



Early Acheulian flint handaxe. Made by Homo heidelbergensis, c500,000BC. 138mm. From Corfe Mullen, Dorset. Value £220.



Middle Acheulian flint handaxe. Made by Homo heidelbergensis, c300,000BC. 180mm. From Kinson, Dorset. Value £240.



Mousterian flint handaxe. Made by Homo neanderthalensis, c70,000-30,000BC. 126mm. From Le Moustier, Dordogne, France. Value £125.



Perigordian flint blade. Made by Homo sapiens, c30,000BC. 142mm. From the Dordogne, France. Value £22.

ANTIQUES INFO - May/June 02

First in a new series on Antiquities

Collecting Stone Age Tools

by Bernard C. Pickard

The earliest men in Britain lived about 500,000 years ago. The period is known as the Lower Palaeolithic. They were an early form of man known as *Homo heidelbergensis* and were wandering hunter-gatherers, who roamed mainly in the southern part of Britain. Their main tool was a handaxe - a multipurpose tool used held in the hand - made from flint. It was usually pear-shaped and to start with had fairly large and deep hollows where flakes had been struck off the flint core by striking with a stone. Usually some cortex (fairly rough skin of the original flint nodule) was left at the butt for grip, which was particularly useful when the handaxe was used to butcher an animal carcass when the fingers would be slippery with blood and fat.

Homo heidelbergensis lived in Britain over a long period, from about 500,000 to 150,000 years ago. 'Swanscombe Man' was of this type. The population in Britain at any one time probably rose by the end of the period to about 1,000. Handaxes from about 300,000 years ago were made particularly by use of what is known as 'baton striking'. Flaking was not as a result of direct blows of stone on stone as the earliest handaxes, but mainly by hitting a stone onto a horn or wooden baton which had its point placed on the flint core where the maker wanted to detach a flake. The resultant flakes left small shallow hollows on the handaxe. This method gave much more control and better shaped handaxes resulted. At first these handaxes were pear-shaped, usually with some cortex, but later many were oval or round often without cortex, and formed by well controlled flaking overall. It is interesting to note that compared with the speed of change in man's technology today, over perhaps 300,000 years, the only important change in the making of flint tools was the method of flaking the flint.

When such handaxes were lost or abandoned, over very many years they would gravitate to low ground and into rivers and be carried downstream, particularly as a result of glacial and interglacial activity, and then be dumped on the river's flood plain along with much gravel to form a gravel terrace. Lower Palaeolithic handaxes are normally found in gravel pits dug into such gravel terraces, such as certain gravel terraces of the Thames and various other terraces of the same date in Southern England. The most famous site is Barnfield Pit, Swanscombe, Kent, where the Swanscombe skull was found. The majority of known handaxes were found in the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth century when gravel from these pits would be dug by a man with a pick, shovel and wheelbarrow. The workers saw virtually every

nodule dug and knew they could sell a handaxe for a good price, so naturally kept an eye open for them. Today, of course, gravel is dug by large machinery and any handaxes exposed are lost. Incidentally, the patination on these handaxes is of great interest, each locality usually having a characteristic colour or mottles of colours. The patination is within the surface of the flint and unreproducible today. Recently struck flint will usually be a dull greyish colour. Lower Palaeolithic flint handaxes are now very rare and prices reflect this. Poorer examples are sometimes available from about £50, but good examples will be £150 upwards. Incidentally, such handaxes are the oldest things made by man in Britain that it is possible to own.

Neanderthal Man - *Homo neanderthalensis* - appeared about 180,000 to 130,000 years ago (a more exact date is uncertain). The culture is known as the Mousterian. The tools Neanderthal Man made include handaxes that were well-made by baton striking and are characteristically shield-shaped. Other flint tools included choppers, picks, scrapers, points, etc. Neanderthals did occur in Britain, but sites are rare. There are many well known sites in France, including Le Moustier - the type site of the culture. British Neanderthal handaxes are extremely rare, but good French examples can be obtained sometimes priced from about £100. The most desirable are those from the type site - Le Moustier in the Dordogne.

