

# **An Archaeological Resource Assessment of the Mesolithic in Leicestershire and Rutland**

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Note: For copyright reasons the figures are currently omitted from the web version of this paper. It is hoped to include them in future versions.

Our view of Mesolithic Leicestershire must be understood against a background of the environmental changes of the period. We do not currently have much information for Leicestershire although work is in progress on a number of sites. At two sites there is evidence of the postglacial woodland, with lime trees evidenced from the pollen, plant macrofossils and insect remains.

Peat deposits have been found in Leicestershire associated with the old course of the River Soar. A Palaeochannel disturbed by quarrying in central Leicestershire from which human bones were recovered in a non-scientific way, contained a thick peaty layer full of well preserved organic material which was radiocarbon dated to c. 8,000 BP. Unfortunately no flint material was recovered from the site. A site in Leicester produced evidence relating to the tundra of c. 9000 BP.

The vast majority of Mesolithic finds from the county have been found by systematic survey. Amateur and professional fieldwalking has produced scatters and findspots (Fig.3). The Misterton area (in the south of the county) shows a high occurrence of medium and large scatters but although this may be true to some extent, unfortunately, the group responsible for the work uses a 70% pick up rate whereas the rest of the county uses either 10 or 20% pick up making the Lutterworth and Misterton statistics somewhat atypical. They have, however, found the sites and they would be large by the county's standards anyway.

There have been several Leicestershire fieldwalking surveys covering useful areas of land. Work on the Brooksby Estate, the Grace Dieu Priory environs and the very extensive "Medbourne Survey" which now covers nearly seven parishes are good examples. These surveys were fieldwalked using a 20m x 60m traverse and stint method giving a 10% pick up. The Brooksby Survey produced a general scatter of blade technology flints. This was a thin scatter of debris with only one tool. A concentration of blades and blade-like-flakes was noted in the western corner which continued into the fieldwalked line of the Rearsby Bypass. The scatter fades and is clearly covered by alluvial deposits from the Eye Brook giving good potential for sealed deposits. Further Mesolithic type material was found within a large multi-period flint site at western end of bypass. The Grace Dieu Survey had some Mesolithic flint in most fields walked, building up to a very dense scatter including blades, microliths, blade cores and retouched blades. (It is worth noting that the western side of the field was in perfect condition for walking while the eastern side was less good). In the "Medbourne Survey" most of the sites could be fitted into two topographical types - ridge ends and small valley bottoms. This could be regional pattern or may with some more research prove true of a wider area.

Insert Fig.1 Distribution of Mesolithic Flint Scatters in Leicestershire and Rutland. North to Right.

Excavation, of course, produces the clearest evidence of the nature of Mesolithic activity in the area but very little has been done on sites of this period. Croft Hill (site plan) in central Leicestershire, is the most informative as a waterlogged landscape sealed by alluvium was uncovered. This included possible house ring ditches associated with Mesolithic type flint scatters and potentially the only evidence of a Mesolithic occupation site. The nature of the site also meant that good environmental evidence could be gained. Unfortunately the site could only be partially excavated.

The recent excavations along the Wing to Whatborough pipeline, in eastern Leicestershire and Rutland, recorded a steady spread of Mesolithic material along the 18km of its length, but the only stratified deposits were found at Ridlington. Here a pit was found to contain 50 early flints including a microlith. A few other excavations have produced small amounts of probable Mesolithic material but not in firm contexts.

The distribution map of Leicestershire and Rutland (fig.3) shows that the material does not appear to be restricted to any one specific topography or drift geology but is pretty well spread. As the efforts of the fieldwork group continues we should develop a clearer picture of this distribution. Further field investigation of some of the best dated known sites such as Ridlington, should be undertaken to increase our understanding of the period and then used as a gauge for defining other areas of potential where little is known to date.

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