

Chapter 6: Lost landscapes of the British Palaeolithic: where do we go from here?

by Mark White

R.I.P. ALSF, 2002-2011

This volume was commissioned to disseminate and celebrate the many successful Palaeolithic and Pleistocene projects funded by the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund during the nine years of its short life. In attempting to realise these aspirations, the work has used key case studies to open up to a wide audience the nature, potential and pitfalls of the Pleistocene record, and to engender an understanding of these factors at a variety of scales. I hope that the volume will be seen as successful in its aims and that it will help usher in a new era of understanding and co-operation between the many stakeholders – one that can ultimately only be for the good of the discipline and, if achieved, will ensure that the results of the ALSF long outlast the life of the fund itself.

As noted in Chapter 1, English Heritage had already commissioned a series of three benchmark reviews aimed at assessing the impact of the ALSF (Miller *et al.* 2008; Flatman *et al.* 2008; Richards 2008), with the headline conclusion that the ALSF most certainly had facilitated better understanding. All three reports emphasised the fact that the ALSF had helped develop a more comprehensive baseline of knowledge for particular regions or resources affected by aggregate extraction and had helped to synthesise large datasets that might otherwise have lain dormant. Miller *et al.* (2008) noted that the profile of research had been raised among the aggregates industry, although Richards (2008) observed that the aggregates industry felt that its support was not widely acknowledged. Given the stalemate reached between the National Ice Age Initiative and the Mineral Products Association (MPA) detailed in Chapter 4, this urgently needs addressing at national level. That said, the particular benefits of the ALSF project results to development controllers, curators, HER officers, as well as university academics must equally be acknowledged. There was a feeling amongst the various authors, however, that the ALSF had failed to gain widespread recognition and had not developed a real identity.

With the demise of the scheme, many of the pointers to the future contained in these documents will probably not be taken forward, although they

still have much resonance: the need for the various stakeholders to promote mutual understanding, the need for all stakeholders to be able to access a range of data reported in a standard understandable fashion, the potential utility of an ALSF Funding Council and the importance of 'social projects'. The last of these issues may be summarised in one word: IMPACT. Impact has assumed a massive importance in UK academic circles due to the Government's 'Impact Agenda', as measured through the periodical Research Excellence Framework 2014 (REF – formally Research Assessment Exercise, eg RAE2008). This demands that university research must have social, economic or cultural impact or benefit beyond academia. Now, as fists pound and doors slam in ivory towers across the land, even the quickest glance at the ALSF's many mission statements outlined in Chapter 1 will show that English Heritage, Natural England and DEFRA were at least a decade ahead of the game. The aggregates industry has also embraced these philosophies far better than many academics (cf Mineral Products Association 2012). ALSF had impact, in all senses of the word. The tragedy, then, is that the scheme has been withdrawn, the dream is over just as its vision was about to be realised.

In this chapter, I will not provide a summary of earlier ones. Instead I will discuss the issues that I (and hopefully my fellow authors) believe face the British Palaeolithic in the post-ALSF years. Building on the themes that have recurred throughout this volume, I will explore the current frameworks, and suggest ways in which the lessons of the ALSF might encourage us to divert from existing courses onto new paths of strategic resource enhancement. It is unashamedly polemical, but will hopefully ring true with some stakeholders.

'WE HAVEN'T GOT A PLAN SO NOTHING CAN GO WRONG' (SPIKE MILLIGAN)

Modern Palaeolithic archaeologists in Britain benefit from a long tradition of multi-disciplinary study that can be traced right back to the Victorian beginnings of our subject. This long heritage has a major downside, however. The pioneering appetite for discovery and excavation was rapacious,

