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**Abbreviations**
The abbreviations used in this volume follow the system laid down in British Standard 4148 part 2; many of the most relevant abbreviations are listed in *Signposts for archaeological publication* ed 3. London: Council for British Archaeology, 1991.

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# II: Poulton, Cheshire
## Evidence of Neolithic Activity

**by Kevin Cootes, Janet Axworthy, David Jordan, Rea Carlin, Matt Thomas and Ian Brooks***

This paper examines five items of Neolithic date recovered from residual contexts during the excavation of the multi-period archaeological site in Chapel Field, Poulton. Each find is diagnostic and notable for the region, comprising a portable polissoir, bifacially worked flint, plano-convex knife, fragment of a polished axe, and a side scraper. These items combine with other finds of Neolithic date from the site, published as part of a larger assemblage of Mesolithic to Bronze Age date in volume 86 of this journal. Taken together, they characterise activity that is beyond casual loss. Not only is a sustained presence indicated, but the unusual nature of the lithics on a regional basis can be interpreted as defining specific activities that took place on the site. This assemblage, and the outstanding survival of Iron Age occupation, suggests that features of Neolithic date may well be preserved in the locality.

### Introduction
#### *The site*

The farming settlement of Poulton lies to the west of the River Dee, about eight kilometres south of Chester, and comprises a hamlet surrounded by fields used for arable cultivation. The fifty-five-acre Chapel Field (Illus II.1) is situated near the eastern edge of the settlement (SJ 402 584) and is part of a plateau demonstrating little topographical variation. At the southern limit of the field, however, the landscape is bounded by a low but prominent scarp overlooking the floodplain of the Pulford

* Kevin Cootes (Corresponding author), Poulton Research Project; Senior Research Officer, School of Biological and Environmental Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, and Fieldwork Co-ordinator, Chester Archaeological Society. Email K.V.Cootes@ljmu.ac.uk

Janet Axworthy, Vice-President, Chester Archaeological Society. Email Janet.Axworthy@flintshire.gov.uk

David Jordan, Senior Lecturer, School of Biological and Environmental Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, 3 Byrom Street, Liverpool L3 3AF. Email D.W.Jordan@ljmu.ac.uk

Rea Carlin, Freelance consultant osteologist, Poulton Research Project

Matt Thomas, Archaeology3D. Email matt@watcuts.com

Ian Brooks, Engineering Archaeological Services Ltd. Email Brooks2@onebillinternet.co.uk

