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Neolithic Flint from Birch, near Colchester

P S Spencer & N J Dennis

Introduction

In 1974, one of us (NJD) recognised the presence of flint implements that occurred in abundance in the vicinity of the village of Birch. The implements were picked up from the surface of several fields after they had been ploughed and harrowed, and a collection of over 300 pieces was eventually amassed after extensive field walking. In 1975 the collection was borrowed by the Castle museum to be photographically recorded, but at that time, no report on the finds was published. Between January and April 1987, with renewed interest in the material by the authors, collecting was resumed, and in order to investigate the geographic range of the sites, the new finds were each provided with eight figure grid references. From this work it soon became apparent that at least three discrete flint scatters existed and this report is based on a preliminary study of these sites and the material collected to date. The presently recognized tool categories and the scheme of classification proposed by Clark (1934) have been used where possible to describe the morphology and possible function of the artefacts.

Location and Geology

The sites lie within the parish of Birch with Layer Breton, approximately 6km south-west of Colchester (fig. 1). The south-western and south-eastern margins of the area are bounded by Eocene deposits of London Clay and these include silty clays and clayey silts which regionally form an extensive bedrock. Outcrops of Unit D of the formation occur approximately 10km south-west of Birch in association with the high level gravels of the Danebury - Tiptree Ridge, an enigmatic structure of uncertain origin. The surface geology and topography are, however, defined by extensive spreads of Chalky Boulder Clay (the Springfield Till) together with underlying sand and gravel (Chelmsford Gravel). Fluctuations in the thickness of both these units have imparted the low lying and gently undulating relief typical of the district.

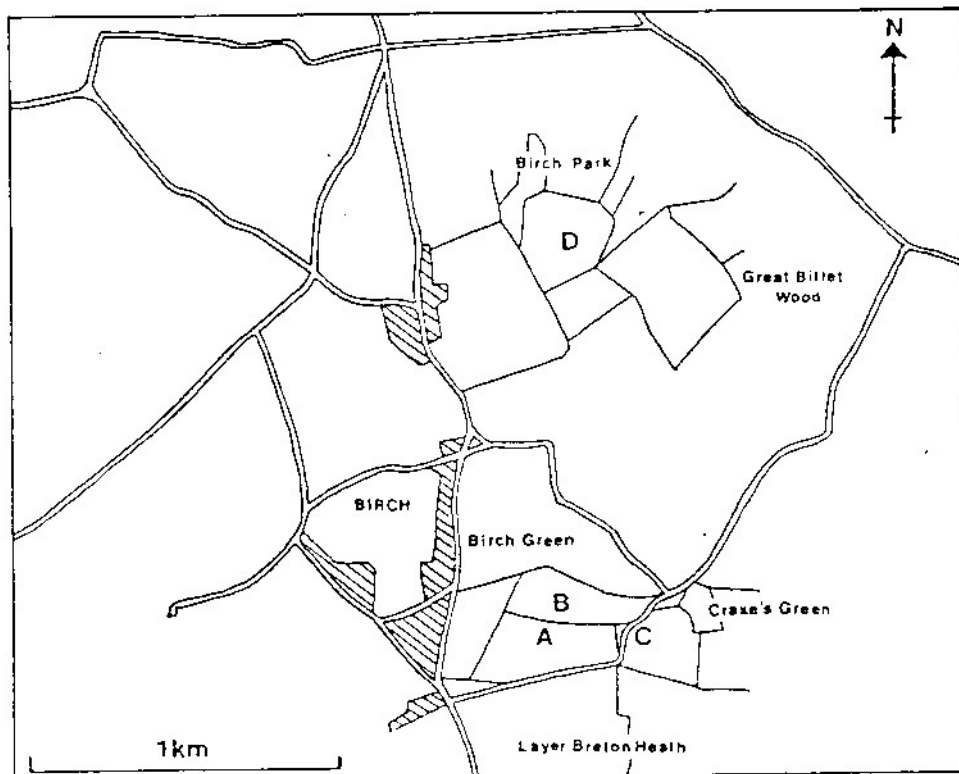


Figure 1.

