

# Surface Collection North of West Kennett Hamlet, November 2016



*Living with Monuments Project*  
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## Summary

This document describes the results of a limited programme of surface collection within the Avebury component of the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site. The work was undertaken over two days during early November 2016. It focussed on an area of arable south-east of the Avebury henge monument in the slope side and valley base to the north of West Kennett hamlet (centred on SU 112 688). The site code is SHB-16 (south Hackpen bottom [valley]).

Relatively low densities of worked flint were found, though with one concentration of possible later Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date in the valley floor. Overall, the material is likely to have been generated through repeated episodes of activity that span the 4<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. Colluvial deposits, even if thin, could mask more substantial scatters of worked flint on the lower slope sides and valley floor.

### **Living with Monuments: aims and objectives**

The work is part of a larger project entitled Living with Monuments: life and cultural landscape between the 4th and 2nd millennia BC in the Avebury region, Wiltshire. It is funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), with support in-kind from the National Trust. It represents a collaborative research venture between the Universities of Southampton, Leicester, Ghent and Cambridge, the National Trust and Allen Environmental Archaeology. It builds upon previous work undertaken under the banner of the Between the Monuments Project (Pollard *et al.* 2011, Gillings *et al.* 2014).

The aim of the Project is to redress a critical imbalance in our knowledge of life and cultural landscapes during a key period of British prehistory - the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (Neo-EBA; c.4,000-1500 BC). Accounts of the Neo-EBA are dominated by an interpretive framework devised to explain the creation of ceremonial and funerary monuments, which form the most visible and tangible part of its archaeological record. By contrast, knowledge of the character of contemporary settlement and other non-monument focussed activity lags behind. This project will redress this imbalance through a coherent and innovative programme of targeted fieldwork and reassessment of existing data within one landscape that is famed for its monumental architecture: that of the Avebury region in Wiltshire.

The specific questions the Project aims to address are:

- (1). Can we develop a detailed understanding of the extent, scale, density, character and tempo of human settlement in the core area of the Avebury landscape during the Neo-EBA?
- (2). What was the relationship between landscape occupation and monument building, both in terms of how monument building impacted on the scale and composition of settlement (e.g. drawing people and resources into the region), and the way that settlement imparted a history to places that could lead to subsequent monumentalisation?
- (3). How was the process of living within this landscape enacted in relation to natural phenomena such as the distinctive local sarsen stone spreads, woodland, other vegetation regimes, springs, streams and rivers?
- (4). Can we provide, through the mapping of sedimentary deposits and the establishment of fine-grained palaeo-environmental sequences, robust estimates as to the likelihood of where well-preserved traces of prehistoric activity might be buried or masked?
- (5). In order to overcome the perception of Neo-EBA settlement and other routine practices as ephemeral and essentially passive and static compared to the active and dynamic practices of monument building, can we generate diachronic accounts that foreground the social complexities of lived life (networks, politics, mobilities, identity formation, etc.)? Essentially, can we be more ambitious in the way we engage with such evidence?
- (6). Linked to the above, how can a regional study of this kind contribute to the development of widely-applicable methodologies and interpretive frameworks with which to interrogate the often intractable traces of settlement during these periods?

This work reported here contributes to addressing questions 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6. It is the first element of a larger programme of judgementally-sited surface collection which will be rolled out over the course of the Project. Rather than aiming for extensive coverage, selective fields/blocks of fields will be targeted to take in different topographic settings, while others will investigate locations of known or suspected archaeological potential that can be related to the Project aims (e.g. scatters seemingly related to monumental foci).

Here we describe the results of surface collection undertaken over two days during early November 2016. It focussed on an area of arable south-east of the Avebury henge monument in the slope side

and valley base to the north of West Kennet hamlet, centred on SU 112 688 (Figure 1). The site code is SHB-16 (south Hackpen bottom [valley]).

