

THREE LATER BRONZE AGE OCCUPATIONS AT RUMNEY GREAT WHARF ON THE WENTLOOGE LEVEL, GWENT

By J.R.L. Allen

Introduction

Because of an underlying tendency in the system toward erosion, the marginal wetlands of the Severn Estuary - the Severn Estuary Levels - are today much reduced in area compared to a thousand years or so ago. Although an alarming tendency in some respects, one beneficial consequence has been the emergence into the intertidal zone of a considerable number and diversity of archaeological sites, of which there could otherwise have been little or no knowledge. Some are prehistoric in age (Green 1989; Whittle *et al.* 1989; Aldhouse-Green *et al.* 1993; Bell 1993b) and others Roman (Allen and Fulford 1992a, 1992b; Fulford *et al.* 1994). Even medieval structures are emerging on the eroding coast (Fulford *et al.* 1992; Allen and Fulford 1996). The purpose of this note is briefly to discuss three new Bronze Age sites which have become exposed intertidally at Rumney Great Wharf on the Wentlooge Level in Gwent (Figure 5). Their discovery significantly increases the total and diversity of sites of this age from the Severn Estuary Levels as represented in southeast Wales.

The sites at Rumney Great Wharf

Rumney Great Wharf lies toward the southwestern end of the Wentlooge Level, an extensive area of wetland between the Usk and Rhymney rivers that was enclosed during the Roman period (Allen and Fulford 1986; Fulford *et al.* 1994). The active salt marsh here surmounts a bold mud cliff and overlooks a wide, intertidal peat ledge and outcrop of pale green silts. The silts

belong to the lower Wentlooge Formation of Flandrian age. The peat ledge is a complex feature, but the deposits associated with it represent the middle Wentlooge Formation. At a distance from the Rhymney River, the ledge exposes three thin organic beds with intercalated pale green silts; traced toward the river, all but the lowermost organic bed peters out, passing into rooted horizons within silts. Above the ledge are pale green and brown mottled silts - the upper Wentlooge Formation - succeeded erosively by the post-medieval Rumney Formation of pale brown and grey silts. The Bronze Age sites are associated with the complex of organic beds.

Rumney Great Wharf 1 (ST 236778) was exposed among silts in the lower part of the mud cliff at the horizon of the topmost organic bed, until obscured by a recently-emplaced rubble revetment. It is an extensive, lenticular deposit of dark grey silt, rich in fire-cracked pebbles and cobbles, small charcoal fragments, animal bones and teeth (including adult and juvenile cattle) and fragmentary pottery, but without evidence of tools or weapons. The deposit had been formed on salt marshes adjoining the banks of a tidal creek which, the relationship of the occupation deposit to the local bedding suggested, was active at the general time of the occupation. Within the bounds of the occupation deposit were two roughly circular holes large enough to have held posts. This deposit seems to represent an occupation sufficiently lengthy for a substantial amount of detritus associated with food preparation to have accumulated. The presence of what could be post-holes suggests that

probably temporary shelters were erected. A summer encampment for the purpose of ranching may be suggested.

The second occupation, Rumney Great Wharf 2 (ST 238779), occurs not far away but some 0.75 m lower in the stratigraphical sequence, within the topmost few centimetres of the lowest (main) peat bed. It is a steep-sided, oval depression in the peat, measuring about 1.25 by 1.75 m. Although usually filled with water, the hollow can be seen to contain a central, gnarled mass of orange-red, baked clay. Thinly scattered in the uppermost peat around the hollow are fire-cracked pebbles and cobbles and fragments of pottery. One object recovered from the scatter is particularly intriguing. It is a smooth, roughly spherical ball of grey, baked clay measuring 31 mm in diameter and marked by several groups of fine, virtually coincident, long striae. No features suggestive of structures were detected, and weapons or tools were not in evidence. The site clearly represents a hearth, which need not have been used for more than a few days at the most. A wild-fowling party may have occupied it, for the ball of baked clay, perhaps manufactured to remedy a deficiency, is similar in size and weight to well-rounded, sub-spherical pebbles occasionally found in the silts of the middle and upper Wentlooge Formation that could have served as sling shot. Alternatively, the clay ball was made for personal amusement, or even as a ritual object.

Rumney Great Wharf 3 (ST 240779) lies near the outer edge of the peat ledge and is a single, incomplete circle about 5 m in diameter of widely spaced, upright stakes of radially or tangentially split oak centred on a post-hole now filled with silt. There was no indication of a continuous outer ring of uprights. The stout stakes penetrate the lowermost peat bed and are surrounded, on top of the peat and in the lowermost few centimetres of the overlying silt, by a scatter of fire-cracked pebbles and cobbles, charcoal, pottery fragments,

and scraps of bone (including cattle). No evidence of tools or weapons was found. The stake setting seems to represent a small hut circle, and suggests occupation on a more permanent basis than at either of the previous two sites.

