for our thinking about the cognitive capabilities of these early hominins.

In marked contrast to the spectacular finds at Cuxton, but no less important, a single small flint waste flake was recovered by MVPP sieving of Clinch Street/Canewdon Gravel at Westcliff High School for Girls (Fig. 3). This gravel is, however, dated to *c.* 600,000 BP, before the Anglian glaciation, and thus this one unprepossessing piece of flint is the earliest evidence of hominin presence in Essex or Kent.

The project also recognised the need to promote understanding and appreciation of aggregates archaeology to the widest possible audience beyond the curatorial and professional archaeological constituency, and included a number of initiatives aimed at achieving this, including a visit and handling session at Aylesford County Primary School (Fig. 4).

**Figure 1.** MVPP fieldwork at Barling Gravel Pit (Essex)



**Figure 2.** Ficron handaxe from MVPP fieldwork at Cuxton (Kent); at 307 mm long, this is the second longest handaxe ever found in Britain



**Figure 3.** Flake from pre-Anglian gravels (Canewdon/Clinch Street Gravel) found during MVPP fieldwork at Westcliff High School for Girls (WHSG 05, test pit 1), Southend (Essex)



**Figure 4.** Pupils from Aylesford County Primary School (Kent) enjoy an introduction to Palaeolithic archaeology and the sand/gravel aggregate resource in their neighbourhood

