Stone tools from the Overhailes pits

The two pits in the yard outside Structure 1 contained particularly interesting sets of flint tools. One of the pits (050) held five scrapers and a serrated-edge flake, while the other (247) held two scrapers, two serrated-edge flakes and a tool which combines both scraping and serrated edges (see Figure 4.8).

Scrapers are flakes of stone; the flakes have been retouched, usually at the distal end, to form convex scraping edges. They were used, as the name implies, for scraping, with the tool held in such a way that the ventral surface of the retouched edge is in contact with the material being scraped. Micro-wear analysis and experimentation has shown that scrapers are multi-purpose tools which can be used for working various raw materials, including wood and bone, but that they are especially suitable for preparing animal skins.

Serrated-edge tools are flakes on which part of the edge has been given closely spaced indentations using the edge of another piece of flint, creating serrated edges that look like the teeth of a fine saw (Figure 4.8). This provides a robust working edge, but its function is still disputed. For a long time it was thought that serrated-edge tools were components – hafted singly or in combinations – of sickle-like harvesting tools. However, microwear studies have shown that serrated pieces have often been used in a whittling fashion rather than in a saw-like motion. Some connection with the working of plant material (including wood) seems likely, in any case, because so many serrated-edge tools have a distinctive edge gloss, thought to relate to continued contact with plant silica. The largest serrated-edge flake from Overhailes has a small patch of gloss on the back of the denticulations (saw-teeth).

While scrapers are a ubiquitous tool type, occurring in archaeological assemblages from the Palaeolithic period to the Bronze Age, serrated-edge flakes are less common. They have been reported in contexts in Britain ranging from the Mesolithic period to the early Bronze Age, but seem to have had a particular currency during the early to middle Neolithic. Since both scrapers and serrated-edge flakes are basic tool-types with fairly standard characteristics, they rarely occur in chronologically diagnostic forms (that is, they are difficult, if not impossible, to closely date in isolation). So their presence together in the pits at Overhailes, dated to the second half of the fourth millennium BC, helps to establish a chronological horizon for these tools in eastern Scotland.

All of the implements from these pits appear to have been used before they were discarded, though they do not seem to have been used so heavily that they were no longer functional. They are also of relatively large size – larger than most blanks obtainable from local pebble sources – and so they could have been reworked into other tools rather than left in the pit. So their presence in these pit fills is somewhat enigmatic, since one might expect them to have remained in circulation rather than been abandoned. Given the ritualised nature of social and technological activity during the Neolithic, however, there could be many reasons why people chose to abandon or conceal them rather than to continue using them.

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vessels (Sheridan, see Chapter 12 and Archive; V 23–26) had been placed in the pit: from two large vessels (pots 23 and 24), a small vessel (V 25) and a small, thin-walled, fine ware pot with incised decoration (Figure 4.6: V 26). These sherds were found in the outer fill (004), lying against the post-pipe, and they may have been tucked in deliberately, along with charcoal, burnt animal bone and burnt hazelnut shell, perhaps from a hearth. The charcoal consisted of oak, alder, birch, hazel, and apple charcoal (Miller and Ramsay, see Chapter 12 and Archive).