

## RUMNEY GREAT WHARF 1992

by John Allen, Michael Fulford and Stephen Rippon

Survey and excavation were carried out at Rumney Great Wharf on the Gwent Levels over two weeks in late March/early April 1992. There were two principal objectives: to record all the ditches that could be observed to intersect with the mudcliff between the mouth of the Rhymney and the NRA silt lagoon at Peterstone Wentlooge and to recover dating evidence from them wherever possible. Secondly, to investigate the focus of previously recorded Romano-British activity opposite Newton Farm with a view to characterising the nature of the occupation (Allen and Fulford 1986, Sites B and C). The work was carried out in difficult conditions by students from the Department of Archaeology, University of Reading. Excavating in the upper reaches of the intertidal zone where each tide destroyed the day's achievements was extremely frustrating. Nevertheless a considerable amount was achieved.

### The Extensive Survey

More than forty ditches were recorded in the survey area, about doubling the number previously recorded from aerial photographs. Their orientation, fills and relationship with the stratigraphy exposed in the mudcliff were noted. The majority of the ditches were interpreted as artificial; a few could be regarded as natural palaeochannels. The majority were open at the time the Rumney Formation began to accumulate and were finally filled at the end of the seventeenth/beginning of the eighteenth century. Evidence suitable for radiocarbon dating was recovered from other ditches.

### Survey and Excavation at Sites B and C (Figure 20)

Prior to fieldwork commencing, Romano-British material had been recovered from only two ditches in this area (Allen and Fulford 1986, Fig. 5, Nos. X and XI = our B4 and B5). A considerable number of new features were explored where identified in the mudcliff. They were distributed over a distance along the shore of about 120 m in the areas corresponding to Sites B and C. This represents the maximum extent of the mudcliff in which Romano-British pottery was found *in situ*. The beach in the area of Site C was cleaned so that archaeological and natural features could be recorded and sectioned, or excavated more extensively.

Features, all of which contained sherds of Romano-British pottery in fresh condition, were identified at B1 (ditch or large pit), B2 (shore-parallel ditch), B3 (well), B4 (ditch), B5 (ditch), F1 (ditch) and F4 (palaeochannel). A few sherds which could not be associated with a specific feature, but which were stratified in the Wentlooge Formation, were located at B0. Although partial excavation of all the above features was carried out as far as was practicable in the mudcliff, more extensive excavation was limited to those traced in plan across the beach and, in particular, to F1. About 8 m of the latter were excavated between where it bottomed out on the beach and the mudcliff; a large assemblage of Romano-British pottery, animal bone and fire-cracked or fire-shattered stone was recovered. Features which did not produce datable artefacts included F2, F3, F5, F25 and F26. Of these F3/F26 and F25 could be traced across the peat shelf. All of the above features

