

THREE ASSOCIATED NEOLITHIC AXES FROM PEMBURY

By P. J. TESTER

A remarkable discovery of three Neolithic axes has recently been made near Pembury, well within the area of the Weald where such finds are extremely rare. The circumstances of the discovery, as communicated to the writer, were as follows:¹

The three implements were found accidentally by Mr. W. F. Francis of Pembury, in June, 1950, while digging near Bassett's Farm (National Grid Reference 642419). They were lying close together in sandy soil (Tunbridge Wells sand) at a depth of about 1 ft. from the surface. Subsequently they were presented to the Tunbridge Wells Museum where it is intended that they will be placed on permanent exhibition.

As can be judged from the accompanying illustrations, these implements are fine examples of a well-known, standardized form of Neolithic axe frequently produced by specialist craftsmen at regular centres of manufacture. In each case the surface coloration is uneven, merging from grey into dull orange-brown. Recent accidental chipping on Nos. 2 and 3 reveals the interior of the flint to be grey. The flaked surfaces are fairly lustrous and there are several small areas of white crust remaining. The cutting edges are not produced by the Mesolithic *tranchet* technique, but by blows directed from around the edge, and forming a fan-like pattern of flake scars.

No. 1 is 9 in. long and is in mint condition. No. 2 is 7 in. in length and has sustained slight damage at the time of discovery, as indicated by the broken line in the drawing. No. 3, which has been similarly damaged, is 6.4 in. long and is rather more coarsely flaked than the others, its outline being less symmetrical, especially when viewed from the side. The shoulder on one face near the butt may, however, have been left deliberately as it would have formed a useful stop-ridge to prevent the flint driving into the handle and eventually splitting it.

It is a fallacy to suppose that the Weald was entirely uninhabited in Prehistoric times. Although certain evidence of Neolithic occupation is lacking, there are about a dozen known Mesolithic sites, chiefly

¹ I am grateful to Mrs. V. M. F. Desborough for seeking this information on my behalf. Mr. R. F. Jessup, F.S.A., was kind enough to inform me of the discovery, and my thanks are also due to Miss H. E. Dale, B.Sc., F.Z.S., Curator of the Tunbridge Wells Museum, for allowing me to borrow and draw the implements.

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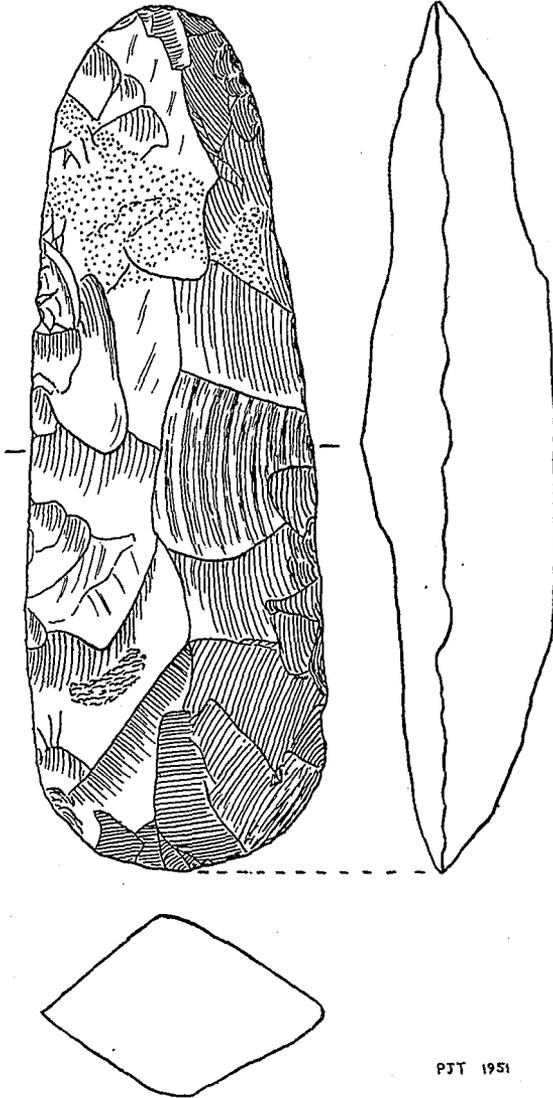


