

# Curating the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic: guidance, case studies & perspectives

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## Introduction

The Historic England-funded *Curating the Palaeolithic*<sup>1</sup> project emphasises the importance of the Palaeolithic record to curators, and best practices for protecting it through the planning process. While specific curatorial approaches to the Palaeolithic are well established, the nature and significance of Palaeolithic resources varies between regions. The guidance highlights key variations (e.g. in the quantity and quality of prior discoveries, the differences between primary and secondary context sites, the relative importance of artefactual and palaeoenvironmental remains) and different curatorial strategies, with reference to the project's case studies.

The complementary *Managing Lithic Sites*<sup>2</sup> guidance explains to curators and land managers the potential significance of Holocene lithic scatters, whether undisturbed or in the ploughzone, and their appropriate handling in archaeological fieldwork. The guidance highlights themes relating to the definition and significance of lithic sites, their identification, assessment, evaluation and excavation, and their mitigation and management. It is supported by case studies ranging in scale from individual sites to wider lithic landscapes and regional/national studies.

## The Palaeolithic Record: Regional Variations and Strategies

- **Primary (Fig. 1) & secondary context sites:** these vary from undisturbed remains associated with land surfaces and flora/fauna (*primary*), to re-worked artefacts found out of context (*secondary*), although the latter sometimes occur in large numbers.
- **Strategies in Palaeolithic 'heartlands'** (e.g. north-east Kent; Fig. 2): abundant prior finds, which can include accumulated knowledge from multiple small-scale investigations, and/or high potential deposits will inform DBAs and WSI strategies and should result in higher intensity investigations.
- **Strategies in the 'margins':** prior knowledge is typically limited in regions and/or time periods with few previous finds (e.g. MIS 5e; northern England; Fig. 2), but any new remains, primary or secondary, are therefore of significance.
- **Sites without artefacts:** palaeoenvironmental evidence is of equal importance to artefacts, and critical to holistic understanding of the Palaeolithic and Pleistocene.
- **Assessment:** DBAs should be informed by existing finds, deposit models, potential for and significance of any remains, and the development impacts. WSI field evaluation methods should be informed by the DBA and be sufficient to assess the varying potential of deposits and any remains.

The above inevitably simplifies real world complexities, and all development scenarios with Palaeolithic-Pleistocene impacts need specialist input. See the full guidance and case studies for detailed examples.

