

# THE SEVERN ESTUARY LEVELS RESEARCH COMMITTEE

## 1990 ANNUAL REPORT

### *Introduction*

Establishment of this committee in late 1985 reflected increasing awareness of the archaeological potential of the Severn Estuary. At the same time the area faced several major development threats, most notably the Severn Tidal Barrage, the Second Severn Crossing and Cardiff Bay Development. The initial impetus for establishment of the committee owes much to a number of discoveries made in the intertidal area by Derek Upton. The committee was established with Professor W. Manning as Chairperson and Dr. S. Green as Secretary; later Dr. Green took the Chair and was succeeded as Secretary by Dr. A. Whittle and then in 1990 by Dr. M. Bell. From 1986 to 1990 the committee comprised around 27 members representing a range of archaeological and environmental interests on both the English and Welsh sides of the estuary. Much of the committee's business has been in the hands of a steering committee with 11 members.

Public meetings on the archaeology of the estuary have been held alternately on the English and Welsh sides. The first meeting, which built on considerable public interest in the Severn Barrage, was held at Weston-super-Mare on 21 November 1987 and was organised by J. Evans, then at Woodspring Museum. Subsequent meetings were held at the National Museum of Wales on 26 November 1988 and again at Weston-super-Mare on 27 January 1990.

Academically the most influential piece of archaeological research within the estuary has been that of Professor J. Allen of the University of Reading. This work was already well advanced before the establishment of the committee in 1985. It has led to the establishment of an estuary-wide sedimentary sequence and in collaboration with Professor M. Fulford, also of Reading, to the identification of widespread evidence for Romano-British and later drainage of the estuarine saltmarshes. Several major publications on this research have already appeared (e.g. Allen 1987; Allen and Rae 1987; Allen and Fulford 1986, 1987). The research is ongoing and this annual report includes brief notes on current investigations of a Medieval quay at Woolaston and a note about the current research of a Reading Ph.D. student, S. Rippon. A detailed palaeoenvironmental investigation of peats on the Gwent foreshore near Goldcliff has recently been published by Smith and Morgan (1989) and produced evidence for Neolithic clearance.

A further major advantage in terms of previous studies is the presence just south of the Severn Estuary of the Somerset Levels peatlands, the most intensively studied area of archaeological wetland in the British Isles (Coles and Coles 1986).

In the summer of 1988 the committee was responsible for a rapid survey of the estuary's archaeology as part of the assessment for the Severn Tidal Barrage. This was co-ordinated on the Welsh side by Drs. A. Whittle and S. Green, and the survey was carried out by Dr. H. Livingston and P. Reeves. On the English side the survey was co-ordinated by B. Croft, R. Iles