FIG. 1
Neolithic axe from Pembury ($\frac{1}{4}$ actual size)

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in Sussex, all of which are situated on the Tunbridge Wells or Ashdown Sands,¹ and a number of Bronze Age objects have also come to light. Now it is probable that Mesolithic groups, with their typical microlithic

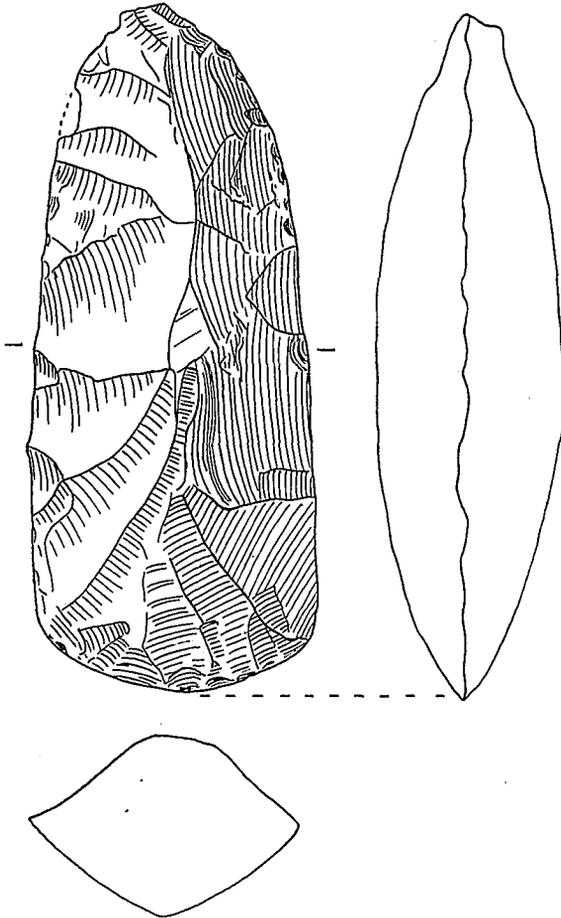


FIG. 2
Neolithic axe from Pembury ($\frac{1}{2}$ actual size)

industries, persisted in this region after the introduction of Neolithic culture in the chalk country bordering the Weald.² While these Mesolithic hunters and food gatherers might retain their way of life

¹ E. C. Curwen, *The Archaeology of Sussex* (1937), pp. 50-61 and distribution map on p. 52.

² J. G. D. Clark, *The Mesolithic Age in Britain* (1932), pp. 89-91.

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almost unchanged, contact with more advanced Neolithic neighbours could have occasionally provided them with specialized flint axes which would be invaluable tools to dwellers in a woodland environment.¹

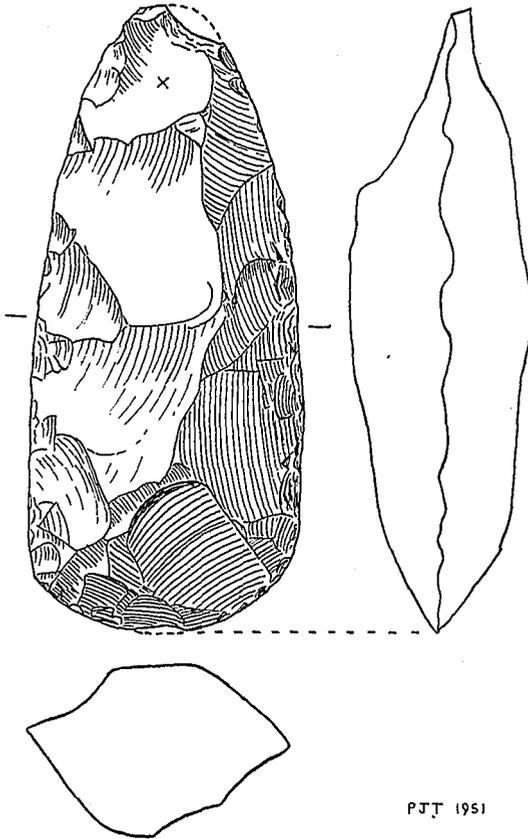


FIG. 3
Neolithic axe from Pembury
× indicates recent fracture ($\frac{1}{2}$ actual size)

