

Mesolithic – 12,000-4,000 BC

It is an illustration of the potential of the AONB for prehistoric activity that a hand axe dated to the Mesolithic (Fig 4) was found by a member of the public while this report was being prepared. The tool that was found on Prinsted beach was dated to 8,500BC and was identified as an adze (Kay Ainsworth, the keeper of archaeology at Hampshire Museums Service quoted in *The News, Hampshire – Havant*, 27 March 2004). However, this artefact may have been brought to the area in more recent times with other stone used for sea defences.

The landscape in the Mesolithic period would have been very different to the one today (Fig 5). The most striking difference would have been that the harbour would have been well inland, some 50km from the sea. At the beginning of the Mesolithic period sea levels would have been much lower than they are today because of the great volume of water locked up in glaciers. During the Mesolithic period sea levels rose rapidly as the glaciers melted until the land mass connecting Britain with the Continent disappeared at about 8,000 years ago. The lower reaches of the AONB would have flooded as sea levels rose.

The potential depth of *in situ* Mesolithic sites in the AONB is illustrated by a submerged cliffline found at Bouldnor off the northeast coast of the Isle of Wight (Momber 2000). Here, Mesolithic flints and microliths were found in a deposit of peat at c. -10m OD. Similar Mesolithic sites may await discovery in the AONB, although at a significant depth below modern ground and sea level. It is important to emphasise that the Mesolithic landscape would have continued well below the modern low water mark. These temporary hunting sites or base camps may be located on the margins of deep ravines running from the Downs to the coast, along which freshwater streams flowed.

Pollen analysis from samples in neighbouring Langstone harbour (Allen & Gardiner 2000) indicates the sort of vegetation that is likely to have been present in the later Mesolithic period in the AONB. In the valleys, open grass and sedge with freshwater fen with alder carr is likely to have existed while the higher dry land supported lindens (lime), perhaps with oak, elm and hazel. Such an environment is likely to have attracted herds of deer and cattle which, together with fish in the streams, would have provided good hunting for the Mesolithic population. Butchery and dismemberment is likely to have occurred at the kill site, with the most useful elements removed to the base camp. The landscape is likely to have been one that was never intensively occupied, but visited frequently by Mesolithic people. The Mesolithic occupation in this area of Sussex is more likely to have been further inland on the chalk fringes, or on the chalk itself.

A possible flint working site was identified in 1996 (Chi SMR 2482; 483700 103500) near Apuldram. The other Mesolithic material found in the AONB consist of stray finds, in addition to the flint adze mentioned above. A Mesolithic conical flint core and numerous blades most with secondary working were found in the cemetery at St. Thomas's Church, Warblington, during grave digging in 1966 (Hants SMR 23,381.00; 472870 105290). A Mesolithic flint working site was found at Nutbourne Creek (Chi SMR 243; 477980 103480); finds included a barbed and tanged arrowhead and a microlith. Chichester District Museum also holds a collection of Mesolithic flints from the Apuldram area (Chi SMR 2472; 484000 103000). An axe head was also found (Chi SMR 2491; 484000 104000).

Research questions

In terms of research, there is a need to identify (perhaps by survey) and excavate *in situ* Mesolithic sites in the AONB, especially those where environmental, faunal and botanical remains are likely to be preserved. The Harbour is a drowned landscape, and Mesolithic sites could survive many metres below the modern low water mark. Stratified sites on the Coastal Plain in general could reveal improved chronological sequences. Important information is also likely to be gained through fieldwalking of plough-spread sites on the coastal plain. Areas under or adjacent to alluvium in the lower stretches of river valleys would also provide useful information if targeted for investigation. Work in the AONB could complement studies about how raw material was procured, for example from the Downs. Research along these lines would lead to a considerable gain in information in the study of the Mesolithic period.

