

Howburn Farm



*excavating Scotland's
first people*

At Howburn Farm in South Lanarkshire, a scattering of flints, discovered by the Biggar Archaeology Group, turned out to be evidence of the earliest human habitation in Scotland. **Tam Ward and Alan Saville** explain.

How far north did Palaeolithic people settle in Britain? The general belief is that they did not go much further than the Midlands, with Creswell Crags often considered the northern limit of Palaeolithic settlement. Now, new evidence from Howburn Farm, near Biggar, Lanarkshire, proves that Upper Palaeolithic people ventured into what is now known as Scotland.

Towards the end of the last Ice Age, around 13,000 BC, the temperature warmed very rapidly. All over northern Europe people recolonised lands freed from the ice, and from northern Germany (the Hamburgian culture) to Creswell Crags (the Creswellian culture) and beyond, a Late Upper Palaeolithic culture flourished. Temperatures declined again at around 11,000 BC (the Younger Dryas phase), when Britain was probably only sparsely populated, if at all. It was not until around 10,000 BC that the climate warmed up again, and we entered the warm phase in which we currently bask. It is to this earlier Late Upper Palaeolithic warm phase, probably at around 12,000 BC, that the remarkable new finds at Howburn Farm belong.

The finds in context

After 30 years in action, the Biggar Archaeology Group (BAG) has found evidence from nearly



every period of Scotland's history, from the Mesolithic to the modern. In 2005, we were walking a field at Howburn Farm, about 4 miles north of Biggar, when we found two concentrations of unusually large flints, of which a high proportion were tools such as scrapers. Such distinctive flint had not been noticed the previous year in the same field, when a range of lithic artefacts and pottery dating from the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age had been discovered.

In 1995, we had excavated a neighbouring field where we found a series of

Early and Late Neolithic settlement sites; therefore, we suspected that another had been freshly ploughed up. We carried out a small-scale excavation on one scatter, turning up the large number of finds we had expected, but were surprised to find that it was a mixed-period assemblage.

We continued to walk the field for four more years, recording all the surface flint accurately by GPS. In the process, we ended up accumulating the largest collection in mainland Scotland of Arran pitchstone – a black, volcanic glassy stone used in the early Neolithic, for some, as yet unknown, purpose. Torben Ballin had published a major work on the entire collection of pitchstone from Scotland (BAR British series No 476), and it was during consultations for this project that we asked him to look at our 'unusual' flint.

Torben also recognised the peculiar nature of this material and consulted Alan Saville of ▶

OPPOSITE PAGE A selection of tanged points excavated at Howburn Farm.

BELOW Looking east towards the site. The valley was flooded after the Ice Age, but before the campsite was occupied.





ABOVE The original trench, showing features which proved to be Iron Age. Note the proximity of the ploughing.

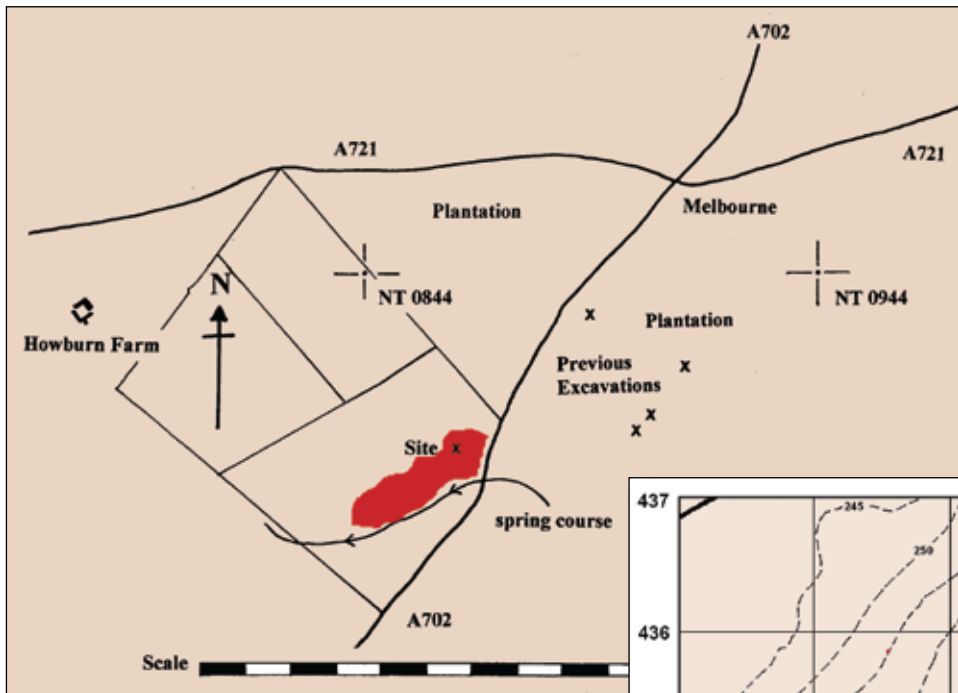
National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh. They were both amazed, as it appeared that the flint could belong to the Upper Palaeolithic period, for which suspected random finds had been made before in western and northern Scotland but never a site with an assemblage. The ‘clincher’ was a tanged flint projectile point which had gone unnoticed, since it was in two parts that,

