# Fieldwalking on Spelsburydown and in the Chadlington Area

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#### SUMMARY

Systematic fieldwalking in a small area of the Oxfordshire Cotswolds has indicated Mesolithic and Bronze Age occupation near a pair of round barrows on Spelsburydown, and probable Bronze Age occupation in the Evenlode valley; distribution of Roman pottery is also mapped. Attention is drawn to the nature of the flint artefacts (which are characteristically small and often reworked) in an area lacking a readily available source of good quality flint. Extensive systematic fieldwalking is advocated in order to establish broad patterns of prehistoric settlement.

# SPELSBURYDOWN

#### INTRODUCTION

Spelsburydown lies in the Cotswolds north of Spelsbury village, some 12 km. NW. of Woodstock and 6km. SE. of Chipping Norton. The field (Grid Ref. centred on SP351236) lies at between approximately 170–180m. above O.D. on a south-facing slope of the Oolitic Limestone ridge between the rivers Glyme to the north and Evenlode in the south (Fig. 1).

The ridge itself was probably an important routeway in prehistoric times, and a ridgeway track, known as the 'Mereway', is traceable running NW. towards the Cotswold scarp in the vicinity of the Rollright Stones. Part of this routeway, in the form of the modern B4026, forms the NE. boundary of the field walked.

The prehistory of the area is not well-known, though Neolithic occupation is attested to by the remains of a probable chambered tomb near Enstone (the 'Hoar Stone' c. SP37772375) and a possible one at Lidstone (now demolished). The standing stone at Taston and the 'Hawk Stone' (SP33922395) are also presumably Neolithic or Bronze Age in date.

There are three extant though heavily ploughed round barrows on the ridge. Two of these, now no more than 0.5m. high, lie in the field walked, which is called 'Lower Disslings'.<sup>1</sup> The other lies 400m. to the north at the edge of Round Hill Field. Both these fieldnames are locally significant, and in this connection it is interesting to note a symmetry of field names NW. of Old Chalford where 'Lower Ditchlings' or 'Lower Distins' (SP337258) and 'Round Hill' (SP340262) fields were the sites of barrows levelled in the 19th century.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Information from the Sites and Monuments Record Card in the County Museum, Woodstock (PRNs 1564 and 2292), though the source is not given. The field is also called 'Rug Piece' (R.T. Lattey (ed.), 'Field Names of Enstone and Little Tew Parishes, Oxfordshire' *Oxoniensia*, xvii-xviii (1952–3), 165).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> V.C.H. Oxon. i. 243.





Fig. 1. Spelsburydown and Chadlington: location of area walked.



Fig. 2. Field D: total flint distribution; core distribution.

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#### THE SURVEY

The surface collection project had the limited aim of trying to establish the nature of prehistoric occupation in the proximity of the barrows, and in particular whether the barrows could be identified as the focus of Bronze Age settlement. An intensive collection of flint artefacts and the knapping debris was made from approximately half the field (which was all that could be covered with the time and manpower available). The area was divided into 50m. grid squares for purposes of recording, and individual finds were plotted (Fig. 2). The collection was made with the aid of a small number of experienced field archaeologists between November 1983 and March 1984. Field conditions varied somewhat, though no work was done in rain or poor visibility.

Roman pottery was also collected, and for future reference is mapped in Fig. 6.

#### RESULTS

Altogether 883 flints were collected from the area walked (7.5 ha.). Of these 36 (4 per cent) were retouched pieces, 37 (4.2 per cent) were cores, 538 (61 per cent) were flakes and blades, and 265 (30 per cent) were 'rough waste'.

# 1. Flakes and Blades

Only 178 (33 per cent) of the flakes and blades were complete, and their lengths, breadths, and breadth:length ratios were calculated and are shown in histogram form (Fig. 3 top). Of immediate note is the small size of the flakes, nearly 50 per cent of which are between 1 and 2cm. long. The absence of large flakes can be partially explained as a characteristic of the flint-working of the area, but it is also related to the fragmentary nature of the surviving surface material. As regards the breadth:length ratios, attention should be drawn to the small number of true blades (B:L ratio less than 2:5) and blade-like forms (B:L ratio 2:5 -3:5), some of which, for reasons given below, are thought to belong to a Mesolithic occupation.