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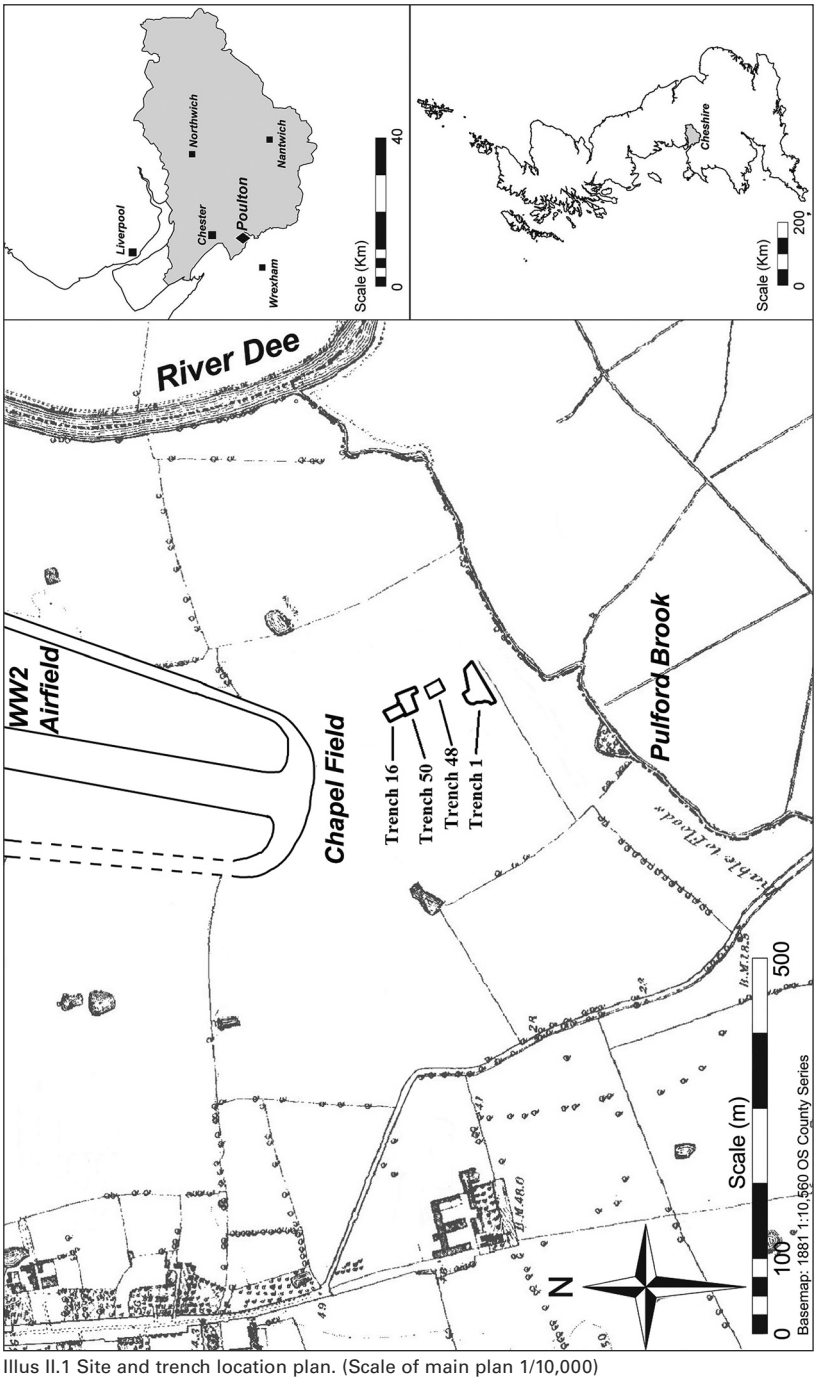



Illus II.1 Site and trench location plan. (Scale of main plan 1/10,000)

Brook, which forms the boundary between England and Wales and flows into the River Dee approximately 450m to the east. Geologically, Chapel Field is covered by glacial deposits in the form of a thick sheet of largely stone-free, slightly calcareous, silty clay, resting directly upon the Kinnerton Sandstone Formation (Earp & Taylor 1986, 69). Soils at Poulton are typical of this area of Cheshire, being dominated by poorly drained argillic stagnogleys that would have been a disadvantage to agriculture in later prehistory but are suited to grasslands. In contrast, the floodplain beneath the plateau is characterised by nutrient-rich alluvial silts (Furness 1978, 117), which would have been appropriate for horticulture or the cultivation of swift-growing crops that could be sown, grown, and harvested between floods. Chapel Field is therefore located on the border of two distinct geomorphological zones that would have been ideal for pursuing a mixed farming strategy.

### *Historical background and research*

The Poulton Project was initiated in 1995 as a community- and research-based excavation, with the primary aim of identifying the site of a lost medieval abbey of twelfth- to thirteenth-century date, attested in historical records (Emery *et al* 1996, 1–9). The site of the abbey has yet to be identified, although the discovery of a decorated medieval floor tile in the 1960s by Mr Gerry Fair revealed the location of a small medieval rural chapel with a secular graveyard (Emery 2000, 19–23). Excavations on the site of the chapel (Trench 1) produced a material assemblage that is unusual for a medieval rural site, with a diverse array of redeposited prehistoric lithics (Mesolithic to Bronze Age), a substantial collection of Roman objects, and several hundred fragments of early medieval Chester Ware. Subsequent excavations to the north in Trenches 16, 48 and 50 revealed extensive evidence for Iron Age occupation in the form of roundhouse gullies and related features (Cootes *et al* 2021). Continuity across the first four centuries AD was attested by a series of features including ditches, gullies, small-scale industrial remains, and a large D-shaped enclosure.