Site Localities

The flint scatters lie on an area of generally flat land devoted mainly to arable farming. The glacial material superficially forms an unconsolidated deposit, the top of which consists of a reddish-brown clayey soil. The soils found in the area have been subjected to continuous ploughing and it is within them that the flints have been found.

The Sites

Most of the artefacts collected came from four sites located at c 30m OD. These sites include: Site A, Site B, and Site C, to the south and south-east of Birch Green, and Site D which is about 1.4km to the north, near Birch Park.

Site A is a moderately large scatter of material, covering an area of approximately 100m west to east and 40m north to south on flat land near to Layer Breton Heath. The majority of the finds were made near to the edge of an open drainage channel which forms the field boundary.

At Site B, a flint scatter occurs in an area of nearly 150m south-west to north-west by approximately 100m south-east to north-west. The centre of the site appears to be restricted to a low poorly defined ridge which lies in close juxtaposition to Site A. A few artefacts have been collected from beyond the boundary of the main concentration suggesting that Sites A and B may represent a single large site.

A large amount of lithic material has been collected from Site C which occurs south-west of Craxe's Green on an area of flat land approximately 70m square. This particular scatter was confined to the northern boundary of a ploughed field.

Site D, the largest scatter of lithic material, covers an area of approximately 350 metres square on the gentle south facing flank of a hill. Finds have been made across the entire area, the majority occurring at the foot of the slope on an area of flat lying ground bordering a small stream.

Artefacts were also recovered in small quantities from two additional sites: within the north-east portion of a field adjacent to the site of Birch Castle, and on a shallow rise of land to the west of Great Billet Wood. A similar rarity of material occurs in the fields adjoining the sites listed above where despite regular annual ploughing, very few finds have been made.

Raw Materials

In general terms the lithic material employed at all localities consists mainly of small flint nodules usually having a thin cortex, which have been subjected to some thermal shattering. The quality of the flint used for flaking is fairly good with few inclusions present. Some variation in the colour of uncorticated parent flint is evident but this does not preclude a restricted collecting source for raw material since flint of this type is locally abundant in the soil and would have been freely available on site.

The types of flint from sites A-D may be conveniently be subdivided into the following categories:

1. Coloured flint: The colour of this flint ranges from a dark grey-brown through to light reddish-brown. In translucence it varies from poor to medium. It is shiny on broken surfaces, fine grained and of good flaking quality. The cortex, where present, is distinct and moderately abraded with iron staining.
2. Grey flint: The majority of flint recovered from sites A-D is of this type. It is semi-opaque and ranges from dark buff-grey to light grey and is fine to medium grained. Coarser textured opaque flint occurs in most instances as light coloured mottled patches and bands.
3. Mottled grey flint: Heterogeneous flint enveloping numerous inclusions. The translucency ranges from medium to good. It is found in small quantities only.

The colour and nature of the majority of flint recovered has been altered to a greater or lesser extent by the post-depositional formation of a secondary cortex (patina). This enhances opacity by producing surface discolouration ranging from bluish-grey to dense white. In the majority of cases, however, cortification is only mild and the true nature of the matrix may be seen in a strong light. The degree of cortification in all sites appears unrelated to the type of flint, although only some of type 3 flint appears to be affected.

Two of the artefacts have been rendered opaque by thermal alteration and may represent 'pot boilers.' They both exhibit surface cracking with the original colour and texture obscured.

The flint implements

Cores (fig. 2, 11-13) - Cores occur in quantity on all sites and represent an important artefact type. They have apparently been worked on site as a basis of flake and blade production. Most are made on flint nodules of small to moderate size, are normally complete and dominated by the single platformed variety, although a small proportion had a pronounced bipolar appearance. The majority have an average of five flakes struck from them, only a few, such as no. 13, have been systematically flaked down to the point of exhaustion, having been worked around their circumference.

