

## Report on The Victorian Discovery of Palaeolithic Southampton by Francis Wenban-Smith *et al.* Talk 8<sup>th</sup> February 2022

Francis introduced himself and two colleagues Wendy Stokes and Ally Hayes, of Bevois Mount History Group (who assisted with the research), showing a photo of excavations at Red Barns. He referred to a paper by William Dale, *Palaeolithic Implements of the Southampton Gravels*, published in 1898 by Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society (Dale was an early Secretary of the Society, until his death in 1924). In this paper Dale discusses the 19<sup>th</sup> century discovery of many hand axes from ancient gravel beds in the Southampton area, such as Highfield, Southampton Common, Shirley, Cofxord and Nursling; from which Francis quoted:

*“wherever the lower level is reached, implements will be found”* (Dale 1898).

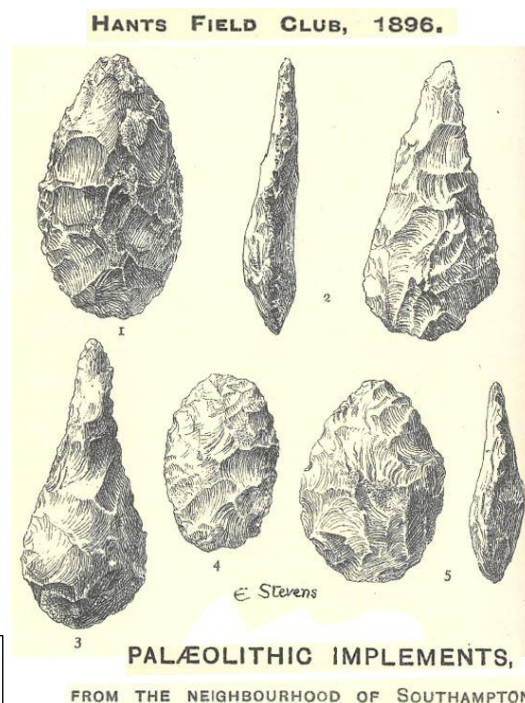


Illustration from the 1898 paper by William Dale.  
Hampshire Field Club Archives.

The Victorian era 1837 – 1901 (Queen Victoria’s 64-year reign) witnessed a scientific and social revolution, accompanied by a great expansion in education (enabling the rise of the middle classes). Meanwhile interest in Geology was developing as a discipline, and the concept of “Deep Time” gained acceptance as knowledge of past/early ice ages became more widespread. In 1860 the Hartley Institute was founded in Southampton and became an important focus for further education in the town.

The study of Geology leading to the understanding of ‘deep time’ was led by Swiss-born academic Louis Agassiz (1807 – 1873) who learned about the movement of glaciers in Switzerland and identified successive ‘Ice Ages’ which were later recognised in other areas of Europe, and in the British Isles. The concept of ‘glacial drift’ was used to describe the movement of rocks and unstratified gravel beds which marked the advance and retreat of glaciers during the Ice Ages. This was noted particularly in northern Europe and North America and gave rise to the idea of ‘Drift’, with glacial fields spread all over the earth. In 1859 Charles Darwin published *On The Origin of Species* which put forward a radical theory of evolution including studies of extinct Pleistocene megafauna. These ideas gave rise to questions concerning the Biblical account of the creation, and the issue of human antiquity with the possible co-existence of humans with animals which were now extinct.

Southampton is located on the spur of land between the rivers Test and Itchen, and the former ‘Solent River’ to the south flowing west – east, north of a chalk ridge between Hengistbury Head and the Isle of Wight. Within Southampton, a ridge of higher ground exists where the Avenue runs towards the south. Local Geology formed by the Test river

system with gravel terraces corresponding to successive glaciations is clearly visible in the lower Test valley but not so much marked in the lower Itchen valley, a less developed system. In the Solent River, gravel terraces are more associated with the chalk ridge to south: this was illustrated by Geological and topographical maps of the areas between Test and Itchen rivers and the Solent.

Watershed 1859 -61: Antiquarians John Evans and Joseph Prestwich visited a quarry at St Achuel, near Amiens, N France at the invitation of French amateur geologist Boucher de Perthes, where they confirmed the discovery of hand axes associated with the remains of extinct animal species. This was published by Evans at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries in London, when he asked why these types of artefact should not be found across the Channel in England, and identified areas where they were likely to be found. This was followed by an upsurge in exploration, often inspired by asking gravel diggers what they were finding; and it was reported that collectors from other areas such as Kent would pay for prehistoric tools found in Southampton's gravels.

