The discovery and excavation of a Mesolithic site in Daer Valley.
Tam Ward December 2004

Summary
This report describes the discovery and excavation of a further Mesolithic site in the Daer Valley. Despite the site being severely damaged by forestry activities, a significant assemblage of lithic was retrieved and also dateable charcoal.

Introduction
The report given here will be restricted to the actual work undertaken and the results thereof; reference should be made to other reports in the Daer Valley Project, most especially to Site No 84 (Ward, 2004), where discussions and conclusions stand good as far as this interim report is concerned.

The site No 85 Fig 1 NS 95196 10295 340m OD
On the north eastern flank of Coomb Rig, at the northern end of Block No 19/28 of Tilhill Forest, there was a discrete scatter of flaked radiolarian chert and some flint. The scatter covered an area of approximately 10m in diameter and was originally seen as isolated pieces of chert on the upcast piles for planting new trees. The area has recently been clear felled of mature trees and replanted in 2003/2004. This site was discovered while searching in the area of Site No 84 which is about 50m to the east and around the same contour on the hill. The site lies just below a break of slope and is on a slight gradient.

Excavations
Initially it was essential to identify the source of the lithic in terms of the recent forest activity. It was clear that the small piles of gravel created to plant new trees on, and where the lithic was first retrieved, had been dug from a large pit, 1m deep, and below a break of slope and this had been by a mechanical excavator. Tests showed that further lithic lay around the pit and later it was noted that the site had also been disturbed about forty years ago when the area was furrow ploughed to plant the original forest of sitka spruce.
The excavation strategy was simply to follow the in situ lithic away from the pit and determine where the concentration lay, while hopefully finding dateable features. However, this was fraught with considerable difficulty, since the ground had been badly disturbed by the earlier ploughing, the expansion of the former tree root systems and stumps, the dumping of thinning branches some decades ago on top of the original ground cover of peat, these branches were covered in a layer of conifer needles and finally, numerous piles of gravel had recently been dumped over the area to plant new trees on. The problems were soon exacerbated when digging began, because a spring invaded the area throughout the work! Nevertheless it was possible to clear small areas at a time and proceed to the final outcome.

It must be stated that excavating conditions were appalling, with mud developing constantly and drainage channels having to be maintained throughout the work. For this reason, attempts to record the finds accurately on the ground were abandoned, it was apparent however where the bulk of the finds were coming from and it was possible to determine the nucleus of the site thus, it was also noted that nearly all of the microliths were found within a square metre or so (see plan).

![Two photos showing the conditions resulting from the spring which may have been a result of changed water tables due to the forest. It is unlikely that the spring would have existed during occupation of the site. Site No 84 lies c 50m beyond the two standing excavators on the right.](image-url)
Since all of the spoil from the site was wet sieved in a nearby drainage ditch, the smallest debitage has been retrieved and it is considered that the vast bulk of the lithic from the site has been recovered.

Seven former tree stumps along with their root systems were eventually removed as well as the forest debris, previous upcast and original cover of peat, the latter being about 0.3m deep, all of this was cleared to get to an old ground surface (ogs) of about 50mm thick and which lay over boulder clay. Lithic was recovered from the former upcast which was now semi compacted around and below the tree stumps and their roots. The in situ lithic was got from both the ogs and the upper surface of the boulder clay upon which the original soil profile lay.

Charcoal fragments were noted occasionally on the ground and also in the wet sieving process, and the two patches of concentrated charcoal were found as discrete and undisturbed deposits.

F1 was the smaller feature; about 0.3m in diameter by c 0.1m deep and it may have been in a shallow pit originally, it was bulk sampled for analyses. A sample of 10 grammes of charcoal larger than 2mm and up to 10mm in size was recovered. The feature also contained a chert core fragment and an irregular flake, also a small chunk of flint was incorporated.

Charcoal analyses from twenty fragments showed that thirteen were Prunoideae (cherry type) and seven were Quercus (oak).

F2, about 0.6m in diameter, was a thin layer of about 50mm – 75mm deep, it was partially sealed below a layer of stones, some of which may have been scorched, although this was not entirely certain, since any discolouration becomes bleached away by the effects of weathering below peat. A sample of 55 grammes of charcoal between 2mm and 25mm was recovered from the bulk sample; a couple of hazel nut shells were included. Ten chert flakes and one of flint were also found in the feature. It is uncertain whether this was a hearth but the possibility exists.

Charcoal analyses from fifty fragments showed that eight were Betula (birch), eighteen were Corylus (hazel) and twenty four were Quercus (oak). A sample of Corylus has been selected for C$^{14}$ dating.
The actual excavation trench edges were not as well defined as those given on the plan; however, the approximation is close. The excavation was terminated where the lithic was deemed to run out.

Finds
Apart from the lithic gathered originally around the site, practically all of the lithic was recovered from wet sieving. Although before excavation the site was strongly suspected as being mesolithic, no diagnostic tools were found at that stage. Cores from the excavation indicated small blade technology and very soon the microliths confirmed the period of the site.