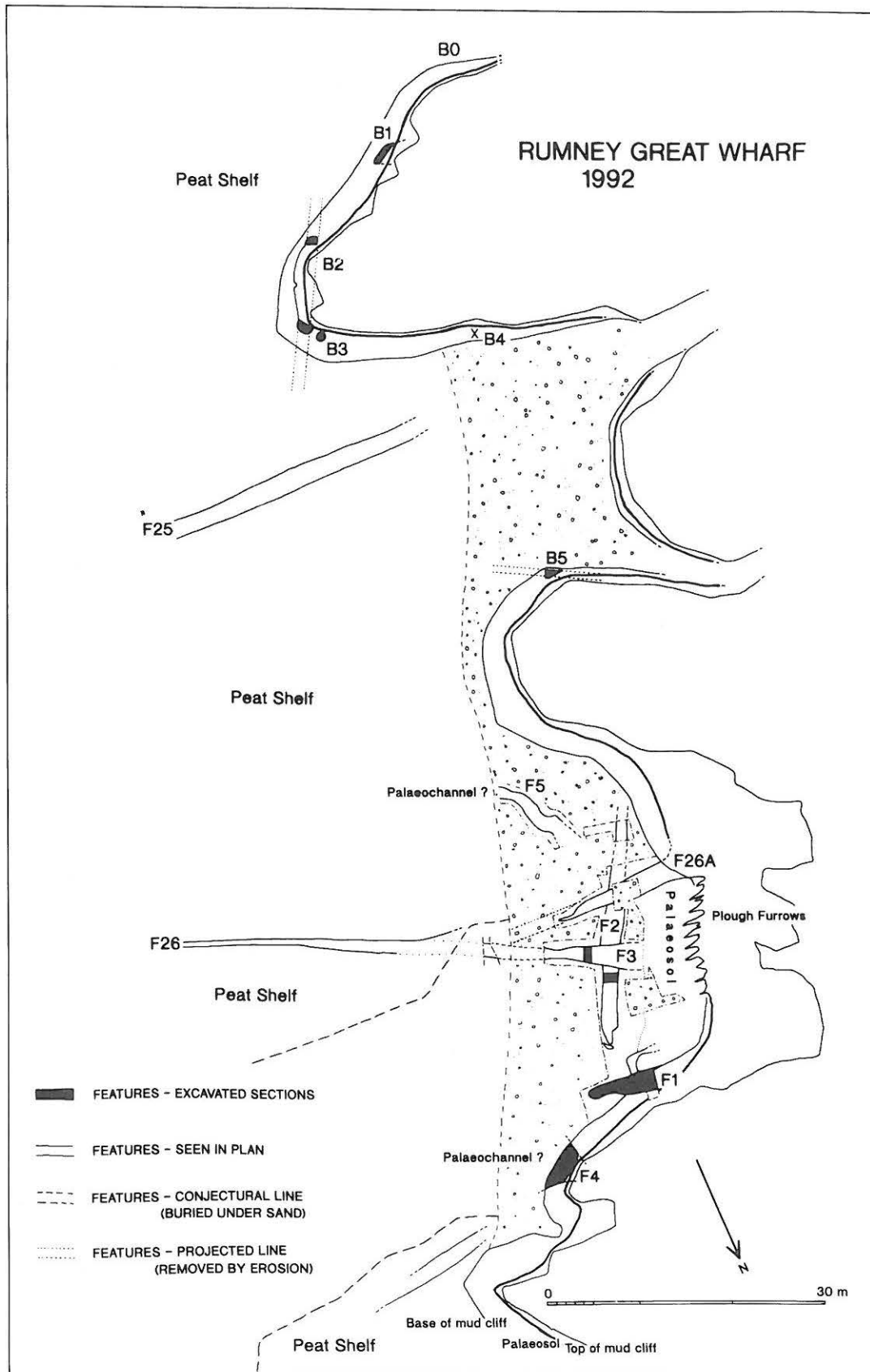


Figure 20. Rumney Great Wharf 1992.

were sealed by alluvium/palaeosol of the Wentlooge Formation, except F25 and F26A which were filled with the Rumney Formation. A series of plough furrows cut into the top of the palaeosol and filled with the Rumney Formation can be traced around much of the shoreline and were recorded in plan at the top of the beach of Site C.

It is possible to postulate a chronology from both internal relationships and the presence of datable artefacts. Further elaboration will depend on radiocarbon or O.S.L. (Optically Stimulated Luminescence) determinations. First, all the ditches with Romano-British material contained greater or lesser quantities of sherds in a fresh condition. The date of this material pivots around the mid-third century A.D. with some of it possibly ranging into the fourth, and some going back into the later second. Ditches with this material embrace two slightly different orientations: one represented by F2, B2, B4 with F2 and B5 at right angles; the second by F1, F26A and F25 on an east-west alignment. The latter two ditches, which can be shown to align with counterparts inside the seabank, share the same orientation as the ditch (F1) with a large assemblage of freshly broken Romano-British pottery. By the same token, the characteristic that these ditches for the most part cut into the peat shelf is shared by one of our ditches on the other orientation. A thin spread of Romano-British pottery and other cultural debris in the vicinity of ditch B4 provides a *terminus post quem* of A.D. 250/300 for the development of the alluvium/palaeosol which seals all our archaeological and natural features except for F25 and F26A.

A provisional assessment of the Romano-British finds assemblage shows that it is dominated by the material from F1. Pottery and fire-cracked or fire-shattered pebbles predominate followed by some animal and bird bone. Metal finds are limited to a very small number of iron

fragments and one bronze finger-ring. A fragment of a shale bracelet was also recovered as well as two glass beads. The pottery assemblage is dominated by cooking and storage wares among which Dorset Black Burnished Ware (BB1) represents a significant element. Extremely rare from excavated contexts are finds of ore, iron-making slags and coal, of which ore and coal were found in earlier collections from B4. On the beach at Site C, however, iron-making slags are particularly abundant.

A sample was taken for environmental analysis from the well (B3) and a column for pollen analysis was taken from the fill of the ditch (B4) extending upwards through the palaeosol into the Rumney Formation. A preliminary study of the macro-botanical remains from the well by Dr. Mark Robinson (University of Oxford) shows no evidence of a saltmarsh flora. The most abundant seeds are those from plants of disturbed ground. Although most, if not all, can tolerate somewhat saline conditions, they certainly do not represent a saltmarsh flora and none is an obligate halophyte. They could have grown on disturbed ground around the well itself or the adjacent settlement, or they could be representative of an arable flora. The only potential crop was a single seed of flax. There were comparatively fewer seeds of pasture or trampled ground. Sedges could have come from the ditches or marshy ground. There is little evidence to indicate scrub or woodland.

These indications are complemented by the evidence of the pollen which has been analysed by Dr. Michael Keith-Lucas (University of Reading). The samples studied were taken from the ditch fill, the disturbed palaeosol with Romano-British artefacts above, and the lower Rumney Formation. Although the pollen will be influenced by a wider catchment, it points to a non-saline, non-calcareous pastoral landscape with Gramineae, Compositae:Liguliflorae, Cruciferae and *Plantago lanceolata* throughout the

sequence investigated; together, these formed more than 50 per cent of the total pollen plus spores. Pollen of *Chenopodiaceae* could derive from nearby saltmarshes or from weeds as a result of arable disturbance. The presence of cereal pollen suggests cultivation nearby. The three horizons sampled differ only in minor details.

The environmental evidence gives a further confirmation to the argument that the embankment and reclamation of the Wentlooge Level was initiated in the Romano-British period and that the area within the present seabank has not subsequently been subjected to major marine transgression and sedimentation.

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