The evidence for dating the three sites at Rumney Great Wharf is of two kinds. A sample of charcoal fragments from the occupation deposit at Rumney Great Wharf 1 afforded a conventional radiocarbon age of 2250 ± 60 years BP (Beta-39437), suggesting an earlier Iron Age date. Charcoal could not be recovered in adequate quantity from other than close to the eroded surface of the sediment, however, and the likelihood of some contamination of the sample cannot be ignored. A conventional radiocarbon age of 3080 ± 50 years BP (Beta-46951) was given by a fresh sample from the youngest part of one of the stakes at Rumney Great Wharf 3. A middle or late Bronze Age date is therefore suggested for the hut circle. All three sites yielded similar fragmentary pottery, and more was recovered from the silt filling a small palaeochannel within the complex of organic beds near Rumney Great Wharf 2. The pottery as a whole appears to lie in the general later Bronze Age tradition of plain, hand-made wares of medium to large size, as reported from Wessex and the Thames Valley (Bradley and Ellison 1975; Barrett 1980; Bradley *et al.* 1980; Thomas *et al.* 1986; Hearne and Heaton 1994), the West and Southwest of England (ApSimon and Greenfield 1972; Alcock 1980; Price and Watts 1980; Woodward in Bell 1990), the West Midlands (Bateman 1976-77; Stanford 1982), and Wales (Musson 1976, 1991; Savory 1980; Quinnell *et al.* 1994). The more ornamented forms invite comparison with the Trevisker-inspired group at Brean Down (Woodward in Bell 1990) and at Trevisker itself (ApSimon and Greenfield 1972). Typically, the vessels from Rumney Great Wharf have simple rims, either rounded or flat-topped, and externally expanded bases.

A variety of lugs together with knobs and handles are recorded. Ornament is sparse and typically absent, consisting of finger smearing or various arrangements of generally short grooves; one body sherd carried a deep horizontal groove and a horizontal chevron of small grooves. Traits not represented, however, are internally-bevelled rims and cordons. With one possible exception - a fabric marked by inclusions of flint and shell - all of the wares could have been manufactured relatively locally. As Woodward (in Bell 1990) concluded for the Brean Down pottery (Units 4, 5b), the Rumney Great Wharf assemblages appear to date from the later Bronze Age.

Discussion

Most work on the Bronze Age in Wales has emphasized 'dryland' occupations, burial and ritual, and the character and distribution of metalwork. The three occupations at Rumney Great Wharf, added to earlier finds from the extensive outcrop of Flandrian estuarine alluvium in Gwent, begin to demonstrate the importance to Welsh Bronze Age peoples of coastal wetland environments on the Severn Estuary Levels and the adjoining estuarine waters.

Twelve Bronze Age sites in all are known, counting separately the palaeochannel near Rumney Great Wharf 2 and the two at Chapeltump