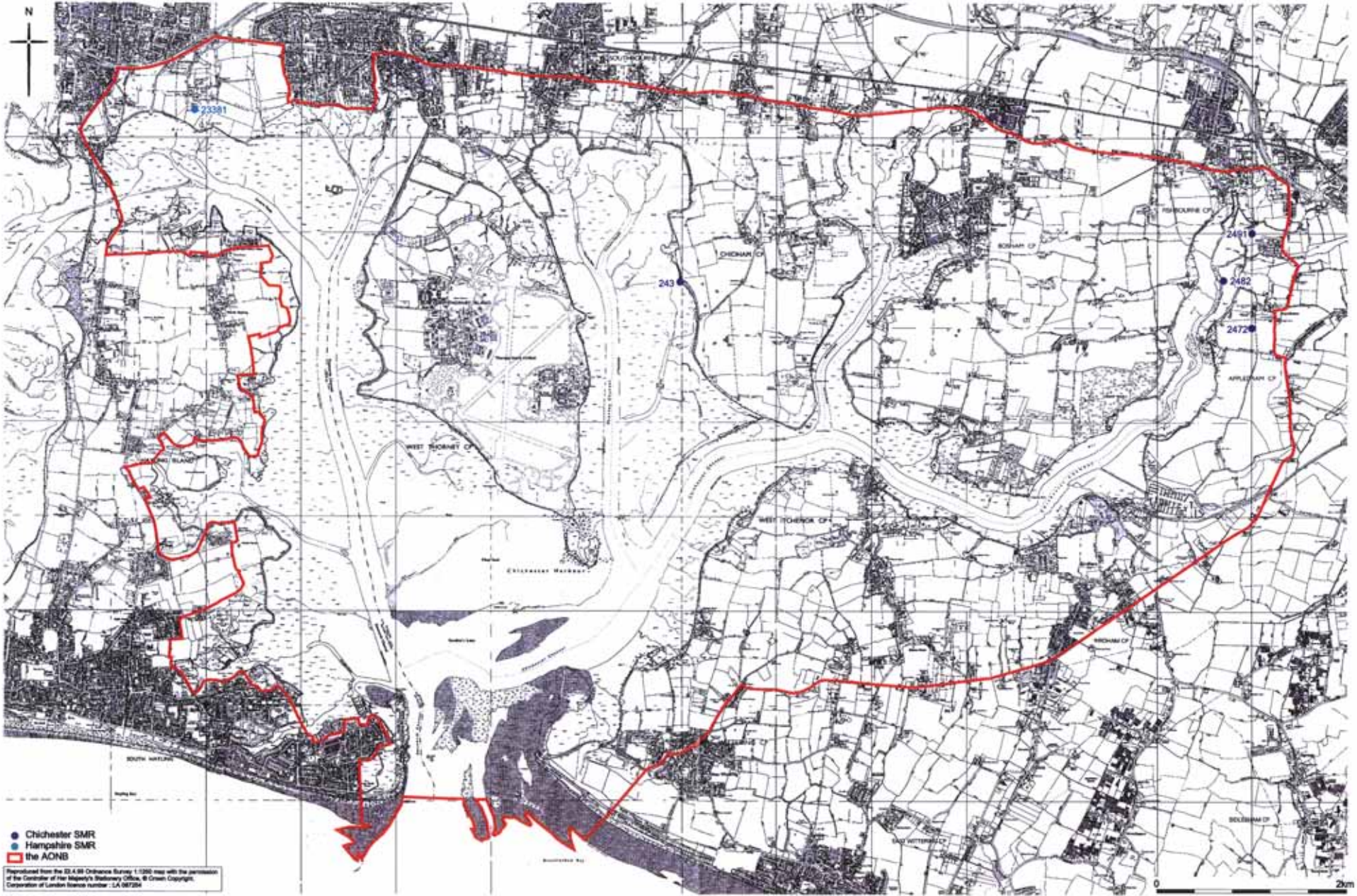


Fig 4 Mesolithic period map