To test an initial impression of a greater number of blades in the lower part of the field, the material, both complete and broken, was divided into the categories 'Flakes' and 'Blades', where 'Blades' were more generally defined as parallel-sided flakes which were either measurably more than twice as long as they were broad, or which could reasonably be assumed to have been so when complete. An indeterminate 'Flake/Blade' category was also included. Squares were amalgamated into groups (see Fig. 3 Centre). It can be seen that, though the proportion of 'Blades' is never high, it is highest at the bottom of the field (Group 1) where they account for 15 per cent of the total waste material. This lends weight to the suggestion of a Mesolithic occupation towards the bottom of the field.

As a further test of whether chronological differences in the flintwork could be distinguished spatially, the flints were subjectively characterised as having light, medium



Fig. 3. Tabulation of flint data.

or heavy patination (with intermediate categories). Although individual flints cannot reliably be given a relative chronology through the degree of patination on them, it is probably valid to say that *on average* older flints will be more heavily patinated. The square groups 1, 2, 3 and 4 were again compared (Fig. 3 Bottom). The results show a progressive decrease towards the top of the field in the relative quantity of heavily-patinated flint, and an increase in the relative quantity of moderately-patinated flint (cf. Groups 1–3). The slight spatial variation in the degree of patination might be explained by field conditions, and this possibility, coupled with the high degree of subjectivity involved, means that no great weight can be attached to these observations. However, they are consistent with the idea of an earlier prehistoric occupation concentrated at the bottom of the field.

# 2. Cores

37 cores were recovered and were divided into the following categories: single-platform, multi-platform, flake-cores (i.e. flakes subsequently used as cores) and rough cores. The small size of cores, complementing the flake-size statistics, is particularly noticeable. This suggests that suitable material for knapping was not available in large quantities, an observation supported by the presence of reused cores (e.g. Fig. 4.2 and 4.3) and relatively large numbers of flake-cores (e.g. Fig. 4.5). It is, however, difficult to know what these



Fig. 4. Cores. Scale 1:2.



Fig. 5. Implements. Scale 1:2 (upper), 1:1 (lower).

small removals were being used for. The presence of a heavily worn single platform core showing blade-removals (Fig. 4.1) supports the suggestion of some sort of occupation in the Mesolithic period.

### 3. Implements

36 implements were collected. The majority were *scrapers*, all of which can be classified as end scrapers though there was some variation in the form they took. A large number were produced on thick flakes (e.g. Figs. 5.1 - 5.6), one (Fig. 5.5) having lightly patinated retouch on a heavily patinated flake indicating the reuse of already worked material.

There were three examples of small thin scrapers (Figs. 5.9 - 5.11), two 'pointed' scrapers (Figs. 5.7 and 5.8) and three miscellaneous ones.

Four complete or broken *barbed-and-tanged arrowheads* were found (Figs. 5.12 - 5.15). These are the only artefacts diagnostic of the Bronze Age.

There was just one unilaterally steeply retouched piece, probably a crude *back-blunted knife*. It is likely that a number of the *miscellaneous pieces* also functioned as cutting implements.

There were five *microliths*, the complete examples of which are illustrated (Figs. 5.16 - 5.18). The quantity is very small and scattered, but indicates a light Mesolithic occupation already suggested by the small blade element in the waste assemblage and the presence of a blade-core.

## Distribution (Fig. 6)

The small quantity and range of implements cannot be taken to indicate a permanent occupation on Spelsburydown at any time in prehistory. A degree of activity in the Bronze Age, probably only of a temporary nature, is indicated by the barbed-and-tanged arrowheads, whose distribution towards the upper end of the field but at a slight distance from the barrow (with which they are presumably contemporary) is similar to the distribution of implements generally. The only discrete area of Bronze Age occupation identifiable is in square H3, where a concentration of struck flint included a barbed-and-tanged arrowhead, two scrapers and two other retouched pieces. Otherwise there is only a diffuse scatter of retouched flint, not necessarily all Bronze Age in date.

#### THE FLINTS

#### Type

Of the 883 pieces of flint recovered, 182 (10.6 per cent) were cortical. From an examination of these pieces it is apparent that both nodular and gravel-derived flint were used. There is no good source of flint in the immediate vicinity of Spelsburydown; the most likely souce of pebble-flint would have been the gravels of the Evenlode valley to the south. Nodular flint may well have been obtained from the boulder-clay around Moreton-in-the-Marsh about 17km. to the NW. beyond the Cotswold scarp, but this is by no means certain. The lack of good, immediately available raw material must have been the major factor influencing the small size of the flint pieces found.