unstructured and often very poorly executed, leaving the modern scholar begging for scraps (or, more literally, gobbets of cave earth stuck high up on a cave wall, denuded spoil heaps and empty pits; cf White and Pettitt 2011; Pettitt and White 2012). The rate of early discoveries is staggering when compared to modern levels, and as Derek Roe famously stated, many British sites were simply discovered too early for their own good (Roe 1981). Year after year as new exciting discoveries are announced across Eurasia and Africa, most scholars in this country find themselves once again sifting through the same dusty materials. Granted, celebrity finds on the Cromer Coast put Britain in the international spotlight. But the truth is that this fame lasts for the notorious 15 minutes, and on their own they are simply not enough. Pakefield and Happisburgh provide only two new data points; yes, they are very old, and yes they challenge ideas about the timing and adaptive constraints of human dispersal into northern latitudes, but we need more. Clive Gamble once said that advances would not come from major new discoveries, but from theoretical developments. I have been a fan of Clive's work all my career, but I am afraid that I simply cannot agree with this statement in relation to Britain. Without a substantial increase in new discoveries, an enhancement of our current database or very significant new analytical techniques or trustworthy dating methods, the British Palaeolithic will decline in significance, and cease to have anything new to say on a European scale. Along this path, the future can only hold decades of fruitless debate over competing hypotheses built on different but equally valid readings of the same tired material – infinite equifinality.

These are the challenges we face in the post-ALSF, economically-squeezed times. We desperately need a new plan to help the British Palaeolithic grow out of this austerity. I believe that the ALSF provides the key.

FRAMEWORKS

There have been two English Heritage commissioned framework documents for the British Palaeolithic: *Research Frameworks for the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic of Britain and Ireland* (1999) and the *Research and Conservation Framework for the British Palaeolithic* (2008). During the years in between these publications, the Mesolithic was seemingly granted a divorce and given custody of Ireland (Blinkhorn and Milner 2014). In editing this book and thinking about future directions that the British Palaeolithic might take, I have perceived two basic problems with both of these documents.

First, the research priorities they outline – however they may be framed – revolve around an evergreen set of questions that have pertained since Prestwich and Evans stepped off the boat back from Amiens (Gamble and Kruszynski 2009). They

include: culture and society; environments and ecology; settlement systems and colonisation; dating; continental connections; subsistence and technology; behaviour in different landscape settings (caves vs open air). The absence of statements regarding the need to discover new sites in this pioneering period emphasises that discovery of sites was a defacto given in the context of widespread quarrying (and the concomitant development) activity across much of the country. Today only the specifics and the theoretical paradigms within which they have been investigated have changed. Moreover, as we have seen many times throughout this volume, since the 1940s the rate of discovery has all but collapsed, leaving archaeologists with no option but to re-examine the same aging datasets. The question that must be asked, then, is do we actually need to continuously re-write these research frameworks, re-iterating questions that we have known for generations, or do we need something that aims to enhance the record and give us more to work with in achieving these research objectives?

Following on from this, I think that the present research frameworks are not talking to the right people. They were written by, and talk almost exclusively to, academics. Now, academics are perfectly placed to write such priorities – and most are well aware of each and every one of the issues raised above – but do they really need to? The research would probably have been done anyway and one might be forgiven for thinking that the framework document is a propaganda leaflet aimed at framing personal designs rather than designing strategic frameworks. Conservation and enhancement appear bolted on as an after-thought, without any real commitment.

An examination of the achievements of the 1999 *Framework*, as listed in the 2008 *Framework*, illustrates where these designs lie (Table 6.1). Of the 17 'Research Themes' listed in 1999, 16 were achieved by 2008 (although given the fact that they will continue to be researched, the idea that any one of these priorities can ever really be 'achieved' is dubious in itself). Education, display and information exchange were even more successful deemed to have hit all its targets bar one. Survey and assessment initiatives – those that could potentially enhance the value of our existing materials and add new data – did not fare so well. Only three of the 13 stated action points were even partly achieved:

With these issues in mind, I intend to side-step the principal research themes of the 2008 *Framework* document (not to mention the knotty question of protection and legislation), and move straight to its 'Strategic Research and Conservation Themes'. Leaving the details aside, these themes can all be viewed as capacity building, designed at enhancing and enlarging the database. They are listed below with a summary of what each aims to achieve, cast in the values expressed throughout this volume.