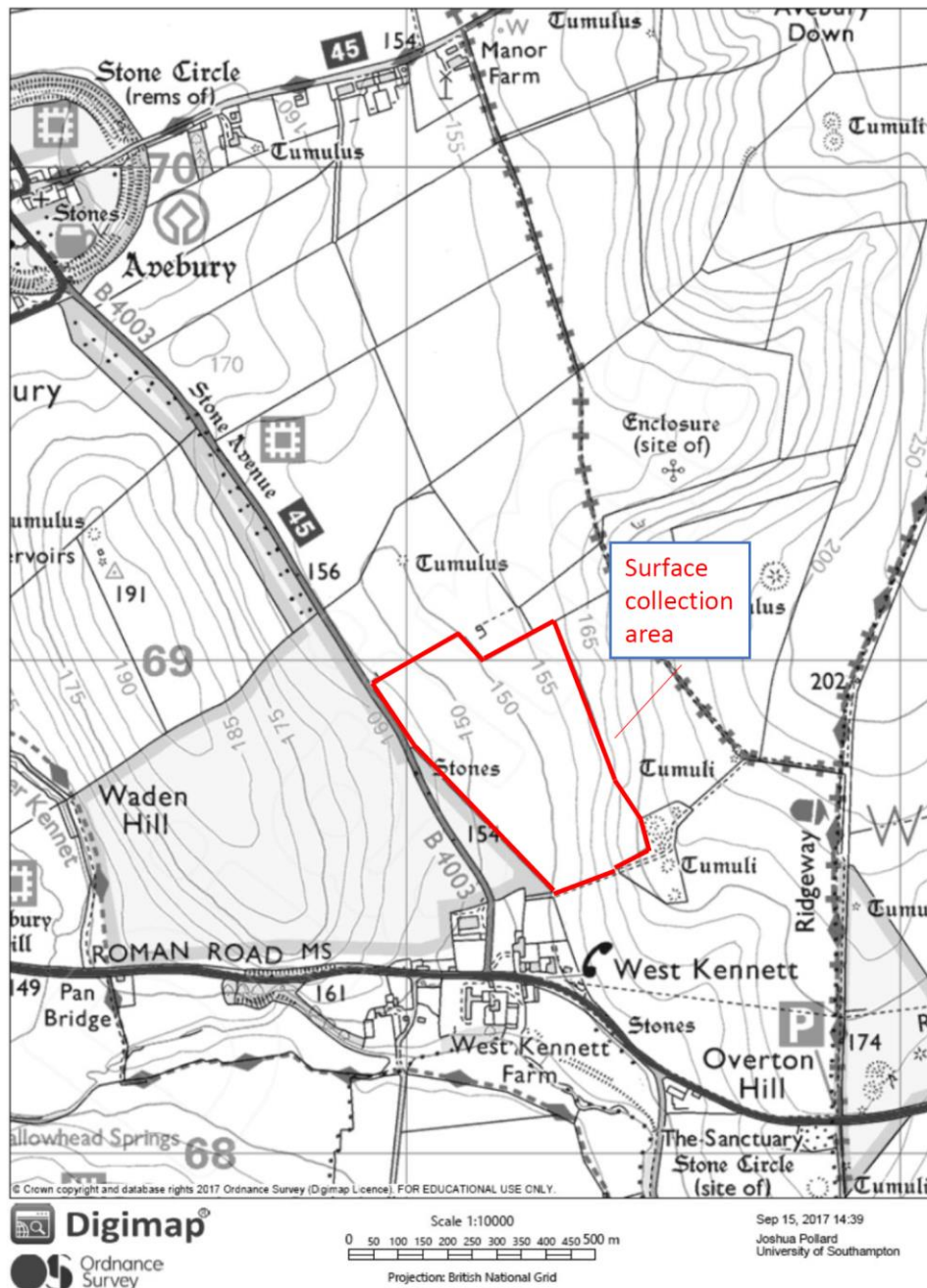


Figure 1. SHB-16 surface collection location

### Methodology

The methodology is similar to that employed during work on the lithic scatter on the Foot of Avebury Down in 2013 (Gillings *et al.* 2014). The aim is to provide both broad coverage – mapping macro variations in the density of worked flint, sarsen and prehistoric pottery, if present – but also to facilitate detailed surface investigation of specific concentrations of material (i.e. within scatter composition and variation). Conventional transect collection does not enable such scaling, and

distorts 'true', point-specific presence/density. To overcome this, total collection is undertaken within 10 x 10m squares. These were spaced at 40m intervals, with judgements subsequently made to infill the collection interval based upon particular concentrations of prehistoric material or the presence of distinctive assemblages of material.

