

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE SEVERN ESTUARY 1993

by Martin Bell (Secretary)

Introduction

The level of archaeological activity in the Severn Estuary increased significantly during 1993 and the first results of this are summarised in this report. Most dramatic is the discovery by the Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust of the exceptionally well-preserved Roman Boat at Barland's Farm, Gwent, see photograph on front cover. This find, during a routine assessment prior to building development, is an illustration of the way in which the estuary continues to produce surprise archaeological finds. In the early part of the year, major activity by Wessex Archaeology took place on the approach roads for the Second Severn Crossing in Avon. Cadw and the Countryside Council for Wales set up the Gwent Levels Historic Landscape Project which is being conducted by Stephen Rippon of Reading University and Rick Turner of Cadw. It is also pleasing that the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England have funded a survey by Richard McDonnell in Bridgewater Bay. Reading University is conducting a survey of what is known about intertidal archaeology in England. This will help to put current work in the Severn Estuary in a wider context.

It must also be reported that the level of threat to the archaeology and cultural landscape of the estuary has increased at an even more dramatic pace than in previous years. The most important factor here is the increasing development pressure on the Gwent and Avon Levels now that the Second Severn Crossing is under construction (see photo on back cover). The biggest single scheme to reach consultation stage during the year is the Welsh Office's proposal to construct a 22km

motorway to the south of Newport as a relief road for the M4. Each of the three alternative routes cuts right across all six SSSI's in the Levels (Tyler and Wragg 1994). The proposals have produced considerable protest from wildlife conservation groups and the local community. A pressure group has been formed: CALM - Campaign Against the Levels Motorway. The Cardiff Bay Development also received parliamentary assent in the autumn; this too will have major effects, not just in Cardiff Bay, but also the sites of proposed Alternative Bird Feeding Grounds (p99). Other development proposals which were brought to the attention of the committee during the year were plans for a major leisure development on the Avon Levels at Puxton near Weston-super-Mare, coastal defence works at Minehead, a proposed railhead near Avonmouth, landfill proposals near the river Rumney, industrial development on the Rumney Levels, and plans to develop an interpretation centre in the fort at the end of Brean Down. Further industrial development on the Europark site at Barlands Farm (p109) is also likely.

Of major longer-term concern are proposals for a Severnside International Airport. This has significant local authority backing in south Wales. The proposals involve taking 500ha of the Gwent Levels and reclaiming 1100ha from the estuary. A published diagram (Nuttall and Jones 1994) showing the location of the proposed development, indicates that it will destroy 10.5km of the present intertidal area in Gwent between Goldcliff Pill and the intertidal area south of Caldicot. The implication is that this will destroy most of the known intertidal sites in the Gwent Levels including the major complex of sites in the Goldcliff area (p81), other sites at Redwick, and three