amazingly, were found separately on the surface of the field.

The two experts then asked us to do further work on the site. The objective was simple: retrieve more diagnostic flint and, if possible, find datable deposits or features. In 2009, we began this next phase of the project. In all, a further 300m² were excavated (with every square metre producing finds) including in situ artefacts below the ploughing disturbance.

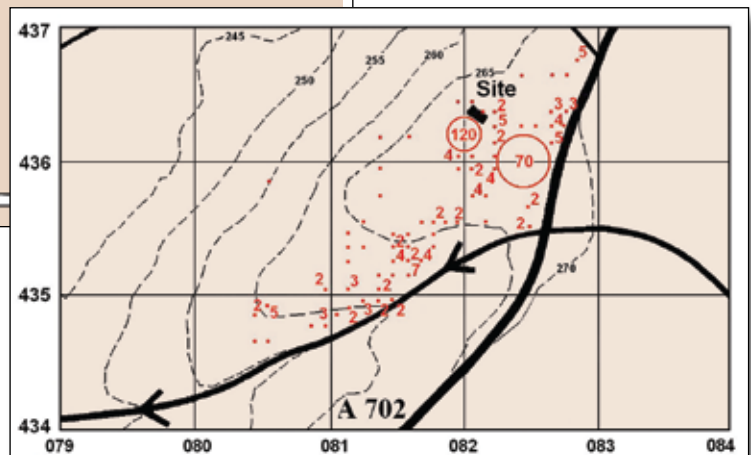
We soon realised the work would be too intensive to do alone, so we had an open call for more volunteers to join us and experience the thrill of pushing back the boundaries of human history. Over 150 people responded, including children with their parents and many who had never participated in archaeology before. Nearly everyone found numerous examples of ancient flint or chert tools. In fact, so much material was found that the organisers called a halt to the project; however, a watching brief will be maintained in the field whenever it is ploughed and it is likely that more of the site will be explored in the future. Of particular interest was the fact that some of the early flint artefacts had penetrated

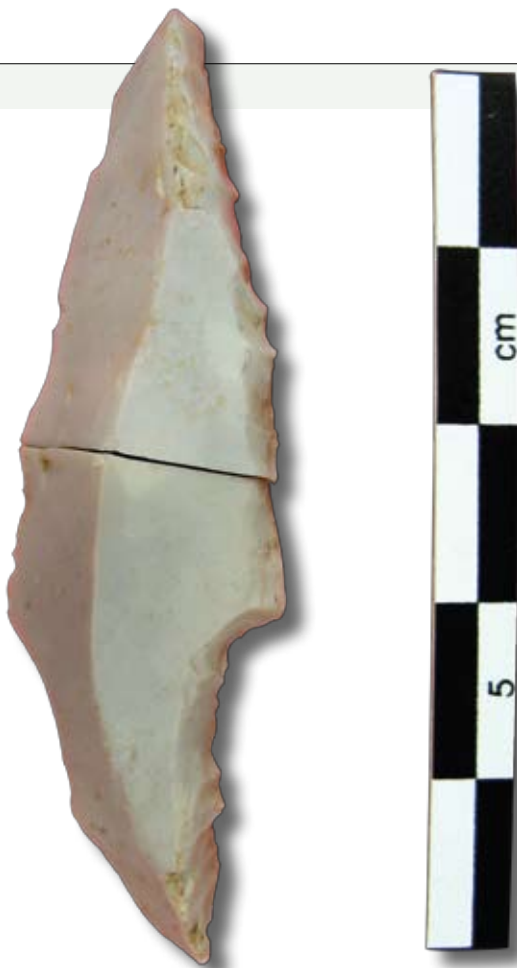
down to the naturally deposited glacial silts through movement in the soil caused by freezing and thawing (a process known as cryoturbation) during the permafrost conditions of the Younger Dryas stadial. This period is known in Scotland as the Loch Lomond Stadial, when glaciers once again blanketed the west Highlands and arctic conditions prevailed. Howburn was abandoned, but, uniquely so far for Scottish archaeology, the lithic artefacts left behind by the Upper



ABOVE The Upper Palaeolithic site, showing Howburn Farm and Melburne crossroads, with other BAG excavations sites of Early and Late Neolithic settlements.