Here, the sampling strategy involved collection across four NE-SW transects, running across the valley from mid-slope to mid-slope, except with the southern-most which extended to the upper slope of Overton Hill on the east side (Figure 2). Transects were spaced at 120m intervals. Individual collection units were intensively walked, usually by a team of two. Field-observed concentrations of worked flint in squares M13 and M17 prompted more intensive investigation. An additional seven squares were walked, laid out over a 50 x 50m block, reducing the spacing of collection units to a 20m interval (e.g. with a 10m gap between).



*Figure 2. SHB-16 surface collection units*

Each collection unit was allocated a unique alpha-numeric designation, running from A to K on the y-axis (north to south), and 1 to 33 on the x-axis (east to west). The position of the collection units was recorded using differential GPS, and will be incorporated into the Project GIS.

The work complements the record provided by the programmes of surface collection undertaken by Holgate and Thomas in 1984, by Cardiff University on the southern slopes of Windmill Hill in 1992,

the National Trust between 1990-95 and Wessex Archaeology in the early 2000s (see Snashall & Cleal 2016 for details).

### **Finds collection and deposition policy**

All artefactual material of pre-modern date was retained. The exception is provided by non-worked burnt flint, which was counted and weighed prior to disposal. Mass-produced materials such as pressed tin plate, plastics, and 'universal' building materials such brick and metamorphic roof slate, were not kept, but the presence of these materials recorded. Retained artefacts were cleaned, catalogued and bagged / boxed in accordance with the Conditions of Acceptance of the Alexander Keiller Museum and the UKIC.

Finds and archive will be deposited within the Alexander Keiller Museum, Avebury.

### **Results**

A total of 36 collection units were walked. Weather conditions were predominantly fine and dry, with occasional showers. Surface visibility was good. Only on the east side was the soil a typical calcareous chalkland ploughsoil. Otherwise, this was a slightly clayey brown soil, likely colluvial on the west side and valley base. Natural sarsen (up to 0.5m in maximum dimension) was concentrated in the valley bottom, with larger, agriculturally cleared, blocks present in enclosing hedgelines. Marshall (2016, 108-9) has observed cropmarks that may relate to the removal of large sarsens along the east side of this valley.

In total, 181 pieces of worked flint, four pieces of burnt worked and five pieces of burnt unworked flint were recovered (Figure 3, Table 1), along with four pieces of worked sarsen. Worked flint densities ranged from zero to 17 pieces per collection unit, with an average of 5.1 pieces per unit. Only five squares produced more than 10 pieces: M13, 15, 17 and 21 in the valley bottom and Y25 on the gently rising eastern slope. Three squares (A5, Y9 and AK17) failed to produce any flint. There is little sense of patterning in relation to topography. It is difficult to compare finds densities with those encountered through earlier programmes of transect walking. However, in the case of the southern slopes of Windmill Hill (Whittle *et al.* 2000) the use there of metre-wide 50m lines (i.e. 50 sq. m. per unit) implies the densities derived here (equivalent to 100 sq. m. per collection unit) should be halved for comparative purposes. The average of 3.8 pieces per unit from Windmill Hill is not too dissimilar to that encountered here, though spatial variability must be taken into account, with the area close to the enclosure producing localised concentrations of over 16 pieces per unit, and frequent values of over 11 (Whittle *et al.* 2000, fig. 2). There is even starker contrast with Avebury Down, where use of the same 10 x 10m units during surface collection in 2013 yielded an average of 16.9 pieces per unit and range of two to 68 pieces (Gillings *et al.* 2014).