### *The lithic assemblage*

Between 1995 and 2016, an assemblage of 273 worked chert and flint fragments was recovered from residual contexts in Trenches 1, 16 and 50, in addition to a bifacial polished stone axe (possibly reused in the Roman period), and a decorated chalk plaque. The majority of the lithics were undiagnostic and originated from small pebble flints that would have been available in the local clays. There were, however, identifiable early Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze Age examples (Cowell 2016), which enabled a limited analysis and spatial distribution to be presented (Cootes *et al* 2016*,* 26–7).

Diagnostic items of Neolithic date comprise the stone axe (Cootes *et al* 2016, 25–6) and the decorated chalk plaque of non-local origin (Teather 2016). Ten blade fragments were categorised as broadly Mesolithic to Neolithic, whilst an awl and three scrapers were stylistically dated to the Neolithic and Bronze Age respectively (Cowell 2016, 11–19). However, this analysis only gave a general impression of human presence in the area during these periods. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to diagnostic Neolithic items in the assemblage discovered after 2016, and the nature of activity during that period.

For the purpose of this paper, the widespread adoption of Neolithic culture in Cheshire has been taken to begin around 4000 BC (Hodgson & Brennand 2006, 23), with the beginning

of the Bronze Age being *c* 2600 BC (Parker Pearson 1999, 77). In the *North West regional research framework*, the Neolithic and early Bronze Age up to 1200 BC are classed as early prehistory and cover the time-period of the lithics analysed here (Myers & Stallibrass 2021).

## Neolithic stone objects

Five stone artefacts were recovered from redeposited contexts in Trenches 1 and 48. Objects 1, 2, and 5 were recovered from unstratified backfill and demolition events in Trench 1. Objects 3 and 4 were recovered from Trench 48: the former from the final backfill of a Roman ditch dated by ceramics to AD 90–130; the latter from a small pit of uncertain date. Objects 1, 2, and 3 are illustrated (Illus II.2–.3)

### *Catalogue* Ian Brooks

1 Portable polissoir. A water-worn cobble of uncertain lithology with one smoothed/polished face and a marked linear hollow worn into one end. L 165mm, W 116.5mm, Th 82.3mm; W of hollow 46 mm, depth 6 mm. Tr I unstratified. Illus II.2.

2 Bifacially worked fragment on a high-quality, translucent, dusky yellowish-brown (10 YR 2/2) flint. Superficial similarities to a leaf-shaped arrowhead but rather thick and few or no fine removals defining the edge. L 29.5mm, W 20.9mm, Th 9.2mm. Tr 1 (1010). Illus II.3.2.

3 Plano-convex knife on a blade of dusky yellowish-brown, opaque, flint (10 YR 2/2). Fine, sub-parallel, long removals around the majority of the periphery define the long, tapering shape of the tool. The platform has been removed with a single flake and the distal end has a small notch. L 62.9mm, W 16.7mm, Th 4.8mm; notch 7.5mm. Tr 48 (48008). Illus II.3.3.

4 Fragment of a polished ?axe, macroscopically probably made on an opaque medium grey (N5) chert. Irregular, broken fragment, but with two highly polished surfaces that suggest that it was originally part of a polished tool, probably an axe. The morphology of the polished surfaces suggests that this fragment is from near the distal end. There is one clear flake on the dorsal surface, whilst the ventral surface is irregularly broken. It is possible that the axe broke during resharpening by reknapping the cutting edge. L 34.4mm, W 50.5mm, Th 19.9 mm. Tr 48 undated pit.

5 Side scraper on a cobble of fine indurated sandstone. One face is the result of a natural fissure and the dorsal surface was produced by the removal of a large flake. The left-hand side is defined by a series of removals to produce the working edge, whilst the distal end and right side of the artefact retain their naturally worn surfaces. L 99mm, W 66mm, Th 24 mm. Tr I (3753).