RIGHT This map shows the flint distribution in the field and the original trench.





ABOVE The tanged point that was found separated on the field. This type is unique to the Upper Palaeolithic.

Palaeolithic hunters have remained in sufficient concentrations for the focus of their campsites to be distinguished. However, all other traces of actual settlement, in the form of hearths or tent-like structures, have now been lost.

Dating the evidence

Dating for the objects found at Howburn Farm has been accomplished through both typology and technology; the way in which they were made with particular technological features, such as spurred (*en éperon*) faceted striking platforms, is very distinctive. The type and technology are directly comparable with similar finds of flint artefacts from north-west Europe during the period from 13,000 to 11,000 BC.

Preliminary analysis suggests the particular flint tool-kit found at Howburn has parallels with examples from the Late Hamburgian (around 12,000 BC) sites in northern Germany and southern Denmark. Such sites have been known for a long time in Germany, after initially being found in the Ahrensburg Valley near Hamburg, from which the culture takes its name. On the Continent, organic finds such as reindeer antler,

animal bone and charcoal have been found and dated with the flint tools, but at Howburn, no organic material remained. Nevertheless, the flint tools from each side of the North Sea are almost identical.

The people of the Hamburgian Culture devised a distinct culture of flint tool-making which was used to hunt and process their prey. Projectile points had a special shaped tang and processing the carcasses was done using long blade scrapers and knives, while hides, bone and antler were worked by tools such as burins and piercers. It is these tool types that have been found in profusion from the two scatters in the field at Howburn. Given the variety of flint types and colours and the quantity of tools recovered, it is evident that the camp site was visited at different occasions, perhaps quite widely separated in time.

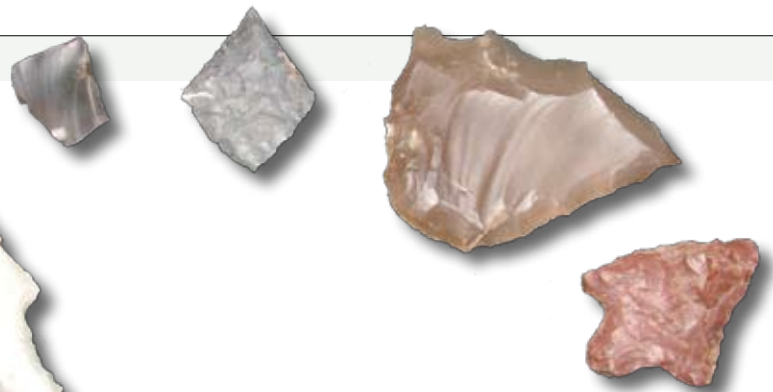
During the whole of the Late Upper Palaeolithic, Britain was a peninsula of the European mainland, with the area of the North Sea still dry land (See *Doggerland* in CA 207). Herds of reindeer and wild horses roamed the area of this extended North European Plain on seasonal migrations, followed by the Late Upper Palaeolithic hunters.

The hunters would also have used tools made of bone, antler, and wood; however, due to the notoriously acidic soils, normally only flint artefacts survive in Scotland unless there are ➔

BOTTOM A depression in the natural till, filled with glacial meltwater silt, into which flints had penetrated through the process of cryoturbation.

INSET An end scraper lying in the meltwater silt.