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- *Areas* – this basically re-enforces the need to understand Palaeolithic occupation in a landscape context at multiple scales. This may operate at the level of the river valley, region or nation or indeed wider area, and may involve one or more of the terrestrial, transitional or marine landscapes, as discussed in Chapters 2-4
- *Understanding the record* – before we can understand the social and behavioural significance of our data, we need to understand how it formed. This involves an appreciation of geomorphological processes, taphonomy, preservation, collection and curation, as outlined in Chapter 5
- *Dating frameworks* – without accurate dating frameworks, we can have no understanding of patterns and processes. All appropriate dating methods should be explored, and all stakeholders should be aware of the potential (and indeed, limitations) of the different techniques
- *Curation and conservation* – mechanisms need to be in place for the collation, archiving and long term protection of the resource. These should include methods of prospection and recording in a variety of development contexts
- *Dealing with development* – we urgently need to capitalise on the results of the ALSF to create meaningful collaboration between archaeologists and aggregates extractors (as discussed in Chapter 4), and to promote a ‘developer-facing’ approach. The importance of the work we do, its intrinsic interest and potential minimal impact on commercial operations, needs to be emphasised. Mechanisms need to be developed to ensure that all stakeholders from the curatorial, development and commercial sector are aware of the value of the resource. Professional bodies and academics may take a lead role in dissemination
- *Collections and records enhancement* – ideally this would be an on-line shared resource for museums and other stakeholders to deposit details of finds, archive, location and accessibility
- *Outreach and education* – at the point when the 2008 Framework was being written it was acknowledged that universities did not always value this activity. Although not really falling under the category of impact as expressed in the REF documentation, public engagement and social/cultural benefits are vital to the healthy future of our discipline

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These research priorities can and should be made to engage all stakeholders. The first six areas outlined above can be further distilled into three basic strategic aims, each of which subsumes outreach and education:

- Extending the Pleistocene record
- Enhancing the Pleistocene Record
- Engaging with the Pleistocene Record

These are not purely academic priorities – they are intended to preserve and enhance the Palaeolithic record in all its forms. Academic research will benefit, but specific research questions are not at the front of the agenda here, and nor should they be. What I, or anybody else, wants to study, and whatever empirical or theoretical stance we wish to take, is utterly irrelevant to the protection and enhancement of our deep past. We need to adopt a nested or scalar approach to our frameworks, beginning with these macro-scale concerns – which I would argue should be the focus of national funding bodies – moving down to the micro-scale of individual academic pursuits. In other words, academics are free to target sites or landscapes to answer specific questions, and free to attract funding from charities and research councils, but national agendas need to be larger, reflect national initiatives and be centrally funded. They also need to have benefits outside academia and speak to the impact agenda by canvassing the widest possible audience.

A number of factors highlighted throughout this volume pertaining to the three principles outlined above – Extending, Enhancing and Engaging – can talk to all stakeholders.

1) Extending the Pleistocene record

In my terms, extending the record describes the need for more sites. Research excavations are unlikely to achieve this on their own, and development is critical. As noted elsewhere, some of the most significant finds of the past decade have been made in advance of construction, for example Southfleet Road (Wenban-Smith *et al.* 2006; Wenban-Smith 2013) and Glaston (Cooper *et al.* 2012). Others have been made during watching briefs in quarries, such as Lynford (Boismier *et al.* 2012).

The most significant unifying principle here is the need for predictive modelling aimed at helping curators and planners make decisions, calming the grieving archaeologists, and assuaging the fears of interference within industry. This will demand the mapping of palaeolandscapes, establishing where humans were most likely to have been active and why, thus enhancing the importance of archaeological landscapes without archaeology (cf Chapter 2). It will also require us to understand the effects of bedrock geology on human mobility and settlement (cf Chapter 3), the distribution of plants and animals (Chapter 4), and changes in human behaviour through time (Chapter 5). Predictive modelling as part of the desk-top survey should occur at the point of conception, alerting the curator and developer to potential contingency measures for excavation or watching brief and comfortably falls within the scope of the National Planning Policy Framework.

2) Enhancing the Pleistocene record

The last comprehensive study of museum collections of early Palaeolithic material was by Derek Roe (1968), which was then used in the 1990s by John Wymer as the basis for TERPS' artefact counts and distribution maps. A lot has happened over the past 48 years, and we urgently need an up-to-date online national database of collections and archives. We also need to increase the scope of previous gazetteers to include all Middle and Upper Palaeolithic material, to include if possible material in private hands and material registered with HERs (much of this is still left over from the 1999 *Framework*).