The vast bulk of the lithic is local blue/grey radiolarian chert which can be found naturally in the upper reaches of the nearby River Clyde, but not in the Daer Valley. Much of the chert from this site is of poor quality, being flawed by veins, this probably accounts for the large number of struck chunks found and the absence of good classic cores. However, some good chert had been worked to form flakes.

Nearly all of the flint is a honey coloured variety, some of which has cortex surviving showing that reduction was taking place from pebbles brought to the site. Only about ten pieces were a darker coloured type.
Other occasional lithics include an agate like stone and a red jasper type, the latter being a microlith.

While the writer is not competent to accurately describe the lithic assemblage, some points may be made; the cores were all irregular, hammer stones were entirely absent, and practically no regular flakes were present. Several of the flint flakes and some chert pieces have edge wear or damage. The microliths listed here all have retouch on one or both sides, and as has been noted elsewhere on Clydesdale mesolithic sites, many appear to be of poor manufacture and may have been immediately discarded by their maker. The proportion of chert to flint microliths corresponds with the amount ofdebitage of each type; however, much of the flint flake retrieved could have been further worked since it is of superior quality to the chert.

It was possible to determine that the bulk of the lithic was in association with the two charcoal features and that there was a fairly tight zone of knapping involved. This covered an area of about 3m in diameter but which had unfortunately been severely truncated by the machine cut into the site. The reason for the concentration of microliths is not readily obvious, it can be said that there was no greater concentration ofdebitage beside them, than anywhere else within the main scatter. One can only speculate that there may have been an area or a container to store them, however, if an expert analysis confirms the writer’s view that many are poor quality, then they may have been discarded to this spot, as they were made.

Expert analyses of the lithic will be required to realise its full potential.

**Finds list**

**Random items from upcast piles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chert</td>
<td>Chunk, irregular flake, spall</td>
<td>122 of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chert</td>
<td>Core</td>
<td>2 of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chert</td>
<td>Scrapers? steep sided</td>
<td>2 of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint</td>
<td></td>
<td>10 of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**In situ items, nearly all retrieved in sieves**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chert</td>
<td>Chunk, irregular flake, spall</td>
<td>c 1600 of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chert</td>
<td>Microliths</td>
<td>30 of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chert</td>
<td>Microliths (possible)</td>
<td>3 of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chert</td>
<td>Edge damage flake</td>
<td>1 of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint</td>
<td>Pebble, chunk, mostly flake</td>
<td>114 of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint</td>
<td>Microliths</td>
<td>15 of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Flint       Regular blade       4 of

Items from features
F1  Chert          2 of
F1  Flint          1 of
F2  Chert        10 of
F2  Flint          1 of

Chert microliths on the left and flint examples on the right all demonstrate re-touch on one or both sides. A few are not given in this photo.

Four samples of possibly burnt greywacke were retrieved and an elongate pebble of much weathered greywacke. They have been gathered as routine and are perhaps not significant.

**General discussion**
Although an area of approximately 40 square metres were eventually exposed, at least 18 of these were already badly disturbed by previous activities. Certainly, without the mechanical excavation of the deep central pit, which obviously truncated the middle of the scatter, the site would probably never have been found, therefore the events of forestry activity may be seen as mixed blessings.

Clearly the site is a mesolithic camp site but whether directly associated in time with Site 84 is at present uncertain. Both sites are being C\(^{14}\) dated. The two sites will offer an analyses opportunity to consider separate lithic assemblages in close proximity and securely dated.
This brings the total of proven mesolithic sites in Daer Valley to seven. As stated in previous Daer reports, it is becoming increasingly clear that many other mesolithic sites must exist in the valley, and it follows that there must be many more awaiting discovery in other upland valley locations in southern Scotland.

This interim report will become a stand alone report while being included in the final ‘History of the Daer Valley Project’ report.

Addenda
A few other lithics were found around the area of Site 85:
Chert 4 of + flint 1 of    NS 95350 10301
Chert 1 of            NS 95365 10279
Chert 2 of + flint 1 of  NS 95333 10308
It is likely that these items are residual pieces from the site and otherwise may have no special significance.

Acknowledgement
Tilhill Forestry allowed access to the forest areas to search for sites and also kindly permitted the excavation to take place.
The following members of the group attended the dig: Fionna Christison, Brenda Dreghorn, Jacquie Dryden, Denise Dudds, Richard Gillanders, Sandra Kelly, Jim Ness and Robert Whitecross (site finder). Charcoal identification was done by Dr Jennifer Miller and Susan Ramsay of GUARD.

The writer organised the project, recorded the fieldwork and processed the finds, and soil samples in preparation for charcoal identification and C14 dating.

Reference
Ward, T 2004 The discovery and excavation of a Mesolithic site in Daer Valley, Biggar Museum Trust.