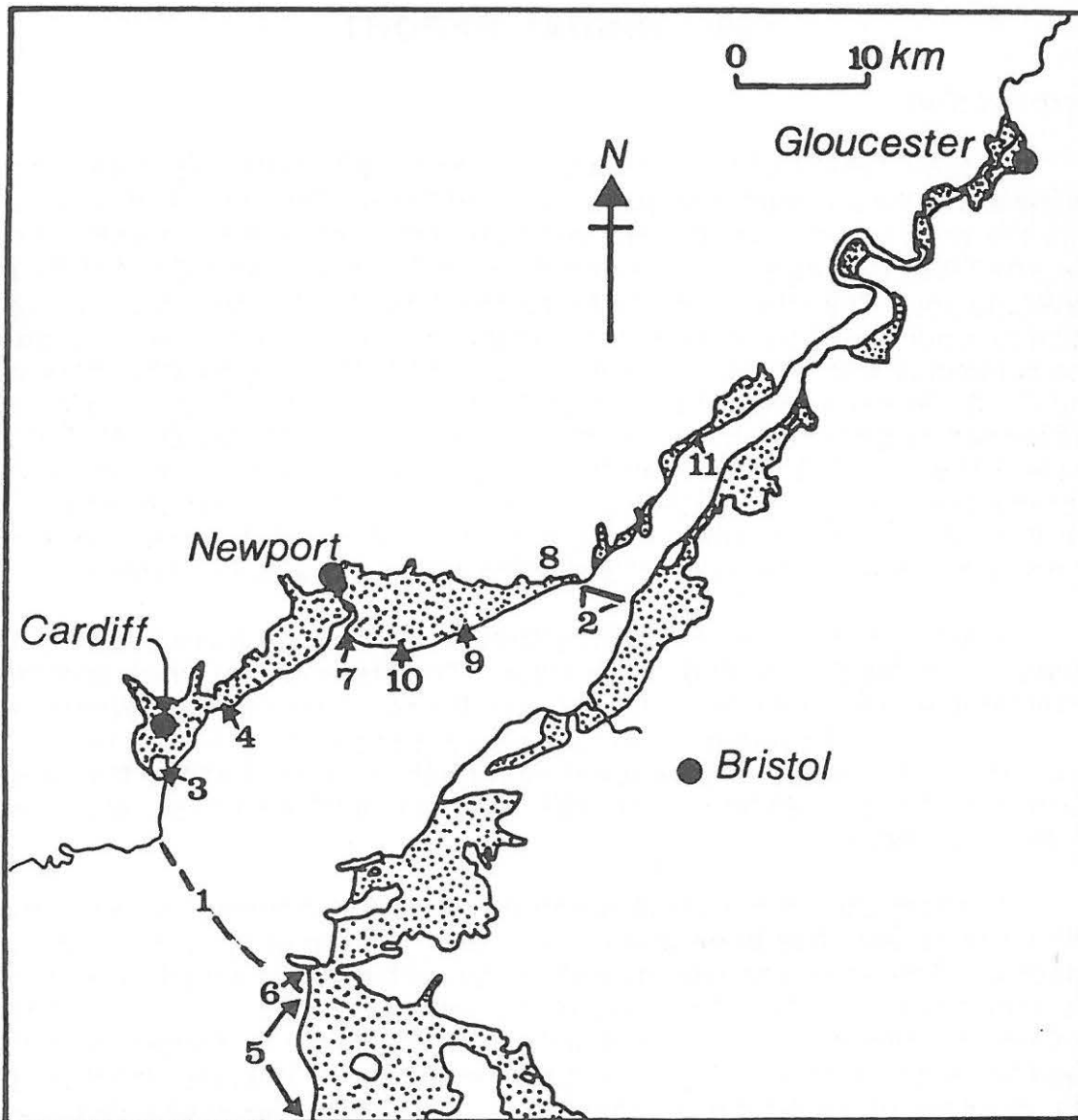


Figure 1. The Severn Estuary showing the extent of estuarine alluvium (after Allen and Rae 1987). Also shown are some of the areas and sites noted in the text:

1. Possible line of Severn Tidal Barrage.
2. Proposed Second Severn Crossing.
3. Cardiff Bay Development.
4. Rumney Alternative Bird Feeding Grounds.
5. North Somerset Levels.
6. Brean Down.
7. Uskmouth.
8. Caldicot.
9. Chapeltump.
10. Goldcliff.
11. Woolaston.

and J. Wills with the field survey being undertaken by R. McDonnell with V. Straker dealing with palaeoenvironmental assessment. A tight timescale for report to the Severn Tidal Power Group meant that the amount of new fieldwork possible on both sides was necessarily limited; however, the report (Green and Whittle 1988; STPG 1989) does represent the first comprehensive account of the archaeology of the intertidal area and a number of significant new discoveries was made. For example, the number of known sites on the English side was increased by 280% and on the Welsh side it provided the opportunity for the recording of several recent discoveries. Furthermore, human and animal footprints were discovered stratified within Earlier Holocene sediments over a 13 km stretch of shoreline from Uskmouth to Collister Pill (Green and Whittle forthcoming).