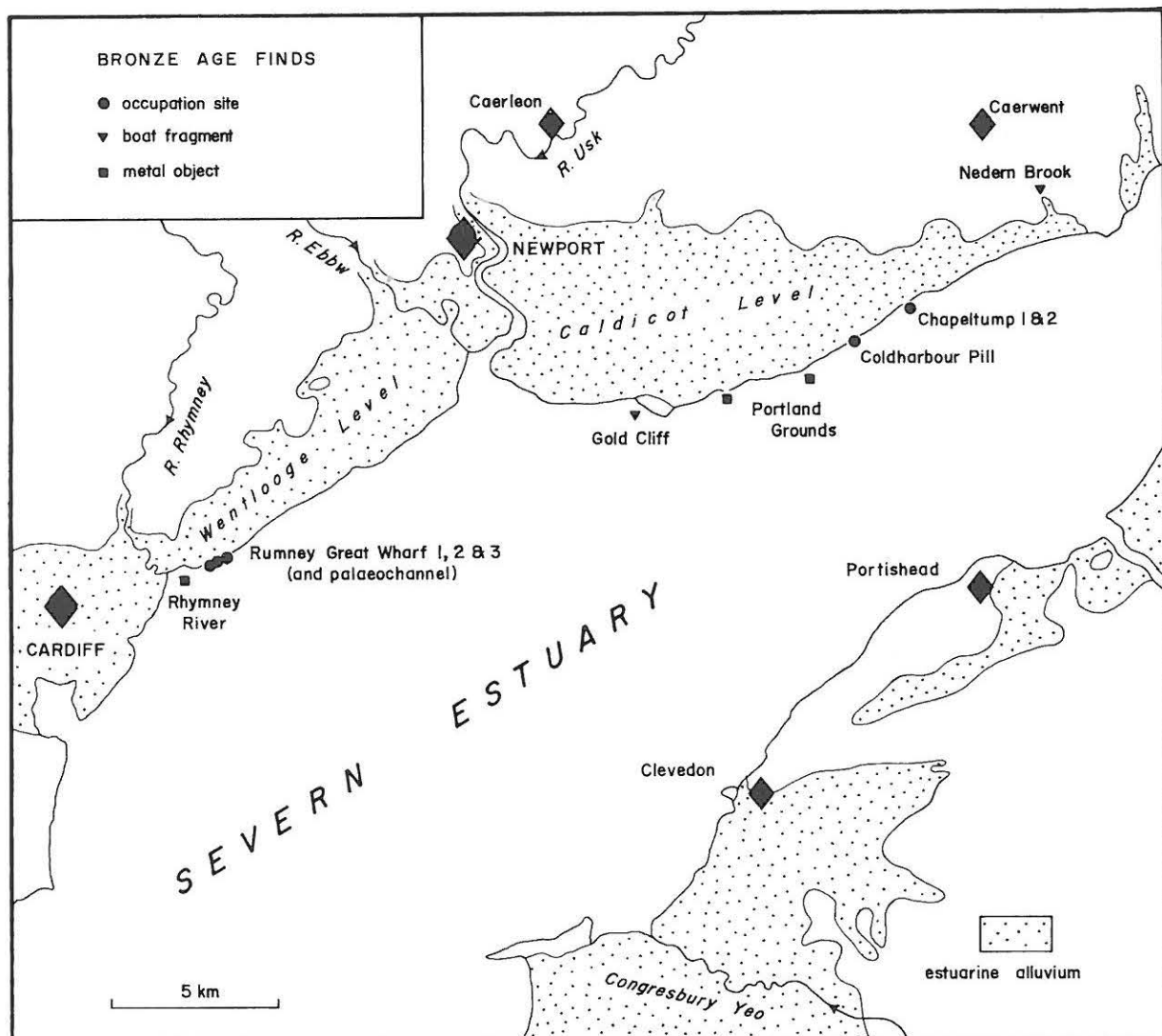


Figure 5. Distribution of described Bronze Age finds on the Gwent Levels, southeast Wales.

(Figure 5). Excavations of tidal palaeochannels in the valley of the Nedern Brook on the landward margin of the Levels have yielded evidence of a landing place, stone and worked wood, pottery, leather, struck flints, animal bones and metalwork (Parry 1988, 1992; Parry and Parkhouse 1989, 1990; Nayling 1992a, 1992b, 1993). On the peat ledge near Undy lies Chapelump 1, a later Bronze Age roundhouse with worked wood, struck flints, fire-cracked pebbles and Trevisker-inspired pottery (Whittle *et al.* 1989). Close by and similar in age is Chapelump 2, yielding Trevisker-inspired pottery but no sign of structures (Whittle *et al.* 1989). From the peat ledge at Cold Harbour Pill, Whittle *et al.* (1989) recorded a later Bronze Age occupation deposit with charcoal, worked wood, Trevisker-inspired pottery, bones and teeth including deer, and fire-cracked pebbles. Green (1989) has described three items of middle Bronze Age metalwork (spearheads, palstave) from intertidal sites on the Portland Grounds and the mouth of the Rhymney River.

Other than it presented a combination of minerogenic and organogenic, mainly tidal marshes, we have no knowledge of the Bronze Age wetland landscape in coastal Gwent. It would be reasonable, however, to assume that, as in modern British coastal marshes generally (Allen and Pye 1992), networks of tidal channels and creeks reached inland across the wetlands, as suggested by such palaeochannels as have so far been recognized (e.g. Allen and Fulford 1986; Bell 1993b; Allen and Rippon 1995). In this light, perhaps the two most significant finds to date are those of boats (Figure 5). The excavations in the valley of the Nedern Brook brought to light a large plank from a substantial sewn boat (Parry and McGrail 1991). Two smaller planks, also from a sewn boat, had been used at Goldcliff to provide footing across a wet patch or gully on the marshes (Bell 1993b). These particular finds, combined with

the evidence for a landing place in the valley of the Nedern Brook, and the creek-side occupation at Rumney Great Wharf 1, emphasize the importance of water transport on the Levels during the Bronze Age. Contacts by boat even across the Bristol Channel are perhaps hinted at by features of the pottery.

The twelve sites and finds reported from Bronze Age horizons exposed in the intertidal zone represent an arbitrary sample of an archaeological resource that could in total be one to two orders of magnitude larger.

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