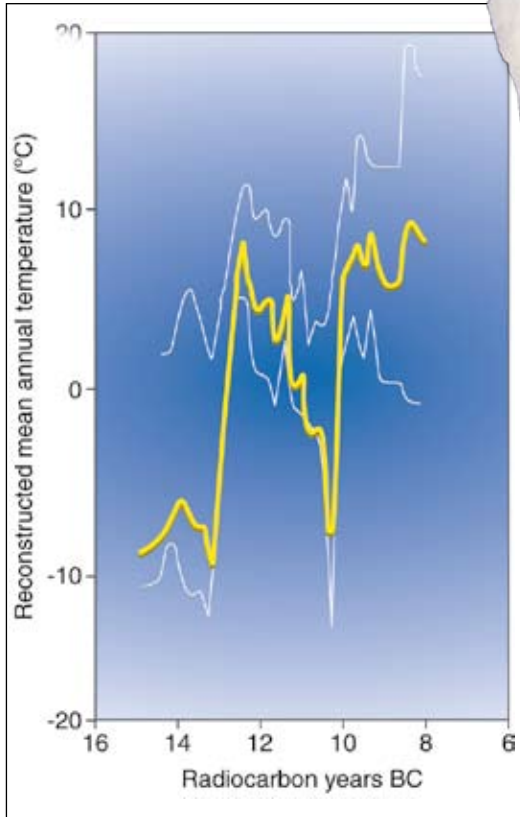
ABOVE A unique set of projectile points of all periods from the Upper Palaeolithic to the Bronze Age has been found at Howburn, reflecting changing hunting fashions over thousands of years.

LEFT The temperature curve for the British Isles. Note the steep drop between 12,000 and 10,000 BC, indicating the Younger Dryas period.

BELOW The probable extent of land during the late Palaeolithic. The hunters of Howburn followed their prey across the area that is now submerged beneath the North Sea.

for dwellings of this kind could be present at Howburn, although the intensity of ploughing in modern times may have severely limited the chances of survival.

The subsequent presence of people at Howburn during the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age periods has been indicated by the recovery of a few scattered artefacts and features. Although the main focus of any actual settlements during these phases seems to have been outside the area of Howburn Farm itself, excavation and fieldwork in recent years has shown the whole region north of Biggar was an attractive one for settlement.



exceptional local conditions for preservation. Since there is no natural occurrence of flint in the Howburn vicinity, this raw material must have been brought to the site from a considerable distance, perhaps from outcrops that now lie beneath the North Sea. The hunters at Howburn also used chert, but, intriguingly, they ignored the locally available cherts, preferring, instead, to bring their chert tools with them from some distance away.

Howburn Farm: past and future

The next evidence for human activity at Howburn after the Upper Palaeolithic is in the Mesolithic period, approximately 6,000 BC, when hunters with a very different technology were again camping in the area. These people were using the locally available radiolarian chert, to make microliths. At this time, the landscape would have been quite densely wooded and the main game animal hunted was the red deer.

The excavations at Howburn have not yet focused on any concentrations of Mesolithic tools, but we know from elsewhere in northern Britain that people at this time did construct fairly substantial round timber houses as well as using more temporary tent-like structures. Evidence



IMAGE: University of Birmingham/CBA (after Coles 1998)

Detailed studies of the large flint assemblage from Howburn Farm are ongoing, with support from Historic Scotland and National Museums Scotland. Analyses and research of the flint assemblage will now be undertaken by Torben Ballin and Alan Saville, while the group will attempt to gain a better understanding of the ancient environment and possible routes adopted by both hunters and hunted. Reindeer remains have been found in several parts of central and southern Scotland and the search is now on to find more sites belonging to this elusive period.

The chief importance of the finds at Howburn is that they have demonstrated for the first time that people were present in southern Scotland in this early phase of the Late Upper Palaeolithic period, approximately 14,000 years ago. Although we envisage there were only limited numbers of people in the hunting groups that periodically made their way across the uplands



ABOVE The map shows the suggested routes adopted by the reindeer and hunters who settled at Howburn. Actual reindeer and antler finds are also indicated.

BELOW Flint knapping took a leap forward in the Upper Palaeolithic, as shown by the significant advancements found in both the methodology and final products.

during this time, it cannot be that Howburn Farm was the only spot where campsites were made; therefore, we can anticipate further discoveries of similar finds in the future. However, the Biggar Archaeology Group is going to have a hard time topping this discovery! @

The Biggar Archaeology Group

The Biggar Museum Archaeology Group was established in 1981 as a voluntary group within the Biggar Museums.

The project work of the group has provided important new evidence of the past material culture of Scotland and, in particular, the area of the Upper Clyde and Tweed valleys. They have completed several major landscape surveys, a significant series of discoveries and excavations, and have developed museum exhibits and educational resources. Additionally, Biggar Young Archaeologists Club has been running successfully since 1990.

Membership is free and is open to anyone who wishes to participate in voluntary archaeology. While most work is carried out in the field, a considerable programme of post excavation research and publication work is done in the museum. The BAG has won the Pitt Rivers Award twice (1996 and 2008), and the Heritage in Britain Award (2006).

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