This general survey of the archaeology of the whole of the intertidal area was followed by more detailed assessments of smaller areas threatened by other major projects. In summer 1989 the archaeology of an area behind the sea wall at Rumney was investigated, in response to proposals to excavate an artificial lagoon to create alternative bird feeding grounds in connection with the Cardiff Bay Development. The lead organisation on this project was the Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust (Parkhouse and Parry 1990). A larger assessment was carried out during 1990 of the area to be affected by the Second Severn Crossing and brief reports on the English and Welsh aspects of this assessment are included here (p.14-18).

In addition to the various survey and assessment exercises members of the committee have also carried out some important excavations in the estuary and its margins. That which has attracted the greatest public interest is the discovery of a late Bronze Age site with waterlogged wood and biological evidence found whilst creating an artificial lake beside Caldicot Castle, Gwent. An interim report on the excavation by S. Parry of the Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust is included below (p.5-11).

On the English side at Brean Down the coastal erosion of a sequence of five Bronze Age settlement horizons and a sub-Roman cemetery led to a rescue excavation between 1983 and 1989 funded by English Heritage and conducted by Dr. M. Bell of Saint David's University College, Lampeter. A monograph on the results of this project from 1983-87 was published by English Heritage during 1990 (Bell 1990).

The committee has also sought to encourage the recording and publication of the growing number of discoveries made in the estuary. To this end Cadw has grant aided work at Uskmouth on prehistoric footprints threatened by marine erosion. This work has been organised by Drs. S. Green and A. Whittle and a note of their results is included below (p.5). The results of a number of other investigations have recently been brought together in publications by Whittle (1989) and Green (1989). Particularly noteworthy among the smaller-scale investigations in the estuary is work on a Mesolithic site at Goldcliff by R. Trett, a number of finds of aurochs (wild cattle) worked on by Dr. P. Morgan and S. Parry, a Bronze Age wooden roundhouse and other sites at Chapeltump (Whittle 1989), and the discovery of the Upton Trackway dating to the fifth century BC (Trett and Parry 1986) and a trackway at Sudbrook dated to the tenth century AD (Trett 1987).

The pace of discovery in the estuary shows no signs of abating and, during the autumn of 1990, D. Upton and B. Trett discovered two rectangular timber buildings in the intertidal area at Goldcliff. Preliminary investigations of these were carried out by J. Parkhouse for Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust and are summarised below (p. 11-14).

During 1990 the committee took stock of its activities after its first five years. Its role was formalised by the adoption of a written constitution (Appendix 1). The most significant change was to widen membership so that anybody with an interest in the committee's aims could apply. The membership list will then form the basis for circulation about the committee's meetings and lectures. The Steering Committee will be elected from the main membership, will continue to handle the main business and will report to an AGM. In this way it is hoped that the SELRC will begin to act as a more effective focus for the activities of all with an interest in the archaeology of the estuary.

On the practical side the future is likely to see considerable activity. Excavations will continue at Caldicot in 1991 and there is likely to be further work on the recently discovered Goldcliff site. There will also be further work in 1991 on both the Welsh and English sides of the Second Severn Crossing. The committee plans a field meeting led by Professors J. Allen and M. Fulford on 27 April 1991 and a public meeting to present recent work in the estuary at Bristol on 23 November 1991.

This annual report is by no means comprehensive in its reference to recent archaeological work in the estuary. It does, however, serve to emphasise the potential of recent discoveries and to give some idea of the range of work which is at present underway. The need for the committee to play a full and active role in the organisation and co-ordination of these various projects is very clear. As Professor Allen's studies have so clearly shown, the archaeology is contained within the same basic sedimentary sequence. To investigate sites in a piecemeal fashion with inadequate co-ordination of work on the English and Welsh sides would be a tragedy. Considerable opportunities now exist for advancing our knowledge of past human activity and environmental adaptation in this remarkable estuarine environment. That potential can be achieved if the various main organisations involved, the Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust on the Welsh side, the County Sites and Monument Records on the English side, the universities, museums and local archaeological societies, can through the SELRC, develop a fully effective and co-ordinated approach to the area.

Martin Bell (Secretary SELRC),  
Department of Archaeology,  
Saint David's University College,  
Lampeter,  
Dyfed, SA48 7ED.