

## SERF Research Agenda conference discussion points for the Lower/Middle Palaeolithic

The approach taken to assessing the Lower/Middle Palaeolithic resource in the South-East region is deposit-centred rather than find-centred. Clearly artefact finds are the most direct evidence of the Palaeolithic; but, research into, and *understanding of*, the period depend almost more upon the context of discovery, and other evidence, faunal and floral, than upon the finds themselves. Most importantly, the potential for the existence of any Palaeolithic remains at a location is initially contingent upon the presence of Pleistocene sediments; and then the questions are:

- What do they contain in the way of artefactual or other evidence?
- How important are these remains for current research?

Therefore the initial assessment of the Lower/Middle Palaeolithic resource in the South-East region focused first upon the distribution and prevalence of Pleistocene deposits of various types within the region, secondarily addressing the presence/prevalence/nature of Palaeolithic remains within them, and their interpretive potential, taking account of how they formed and the range of evidence they contain.

Having provided this background, we could recap our current understanding of the Lower/Middle Palaeolithic of the region, both in its own right and within the wider national context, addressing: the range and potential of the resource; the history of occupation and cultural change represented; and interpretations of lifestyle and behaviour. This highlighted gaps in our understanding, and helped identify some priorities for future research. These are summarised below, for discussion at the SERF Research Agenda Conference of 26<sup>th</sup> April 2008, during which additional questions may also become apparent.

After agreement has been reached on priorities for Lower/Middle Palaeolithic research in the SE region, we can move onto developing strategies for addressing these priorities, perhaps including identifying some immediately desirable projects that could start to address them. And perhaps some of this ground will also be covered at the 26<sup>th</sup> April seminar, in anticipation of which a few initial suggestions are put forward below.

### **RESEARCH PRIORITIES AND STRATEGIES**

#### **National framework**

It was recognised in the 1980s that the present structure of archaeological curation and investigation in advance of development requires a framework of academic and research priorities, against which to consider the significance of sites and to guide their investigation. The seminal English Heritage publication *Exploring our Past* (1991) identified three main themes — physical evolution, cultural development and global colonisation. This was followed in 1999 by definition of a number of research themes and priorities by a working party of the Prehistoric Society. This has recently been updated under the guidance of English Heritage, who are launching in April

2008 a revised Research and Conservation Framework for the British Palaeolithic. Appended is a proposed list of national research priorities, collated from these sources, and taking account of actual ongoing research across Britain (**Appendix 1**). It is suggested that all L/M Pal research within the South-East region should be relatable to this framework, and that much of it will be regionally specific instances of these national generalities.

### **South-East priorities**

In general, priorities for Palaeolithic research for all parts of the resource revolve around: provenance; integrity; chronology; climate; and environment. Deposit-specific angles on these general categories are summarised below, with the addition of a number of other priorities that are not restricted to a specific deposit type.

#### *Clay-with-flints*

- Can individual artefacts from Clay-with-flints deposits be dated on the basis of condition and/or patination: (a) to the Palaeolithic; (b) to any particular stage of the Palaeolithic?
- Do Clay-with-flints deposits contain stratigraphically/chronologically constrained beds containing Lower/Middle Palaeolithic material? And if so, can any such beds be identified and dated?
- How did Lower/Middle Palaeolithic activity at outcrops of Clay-with-flints fit in with behaviour across the wider landscape?
- Was activity of similar nature/intensity at outcrops of Clay-with-flints throughout the Lower/Middle Palaeolithic, or is there differential patterning at different stages?

#### *Fluvial deposits*

- How disturbed/transported are Palaeolithic remains in fluvial contexts?
- Are there levels or geographic/topographic zones that are more likely to be richer in Palaeolithic artefactual remains?
- Improved mapping, longitudinal correlation and dating of terrace systems within major river valley and tributary systems (Lower Thames, Stour, Medway, Arun, Rother eastern Solent Basin, Wealden rivers)
- Correlations of terrace units with each other between basins/systems?
- Relationship of terrace formation with tectonic uplift, climate change and marine isotope stage (MIS) framework?

- Characterisation of occupation (technological/typological change, presence/density of occupation) in specific terrace units, combined into regional/basin picture?
- Relationship of fluvial terrace systems with Sussex raised beach sequence?
- Modelling of fluvial deposit zones/types more likely to contain undisturbed or minimally disturbed remains and biological remains

#### *Raised beaches*

- Improved mapping, sub-surface deposit modelling and dating of raised beach deposits; in particular further work on the date of the Aldingbourne raised beach, which is currently variously attributed to MIS 7 or MIS 11
- Modelling of raised beach deposit zones/types more likely to contain undisturbed or minimally disturbed remains and biological remains
- Relationship of Sussex raised beach sequence with fluvial terrace systems?

#### *Colluvial/solifluction/aeolian deposits*

- Identification of areas of colluvial/solifluction deposits that may contain undisturbed or minimally disturbed concentrations of Palaeolithic remains (cf Red Barns)
- More attention to "brickearth", and characterisation as colluvial or aeolian (or fluvial)
- Mapping and dating of loessic sediments, and modelling of likelihood of any contained Palaeolithic remains

#### *General priorities*

- Patterns of occupation, settlement and cultural change in the region through the Lower/Middle Palaeolithic
- Identification, and more precise dating, of Middle Palaeolithic occupation
- Identification and dating of Lower/Middle Palaeolithic occupation in the Weald
- Integration, correlation and chrono-stratigraphic attribution of Sussex raised beach deposits and major fluvial terrace systems (such as the Solent Basin, the Lower Thames, the Medway, the Stour)

- Patterns of technological/typological change through the Palaeolithic, and contrast/similarities with adjacent regions such as the Solent Basin, the Thames Valley/London Basin and East Anglia

### **Priority research projects**

- Intensive surveys of the spatial and vertical distribution of Palaeolithic remains in a variety of artefact-bearing fluvial deposits of differing depositional energies, bedrock geologies and topographic situations
- Targeted test pit investigations, biological sampling and OSL dating of terrace and raised beach systems
- Systematic fieldwalking of fluvial gravel outcrops to provide baseline information on the possible presence of Palaeolithic remains in as-yet-uninvestigated areas

### **Strategies**

??? — We seek discussion and suggestions.

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## APPENDIX 1. NATIONAL PALAEOLITHIC RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

<b>Aim</b>	<b>Details</b>
N 1	Documentation of regional sequences of material cultural change
N 2	Dating of artefact-bearing deposits within regional, national and international Quaternary frameworks
N 3	Developing understanding and dating of regional Pleistocene environmental, climatic and litho-stratigraphic frameworks
N 4	Explanation of diachronic and synchronic patterns of material cultural variability
N 5	Behaviour of Archaic (pre-anatomically modern) hominids (a) at specific sites, (b) across the wider landscape
N 6	Behaviour of anatomically modern hominids (a) at specific sites, (b) across the wider landscape
N 7	Extent of contrasts in Archaic and anatomically modern human behaviour and adaptations, and in fundamental cognitive capacities
N 8	Patterns of colonisation, settlement and abandonment through the Pleistocene
N 9	The climatic and environmental context of Archaic settlement, and the relationship between climate/environment and colonisation
N 10	The history of isolation/connection between Britain and the continental mainland, and the relationship/implications for Palaeolithic settlement and cultural development/expression
N 11	Improved documentation and understanding of hominid physiological evolution
N 12	Investigation of the relationship between evolutionary, behavioural and material cultural change
N 13	Social organisation, behaviour and belief systems
N 14	Models for cultural transmission and learning