In the Upper Palaeolithic period, our direct ancestors, *Homo sapiens*, appeared in Europe from Africa where he originated, around 30,000 years ago. During the period 30,000 B.C. to 25,000 B.C., both *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens* lived together in Europe. The latest known Neanderthal site is the cave of Zafarraya in southern Spain, where some Neanderthal tools were found. They are dated to about 25,000 B.C. Neanderthal Man is unknown after this date, although some interbreeding with our direct ancestors - *Homo sapiens* - may have taken place. The population of *Homo sapiens* in Britain during the Upper Palaeolithic period probably rose to about 3000. The famous cave paintings in France and Spain were made by *Homo sapiens* in this period. They did not make handaxes - it was essentially a 'blade' culture, i.e., conducting highly-skilled flint work, carefully planned, by dressing and striking a suitable flint core to produce a flake which may be parallel-sided with one or more keels on one side and one or two very sharp edges. Some would have one end dressed by pressure flaking to produce a point, others would be given a blunted back for safety in grip for cutting or have a

special chisel-end for carving bone. Many would have been hafted in wood. There are about twenty-five known Upper Palaeolithic sites in Britain, some in caves, some in the open. British tools are quite rare, but French ones are more easily obtainable. Flint blade tools of this culture, which are the first tools made by Homo sapiens in Europe can be bought from only about £5 to perhaps £20 upwards for good examples from France. From this period onwards, the only man to exist in Britain and the rest of Europe was ourselves - Homo sapiens.

In Britain, the subsequent period from about 8000 to 4000 B.C. is known as the Mesolithic (the Middle Stone Age). The population by this time had risen to perhaps 10,000. There were various subcultures of the Mesolithic period, but again most of these were blade cultures, although the blades made were smaller than those of the Upper Palaeolithic, some being very small. Some were evidently set into wooden shafts. Mesolithic blades from Britain are often available for only a pound or two each, sets of different examples sometimes being available for perhaps £20 for ten.

The next period was the Neolithic - the New Stone Age - which lasted in Britain from about 4000 to 2300 B.C. The population of Britain increased over the Neolithic period from about 10,000 to perhaps 200,000. Neolithic people grew crops and herded animals and lived in permanent or semi-permanent settlements and were the first people to make pottery. Many different types of flint tools were made, including axeheads (for hafting in deer-antler or wood), adzes, picks, choppers, points, knives, saws, scrapers, concave scrapers (for shaping spearshafts and arrowshafts), borers, engravers and hammerstones. Also arrowheads of pointed oval or trapezoid shape were made. The most characteristic Neolithic axeheads had ground and polished surfaces. Some were made from flint, others from various other stones, such as the igneous rock of Penmaenmawr in Wales, Cornish greenstone and the grey-green volcanic tuff of Great Langdale, Cumbria. Factory sites existed at these places where the stone was roughly shaped (to reduce weight) then traded for later finishing over surprisingly wide areas, Langdale axeheads having been found as far south as Hampshire. Neolithic people lived particularly on uplands (easier to clear than the heavily forested lowlands) such as the chalk downs of Southern England. Incidentally, Neolithic flint tools found on chalk areas have often developed a beautiful white patination through the years. Prices of British Neolithic stone tools vary greatly. Ground and polished axeheads are usually from about £50 up (particularly good examples can be £150 up), flint adzes, picks, choppers, points, knives, saws, etc., with flaked surfaces overall, are often available from about £10 to £50, scrapers of different types usually only being priced at a few pounds each.

Even after the first use of bronze in Britain, about 2300 B.C., tools continued to be made of flint. In the Early Bronze Age period, tools such as knives, sickles and barb-and-tanged arrowheads were made, often showing highly skilled flint work by pressure flaking. Such tools are rare. Commoner tools, however, such as scrapers, continued to be made until well into the Bronze Age period. Early Bronze Age tools can be quite expensive. A good flint barbed and tanged arrowhead can be £75 or more, a good sickle can be £300 up. Scrapers and similar small flake tools, however, are usually only a few pounds each.

Incidentally, records of where each individual tool was found is important and adds to its value, the more exact the better.

It is not easy to build up a fully representative collection of British stone age tools, as many are very rare, and very few of certain types are found today. Most that do become available are from old collections made in the nineteenth century or early in the twentieth century. Such a collection may not be decorative, but would be of great interest - an illustration of our past starting at the very beginnings of man in this country.



Mesolithic chert pick. Made by Homo sapiens, c7000BC. 115mm. From Portland, Dorset. Value £23.



Neolithic black stone axehead. Ground and polished surface overall. c3000BC. 85mm. From southern England. £78.



Neolithic stone axehead with flaked surface. c3500BC. 155mm. From Wadi Tunilat, Egypt. Value £90.



Neolithic flint arrowhead. c3500BC. 38mm. From the Sahara. £12.



Early Bronze Age stone 'Battleaxe'. With piercing for fitting shaft. 154mm. c2300-2000BC. From northern England. Value £160.



Neolithic black stone axehead. Partially ground and polished surface. c3000BC. 123mm. From southern England. Value £85.