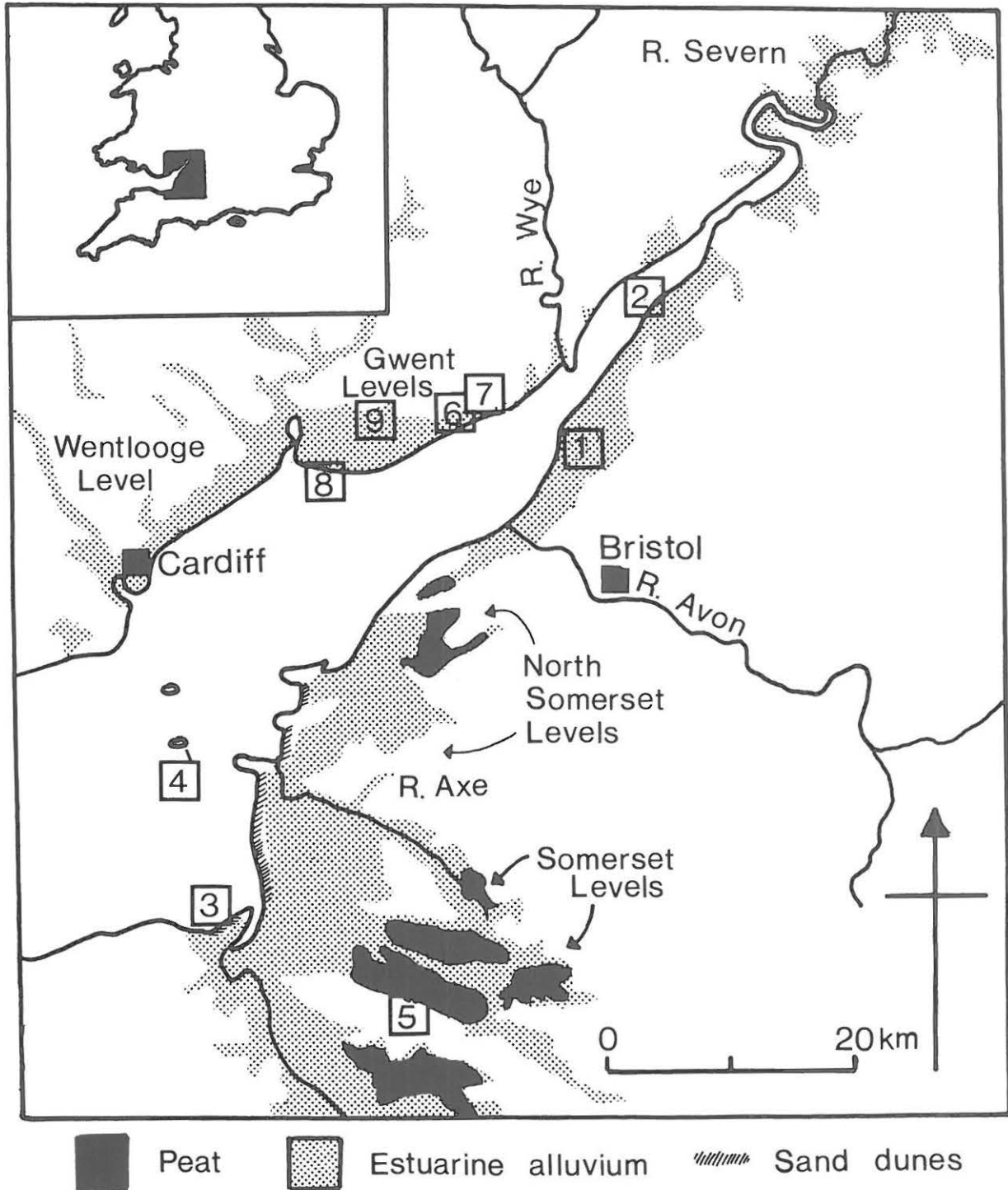


Figure 1. The Severn Estuary and Somerset Levels: Location of sites discussed in this report:

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| [1] Second Severn Crossing, Avon | [5] Shapwick Heath |
| [2] Hills Flats | [6] Vurlong Reen |
| [3] Gore Sands and Stert Flats,
Bridgwater Bay, | [7] Caldicot |
| [4] Steep Holm | [8] Goldcliff |
| | [9] Barland's Farm, Magor |

of the sites previously investigated by Alasdair Whittle (1989): Cold Harbour Pill, Magor Pill and Chapel Tump. Also in the area affected are the findspots of a Bronze Age spearhead and palstave from Porton Grounds and a Neolithic axe from Magor, all published by Green (1989).

Some of these proposals may, of course, never come to fruition but the number and scale of the proposals highlights the extent to which the Levels and the intertidal area are seen as a landscape ripe for development. Paradoxically almost the whole area is protected by SSSI status. The case for conservation is greatly enhanced by the archaeological discoveries now coming to light. Rippon and Turner's contribution (p113) highlights the historic nature of the Gwent Levels landscape. It is also clear that the rich archaeology now being revealed in the intertidal area is part of a sedimentary sequence extending under the seawall and below the clay levels. The intertidal discoveries give us a glimpse of what we may be losing by lowered watertables and development schemes behind the seawall. That point is further reinforced by chance discoveries where deep excavations are made on the clay levels, as for instance the Roman boat at Barlands Farm (p109) and the Bronze Age site at Caldicot (p77).

On a more positive note it should be noted that as local plans are drawn up for areas of the estuary, planning authorities are taking the opportunity to write in reference to the area's archaeological potential as a way of making sure it is given adequate consideration during the planning process. This has been done during the year in relation to the local plans for Newport, North Avon and Bristol.

It must be acknowledged that the committee, with its very limited resources and lack of any paid support, is finding it increasingly difficult to respond to the challenges created by the scale of current threats. It plays an important role in helping to coordinate

the activities of the many archaeological organisations now active in the Estuary. It has helped to establish the estuary as an area of archaeological importance comparable to the other great wetlands of England where 'extensive programmes of research are underway. To do a fully effective job, however, the committee must find ways of increasing the resources available for its important coordination role.

One of the roles of the committee is to try and keep interested people informed about work which is going on in the Estuary. To that end our member Jon Brett has compiled a bibliography of archaeological and environmental work published during 1993. Many of the items are in the references at the end of the report where they are distinguished by an asterisk at the end of the reference. Others are listed in his 1993 bibliography which follows the references.

At the practical level of the committee's activities during the year, the Annual Meeting was held at Bristol University on 20.11.93 with Vanessa Straker as local organiser. The meeting was opened by Professor John Allen who identified some of the area's research problems and opportunities. Progress reports were given on current projects outlined here. In addition two contributions helped to place our activities in a wider setting. Ben Ferrari outlined the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England coastal survey. Jeanette Ratcliffe, of Cornwall Archaeological Unit, outlined the results of coastal and intertidal survey in the Scilly Isles (Ratcliffe 1993).

On the advice of the Treasurer, Astrid Caseldine, the annual meeting took the decision to raise the subscription to £5 for individuals and £10 for institutions. This more accurately reflects the cost of the annual report and mailings to members during the year. The Steering Committee has had some changes of

membership. Dr Cox has left Somerset County Council to work for Giffords but continues to be involved in research in the area (p57). Paul Gosling also left and was replaced as English Heritage representative by Andrew Davidson. Other new members include Professor John Allen and seconded members Dr Steve Rippon and a representative of Wessex Archaeology. One field meeting was held during the year at Goldcliff on 22 August. The Steering Committee met twice during the year on 14th January and 7th October.

1994 promises to be an active year with ongoing activity by the Gwent Levels Landscape Survey, proposed fieldwork at Magor and what is hoped may be the final season of fieldwork at Goldcliff. There will be a field meeting at Goldcliff and the Gwent Levels. Other field meetings are planned and members will be notified. The Annual Meeting will be held at Newport, Gwent on Saturday 12th November 1994 with Bob Trett as Local Secretary. As well as progress reports on work in the estuary, Dr David Tomalin has agreed to speak on current research in the Solent.

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