In addition to the predominant varieties above, two nodules bore random flake scars and one only had three removals. The only discoid core represented (no. 13) was collected from site B. Core rejuvenation flakes were found commonly on most sites.

Core scrapers - The tendency to retouch cores for use as scrapers is rare, possible re-use as a scraper occurred only on two pieces. The illustrated example, no. 14, is made on a very thick flake.

Flakes - Unretouched flakes discarded without any apparent utilization are common on all sites, accounting for c 55% of all the artefacts recovered. Only a small proportion could, with any certainty, be classified as blades. Although these tools are strictly speaking unretouched, many exhibited chipping from use on all edges and may have served a cutting or sawing function. Several examples showed battering on the proximal and distal ends which may have resulted from pressure against a resistant material.

Despite the wide ranging morphology evident in the flake sample, the following analysis of the complete flakes was prepared with the intention of providing useful technical information.

| <u>Length (cms)</u> | <u>Number</u> | <u>Breadth/length ratio</u> | <u>Number</u> |
|----------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1-2 | 2 | 1:5 | 25 |
| 2-3 | 11 | 2:5 | 29 |
| 3-4 | 26 | 3:5 | 27 |
| 4-5 | 18 | 4:5 | 4 |
| 5-6 | 13 | 5:5 | - |
| 6-7 | 4 | 6:5 plus | - |
| Total | 75 | Total | 75 |

These figures provide the following information: firstly that large, intact flakes are the predominant variety, and secondly, the extreme rarity of narrow flakes. The date of the flakes would appear to be difficult to define from these figures but they may be useful for comparison with other local industries.

Scrapers (fig. 3,15-18) - Amongst the flake scrapers it is possible to distinguish end scrapers, end-and-side scrapers and side scrapers. All use predominantly decorticated flakes with the retouched scraper edge normally convex. The retouch is of typical scraper type ranging from coarse & steep to light & shallow, although inverse retouch is often met. No. 18 has had flakes removed to thin and prepare the butt. A minority exhibit chipping on the ventral indicating a two-way scraper motion on some hard substance and some appeared to be heavily abraded.

Laurel leaf (fig. 3, 21) - This finished flake, discovered on the east boundary of site B, may be described as a Laurel Leaf in accordance with the scheme of Piggott (1954). Although ventrally, marginal retouch is limited to one side only, its sub-triangular morphology, blunted point and randomly executed coarse flat flaking are typical of this tool type.