From 1860s onwards a number of collectors became active in Southampton:

1862-66 Lt Col William Thompson Nicholls who came from a military background and served 25 years in India, when he retired to Southampton where he lived for 10 years. Nicholls (quoted by Dale 1900) – spoke to grave diggers and gravel workers about finding prehistoric flint tools (often referred to as 'palaeoliths'). He wrote about occasional finds of animal remains (eg an elephant molar, Swaythling) in association with tools. On leaving Southampton Nicholls donated his collection to the Hartley Institute.

James Brown: Paleoliths found in gravels at Hill Head (Rainbow Bar?), displayed at the Blackmore Museum.

A paper by Evans (1872) records the first specimens discovered at quarries on Southampton Common (Codrington 1870) – one in the area of the Old Cemetery, and others in the north part of the Common.

1860s/70s Mr William Read 'CE' (civil engineer), was the first person to find hand axes in Southampton, and showed Evans around on his visit to the town. He moved house several times while living in Southampton, and was listed in census records as 'Proprietor of Houses'.

William Erasmus Darwin, eldest son of Charles Darwin and his wife Emma. After studying at Cambridge University W E Darwin came to Southampton in the early 1860s, where he worked as a banker. He became a local councillor and magistrate, and was involved with the Hartley Institute. After the death of his wife he moved to London, and he died in 1914.

Numbers of 'palaeoliths' are reported from Highfield Pit: in Church Lane where a brook near Highfield church runs down to the River Itchen.

Also, the pit near St James Church, Shirley (Shirley Church Pit, now St James Park) and a pit known as 'Mousehole Pit' (Mousehole Lane, now Oakley Road).

Withed Wood or Harris' Pit, between Hill Lane and Shirley Road).

Others were found at Rockstone Place, on display in SeaCity Museum with a report that they were presented by Miss Gordon (sister of General Gordon of Khartoum).

Francis showed some local press reports regarding a long and disputed negotiation over the right of the parish of Millbrook to the extraction of gravels from the Mousehole Pit, which was owned by 'Lady Barker Mill'. The parish claimed the right to collect gravel freely to repair local highways, disputed by the owner's agents (Hampshire Advertiser 1885/6). Other press reports concerned a number of accidents which took place in gravel workings, some of them fatal, which indicate that working conditions of the labourers were often unsafe even for experienced workers. Francis gave an example of the contrast between the antiquarian collectors with the living and working conditions of labourers: a man named John Burge with a family of seven lived in one house with five others, at 7 Henry Street. This street ran between Amoy and Canton Streets (Bedford Place) where census showed 80+ people living in twelve small houses. Burge died aged about 40 years, from injuries caused by a fall of gravel when working at a pit in Basset, Southampton.

Francis raised his concern that this area was rich in past finds of prehistoric tools, while few have come to light in recent excavations in Southampton. One reason may be the use of mechanical digging in pre-development investigations, and the fact that modern excavation tends to stop when 'natural' deposits are reached, which may not go far enough down to identify tools embedded in ancient river gravels. He considers there are still important questions to answer:

This was a rich area for finds of Palaeolithic tools in the past

- Presence of Chalk anticlinal ridge underlying the city
- Availability of Flint raw material associated with chalk
- Landscape situation of Southampton's river gravels

#### Some questions and comments:

Was there an 'industry' of hand axe making? The tools would take about 10 minutes to produce for a skilled person so they would be made as needed, and might then be left behind after use. Possibly tools were left where they could be re-used, but they would have been disturbed by later movement of the gravels by water (unlike at sites such as Boxgrove, West Sussex where many hand axes were found *in situ* with animal bones at butchery sites).

The oldest tools were from 500,000 years ago, down to ~ 50,000ya.

Frank Green – commented on a book on stone tools by Nicholson, which he bought from old Hartley Library stock, and discovered it had been owned (and signed) by OGS Crawford.

Ally Hayes and Wendy Stokes brought copies of their new book *A Walk up the Avenue*, published by Bevois Mount History group, 2021.

The talk was well-attended with an audience of 45, including ten guests.

Sarah Hanna