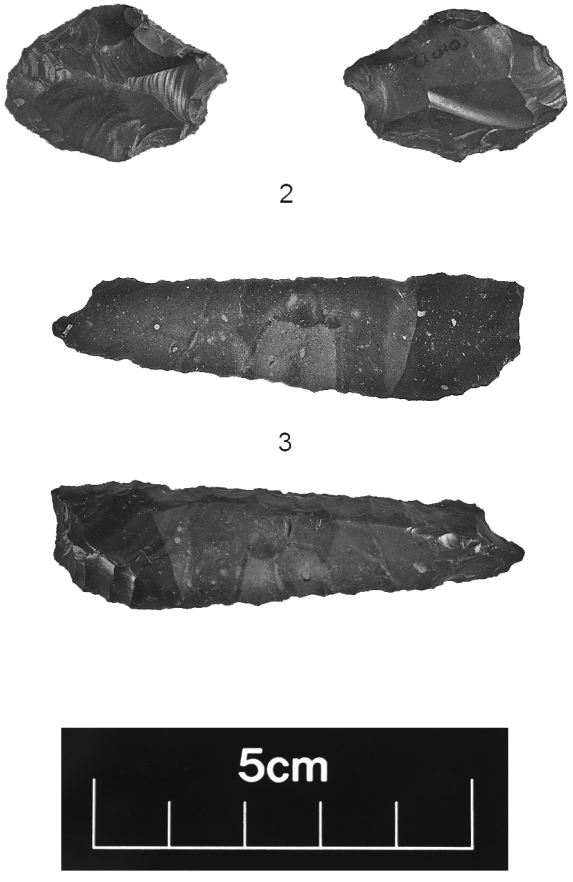
Of the artefacts analysed, two are of flint, one chert, with the remaining two of water-worn cobble and fine-grained sandstone. It is noticeable that the plano-convex knife (Cat no 3) and possible arrowhead (Cat no 2), are of relatively high-quality material. There are no primary flint sources in the North-West, with the nearest situated in Antrim, Lincolnshire and Wessex. However, the Irish Sea Till is known to contain a low percentage of flint erratics (Mackintosh 1879). It is therefore possible that the flint used to construct the knife was imported from some distance, but equally it could have been made from one of the better-quality erratics.


Illus II.2 Portable polissoir. (Scale 1/2)

## *Discussion and conclusion*

The selected artefacts from Poulton are all residual, but when combined with the stone tools of Neolithic date published in Cootes *et al* (2016), they begin to reveal a level of activity during that period within Chapel Field that is difficult to account for by casual loss.

The typologically distinct artefacts provide important chronological information. The plano-convex knife suggests a late Neolithic component to the assemblage, whilst the axe fragment and possible leaf-shaped arrowhead have a broader date range within the period. This reflects the previous recovery of a polished axe (Cootes *et al* 2016, 25–6) and the scale-flaked awl piece and blades reported on by Cowell (2016, 22). Of particular note is the




Illus II.3 Flint objects. (Scale 1/1)

portable polissoir. This has a broad groove that has been worn into the end of the cobble, but the fact that the adjacent face has also been worn smooth suggests that this artefact may have had more than one use. The position of the groove means that the polissoir could not have been used without having been supported in some way, possibly by burying part of it. Portable polissoirs are not common but they are known from Neolithic contexts at Llanfaethlu (Brooks *forthcoming*), Llandegai (Houlder 1968, 218), Gwernvale, Etton, The Trundle (Edmonds 1995) and at the Ness of Brodgar (https://www.nessofbrodgar.co.uk/dig-diary-friday-august-4-2017/).

Despite being redeposited, these finds form a significant assemblage, as the nature of early prehistoric land use is still poorly understood in Cheshire (Myers & Stallibrass 2021). When combined with the material published in Cootes *et al* (2016), they provide a glimpse of life in the Neolithic period. The polissoir demonstrates that stone tools were being constructed. The plano-convex knife and blade fragments could have been used for a variety of daily activities, such as butchery, whilst the scrapers and awl would have been used to work organic material. The bifacially worked flint possibly reflects a failed attempt to make

a leaf-shaped arrowhead using small, locally sourced material. Not only does this suggest that hunting was taking place but also that flint was in such short supply that even this small piece was adapted into another kind of tool when it failed to produce the desired shape. Finally, the decorated chalk plaque reported in 2016 suggests that a ritual element was present.

In conclusion, when the Neolithic material is considered within the context of the outstanding survival of later occupation evidence at Poulton, early prehistoric features may be preserved elsewhere in the field. Such remains would present the opportunity to increase our understanding of these elusive human groups.

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