In any case, as the Weald possesses no natural sources of flint, all such implements which occur there must have been introduced from elsewhere, either as finished products or in the form of raw

¹ Such a state of affairs exists among certain groups of Australian aborigines. For example, the Arunta tribe are dependent for some specialized stone implements, such as arrow-heads and picks, on the Warramunga who inhabit territory to the north. See Spencer and Gillen, *The Arunta* (1927), p. 537 and p. 546.

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material. Nodules of a size suitable for the production of these axes are not likely to have been transported over a long distance so it may be assumed that the axes were manufactured near the source from which the flint was obtained.

The fact that they were found lying together suggests very strongly that they were originally deliberately buried for safe keeping and never recovered. Such hoards are known from several localities, a notable Kentish example being at Upton, near Bexley, where five splendid Neolithic axes were found in 1883.¹ Here also the find-spot was some distance from the source of raw material and it seems reasonable to suppose that in such cases the axes represent hidden stores of unused tools purchased at some distant centre of manufacture and buried by their owners for safety until required for use. It may be observed that on none of the Pembury specimens are there any marks of utilization, nor have their surfaces been ground, as was often the practice in finishing such implements. Axes found at the centres of manufacture, such as Grimes Graves and Cissbury, are seldom ground and it seems likely that it was left to the purchasers to carry out or omit this final laborious process according to their inclinations.

On the other hand, there is reason to believe that in some cases stone and—in later times—metal objects were buried as votive offerings to a local deity or to propitiate malignant spirits associated with the spot where the deposit was made. Articles comprising the Bronze Age hoard found at Goudhurst (also in the Weald) were disposed in a manner suggesting that they formed a ritual deposit.²

It is interesting to consider the route by which these implements may have been brought into the Weald. North of Pembury there exists a wide belt of heavy clay soil (Wealden Clay) which in earlier times supported dense forest—a formidable barrier to human communications. Direct access to the flint producing area of the North Downs was therefore difficult. Similarly, connection with the South Downs and the flint mining district near Worthing would be hampered by the southern extension of the forest belt. Several finds which have been made in the midst of the clay area show, however, that although the dense forest undoubtedly proved an obstacle to Prehistoric man, it was not an impassable barrier. A study of the geological map reveals that there are no breaks in the clay belt enclosing the Weald, and, apart from possible sea-borne invasions from the east, penetration of this forest must have been effected by primitive man whenever he journeyed into the sandy and less thickly wooded regions of the

¹ *British Museum Guide to the Antiquities of the Stone Age* (1926), p. 103, and Pl. VI. These were also of grey flint which, it has been suggested, came from Lincolnshire.

² R. F. Jessup, *The Archaeology of Kent* (1930), pp. 99-100.

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interior. Such penetrations would most likely have been made by following the courses of streams.

Hoard of Bronze Age implements, which must necessarily have originated outside the Weald, have been found at Marden and Goudhurst, not far from streams flowing northward into the Medway Valley, and within a short distance of the Pembury site the O.S. map shows a rivulet which joins the Medway near Yalding. There is ample evidence that the area bordering the Lower Medway was extensively settled in Neolithic and later Prehistoric ages, and the river itself was an obvious line of communication into the interior.

From this it would seem likely that the Pembury flints were brought from the region of the Lower Medway, possibly at the time of its occupation by those responsible for the erection of the megalithic monuments of which Kits Coty House is the best known example.

The term "Neolithic" as applied to these finds must be interpreted in its widest sense. Axes of this general form belong to the period approximately 2500-1800 B.C., extending into the Bronze Age. Bronze Age barrows have been found to contain flint axes and some of the Sussex flint mines were being worked at that time. Moreover, a backward area like the Weald may well have continued to provide a market to Downland flint workers after the introduction of metal into more favoured regions, and we cannot, therefore, rule out the possibility of an Early Bronze Age date for the Pembury hoard.