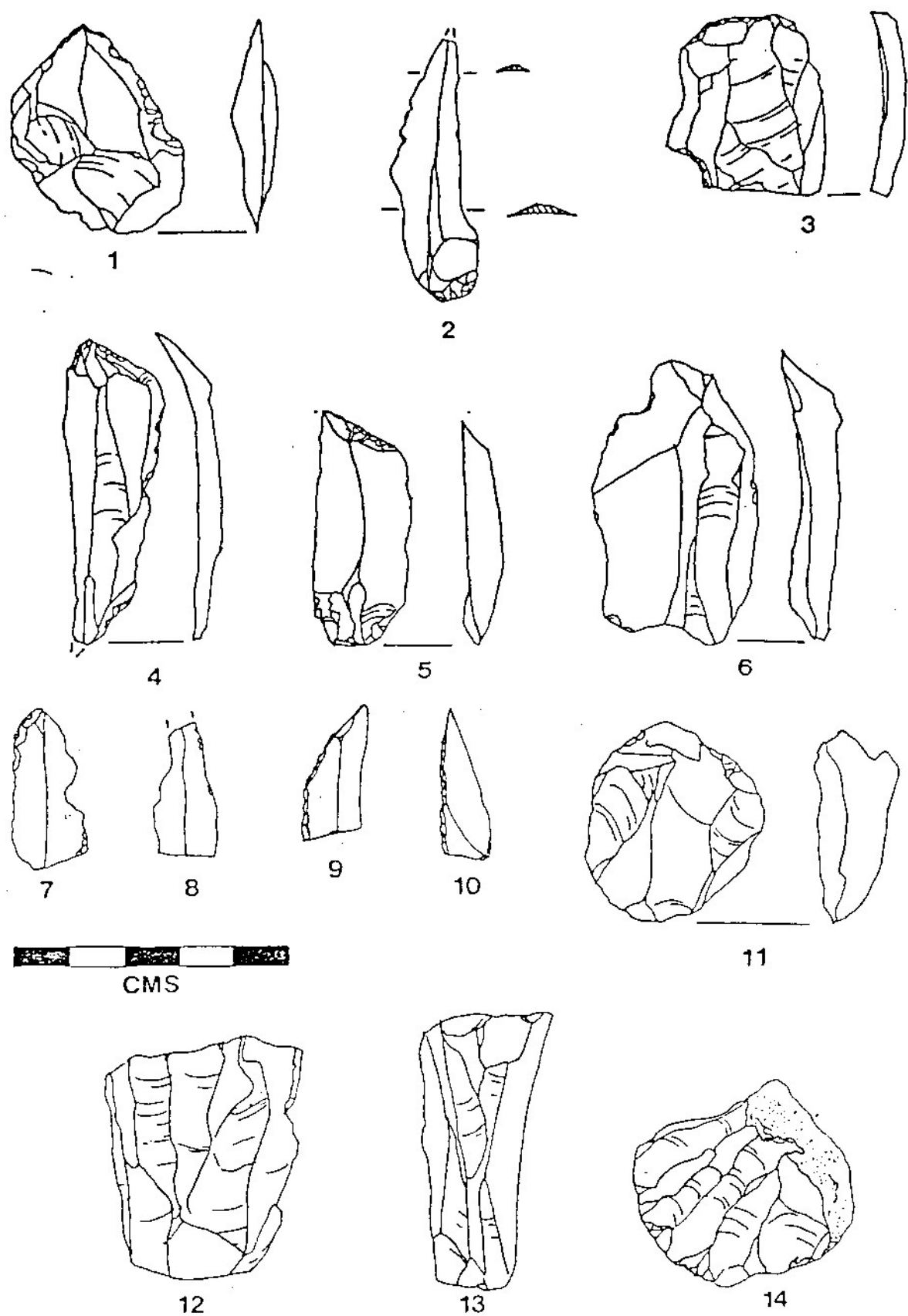


Figure 2.