Of the worked unburnt flint, 29 pieces (or 16%) are identifiable as implements/retouched flakes (Tables 1 and 2). Formal implements include scrapers (seven), knives (five, including an expediently-worked discoidal example from Y13), notched flakes (two), a piercer/awl, microdenticulate, denticulate and hammerstone. Debitage products are flake dominated, but include eight blades/blade-like flakes, perhaps hinting at an early Neolithic component. There is a good balance between preparation, secondary and non-cortical flakes, indicating that all stages of core reduction were taking place, though not necessarily synchronically. Displaying hard-hammer working and a degree of expediency, the concentration in and around squares M13-21 may relate to a later Neolithic or Early Bronze Age phase of settlement activity.



*Figure 3. SHB-16 surface collection units*

The flint utilised is of variable quality, generally with a thin, weathered cortex. One likely source is the immediate slope-sides of Avebury Down/Hackpen, as confirmed by excavation to the north in summer 2017 (Gillings et al. 2017). Patination varied, reflecting local soil conditions. Much of the flint from the valley floor was unpatinated or lightly patinated, while that from the higher slope sides in the SE was heavily patinated.

A limited amount of modern material, principally CBM, was present in the ploughsoil (principally CBM).

	Blade	Blade-like	Prep. flake	Secondary flake	Non-cortical flake	Rejuv. flake	Chip	Single plat. flake core	Implements	Retouched	Burnt worked	Burnt unwrkd	Total
A1						1			1	1			3
A5													
A9										1			1
A13								1					1
A17			2						1	1		1	5
A21				2		1							3
A25				1				1					2
A29					2				1				3
A33		1		1									2
K13					1				2	2			5
K15				3									3
K17	1		1	1		1		1	2	2			9
M5	1	1		4						1			7
M9			1	3	1				2	1			8
M13		1		3	2	2			3		1	1	13
M15			3	9	3		1		1			1	18
M17			1	6	1		1	1		1			11
M21		1	2	3	1	1	2		1		1	1	13
M25			1	1									2
M29				1	2								3
O13				1					2				3
O15			1			1						1	3
O17					2	1	1			1			5
Y5			1	2	1								4
Y9													-
Y13									1				1
Y17		1	2	2									5
Y21		1	2	3	1								7
Y25			6	5	2		2				1		16
Y29			2	6	1								9
AK9			1	4	1						1		7
AK13			1	1									2
AK17													-
AK21			1	5	2				1				9
AK25			2	4	1								7
AK29													-
	2	6	30	71	24	8	7	4	18	11	4	5	190

Table 1. SHB-16 worked and burnt flint according to collection unit



	End scraper	End and side scraper	Non-flake scraper	Piercer/awl	Microdent.	Denticulate	Notched flake	Backed knife	Discoidal knife	Other knife	H'stone
A1								1			
A17								1			
A29					1						
K13			1	1							
K17	1						1				
M9		1				1					
M13	2							1			
M15							1				
M21										1	
O13	2										
Y13									1		
AK21											1
	5	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	1	1	1

Table 2. SHB-16 implements according to collection unit

### Discussion

Surface collection revealed relatively low densities of worked flint. This was likely generated through repeated episodes of activity spanning the early 4<sup>th</sup> through to 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, and in that respect is typical of the region. Perhaps the most significant result is the identification of a localised concentration of material, including implements, around squares M13-21. This could represent of small settlement focus of 3<sup>rd</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC date.

Questions must remain regarding surface visibility since colluvial deposits, even if thin, could mask more substantial scatters of worked flint on the lower slope sides and valley floor. That may prove especially pertinent in the southern part of the walked area, where recent geophysical survey has identified a large fan of colluvial soil washing off the SE side of Waden Hill into the valley bottom (Philippe De Smedt pers. comm.). We already possess some knowledge of the character and masking effects of those deposits through excavation in 2002 and 2003 on the projected line of the West Kennet Avenue, 50-75m SW of the most south-westerly of the collection units. Here colluvial soils and a thick buried soil had a combined depth of up to 0.6m. Earlier Neolithic worked flint and pottery was present in the soil, scattered around a series of small sarsen boulders (Gillings *et al.* 2008, 135-8). That material is not visible on the surface, and highlights the need to follow up surface collection exercises such as that reported here with test pitting or evaluation trenching of zones of suspected colluvial masking.

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## Authorship

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