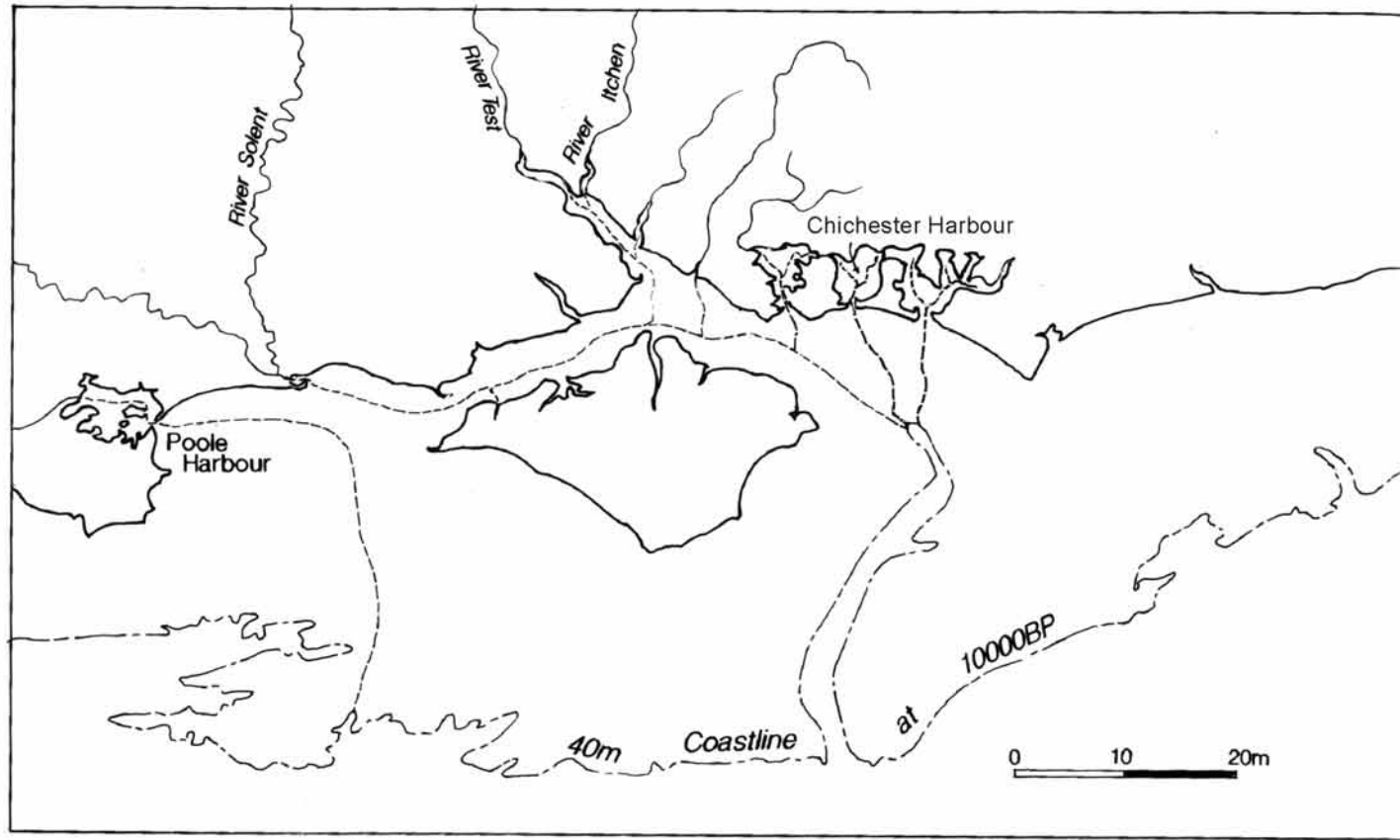


Fig 5 Mesolithic coastline (from Allen and Gardiner 2000)