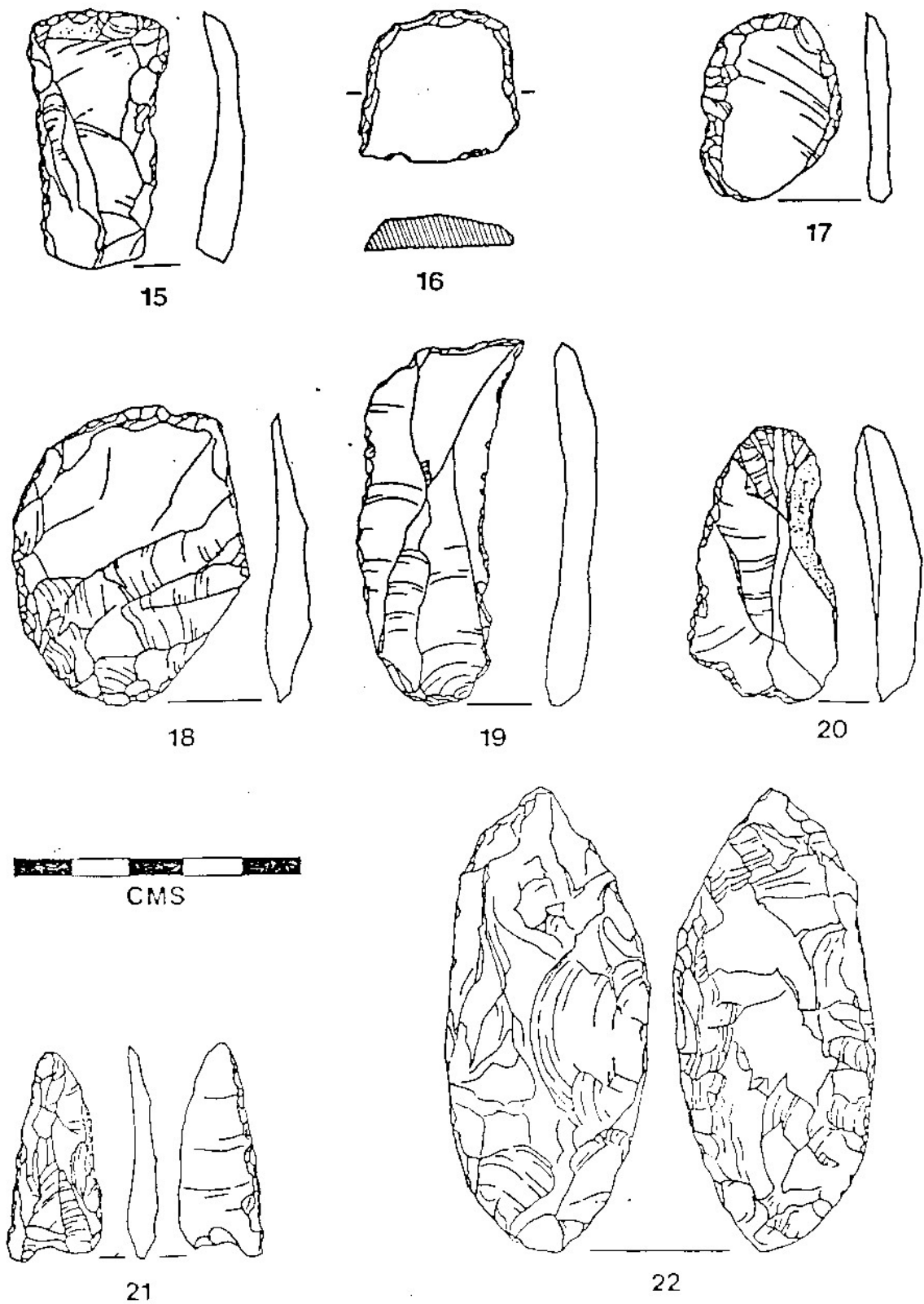


Figure 3.

Knives (fig. 3, 19-20)- These are a heterogeneous group lacking any uniform characteristics. They are found in all sites. Generally they are made on large tabular flakes with a wedge-shaped profile having at least one side retouched. The retouch may be light and irregular to intense, extending around most of the perimeter of the blank. Two examples are made on large robust flakes with retouch limited to one side; on no. 20 a thick area of cortex has been left opposite to the functional edge and it may be classified as a blunt-back knife. Many pieces demonstrated step fracturing on bifacially worked surfaces.

Reaping knife (fig. 3, 22) - This artefact from site B has invasive flat flaking on both surfaces producing a characteristic lenticular cross-section.

Awls and Piercing tools (fig. 2, 1-5) - These implements made either on long and narrow or thick tabular flakes are of rather varied form, but the Birch examples can conveniently be subdivided into the following categories:

- a) Flint points of rudimentary type with minimal retouch at the tip on a suitably pointed blank. The retouch hardly modifies the blank which is symmetrically triangular in the case of no.1, and in no. 2 it is formed on a pointed keeled flake.
- b) Points that are markedly asymmetric and obliquely truncate one or both sides of the blank, having heavier retouch (Nos. 3-5). The points are deliberately shaped by retouch unifacially or bifacially, though light marginal retouch may also be employed.

The purpose of these tools is uncertain, but No. 4 and No. 5 could clearly have functioned as points or awls. No. 4 has additional lateral retouch and may have had a combined use. In artefact No. 3 the point occurs at the side of the flake toward the proximal end. The proximal end is truncated by classic 'scraper retouch' and it too may have had a combined functional relationship.