This is easier said than done. Museums have literally hundreds of thousands of Palaeolithic artefacts. The whereabouts of some historical collections can be difficult to track down, as museums have merged/closed and material has been relocated or even sold. Some material is in private hands (like the Trent handaxes mentioned in Chapter 5), but a simple web-based campaign or initiative similar to the Public Catalogue Foundation's picture gallery should help bring these to light. Archival material also needs databasing, scanning and publishing online, as the information it contains can totally transform the value of old collections and, in effect, render them new sites – as has been done for Baker's Hole and Foxhall Road. Regional and national scale assessments, predictive modelling and curatorial decisions utterly depend on such databases. These suggestions complement the findings and suggestions of the recently published *Archaeological Archives and Museums document* (Edwards 2013), supported by English Heritage, the Society of Museum Archaeologists, and the Federation of Archaeological Managers and Employers, highlighting the fact that this problem is endemic in archaeology, not just the Palaeolithic.

Likewise, the value of well-known sites can be massively enhanced through the application of new analytical techniques and dating programmes, sometimes with very small-scale sondages to target critical deposits (eg TVPP, MVPP).

3) Engaging with the Palaeolithic Record

The initiatives started by the *National Ice Age Network* need to be revisited. There was nothing wrong with the original philosophy and aspirations of NIAN – to get a better long-term 'deal' for significant Pleistocene remains brought to light during commercial quarrying, and an agreement in principle about recording/recovering remains in quarries. It also had the backing of English Heritage, English Nature, the Quaternary Research Association, the Geologists' Association, the Council for British Archaeology, UKRIGS and the Prehistoric Society. Still, for the reasons outlined in Chapter 4, they were very badly received by the some key players within the quarrying industry,

even though as a whole NIAN was seen as being 'pro-industry' within the industry itself. Obviously each stakeholder sees things through different lenses (see below), but we need to resurrect these cross-party talks, with constituent members drawn from the full range of constituencies.

TOWARDS MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

We have spoken a lot in this volume about mutual understanding among stakeholders (see also Last *et al.* 2013). Hopefully, most of the stakeholders in the heritage sector already do understand each other to a greater or lesser degree, depending on proximity of interests. It is parties with other priorities that we need to reach out to in a genuine way, not as lip service, and begin exploring how we deal with points 1 and 3 above. Many archaeologists are so passionate about the past that they regard anything that affects our heritage with hostility, be it a road through a historical landscape, a housing development on a deserted medieval village, a quarry exploiting 400,000 year old sands and gravels, or metal detecting night-hawks. Archaeologists in general will tell you about the value of the past, how it enhances social and cultural lives, how it links the living with the dead, people to places, and provides a sense of national pride. The number of TV shows and internet sites devoted to the past, genealogy, history etc, shows that this is most certainly the case. Archaeology matters.

The MPA recognises this:

"Mineral extraction often produces archaeological finds that give us a better understanding of our past. Disturbing ground can create a risk of destroying valuable archaeology, and the industry has long accepted its responsibility not just to cooperate but to fund advance investigation work. In a typical year, operators pay for work covering more than 600 hectares, around half of that before planning permission has been granted. The MPA is a co-signatory of 'Mineral extraction and archaeology: practice guide' published by English Heritage."

(MPA 2012, 6)

I cannot imagine that RCUK-funded projects can make such a claim in respect to the scale of funded excavations, so the first thing we need to be clear on is that the aggregates industry is one of the most important facilitators of archaeological research in the country.

Mineral extraction and archaeology: a practice guide – written by the archaeologist Clive Waddington – also recognises the different needs, which are paraphrased here:

- A steady, adequate and sustainable supply of minerals is essential to the nation's prosperity, infrastructure and quality of life
- Minerals are finite and irreplaceable resources

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that can only be worked where they occur (ie geology dictates the positioning of quarries)

- Archaeological remains are a finite and irreplaceable resource that may occur anywhere
- Archaeological resources are not all equal in value
- It is the role of the planning system to reconcile the needs of the historic environment and minerals development in the context of sustainable development (Waddington 2008, 4)

It also recognised that the best way to deal with Palaeolithic archaeology that occurs within an aggregate body is through monitoring sensitive landform units, and that the *in situ* preservation will rarely be practical or justified. This means that all or any of the techniques described in Chapter 2 might be of relevance, depending on context and significance.

This was all part and parcel of the NIAN initiative but outside archaeological circles, Point 1 above is most relevant to the people and government of Great Britain. These quotes should readily explain why.