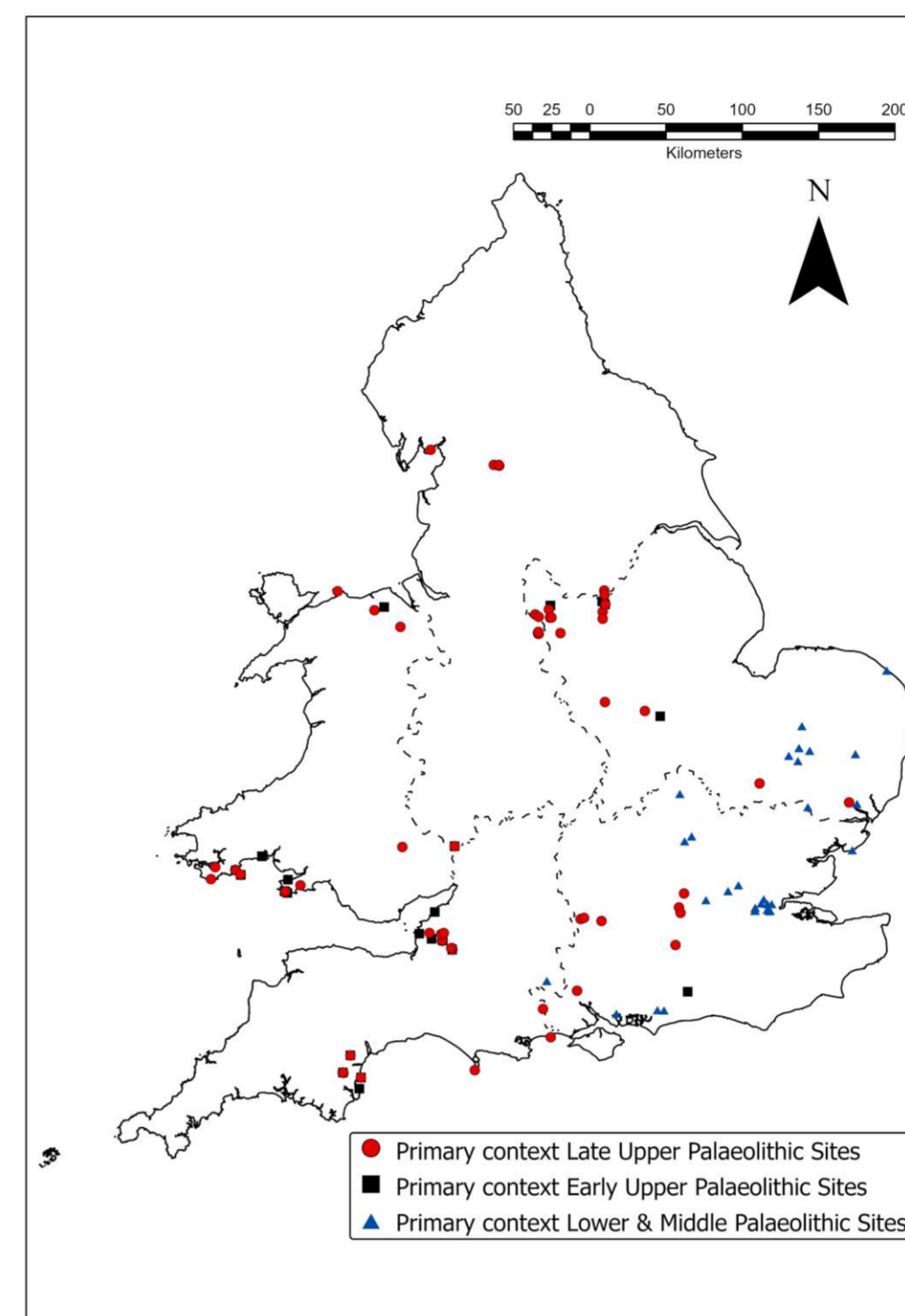


Figure 1: Distribution of primary context Palaeolithic sites<sup>1</sup>

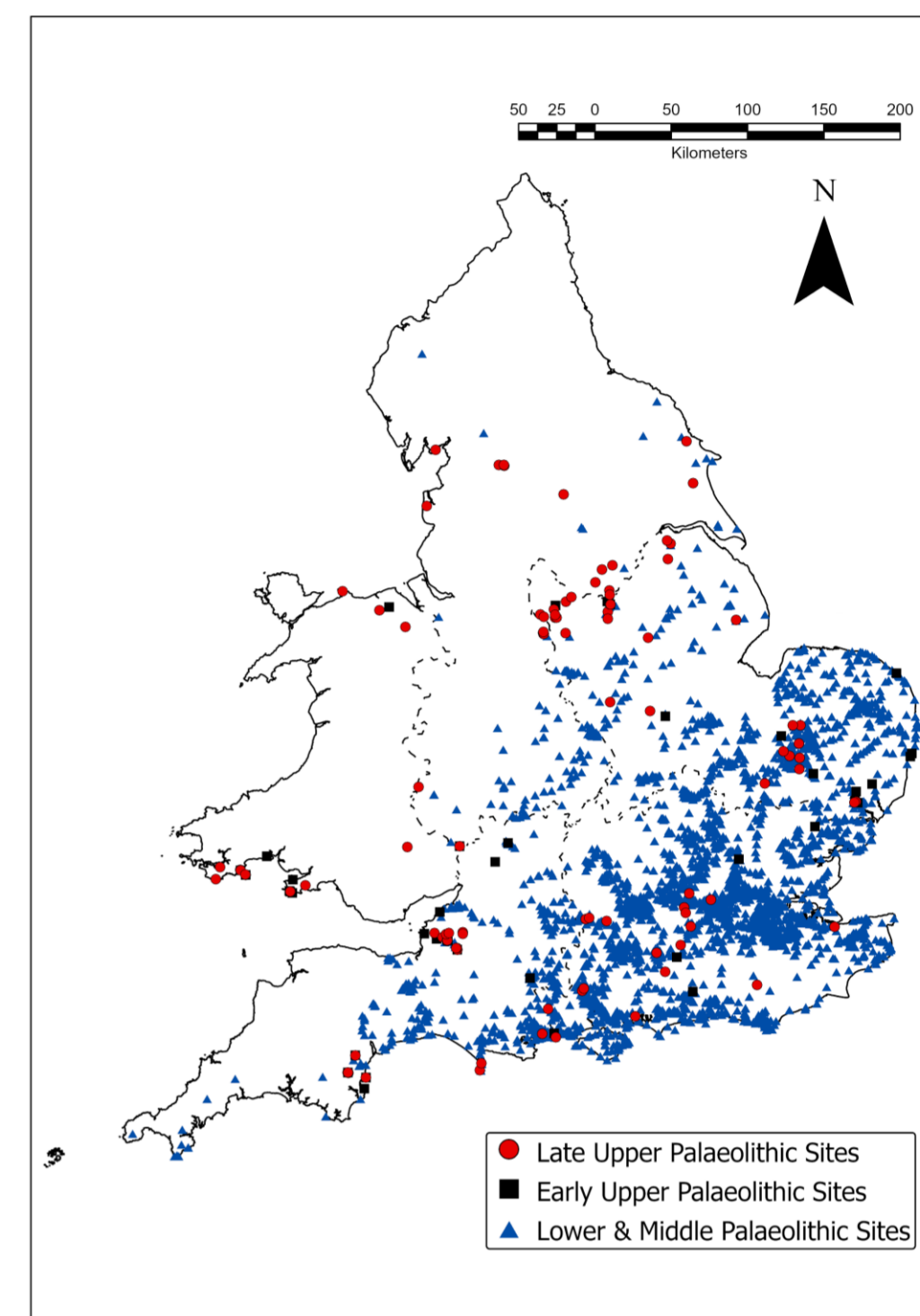


Figure 2: General distribution of Palaeolithic sites<sup>1</sup>

## Holocene Lithic Sites: Significance and Approaches

- **Identification & management:** the guidance distinguishes lithic scatters (assemblages displaced from their original context, predominantly into ploughsoil deposits) from undisturbed lithic sites (assemblages associated with their primary depositional context, usually buried palaeo-land surfaces or soil horizons; Fig. 3), outlines the significance of each type and indicates where they may be encountered. Management options are also considered.
- **Assessment & evaluation:** potential sources of information for DBAs are summarised as well as the importance of deposit modelling and the need for appropriate field evaluation methods, including geoarchaeological investigation and surface collection techniques.
- **Excavation & analysis:** considerations for ensuring appropriate recovery, spatial control and efficiency during excavation are outlined, along with the range of analytical techniques for lithic assemblages, including technological, spatial & scientific methods.



Figure 3: Excavation of *in situ* lithic sites along the Bexhill to Hastings Link Road, East Sussex (© Oxford Archaeology)<sup>2</sup>



**Managing  
Lithic Sites<sup>2,e</sup>**  
(document link)

### References

1. Historic England. 2023. *Curating the Palaeolithic*. Historic England: Swindon. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/curating-the-palaeolithic/>
2. Historic England. 2024. *Managing Lithic Sites*. Historic England: Swindon. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/managing-lithic-sites/>

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- <sup>d</sup> Co-authored this poster. Other colleagues authored case studies as part of the *Curating the Palaeolithic* or *Managing Lithic Sites* projects.
- <sup>e</sup> We welcome feedback on the documents.

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