Miscellaneous Retouched tools - Of the 21 artefacts included in this category only a small proportion can with certainty be grouped with any of the conventional tool types. The majority are broken and therefore unclassifiable.

Notched Flakes (fig. 2, 6-8) -This type of artefact was uncommon on all sites, the majority occurring on site D. They are flakes of widely varying morphology that have in the common a worked concave area ranging from 5-11 mm in width to 1.3-4mm in depth, usually being twice as long as they are deep. Double notches also occur as on No. 8, but these may have been formed accidentally, perhaps as a result of rough fabrication. The long edge of these tools may also be retouched giving a double use.

Microliths (fig. 2, 9-10) - Two microliths were recovered from site D. Both are conveniently categorized below using a simplified version of Clark's scheme (1934). LHS indicates touch on the left-hand side.

| <u>Type/Illust. No.</u> | <u>Length (cm)</u> | <u>Breadth (cm)</u> | <u>Width (cm)</u> |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Blunted all down one side. | | | |
| LHS (No. 9) | 2.6 | 1.15 | 3.0 |
| LHS (No. 10) | 2.8 | 0.90 | 0.3 |

Although these specimens are classified in the same way, they differ markedly in the morphology of the retouched area; No. 9 has a strongly convex blunted side while on No. 10 the same area is entirely straight.

Discussion

In the main, the material described is acceptable in a neolithic context. Some types however should be assigned to the period with some degree of caution. The scrapers, knives and probably the Laurel Leaf may only serve as poor chronological indicators. The two microliths are more readily datable and represent the only evidence of much earlier activity. They are of broad blade type and can tentatively be assigned to the earlier mesolithic period. There is good reason to regard their occurrence in the area as representing casual hunting losses, since the paucity of much earlier material of this type would not seem to support an

occupational interpretation.

It may be concluded that the Birch flint scatters appear to generally represent neolithic sites of long term occupation. This interpretation is supported by: the low lying setting which would have been compatible with settled domestic use; the abundant supply of moderate to good flint for flaking, probably derived from approximately the same geographic area and abundance of cores and associated implements, the physical evidence of domestic activity.

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Note on the Cropmark of a possible Salt Road near Great Braxted, Essex

Ida McMaster

The Winter edition of the *Essex Archaeology and History newsletter no. 101* recorded the possible existence of a Roman road which had appeared briefly during the 1984 flying season. Cropmarks of parallel linear ditches were seen to emerge from woodland east of Braxted Park. The ditches pre- dated the existing road to Great Braxted since they could be seen faintly also in the field to the south-east beyond the road.

The common parish boundaries of Tolleshunt D'Arcy/Tolleshunt Major were later observed on the O/S map to project the alignment of the cropmark ditches for some three kilometres in a south-easterly direction. It was therefore conjectured that such a road, if continued, would have served mainly to transport salt from the prolific 'Red Hill' salt-making sites at Goldhanger and Tollesbury.

Pat Adkins flying in 1988, picked up another parallel ditched cropmark of a possible road, this time travelling north-west from the Rolls Farm red hill sites at Tollesbury. These ditches are virtually on the same alignment as the previous pair, needing only a slight veering to join the original route a little way inland, closer to Wycke Farm. In fact the St Osyth Roman road from Elmstead has been shown to veer slightly at its termination at St Osyth's cemetery.

Any further stretches of parallel-ditched cropmarks recorded at a future date in the vicinity of Hole Farm, Rivenhall on the A12 and travelling along a line to just west of Rolls Farm, Tollesbury should therefore provide tangible proof of this possible Roman road.

Ewart Russell

As we go to press we learn, with regret, of the death of Ewart Russell who was a member of the group for many years. He made special studies of ironwork (lamp-posts, railings etc.) and heraldry, and wrote several articles on these topics for the *Bulletin*. He also gave lectures to the group on several occasions and was due to speak at this year's group activities meeting, when he was suddenly taken ill.