“No industry pumps more materials into the arteries of UK life and the economy than mineral products. Over one million tonnes in a typical day, worth £9bn a year and providing jobs for 70,000 people. But what is really significant about our industry is the extent to which it supports others and, in doing so, is essential to the UK economy. We estimate that the knock-on benefit of what we do supports over £400 billion in terms of turnover in industries we supply and over 2.5 million jobs in the economy as a whole.”

“Mineral products enable us to build and improve our housing stock, transport networks, commercial and industrial buildings, utilities, schools and hospitals. While markets have suffered significant decline during recent years, the sheer scale of the £250 billion investment identified by Infrastructure UK and the outstanding need to increase the availability of housing, demonstrate the critical role we will play in delivery.”

“The value of such assets to the UK is huge. For example, the strategic road network of motorways and trunk roads in England [is] built with mineral products and dependent on them for maintenance ...Some products we make possible are not so obvious. Without limestone, there would be no steel. Take away sand, and there would be no glass. Remove lime, and water would not be fit for drinking.”
(MPA 2012, 2-3)

So, if an important new site was discovered, what is the best we could hope for? One thing is for certain – not a cessation of operations. Too much

else is at stake. It would involve negotiation between operator and archaeologist. There would be no blanket policy, but personal talks about what area could be left fallow for excavation, for how long, whether the operator would be prepared to contribute, or whether emergency funds should be sought from RCUK (cf. Norton Subcourse which was funded by a combination of a NERC urgency grant, the QRA, the Royal Society and the Leverhulme Trust (via AHOB) or elsewhere (cf. Lynford). Predictive modelling will again help curators assess the impact on Pleistocene remains at the planning and mineral permission stage, which can be factored in to long-term extraction plans.

Another important point is what constitutes an important site. I would argue that it would not include a few rolled handaxes and a scrappy mammoth tooth but would require *in situ* finds of the quality of Boxgrove or Lynford. The excavations at the latter, incidentally, involved an area of around 200m² at the very edge of a quarry hundreds of times that size. The scale of archaeological excavations (usually restricted by costs) appears to be over-estimated by quarry operators who are probably more used to dealing with major later-period excavations on the land above – but that is a wholly different issue that I do not intend to tackle here.

What other measures could be suggested? Funds could be made available to train quarry workers to monitor faces as they extract sand and gravel, rapid responses (local units or universities) could be coordinated to rescue and bulk sample materials in a fashion that can be meaningfully analysed in the laboratory without stopping productions (as was successfully done at the Maastricht-Belvedere quarry in the Netherlands), and suitably trained archaeologists with Quarry Safety Passports could be allowed periodically to monitor and record, to develop those personal relationships and negotiate sensitively if anything of real importance is uncovered. The MPA will also need assurances that they will not be horribly surprised by an unexpected bill outside any contingency factored in at the planning stage.

The critical thing is that something is in place to enable the sites to be identified in the first place. But without the ALSF and projects like NIAN, are these just pipe dreams?

CONCLUSIONS

The next decade will be extremely challenging for Palaeolithic archaeology. With continued economic uncertainties everybody is nervous. The academic faces falling student numbers and lack of research funds. Developers are stretched to the limit in a country where the market can hardly be described as buoyant. Development controllers find themselves in the spotlight if they are seen not to favour the developer and in the news if a decision upsets the local community. Quarry operators face continued taxation through the aggregates levy,

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even though the money is no longer channelled into affected communities, and have expressed frustration over what they perceive as excessive levels of archaeological investigation (cf. Last *et al.* 2013); while the MPA has openly stated it has little faith in NPPF to deliver certainty (newsfeed on 18th March 2013 at <http://www.mineralproducts.org>). Meanwhile, the woman on the Clapham Omnibus is worried about her job, her mortgage, how Jenny will afford her university fees, and whether archaeology really is such a good choice of subject.

The answer to all – the Lost Landscapes of the Pleistocene do deserve some level of protection, but this needs to be balanced with all these other factors and anchored in economic reality. The opportunity for both archaeologist and industry to positively impact upon science and community is real, but we need to understand each other's needs, hopes and fears as they really are, and not grotesque caricatures. If the door between NIAN and the MPA is not locked, then there is just one question left to ask the multitude of different stakeholders: 'can we please talk?'