Fig. 6. Field D: distribution of implements; distribution of Roman pottery.

# THE CHADLINGTON AREA, EVENLODE VALLEY

#### THE SURVEY

On completion of the Spelsburydown project, the second half of that field (Field D, Fig. 7) and three other fields near Chadlington (Fields A, B and C) were walked in a less intensive manner – in 20m. transects – and all finds plotted. The aim of the project was to put the original collection in a wider context; it was thought useful to contrast the type of occupation in the valley with that already found around the barrows on Spelsburydown.

Two of the fields (A and B, Fig. 7) lie on a gravel 'island' in the valley of the River Evenlode. Prehistoric use of the area is indicated by artefacts previously discovered during gravel quarrying. A fragment of polished stone axe of Cornish group 1 came from a quarry to the east of field A,<sup>3</sup> and what appears to have been a collared urn, inverted over a cremation, from a quarry to the west.<sup>4</sup> The third field (C) lies on the lower slopes of the Oolite just north of Eastend, Chadlington. All four fields are fairly level and were walked between October 1984 and March 1985 under a low winter wheat crop.

#### RESULTS

The results were plotted (see Fig. 7). The smallness of the sample makes any statistical analysis worthless, so comments will be restricted to general observations.

Flints were found in all fields, though none of the densities can be described as particularly high. The highest density was in D (one flint every 136m. or approximately 36 per ha.) where Bronze Age and Mesolithic occupation has already been established. Because of the different methods used in the two surveys in this field, the flint densities are difficult to compare.

The proportion of retouched pieces from field D is remarkably high (four out of 22). This compares with three out of 37 in fields A and B combined where there is a higher proportion of cores (seven out of 37). Perhaps this indicates that flint-knapping was more pronounced in the valley, using raw material chiefly derived from the gravels, whereas on Spelsburydown the principal activities involved the reworking of flakes.

The scatter of flints towards the bottom of field C may also suggest light occupation above the clay of the valley floor. However, the evidence is not very convincing and may rather be seen as 'background scatter'.

The contemporaneity of occupation in these areas cannot, of course, be demonstrated. The only chronologically diagnostic artefact was a broken barbed-and-tanged arrowhead from field A. For a similar reason Bronze Age occupation was inferred on Spelsburydown. The total absence of diagnostically Neolithic artefacts from any of these fields makes it reasonable to suppose that most of the occupation is Bronze Age, and presumably contemporary with the two barrows on Spelsburydown.

#### CONCLUSION

Results from fieldwalking on Spelsburydown showed one major concentration of flint towards the bottom centre of the field (Fig. 2). Though there is evidence of Mesolithic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> H.E. O'Neil, 'A Greenstone Axe from Dean, near Charlbury, Oxfordshire'. Oxoniensia, xxiv (1959), 102.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> E.T. Leeds, 'Two Saxon Cemeteries in North Oxfordshire.' Oxoniensia, v (1940). 24.



Fig. 7. Spelsburydown and Chadlington: flint distribution.

occupation in this area, in the form of bladelets and a blade-core, a paucity of microliths makes an occupation of any substance unlikely. There is no material diagnostic of the Neolithic (e.g. leaf-shaped or transverse arrowheads), and for this reason it may be assumed that most of the flint is associated with the Bronze Age occupation attested by the four barbed-and-tanged arrowheads.

This occupation shows a light and rather diffuse spatial pattern, except perhaps for one discrete cluster about 100m. SE of the barrow. Probably significantly, there is almost a complete absence of flint implements within about 30m. of the barrow (Fig. 6).

Both gravel flint and nodular flint were worked. The flint pieces were invariably very small, probably due to the nature and scarcity of raw material rather than to cultural preference. This would make cultural/chronological comparisons based on the size of artefacts of doubtful validity in this instance. The scarcity of raw material is also suggested by the re-use of flakes for both implements and cores, and by the reworking of discarded cores.

The limited quantity and range of flint implements does not suggest a permanent Bronze Age occupation on Spelsburydown, though the actual nature of the occupation cannot really be estimated without comparative studies in the Cotswold region. Results of fieldwalking in the Evenlode valley (Fig. 7) indicate that extensive transect walking would be a valid and useful method of approaching the problem. Here, light Bronze Age occupation is suggested on one of the gravel islands.